



Divrei Chag be-Chag: The Chag HaSemikhah Addresses of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm

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In one of his most famous lectures, “Notes of an Unrepentant Darshan” (1986), Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm pointed to three great influences on his speaking style: his uncle, Rabbi Joseph M. Baumol, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, who taught homiletics at RIETS, and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Rabbi Lamm explicated the greatness of each of his mentors, and the different lessons he learned from them. There was, however, one thing that these greats shared in common. “Each of them succeeded because he spoke to his own listeners, not to some imagined or stereotyped or idealized audience.”

When one reads the myriad of Rabbi Lamm’s printed sermons from his years in the rabbinate, one can easily discern the nature of his audience. His words were chosen not just for their beauty

and power, but because Rabbi Lamm felt that he had what to say to his *kehillah* and his generation. Though his *divrei Torah* are timeless, one is brought back to the 1950’s, 1960’s and 1970’s in almost every sermon. He was not afraid to speak the truth, and his wisdom, often commentating on issues well before their time, continues to instruct us today. Yet, one cannot help but conjure up an image of his audience while reading his *derashot*.

Rabbi Lamm shared with his family that some of his favorite *derashot* were those delivered at the many Chag HaSemikhah convocations over which he presided as Rosh HaYeshiva of RIETS and President of Yeshiva University. True to form, these speeches were not just masterful and eloquent. They resonate with timely messages spoken to the audience sitting before him at the front of Lamport Auditorium on the Uptown Yeshiva Campus — the newly minted rabbis celebrating their ordination and

beginning their careers in the rabbinate.

In his famous 1994 Chag address, “The Spirit of Elijah Rests upon Elisha,” Rabbi Lamm expressed his passion for the Chag HaSemikhah and what it represented. He noted that Eliyahu, when commanded at the end of his prophetic career to appoint new kings in Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and *afterwards* to anoint a new prophet in the person of Elisha, reverses the order of his missions. Rabbi Lamm explained that “as important as political moves and international relations and diplomatic maneuvers are, the single most important task before the Jewish People in every generation is to ensure the continuity of its spiritual leadership. Let kings and heads of state wait; let matters of historic moments bide their time; let the politicians stand aside and let the statesmen cool their heels in the outer offices of our attention. The priority of priorities is that there be prophets of G-d and teachers of

Torah and models of moral conduct and exemplars of Torah ethics to make our people worthy of saving.”

Rabbi Lamm was well aware that not every *musmakh* before him would be pursuing *avodat ha-kodesh*. He spoke directly to the future doctors and lawyers in the graduating class, reminding them of their duty to give back to RIETS to allow others the same full scholarships they had received for their *semikha* studies and their special responsibility — beyond their rabbinic colleagues — to study Torah and find ways to uplift the community.

Yet his remarks were clearly directed to the community rabbis before him. A synagogue rabbi himself for some 25 years, Rabbi Lamm shared the lessons of his rabbinate along with advice on emerging issues in the Jewish community that his students would soon face. Some of his messages were equally relevant to those who would be serving in schools, but, more often than not, he presented the rabbinate through the eyes of a shul rav.

There is no summary that could do Rabbi Lamm’s words justice. I strongly suggest reading these addresses in full in the collected volume *The Spirit of the Rabbinate*.¹ I will, however, lay out four themes that Rabbi Lamm returned to, decade after decade, in speaking to the *musmakhim*. In order to maintain the beauty of his style, I have taken the liberty to quote generously from his addresses, summarizing only when needed to maintain the brevity of this article.

Rabbi Lamm exhorted his students, with one thousand guests assembled in Lamport Auditorium, to follow the examples of great leaders in Tanakh — Moshe, and of course, Eliyahu and Elisha, who seemed to be his favorites. He also spoke frequently of the builders of RIETS and YU, giving a new generation of students an appreciation for their yeshiva, the institution of RIETS.

Each address introduced a new starting point, whether in Tanakh or the words of Chazal. Four themes, however, appear again and again:

- *Musmakhim* should feel pride in their choice of career.
- Growth in Torah must continue long after one leaves the walls of Yeshiva.
- RIETS graduates must reach out to Jews of all backgrounds with the word of G-d.
- Future rabbis must lead with integrity, boldly standing up for their values.

