In Memoriam: Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z”l

by David Berger

In the early modern period, we find reference in the works of Jews in the Islamic orbit to the ideal of a hakham shalem—expert in both Torah and the various forms of wisdom. If we wish to be yet more ambitious, we can imagine an individual who supplements these already daunting characteristics with a constellation of exceptional personal qualities.

Rabbi Norman Lamm came remarkably close to meeting this extraordinary standard. He was a major thinker who articulated and embodied an ideal of interaction between Torah in its purest sense and world civilization and culture. He contributed to the academic study of Jewish thought. He composed works that inspired Jews to renewed and enhanced observance of mitzvot. He delivered shiurim to classroom audiences and to packed auditoriums, and he published a book of hiddushei Torah. He was an orator of almost transcendent talent; no one in the Jewish world—certainly in the Orthodox world—after Rav Soloveitchik came close. He radiated atzilut (which I would translate inadequately as an aristocratic demeanor) while maintaining genuine concern for virtually everyone he knew; he is said to have responded personally to every letter he received, and he sent congratulatory notes to friends and acquaintances upon reading a review or even a letter to the editor of which he approved. He stood at the helm of a religious movement, leading its central, indispensable institution, founding the Orthodox Forum, the Orthodox Caucus, and the Torah u-Madda Project, serving as the first editor of Tradition, and initiating GPATS, the primary expression of Modern Orthodoxy’s commitment to genuinely advanced Talmud study for women.

Several years after Gerson D. Cohen left Columbia to become Chancellor
of the Jewish Theological Seminary—and well before his tragic, debilitating illness—he told me, “I am out of commission as a scholar.” Cohen was a brilliant, driven figure of stunning intellectual breadth and vibrant energy. I often thought of this comment when contemplating the remarkable productivity of Norman Lamm as he led a much larger, far more complex institution, and I shook my head in wonderment.

My one opportunity to characterize an aspect of Rabbi Lamm’s multifaceted accomplishments came when I was invited to write the Foreword to the Deuteronomy volume of his Derashot Ledorot, a series made possible by my wife Pearl, who was then Dean of Yeshiva University’s libraries. She spearheaded an initiative—in consultation with Rabbi Lamm—to place the treasure trove of his typewritten sermons in a digitally accessible data base, which continues to register triple-digit hits on a weekly basis, available here.

In that Foreword, I wrote about my reaction to his sermons, noting among other things his linguistic brilliance. My favorite example was his striking reformulation in a sermon about the drug culture of the late 1960’s of a classic line by Marx. “Opium,” said Rabbi Lamm, “is the religion of the masses.”

I conclude with the following passage from that Foreword recording two memorable incidents unrelated to the published sermons:

One [of these incidents] left me with an enduring impression of Rabbi Lamm’s extraordinary sermonic instinct, and the other revealed a sharp, quick, and agile mind that supplemented the deep and serious intellect expressed in his scholarly and philosophical works.

In March of 1987, Yeshiva University held “A Centennial Event Honoring the Establishment of the Yeshiva University Archives.” Because the archives contain major collections relating to the Holocaust, particularly the records of Orthodox organizations like Vaad Hatzalah and Rescue Children, the program was entitled, “Zachor: Written and Oral History,” and Prof. Geoffrey Hartman of
Yale, who directed a video archive of Holocaust-related testimonies, was invited to address the gathering. Rabbi Lamm’s role was to provide a brief introduction to the event. He was by no means the principal speaker, and he could have fulfilled his obligation with a routine comment or two requiring barely a moment of thought or preparation. His introduction was indeed brief, but it was more memorable than anything said by the distinguished visitor.

I wondered, said Rabbi Lamm, why the director of an oral archive would be invited to speak at the launching of an archive of written materials. But then, he continued, I realized that when the Torah speaks of the requirement to remember Amalek, the quintessential precursor of the Nazi murderers, it introduces the divine commandment as follows: “Write this as a remembrance in a book, and place it in the ears of Joshua” (Exodus 17:14). Remembering Amalek requires both a written and an oral archive.

The second episode emerged in the wake of a position that Rabbi Lamm took on a controversial issue that need not detain us here. A prominent rabbi in the Traditionalist Orthodox community responded in a public address with the assertion that Rabbi Lamm was a sone’ Hashem, a hater of God. The editor of the Yiddish newspaper The Algemeiner Journal asked the purported God-hater for his reaction. Rabbi Lamm replied with a single, brief quotation from the Talmud: “Those who are shamed and do not shame in return, who hear their disgrace and do not respond...of them Scripture declares, “All who love Him shall be like the sun rising in strength” (Judges 5:31).

We have suffered the loss of a unique leader whose legacy will remain with us in virtually every nook and cranny of our Jewish lives.