

Derashot LeDorot
A Commentary for the Ages
Deuteronomy



Norman Lamm

DERASHOT
LEDOROT
DEUTERONOMY

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FOREWORD BY

David Berger

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Dedicated to the Memory of

Sara Lamm Dratch

שרה רבקה בת הרב נחום ומינדל לאם

Beloved daughter, mother, wife, sister, and aunt

*May her memory be forever a source
of blessing, song and, most of all, laughter.*

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Foreword

David Berger

I never heard Rabbi Norman Lamm deliver a sermon. I did hear him speak on many occasions – graduations, funerals, university events of many sorts, and meetings of the Orthodox Forum – so that I experienced firsthand his remarkable gifts as an orator. Nonetheless, a sermon is a genre unto itself, and when I agreed to write this foreword, I did not know quite what I would find.

Beyond the evidence of those other talks, I knew that my distinguished brother-in-law Prof. David Shatz, whose judgment even as a teenager was surely stellar, spoke with awe about the experience of listening to those sermons as a youthful congregant in the Jewish Center. I knew as well that my wife Pearl, who conceived and spearheaded the website of Rabbi Lamm’s sermons under the aegis of the Yeshiva University library that she directs, spoke of the remarkable, sustained traffic that it experienced, with striking spikes during holiday periods. It was evident that only addresses of exceptional quality could generate such a level of activity after a period of initial curiosity.

These indications of what lay in store for a reader of these sermons were reinforced by two experiences. One 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 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).

And so I came to this collection with high expectations.

I was not disappointed. As we shall see, one of the recurring themes of these sermons is the challenge posed by conflicting forces and values: the need to balance them, to integrate them, to choose one

over the other, sometimes to reject both. A preacher preparing a sermon faces a similar challenge, to wit, the need to accommodate two fundamental objectives, both critically important, that often stand in opposition to one another: arousing emotion and engaging the intellect. It hardly needs to be said that emotional appeal does not co-exist comfortably with the careful weighing of arguments that is the essence of intellectual discourse; a sermon that inspires passion and simultaneously triggers serious reflection is a rare accomplishment. On the whole, Rabbi Lamm's sermons tend toward the intellectual, but a remarkable percentage attain both goals. The reader can almost be forgiven for imagining that this extraordinary achievement is a matter of routine.

Derush, or Jewish homiletics, is a genre that takes many forms. Generally speaking, it begins with a classical text, biblical or rabbinic, and uses it – often by means of an interpretation that deviates from the straightforward meaning – as a springboard for the message that follows. At its best, this creative reading retains a genuine connection to the text while conveying a significant insight or exhortation. At its very best, the divergence from the plain meaning will elicit admiration for its adroitness and cleverness, thus enhancing the likelihood of internalizing and remembering the message. Even in the hands of a master, not every sermon can be *derush* at its very best, but here again, the percentage of selections represented in this collection that approach or exemplify that rarefied category exceeds all reasonable expectations.

Let us turn, then, to some illustrations of the style and content of these sermons, focusing on the recurring theme of confronting values and forces that stand in tension with one another.

In “Heart Transformation,” we learn that there are two ways of choosing good over evil. In ideal circumstances, we can will our good inclination to prevail over our evil one. But this is often unrealistic; the evil inclination is too powerful simply to be ignored. It must be engaged, confronted, redirected. And here we find brilliant examples of *derush*. The Torah tells us, “Do not stray (*lo taturu*) after your heart.” This means, we are told, that you should not engage those forces in your heart “like a tourist,” taking in their sights and pleasures and allowing them “to take you on a wild spree through life.” Rather, “*vahashevota el levavekha*,” “You should return to your heart,” engaging those very

forces and sublimating them. The grammatical form “*vahashevota*” does not easily yield Rabbi Lamm’s interpretation, and the Jewish Publication Society translation renders the Hebrew phrase as “keep in mind,” which more or less represents its straightforward intent in idiomatic English. Nonetheless, it is Rabbi Lamm’s *derush* that retains the original meanings of the Hebrew roots of both the verb and the noun. This is a striking example of how the very words of the text can be lost in a translation that conveys the plain meaning, and they can be recovered in an act of homiletical creativity.

Two sermons explore the relationship between quotidian, routine existence and moments of passion. The first of these sermons addresses sin and the second examines service to God. In “The Religious Foundations of Business,” delivered on the Labor Day weekend following Martin Luther King’s historic march on Washington, Rabbi Lamm moves from the weekly portion’s prohibition of the dishonest use of weights and measures to Labor Day to the march through a set of transitions that make those moves appear utterly natural and seamless. The connection between improper business practices and Labor Day is straightforward. As to the march on Washington, one might expect that the common thread would be the requirement to pursue justice. Instead we find a subtler and deeper connection. The gravity of dishonest business practices is rooted in the fact that they represent ingrained, pervasive sin rather than behavior that takes place in the heat of passion. Similarly, the oppression of blacks was an entrenched, routine sin that pervaded American society for generations.

