

Norman Lamm

DERASHOT
LEDOROT
GENESIS

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FOREWORD BY

Meir Y. Soloveichik

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Foreword

Meir Y. Soloveichik

In an article in the *Weekly Standard*,¹ the essayist Joseph Epstein once wrote with annoyance of how cell phones have changed what was once a quiet commute to work:

Everyone, I suspect, has had a moment when he wished he could grab the cell phone from a boisterous talker and smash it on the sidewalk. A friend of mine named Ann Poole told me about sitting on a commuter train from her suburb into Chicago, in front of a young woman who made no fewer than ten cell phone calls to friends, explaining in great detail why she was changing the restaurant in which she was giving a lunch party that Saturday... in a loud and irritating voice, she left elaborate instructions on voice mail about the change in plan along with the reasons for the change. “Hi, this is Amy Hemstead [I’m making up the name], and I thought I’d let you know that I’ve changed the location of Saturday’s lunch from the Zodiac Cafe to Phil Stefani’s. We’re still

1. 11:30 (April 2006).

meeting at noon...” My friend Ann, who fervently believes that trains are for reading not phoning, seethed in a quiet but genuine rage. “Did you do anything about it?” I asked. “I said nothing,” she replied, “but when I got to work, I called Stefani’s and, using dear Amy’s name, I cancelled her reservation for Saturday.”

On *Kol Nidrei* night, 1965, Rabbi Norman Lamm delivered a sermon entitled “Divine Silence or Human Static?” His thesis was that if we do not hear the voice of God in today’s day and age, it is not because God is not speaking, but because we are not listening, because, in his words,

We are too busy talking. We are too involved in so many other things that are inconsequential and meaningless. Our society is too wordy, we are drowned in the verbosity of our mass media of communication. Words come to us not in sentences, but in veritable torrents, from mass media.

If there was too much human static and mass media in 1965, imagine how difficult it must be today for the still, small voice of the divine to penetrate. When our world has gotten so much noisier, and human listeners so spiritually insensitive, the voice of God becomes reduced to the question asked in the cell phone commercial: Can you hear me now? It is in a world of so many distractions, so much noise and *narishkeit*, that we are in such desperate need of the gifted *darshan* to hone and focus our minds to hear the voice of God. For the art of listening, in Rabbi Lamm’s own words, “involves more than the use of the ear. It means opening one’s heart, one’s mind, one’s soul, and sharpening one’s sensitivity to listen to the divine voice.” It is the *darshan* that helps us sharpen this sensitivity, and this book contains the words of a master communicator, or, as he has called himself, an “unrepentant *darshan*.”

Since the Lamm archives were first published online, it has been my privilege to immerse myself in the PDFs of sermons painstakingly typed out on an ancient machine known as the typewriter. And in these pages I have discovered a world which existed not that long ago, and which, in certain respects, was quite different from our own age. It was a world in which Orthodoxy appeared outmoded and irrelevant, on its

way out, and it was in this age that this young rabbi engaged in a passionate defense of the Torah and the relevance of its obligations to our lives.

United States Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, reflecting on all the readings of briefs and all the composing of opinions that take place at the court, commented as follows: “I used to tell my son, ‘You see? If you do your homework really well, you can get a job where you do homework for the rest of your life.’” In Rabbi Lamm’s sermons I discovered a young rabbi, around the age I am now, who exhorted his congregants that being successful, modern, American adults was no excuse for lack of spiritual homework, that they were obligated to work every day at growing in their connection to God, knowledge of His Torah, and observance of His mitzvot. He did so through his extraordinary *derush*, in which the beauty of the Torah and its laws were made relevant and clear to congregants in a symphony of gorgeous, passionate prose.

Today, of course, thanks to the efforts of Rabbi Lamm and others, we live a proud, thriving, unabashed Orthodoxy. And yet, as Rabbi Lamm himself noted in a 1986 essay, despite the extraordinary amount of Torah study in today’s day and age, the homiletical beauty, or *derush*, that produced these original defenses of Judaism can scarcely be found in synagogues today; we have experienced, in Rabbi Lamm’s own words, a “loss of verbal potency.” Ironically, in our noisy world, because we have so much language, so much email and texts and tweets, so many words, we no longer take the time to craft them with care.² And that is a shame, for, as Rabbi Lamm noted, if halakha is the science of Torah, then *derush* is its art, its song. It is the way that the beauty of the Torah can be exposed, so that not only the words, but the song of Torah can be sounded generation after generation.