Rabbinic Pride

Rabbi Lamm felt that low self-esteem was a greater threat to most rabbis than an inflated sense of self-worth. No doubt, individual rabbis suffer from outsized egos, many seeing their rabbinic positions as opportunities for self-aggrandizement rather than service to their flocks. Yet his first Chag HaSemikhah *derasha*, “The Self Image of the Rabbi” (1981), was used to reinforce a sense of pride in those who chose *avodat ha-kodesh* professionally.

He began by calling for balance: “It is imperative that our *musmakhim*, who bear the burden of Torah leadership and of continuing the heritage they have learned in these sacred precincts, guard against both extremes in their rabbinic role — that of *ga’avah*, as exaggerated and over-weening self-confidence and self-importance; and *shiflut* in the form of a weak self-image, the lack of self-esteem and self-worth.”

Most of his lecture, however, decried the fact that the rabbinate had been devalued in modern times, not just in the eyes of the community — but in the minds of rabbis themselves. Rabbi Lamm spoke directly to the students before him: “You are a group of intelligent and bright young men who could have become doctors and lawyers, businessmen and scientists, psychologists and computer experts, as easily as your colleagues who graduated

with you from Yeshiva College. You do have the blessing of abundant ‘intelligence and knowledge.’ But you chose to use it for Torah, which is ‘in your mouth and in your heart in order to do it.’”

A new generation of rabbis needed to project a sense of pride and excitement to the public: “Lead, for Heaven’s sake; lead *le-shem Shamayim*; and let the world know that there is a new and reinvigorated and energetic and authentic rabbinate, that there are still prophets in Israel! There is hardly a greater *kiddush Hashem* than the awakening awareness that the *rabbanut* is alive and well and that Torah is thriving in Israel!” (“There is a Prophet in Israel”, 1986).

Of course, the fact that the rabbinate is an optimal career choice meant that *musmakhim* had little reason to complain about their institutional responsibilities. Their careers would be difficult — but many careers are difficult. They would face burnout — but they would do so in the service of G-d. They might not see the financial compensation and benefits of their peers in certain secular professions — but they would live lives of meaning, infused with Torah study (“A Perfect World”, 2002). This message was also imparted by the Rosh HaYeshiva to first and fourth year *semikha* students each year, at dinners for their respective classes.

Torah Study

Rabbi Lamm seemed very concerned that his students would abandon *limmud ha-Torah* once they settled into their positions. Time and again, he exhorted his graduates at the Chag HaSemikhah to make Torah study a lifelong pursuit. Was he simply frustrated, as he mentioned in other *derashot*, about rabbis spending more time reading the *New York Times* over their morning coffee than perusing the upcoming *parsha*? Or was he challenging them to follow in his footsteps by which he grew into a formidable Torah scholar despite years of

crushing communal responsibility?

At times, he seemed to be cautioning against a neglect of Torah study, reminding his students with a touch of humor that their *heter hora'ah*, rabbinic license to arbitrate matters of halakha, came with a *heter lilmod*, the permission to continue their study (“The Self Image of the Rabbi”, 1981). A central theme of one of his earliest Chag HaSemikhah addresses, entitled, “The Makings of a Ben Torah” (1983), was that *musmakhim* needed to minimally remain *bnei Torah!* “The day you stop studying, the day you stop climbing the road to Torah excellence, is the day you are no longer a *ben Torah*. On that day, all that is written on your rabbinic diploma is rendered meaningless.”

At other times, he shared with the *musmakhim* the place that high-level *talmud Torah* played in his life. In a stirring portion of “The Spirit of Elijah Rests upon Elisha” (1994), he begged his students “to continue to immerse yourselves in Torah study; never stop. Your Torah will be your refuge and your strength, your consolation and your joy, and your inspiration to greater aspiration. And it, above all else, will help you help your people. It is our firm belief that, as the Sages told us, the eternal light of Torah will lead people to the paths of goodness and holiness, and that ‘the people’ in this case refers both to your congregants or your pupils, and to you yourselves as well. It is inevitable that your long immersion in the world of Gemara and Rashi and Tosafot and Rishonim will inspire you to devote your lives to spreading Torah and to [service of] the Jewish people.”