The other sermon built on this theme, “Acts of Kindness,” ponders the difference between serving God in moments of passion and exaltation and serving Him steadfastly in daily life. With all the experiences of high drama that marked Moses’ life, Rabbi Lamm sees him as an exemplar of the latter. His quiet death without drama or fanfare is a mirror of his unwavering commitment to God in life, and the evocative description of that death is one of the most moving paragraphs in this volume.

So far, the differing or conflicting forces and values that we have examined have a positive valence or are at worst neutral. Other sermons that fit this paradigm address the proper balance of “Law and Love,” nationalism and religion (“The Lord’s Children”), individual and

society, and freedom and dignity (“The Limits of Individualism”). But we also find sermons in which Rabbi Lamm warns us about conflicting extremes that are both objectionable and need to be avoided.

“What It Means to Live” exhorts us to reject a monastic ideal and at the same time not to succumb to the allure of undisciplined life in the world. The first point, says Rabbi Lamm, does not have to be made to his audience:

All this having been said, I confess to the irrelevance of this polemic to this particular congregation. After a decade of service in this community, I have yet to come across the first case where my services were desperately needed to dissuade some noble soul in this congregation who was ready to liquidate his business and abandon his wife and children because he was gripped by an irresistible passion to go off into the wilderness, there broodingly to contemplate the glory of God in splendid isolation.¹

On the other hand, the need to beware of the other extreme is far more pressing. That extreme is the hedonistic, drug-filled life of the “Now Generation.” Here we are witness to Rabbi Lamm’s exceptional gift for the brilliant turn of phrase. Adherents of that life style, he says, have their own version of Psalm 23: “My pot and my acid, they shall comfort me.” And then he encapsulates that life style in an inspired reversal of Marx’s famous observation: “Opium is the religion of the masses.”

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1. This caustic passage reminded me of a remark made by Prof. Mark Steiner of the Hebrew University as we drove back one evening from the *Mincha* and *Ma’ariv* service at the Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills in Queens. The brief class between the two prayers was devoted to the theme of rejecting extreme asceticism. As we drove along Main Street, Prof. Steiner remarked, “We are passing three kosher pizza stores, three meat restaurants, and two dairy restaurants, and he thinks that what we need to be told is that we must avoid excessive asceticism.”
 2. In precisely the year when this sermon was delivered, I was in the very early stages of my teaching career, which began in Yeshiva College. We were discussing the impact of the prohibition of gentile wine on the economic activities of medieval Jewry. Since one reason for this prohibition was the concern that drinking together might lead to intermarriage, I was asked why gentile whiskey was not prohibited. During

In “Defeat as the Fruit of Despair,” we confront two extremes of a more profound nature that are also to be avoided. Sin can result from a misplaced confidence in one’s immunity from its consequences (Deuteronomy 29:18). In Rabbi Lamm’s typically striking formulation, “The childish illusion of immortality gives rise to the adult myth of immunity from the fruits of immorality.” But another, perhaps even more insidious facilitator of sin is a sense of despair rooted in one’s perceived inability to live up to the demands of the Torah. Here we are introduced to the hasidic message that maintaining a sense of self-worth is indispensable to waging a successful struggle to resist the blandishments of the evil inclination. Rabbi Lamm, as an effective preacher, does not simply denounce his audience for their misdeeds – though he does not hesitate to do this, he also provides an uplifting message that imbues them with confidence that they can live up to their higher calling.

Finally, we arrive at the very last sermon. Here we find conflicting forces that co-exist, that interact, that merge, that live in fruitful tension. We are afforded a glimpse into Simḥat Torah during the Yom Kippur War: joy in adversity, rejoicing in tears. If nothing else rendered this book worthy of attention – and, as we have seen, this is as counterfactual a proposition as one can muster – the remarkable, exhilarating paragraphs that mark its conclusion would make it all worthwhile.

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the subsequent discussion, someone asked a question that led to one of my most embarrassing moments as a professor. Bread baked by gentiles, called *pat nokhrim* or *pat akum*, is also prohibited according to some rabbinic opinions. The question, as I imagined it, was “What about *pat*?” I began to speak about the bread of gentiles. As I noticed the smiles, and eventually the chuckles, of the students, the dimensions of my misunderstanding started to dawn on me.

Editor's Preface

As it has been for the last four volumes, it is once again an honor to present to the reader this selection of Rabbi Norman Lamm's sermons on the book of Deuteronomy.