One of my ancestors, Reb Yitzchak Zev Soloveichik, the father of the Beit HaLevi, was one of the few religious Jews known in his age able to speak Russian eloquently. As such, he was often asked to represent members of the Jewish community on trial before the Russian court. Punning off the name “Soloveichik,” which means “little nightingale,” Reb Yitzchak Zev would be asked by the Russian prosecutor, “What will the *solovei* sing now?” This is a question that I ask myself as I seek to

2. See “Under the Terebinth” in this volume.

craft *derashot* today. What will the *solovei* sing now? How can I follow in the footsteps of Rabbi Lamm, and attempt to inspire a new generation by engaging in the art of *derush*? How can I defend the truths and traditions of Orthodoxy, which today remain on trial in much of the world? It is at this moment that I have, time and again, been inspired by the insights and art of Rabbi Lamm, and I eagerly seized the opportunity to quote him and his words to a new generation, my own humble attempt at a *solovei's* song, drawing on the sheet music of a maestro. In a noisy world so desperately in need of inspiration, I am so grateful for this gift.

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Editor's Preface

Stuart W. Halpern

It is an honor to present to the reader this selection of Rabbi Norman Lamm's sermons on the book of Genesis. Selected from among the numerous *derashot* given by Rabbi Lamm between the years 1952 and 1976 in both Congregation Kodimoh in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Jewish Center in New York, New York, these *divrei Torah* are no less powerful or pertinent today. The luminance of the exegesis, the sharpness of the observations, and the care and concern for *Am Yisrael*, *Torat Yisrael*, and *Medinat Yisrael* that they convey can best be described by the words in Deuteronomy 34:7 describing Moses' skin: "*Lo nas leho*," their "natural force" has not abated. As examples of passionate pulpit pedagogy, brilliant biblical insight, and steadfast communal commitment, these essays stand in testimony to a master rabbi and teacher, whose words spoke to his congregants – when they faced war, political upheaval, social unrest, and rapidly developing technology – and continue to speak to us today.

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 to which Rabbi Lamm was responding at the time. On occasion, the reader will note certain sensitivities of language that have developed since these words first were spoken.

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*. Rabbi Mark Dratch's helpful guidance throughout the entire process of creating this volume, as well as his assistance in locating many of the sources cited within, was truly invaluable. Mr. Shalom Lamm's ongoing support is also tremendously appreciated, as is the enthusiastic encouragement from my wife, Ahuva Warburg Halpern, and the entire Lamm, Dratch, Halpern, and Warburg families. I would also like to thank Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik for his heartfelt and eloquent foreword. 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. Many thanks are also due to the entire Maggid Books team, Mrs. Deena Nataf, and Mrs. Nechama Unterman for ensuring the high quality of this volume.

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

Bereshit

*Reflections on the Divine Image*¹

P*arashat Bereshit* teaches us one of the most fundamental concepts of our faith. It is something we speak of often, and that is perhaps why we frequently fail to appreciate its depth and the magnitude of its influence. The concept of man's creation *betzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, is one of the most sublime ideas that man possesses, and is decisive in the Jewish concept of man.

What does it mean when we say that man was created in the image of God? Varying interpretations have been offered, each reflecting the general ideological orientation of the interpreter.

The philosophers of Judaism, the fathers of our rationalist tradition, maintain that the image of God is expressed, in man, by his intellect. Thus, Sa'adia Gaon and Maimonides maintain that *sekhel*, reason, which separates man from animal, is the element of uniqueness that is in essence a divine quality. The intellectual function is thus what characterizes man as *tzelem Elohim*.