Outreach

Insufficient attention has been paid to the extent that Rabbi Lamm pushed his *musmakhim* to speak to a wide spectrum of Jews — and even non-Jews — through their rabbinates. After all, he served as a Rosh Yeshiva at RIETS and a shul Rav in Manhattan (albeit preaching to

baalei batim of the 1960’s and 70’s and notwithstanding the fact that he started in Springfield Massachusetts). He stressed, however, that much more was needed from a new generation of rabbis.

“Torah was meant for *all* Jews, not just for a small circle of the religiously privileged, the halakhic cognoscenti. It was meant for laymen as well as rabbis, for those who yearn for the poetry of Torah as well as for those who revel in its intellectual rigor, for those who are not yet observant as well as for those who already are.

And that means that rabbis, whether in the pulpit or the classroom, must use all the forms of communication in order to bring Torah close to Israel — not just those forms that confer prestige in the halls of the yeshiva.” (“The Makings of a *Ben Torah*”, 1983)

He, admittedly, understood that for *bnei yeshiva*, the responsibility of outreach meant moving beyond one’s personal comfort zone. Rabbis, he said, needed “the readiness to have your concern embrace *Kelal Yisrael* and even the rest of humanity. And I add this important caveat: you must never fall prey to the comfortable but execrable and scandalous notion that the term *Kelal Yisrael* is restricted to only those who do and think as we do.” (The Rabbi Inside and Out”, 1990). In an early reference to an image he would expand into one his most famous lectures, “Caves and Enclaves” (delivered at the RIETS Centennial in 1997), he called upon his students to be prophets who leave their “cave”, the warm, nurturing environment of the yeshiva, to meet the Jewish People *ba’asher heim sham*. “A cave is secure and safe and protective — but one who does not venture out to meet the brutal realities of ‘real life’ to which ordinary Jews are subjected, who prefers safety over risk and caves over vision and his own security over his people’s needs — is no prophet!” (ibid)

Calling upon the example of Moshe Rabbeinu, Rabbi Lamm told his audience of future rabbis that “the love of Israel

means that even if I do not approve of them or endorse their views or relish their company or even *like* them — I must *love* them. I must dedicate my life to saving and enhancing and enriching their lives, to healing them spiritually and physically, to comforting them, to bringing them to Torah and Torah to them — and them to each other. (“The Makings of a *Ben Torah*”, 1983)

Such an approach is needed not just in the face of personal discomfort, but even when such outreach threatens one’s professional aspirations. In 2002, in his last address as Rosh HaYeshiva (“A Perfect World”), he charged, “You must never give up on any Jew, no matter how difficult it may be. You must risk everything to bring about such a vast change in the communal mood as to make the commitment to Torah the most logical, rational choice for *Kelal Yisrael*.”

Finally, Rabbi Lamm spoke to the fact that a selfless rabbinical career would lead to exceptional personal growth. It is difficult to love one’s congregants, but a lifetime of effort on their behalf would bear fruit in terms of middot development. This love will be difficult to practice at first but will become second nature for a dedicated Rav. “It will take time, but you will learn it. The Rav quotes R. Chaim as saying, ‘I am basically a cruel person and I am also stingy, but I worked on myself and turned my cruelty into kindness and miserliness into generosity.’ So, work on yourselves! Both you and your people will benefit.” (“The Who What and Where of the Rabbinate”, 1998).

I share this last point frequently with my talmidim at RIETS. A life in the rabbinate is more than a sacrifice on behalf of the *kelal*. Many of the “negatives” associated with life as a synagogue rabbi, from the need to be on one’s best behavior at all times, to the challenges and stresses of accompanying families through the most difficult of circumstances are simultaneously pathways for personal spiritual success.

Leadership

While Rabbi Lamm spoke about the challenges and responsibilities of the rabbinate in most of the Chag HaSemikhah addresses, this topic served as the overarching theme of his 1986 keynote “There is a Prophet in Israel.” “Leadership,” he said, “is not for the faint of heart, but neither is it for the light-hearted and frivolous. If an ordinary person makes a mistake, he merely makes a mistake; if a leader errs, he misleads.”