The last of the Five Books of Moses recounts Moses' final words to his people, who would be entering the Land of Israel and were in need of words of encouragement, guidance, and instruction. In the sermons collected in this volume, Rabbi Lamm offered his own words of teaching and insight to his listeners, inspiring them to be strong and resolute when faced with diverse and unanticipated national and religious crises, including the Yom Kippur War and the Water-gate scandal. As always, Rabbi Lamm addressed these momentous events with his keen intellect, sharp exegetical eye, and unyielding and unwavering faith.

These sermons are presented as they were first articulated, with only minor editorial tweaks. The "current events" referenced in many of the *derashot* are an integral part of the power and relevance of the pieces, and thus those parts that describe them in detail have been retained so that the reader can best appreciate the historical and communal situation that Rabbi Lamm was responding to at the time. On occasion, the

reader will note certain sensitivities of language that have developed since these words were first spoken.

As in the previous volumes of this series, much gratitude is owed to the many individuals who assisted in the production of this volume. As these sermons were gleaned from the selection on the Lamm Heritage website at Yeshiva University, many thanks go to the Dean of Libraries of Yeshiva University, Mrs. Pearl Berger, whose idea it was to create such a wonderful online collection of *derashot*. Many thanks to Ms. Hilda Tejada for her work in preparing this volume for publication, as well as to Adam Joseph Neuman, Tova Ross, Jina Davidovich, and Jonathan Schwab for their assistance. Dr. David Berger's characteristically insightful and humorous foreword is tremendously appreciated. And as always, this volume would not be possible without the enthusiastic encouragement from my wife, Ahuva Warburg Halpern, and the entire Lamm, Dratch, Halpern, and Warburg families. Lastly, my sincerest appreciation goes to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Tomi Mager and the entire Maggid team for their hard work on producing the beautiful volume you hold in your hand.

The publication of this book was made possible by the OU Press as well as the support of the Michael Scharf Publication Trust of RIETS/Yeshiva University Press, which, for many decades, has played a vital role in the production of Torah scholarship under the auspices of Yeshiva University.

From the moment they were first spoken, the words in this volume cried out "*kitvuni ledorot*," "write me for generations" (*Megilla* 7a). Indeed, may they echo for generations to come.

Devarim¹

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1. Editor's note: Because of Rabbi Lamm's summer schedule, no sermons were available for *Parashat Devarim* and *Parashat VaEthanán*. With Rabbi Lamm's approval, we have moved two sermons from their original place in order to fill this lacuna. "Law and Love," which addresses material appearing in more than one *parasha* in Deuteronomy and analyzes large themes that pervade the book, was moved from its original context of *Parashat Ki Tetzei* to *Parashat Devarim*. "Being Commanded to Love" was moved to *Parashat VaEthanán* from *Parashat Ekev* because it addresses a verse in *Parashat VaEthanán* in the context of its central theme. A few phrases in the original have been modified in order to reflect this change in location.

*Law and Love*¹

The book of Deuteronomy contains within it numerous laws relevant to the Israelites' anticipated life in the Land of Israel. The *sidra* of *Shoftim*, which we will read in a few weeks' time, deals primarily with society and government. We are told to install judges and police administration "in all your gates," i.e., in your cities (Deuteronomy 16:18). In contrast, in the very next *sidra*, *Ki Tetzei*, we deal primarily with family and home, and we are told, in reference to the captive woman, "you shall bring her into your home" (Deuteronomy 21:12). Thus, the first of these portions deals with city, the second with home.

One would expect, therefore, that the treatment be radically different in each case – that the case mentioned in *Shoftim* be expressed in the form of laws, while *Ki Tetzei* be presented in the idiom of moral advice. *Shoftim*, which deals with the types of government that the Israelites are to establish upon their entry into the land, should be a portion abounding in rigorous and exacting standards of justice, while *Ki Tetzei* should contain mostly preachments on love and tenderness and

1. September 16, 1967.

gentleness. After all, government and society are based on the principle of *mora*, of fear of authority and respect for the rights of others. Otherwise, anarchy prevails. Thus did the Rabbis (*Avot* 3:2) teach, “If not for this principle of respect for authority, people would swallow each other up alive.” That is why society and government require the institution of law and the principle of justice: “Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20). But family and home are built on love and affection and friendship, and hence one would expect that law as such be at a minimum.

Yet, surprisingly, that is not so. In both portions we find a very large number of rules and regulations. *Ki Tetzei*, indeed, is full of prosaic laws.

How can we explain that this latter *sidra* – and this is characteristic of all of Torah – presents its doctrine of marriage and family life in legal form, full of commandments and prohibitions, of laws and duties? How can the modern mentality understand that these laws referring to family life should constitute as much as one fourth of the entire *Shulhan Arukh*, the code of Jewish law?