However, the ethical tradition of Judaism does not agree with that interpretation. Thus, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, in his *Mesilat*

1. October 15, 1960.

Yesharim, does not accept reason as the essence of the divine image. A man can, by exercise of his intellect, know what is good – but fail to act upon it. Also, the restriction of *tzelem Elohim* to reason means that only geniuses can truly qualify as being created in the image of God. Hence, Luzzatto offers an alternative and perhaps more profound definition. The *tzelem Elohim* in which man was created is that of *ratzon* – the freedom of will. The fact that man has a choice – between good and evil, between right and wrong, between obedience and disobedience of God – is what expresses the image of God in which he was born. An animal has no freedom to act; a man does. That ethical freedom makes man unique in the creation.

But how does the freedom of the human will express itself? A man does not assert his freedom by merely saying “yes” to all that is presented to him. Each of us finds himself born into a society which is far from perfect. We are all born with a set of animal drives, instincts, and intuitions. If we merely nod our heads in assent to all those forces which seem more powerful than us, then we are merely being passive, plastic, and devoid of personality. We are then not being free, and we are not executing our divine right of choice. Freedom, the image of God, is expressed in the word “no.” When we negate that which is indecent, evil, ungodly; when we have the courage, the power, and the might to rise and announce with resolve that we shall *not* submit to the pressures to conform to that which is cheap, that which is evil, that which is indecent and immoral – then we are being free men and responding to the inner divine image in which we are created.

The late Rabbi Aaron Levine, the renowned Reszher Rav, interpreted, in this manner, the famous verse from Ecclesiastes (3:19) which we recite every morning as part of our preliminary prayers. Solomon tells us, “*Umotar ha’adam min habeheima ayin*,” which is usually translated as, “And the preeminence of man over beast is naught.” Rabbi Levine, however, prefers to give the verse an interpretation other than the pessimistic, gloomy apparent meaning. He says: “And the preeminence of man over beast is – *ayin*, ‘no.’” What is it that gives man his distinction? What is it that makes man different from the rest of creation, superior to the rest of the natural world? It is his capacity to say *ayin*, his capacity to face the world and announce that he will *not* submit to it, that he

will accept the challenge and respond “no”. An animal has no choice – no freedom – and therefore must say “yes” to his drives, to the world in which he lives. But a human being *can* say “no” to that which is unseemly and beneath his dignity. And when he says “no” to all that is ungodly, he is being Godly. He is showing that he was created in the image of God.

Adam and Eve had to learn this lesson, and their descendants forever after must learn from their failure. We are nowhere told in the Torah that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was in any way different from the fruit of the other trees in the Garden of Eden. Yet when she was tempted by the serpent, Eve looked at the fruit, and in her mind’s eye its attractiveness grew out of all proportion to reality. It looked more luscious, it looked more juicy, it looked more appetizing. She even imagined that this was some kind of “intelligence food.” Her instinct bade her to do that which was in violation of the divine command. But counter to this she had the capacity, as a free agent created in God’s image, to say *ayin*, to say “no” to her instinct and her temptation. But she forfeited her opportunity. The first human couple did not know how to say “no.” This was the beginning of their downfall.

Abraham was a great Jew – the first Jew. Yet in our tradition he is not famous so much for saying “yes” as he is for saying “no.” Abraham was the great iconoclast. It was he who said “no” to the idolatries of his day, who said “no” to his father’s paganism, who was the one man pitted against the entire world, shouting “no!” to all the obscenities of his contemporary civilization.

Moses was a great teacher. He gave us 613 commandments. When you investigate the commandments, you find that only 248 are positive – commanding us what to do. But 365 of them are negative – they say “no” to our wills and our wishes. For when we learn to say “no,” we are being free men and women under God. The famous Ten Commandments have only three positive laws; the other seven are negative. Indeed, it is only through these negatives that we can live and survive and thrive at all. Without “You shall *not* murder,” there can be no society. Without “You shall *not* steal,” there can be no normal conduct of commerce and business. Without “You shall *not* commit adultery,” there can be no normal family life. Without “You shall *not* covet,” the human personality must degenerate and man becomes nothing more than an animal, a beast.

“And the preeminence of man over beast is *ayin*” – it is this which gives man greater dignity and superiority over the animal – his power to say “no.” It is this freedom of the human personality taught by our Jewish tradition that we Jews must reassert once again in our own day.