The *derasha* focused on the account in *Melachim Bet* of Naaman, an Aramean king stricken with incurable leprosy. In this narrative, read as the *haftara* for *Parshat Tazria*, the text explains how the advice of a young Jewish slave-girl points the powerful king to seek answers from the Hebrew prophet Elisha. Naaman, however, approaches not the prophet, but King Yehoram, who muddles this opportunity for a great *Kiddush Hashem*. Elisha sends word to the king, “Let him know that there is a prophet in Israel.” Elisha reverses the failure of Yehoram, heals the gentile king and brings about a great sanctification of the Divine Name.

Rabbi Lamm saw in this story the classic tension between the Jewish king and prophet. The former bears the responsibility to administrate the needs of the Jewish people. He lacks, however, the religious sensitivity of the seer. Those infused with the wisdom of G-d needed to play an equal role in steering the nation.

Rabbi Lamm did not downplay the challenges that lie ahead for his charges. He understood that the world in which the *musmakhim* would soon be serving was hostile to many values cherished in the walls of the yeshiva. The *talmidim*, who found comfort amongst their colleagues in the *beit midrash* would soon spread out across a foreign world.

“[A] requirement for true spiritual leadership is courage, the moral strength and spiritual power to fight a lonely battle, to stand up against great odds and to

struggle for what you believe and know is right. I am not championing mavericks who are dissenters just for the fun of it. I refer to the quest for principle, for the stubbornness that comes from seeing and holding fast to a truth when others are blind to it.” (The Rabbi Inside and Out”, 1990)

“Leadership means not only marching at the head of a column of loving and admiring followers, but also the ability to put up with criticism, justified and unjustified, often harsh and pitiless; with sarcasm and innuendo and vicious rumors; with yes-men who shield you from the trust and, more often, implacable adversaries who expose you to falsehood; with inertia and with hysteria; and with a lot more. Leadership means to put up with all this, and yet to hold fast to your principles despite all; to draw strength from your supporters — and even from your critics.” (“There is a Prophet in Israel”, 1986).

He cited RIETS, as a model which the students should emulate. “[T]he greatness of our Yeshiva is that we kept to our *derekh* with strength and with courage, that we conducted ourselves with individual and institutional dignity, that we refused to reciprocate petty insults and trade invectives, but continued to relate to others according to the principles of *kevod ha-beriyot* and *kevod ha-Torah*. This will continue to be our policy — one from which we will not be deterred, neither by flattery nor by threats.” (Ibid)

Rabbi Lamm noted that many leadership positions in the non-profit world of Jewish organizations were being filled by well-meaning people who lacked a Torah orientation. The time had come for the *talmidim* of RIETS to fill positions through the Jewish world, “by forthrightly articulating what we stand for, and doing so with *darkei noam*, the ‘ways of pleasantness.’” (“There is a Prophet in Israel”, 1986).

In 2003, Rabbi Lamm handed over the presidency to Richard M. Joel. He

graced the stage at the Chag HaSemikhah through the Chag of 2014 but was well enough to speak just one additional time. At the Chag of 2006 he delivered a short, but powerful speech entitled “Elijah as a Model for Rabbis.” For this final address he hearkened back to one of his “rabbinic” heroes, the Prophet Eliyahu, and to key messages of earlier glorious years.

The former president of RIETS gave voice to Elijah’s professional burnout and his disappointment in the Jewish People. He doesn’t blame the prophet for his frustration. But Rabbi Lamm proclaimed G-d’s response to Elijah as a message for his *musmakhim*: “Don’t curl up in a cave. *Mah lecha po, Eliyahu?* Be among Jews, disobedient and fickle as they are! You are a Jewish prophet, a spokesman for the Almighty, not an actor playing to an admiring audience!”

He did more than just exhort them; he reassured them. “Our Yeshiva stands behind you. You may occasionally feel lonely, but you will never be alone. We are proud of you. And you should be proud of us — your Rabbeim, your colleagues, and those many who work with you behind the scenes ... and may the *Ribbono shel Olam* guide and guard you, your families and pupils and congregants, *mei-atah ve-ad olam*, from now and forever more.”

Rabbi Lamm would never have said “I will stand behind you”. He was a man of the institution, never singling himself out. And yet, with his passing, rabbis of my generation feel orphaned. Still, *siftotav dovevot ba-kever*, his words saved for practicing rabbanim and generations of rabbis to come, continue to guide, motivate and inspire.

Endnote

1. Published by the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in 2010, with a foreword by President Richard M. Joel.