First, let us repeat what a recent rabbinic writer said, something which appears rather astounding and yet is completely true: Woe to the couple that regulates its married life solely on the basis of the *Shulhan Arukh*! Law adjudicates rival claims; it attempts to reconcile conflicting demands. Whereas such accommodation of conflicting claims can save a bad domestic situation from disintegrating entirely, it is certainly not the ideal way to live a married life. It is unfortunate if husband and wife, or parents and children, think only of their rights and their demands upon each other. For a family to be successful there must be love and patience and tenderness and a willingness to forgive and forget and forgo. Thus does the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 41a) teach that the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18), refers in the first instance to one’s wife! And Maimonides codifies as Jewish law (*Hilkhot Ishut* 15:19) the statement of the Sages that a man should honor his wife more than himself (in the sense of providing for her), and love her as much as himself.

Having said all this – and it should be understood as a self-evident principle – we must add that love itself is an insufficient basis

for life. King Solomon, the wisest of all men, proclaimed that, “Love is as strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6). Love is powerful, one of the most powerful forces in the universe, but, unregulated and undirected, it can also be deadly and destructive.

Why is this so?

First, without law we cannot distinguish between licit and illicit love – the limits of love’s expression are gone, and one does not know where it will lead.

Second, human love, for all its eminence in life and in doctrine, does not remain the highest value of all. Judaism teaches that one must submit his entire life and most cherished commitments to the higher authority of God Himself. There is a love that transcends our love for parents and wife and children – and that is love for God. There is a judgment that surpasses any human judgment no matter how ethical – and that is the divine judgment. This, indeed, is a teaching of the *Akeda*: Abraham, despite his passionate and deathless love for his only son, bows his head and submits to the divine decree to offer up his only son as a sacrifice. The law of God takes precedence over the love of man.

Third, without law, love not only fails to conquer all, but it destroys all – including itself! Law is that which allows love to endure within the context of life. The *mitzvot* provide the framework in which true and authentic love can flourish; otherwise it is in danger of spending itself prematurely. Look at our society – rarely before in human history has the word “love” been as popular. Love is, indeed, the cheapest commodity available on the market today. It fills the scrapbooks of countless teenagers, it is the major component of all pulp magazines, it is sentimentally blared forth on television and peddled in the cinema. At the same time, our society is successively discarding all traditional laws and religious and moral restraints. Yet who is it who will maintain that human relations nowadays are unusually characterized by an excess of love? The “hippies” recognize this cynicism and cant and hypocrisy that lie at the heart of modern society. They are sensitive to this corruption and this rot, this total lack of genuine love. Yet they make the disease worse by giving unrestrained expression to what they consider love while at

the same time abandoning all laws and restraints which alone can make it meaningful. Their life is therefore immoral, uncreative, and astoundingly self-centered. Any sane person – especially one over thirty! – can see that this is a caricature of love and life. Like a living cartoon, it exposes the ludicrous bluff and bluster in society; but it has no solutions to offer, no cures for the ills it protests. It cannot therefore be taken as a serious social movement.

So, Judaism appreciates the importance of love as a basic ingredient in successful human relations. But it knows that love cannot flourish if we do not place it in the context of justice, if it does not have the protection of laws and duties and restraints. Those who can and do experience love must direct it and orient it properly and must always consider its effects on others – even on the unborn.

Finally, we must not ignore those (and they may well be the vast majority of human beings) who cannot or do not experience love. Such people have every right to a decent life and to the protection of their children and their progeny – no less so than those blessed with the gift of feeling love.

It is precisely because of Judaism's concern for the integrity of marriage and home that it legislates on such matters, specifically in the book that we began reading today, which is addressed to the Israelites on the cusp of their settlement of their new home in the Land of Israel. In fact, the more important the subject, the more does Judaism hedge it about with laws. Torah considers marriage and family and *yihus* (the legitimacy of lineage) so significant, that it must not be left to the whim of sudden passion or instantaneous infatuation.

That is why the laws of divorce and marriage abound in such complex technicalities. Marriage is a lifelong relationship of the most significant and far-reaching consequences which is initiated by a single ceremony or contract. Therefore, we must make sure that both parties know exactly what they are doing, that both offer their free and untrammled consent, in order that no avoidable errors be perpetrated. Hence, the *Halakha's* insistence upon the formality of the ring, of the witnesses, of the proper quorum, and so forth – so that there be no misinterpretation of what is occurring.

As such, it now becomes clear why, while the Torah mandates a judicial system and the creation of a just society and government, it also mandates laws of love, laws of the home. After all, without proper divine guidance on the micro level of the household, there would be little hope of the proper sense of justice in the public square. And it was justice and righteousness, on all levels, that the Israelites would need to establish and maintain, as they began their lives in the Land of Israel.