The author Herman Wouk told me some time ago that a number of years earlier he was boarding a ship to go on a trip overseas. Several hours after he boarded, a cabin boy brought him a note from the apostate Jewish author Shalom Asch, asking Wouk to come to his cabin. There Asch complained to him and said, “I don’t understand you, Mr. Wouk. You are a young man – yet you are observant and Orthodox. When my generation of writers was young, we were rebels, we were dissenters. We rejected tradition, we rejected authority, we rejected the opinions of the past. What happened to you? Why do you conform so blandly?”

Wouk gave the older man an answer that I believe is very important for all of us to know. He answered, “You are making a terrible mistake, Mr. Asch. You seem to forget that the world we live in is not a paradise of Jewishness. You seem to forget that the world we occupy has become corrupted, assimilated, emptied of all Jewish content. In a world of this sort, one does not have to be a rebel at all in order to ignore the high standards of Judaism. If you violate the Sabbath, if you eat like a pagan, if you submit to the cheap standards of morality of the society in which we live, then you are being a conformist; you are merely allowing your own animal instincts to get the better of you. Today, if I and some of my contemporaries are observing the Jewish tradition, then it is because we are the dissenters, the *nein-sagers*. For we are the ones who say ‘no’ to the desecration of the Sabbath, ‘no’ to the creeping assimilation that ridicules all of Judaism and threatens its very life, ‘no’ to all the forces that seek to degrade our people and diminish the uniqueness of Israel that is its dignity and its preeminence. You are the conformist.”

This is the kind of force, the kind of courage, the kind of conviction that has sustained us throughout the ages. It is that which has given us the power to say “no” to the threats of Haman, the cruelties of Chmielnicki, the genocide of Hitler, as well as the sugarcoated missionizing of more enlightened enemies of Judaism. We demonstrated the image of God when we exercised our freedom and said “no” to all this.

I am not suggesting that we ought to be destructively negative. It is, rather, that when we fully exercise our critical functions and faculties, then the good will come to the fore of itself. It is because I have confidence in the innate powers of the good that I suggest we concentrate on denying evil. "Depart from evil and do good" (Psalms 34:15). If you pit all your energies into negating evil, then good will be done of its own accord.

It is this power to say "no" that we must exercise in our relations with our fellow Jews in the State of Israel. For, in addition to all our constructive efforts on behalf of the upbuilding of the land, we must also be able to call a halt to the creeping paganism that plagues it.

When we find that in our own Orthodox community in Israel certain things are done which serve only to desecrate the name of God, we must not be shy. We must rise and as one say "no" to all those forces which would compromise the sanctity of the Torah and the sanctity of the Holy Land.

In our own American Jewish community, we must, here too, be the critics. And when, to mention just a seemingly trivial matter, certain artists and entertainers who are Jewish, and who rely upon the community as such for acceptance of what they have to offer, elect to entertain on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, we must say "no." We must realize that it is no longer the domain of one's own conscience, when the matter is a public demonstration of contempt for American Jewry. "And the preeminence of man over beast is *ayin*" – we must not sheepishly go along with everything that "famous people" are willing to tell us. We must be men, we must be human beings, we must use the freedom that God gave us when He created us in His image, and learn when to say "no."

I conclude with the statement by one of the greatest teachers of Judaism, a man who indeed showed, in his life, that he knew the value of "no." It was Rabbi Akiba, the man who was able to stand up to the wrath and the might of the whole Roman Empire and say "no" to tyranny and to despotism, who taught us, "Beloved is man that he was created in the image of God" (*Avot* 3:18). Beloved indeed, and precious and unique and irreplaceable is man when he has the freedom of will that is granted to him by his Creator. And furthermore, "*Hiba yeteira noda'at lo shenivra*

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betzelem” – a special love was given to man by God, it is a special gift when man not only *has* that freedom but when he *knows* that he has that freedom – and therefore uses it to combat evil and to allow the great, constructive forces of good, innate in himself, to come to the fore so as to make this a better world for all mankind.