

The Genius of Norman Lamm, z”l

Jewish Commentary

by **Meir Y. Soloveichik**

One Yom Kippur, a young rabbi in a prominent New York synagogue delivered a sermon titled “Divine Silence or Human Static?” His inspiration was a rabbinic statement that “every day, a divine voice issues forth from Sinai.” The question, this rabbi reflected, was obvious: If the voice of God continues to thunder forth, why is it not heard? His answer was that if we do not hear God in today’s day and age, it is not because God is not speaking, but because “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.”

One can easily imagine these words being spoken today as a description of the digital age. Yet they were said in 1965 by Norman Lamm, who passed away at the end of May. Lamm ultimately became the president of Yeshiva University, saved that institution from bankruptcy, and propounded in writings and rhetoric its affiliated philosophy of Modern, or Centrist, Orthodoxy. He is without question one of the most significant figures in American Judaism in the past half century. In the face of this legacy, it is easy to miss that, prior to assuming leadership of Yeshiva, Norman Lamm

was the greatest composer of sermons in the English-speaking rabbinic world.

Every single sermon he delivered from 1952 to 1976 is now available online in the Lamm Sermon Archive. Reading the PDFs of these typewritten pages, complete with edits added by hand, one senses the labor of love that produced them, the attention painstakingly paid to both substance and style. This man practiced homiletics not merely as a duty but a delight. The sermons take one through the Torah's text, but also the issues of the day: Israel's early years, Kennedy's assassination, the moon landing, Vietnam, the Six-Day and Yom Kippur Wars. In its breadth, few other collections of sermons in Jewish history can compare.

To read them is to discover homiletics as a lost art. In the 1980s, Peggy Noonan reflected, "The irony of modern speeches is that as our ability to disseminate them has exploded, nevertheless their quality has declined. Why? Lots of reasons, including that we as a nation no longer learn the rhythms of public utterance from Shakespeare and the Bible." She urged speechwriters to respect the audience by aiming high: "Be honest and logical in your approach and they will understand every word you say and hear—and know—that you thought of them." Writing at almost exactly the same time, after he had left the pulpit, Rabbi Lamm reflected that if rabbinic rhetoric was no longer rising to the occasion, it was because "part and parcel of today's society is the loss

of verbal potency.” Preaching “is a form of communication; rhetoric demands verbal skills,” he wrote. “And the art of homiletics therefore suffers along with all other forms of verbal communication. Even if one is endowed with the requisite talents of imagination in interpreting a text, he lacks the skills needed to express himself.”

These were not skills Norman Lamm lacked, and he used them to hone a message about the modern world. The *New York Times* obituary described him as “the longtime leader of Yeshiva University who nurtured it as a centrist Orthodox Jewish institution that encouraged engagement with the secular world.” That is true. But in his sermons, Lamm also consistently criticized the spiritual flaws of modernity. Speaking of Adam in Eden, who foolishly fled following his sin, thinking that there was somewhere devoid of the divine, Lamm suggested that we have restaged the same scenario.

“Modern man,” he said, “repeats the same syndrome—with even more tragic results. We have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge like no generation before us—and we have found the fruits bitter; for such is the taste of radioactive ash. We have developed science and technology at an incredible pace. Yet we have become what in Jewish literature is known as *hakham le'hareia*, ‘wise for our own hurt.’ Our genius has proved an evil genius. With our increase in knowledge has come a shrinkage of wisdom; with the conquest of the universe, we have discovered that we have let our own lives lie fallow; learning to make a living, we have forgotten how to live; exploring outer

space, we have ignored the thunderous silence of our inner space and inner void.”

Lamm concluded that modern man “gets even with God; once He expelled us from Paradise, now we shall build ourselves a little Paradise and keep Him out.”

What was true of America in general applied, in his view, especially to American Jewry, who he thought had eschewed the opportunity offered by America to embrace both their faith and society. In 1961, Lamm visited Fatehpur Sikri, an ancient city in India that had been abandoned because it was built without regard for a water source. Lamm returned to New York and saw parallels in his own civilization:

As a community, we American Jews have come dangerously close to doing just that. In too many instances we have built fabulous public Jewish institutions—charitable, educational, social—without any regard to G-d, Torah, Judaism....A

Jewish-sponsored university in Massachusetts is one of the most heavily endowed schools in the country. But its builders forgot all about God....Jewish country clubs in the most fashionable neighborhoods are elaborate, ornate structures which have everything—except the vital source of Jewishness...we have become Fahtepur Sikris, having everything but the Source of living waters—G-d. Life has run dry. Our social

lives are bathed in cocktails, but the soul is parched. Outside we are the envy of our neighbors; inside we are dried up.

What Norman Lamm said on that Yom Kippur more than half a century ago is even more true today. We live an age of torrents of words, a multitude of media, but while it has become *easier* to communicate, that does not mean we have become better at it. He reminds rabbis, and really anyone in a public position, that particularly when whatever we say and write can be preserved forever, it is our obligation to weigh every word, carefully fashion every phrase. Yet in today's digital world, with the advent of every controversy, some rabbis and other Jewish public figures are tempted at times to take to Twitter, or fulminate on Facebook, or propound from the pulpit, without giving every single word the careful consideration that Rabbi Lamm would every week.

One Sabbath, while still in his twenties, Norman Lamm delivered a sermon on the tale of the Tower of Babel, whose builders, creating an arrogant monument to their might, were punished by God by a sudden inability to speak to one another. Babel, the Torah tells us, was given its name because of the root *balol*, to confuse, describing the linguistic result. But as he noted, this is a sarcastic pun; originally the Mesopotamians themselves called their city Babel because in their language the name was derived from the words *Bab-ili*, meaning the "gate of the god." It is only in Hebrew that "Babel" is etymologically linked to "confusion." This, he argued, is the inside joke:

What the builders thought was their gate to their own divinity was nothing more than the “confusion of their poor minds.”

Reading the sermon today, I fear it speaks to our own age all too well. Biblical Babylon was the first technological society; I worry that today, with all our technological methods of communication, what we are left with is babble. In the face of this human static, we can turn to a sermon archive where the homiletics of a true artist can pierce our cacophonous cocoon, and make the sound of Sinai heard again.