

The Search for the Elusive Center: Norman Lamm and American Orthodoxy

By: LAWRENCE GROSSMAN

Soon after assuming the presidency of Yeshiva University in 1976, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm renamed Modern Orthodoxy, the religious community with which he had long identified. Calling it Centrist Orthodoxy, he hoped to clarify the movement's ideology and enhance its attractiveness. The failure of the attempted rebranding both illustrated and compounded the internal contradictions of an Orthodox Judaism open to the intellectual and social currents of the wider world.

Modernism and Its Discontents

Lamm had long expressed unhappiness with the term Modern Orthodox. In a Shavuot sermon delivered on May 23, 1969, at The Jewish Center, where he served as rabbi, Lamm said, "I flinch when I articulate the words." The same year, writing in the pages of *Jewish Life*, the organ of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU), he called them "dreadfully inadequate," to be used only "with the greatest hesitation." Calling a religious body "orthodox," Lamm felt, was "almost pejorative" since it implied "a stifling and unthinking narrow-mindedness," while "modern," with its connotation of preference for the new and trendy, "is amusingly pretentious; it adds nothing to the validity or invalidity of a proposition." Three years later, he called Modern Orthodoxy "an unhappy semantic hybrid."¹

¹ Norman Lamm, "The Arrogance of Modernism," in Lamm, *Torah Beloved: Reflections on the Love of Torah and the Celebration of the Holiday of Matan Torah*, ed. Daniel Gober (New York: Ktav and OU Press, 2020), p. 33; idem., "Modern Orthodoxy's Identity Crisis," *Jewish Life*, May–June 1969, p. 5; idem., *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (Ktav: Hoboken, NJ, 1972), p. xv.

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He was hardly alone in his view.

The negative connotation of the designation Orthodox had been widespread for some time. In 1946, the year Lamm entered college, the first issue of *Jewish Life* editorialized that “‘Orthodox’ Judaism is an ill-fitting name” because it “suggests something rigid, motionless and static,” while traditional Judaism was in fact “dynamic and progressive throughout.”² Six years later, while Lamm was serving as assistant rabbi at the Kehilath Jeshurun synagogue in Manhattan, its senior rabbi, Joseph H. Lookstein, declared at the convention of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) that “there is nothing Orthodox about the word Orthodox,” and said it should be replaced by “traditional.”³ At an RCA convention a few years later, Lamm’s brother, Rabbi Maurice Lamm, complained that “Orthodox” was a marketing disaster. Since it had, he claimed, “no mass appeal, it provokes the old prejudice before our message is even considered, and it cripples whatever image we wish to foster.” Like Lookstein, he preferred “traditional” which, in his mind, connoted “long,” “honored,” “hallowed,” and “rich.” A Hillel rabbi at the convention suggested “classical Judaism” as an alternative.⁴ Rabbi Leo Jung, senior rabbi at The Jewish Center in New York City, where Lamm began serving as associate rabbi in 1958, claimed credit for introducing his preferred synonym for Orthodoxy, “Torah-true” Judaism—translated from the German—to the United States.⁵

The “Modern” modifier of Orthodox, lacking any precise meaning, hardly helped matters. It was often used to justify not just such externals as clean-shaven rabbis, decorous services, and responsive readings in English, but also the institution of mixed-gender seating and other innovations in the synagogue common to Conservative and a significant number of nominally Orthodox synagogues, but not sanctioned by Orthodox authorities. As late as the mid-20th century, the difference between Modern Orthodox and Conservative Judaism was so unclear as to be invisible to many.

² “Jewish Law in the Making,” *Jewish Life* 1, Oct. 1946, p. 4. The editorial was signed by Trude Weiss-Rosmarin.

³ “What’s in a Name,” *Orthodox Jewish Life* 19, July–Aug. 1952, pp. 3–4.

⁴ David Wachstock, “Orthodox Connotes Long Beard, Foreign Accent,” *Jewish Post and Opinion*, Feb. 12, 1960, p. 8.

⁵ Leo Jung, *The Path of a Pioneer: The Autobiography of Leo Jung* (London and New York: Soncino Press, 1980), p. 126.

By the 1960s, however, Conservative Judaism had established its independent identity.⁶ At the same time, the word Orthodox had lost much of its negative association with the dead past and was taking on instead—even for many who did not practice it—an aura of Jewish authenticity that also offered a wholesome alternative to the perceived hedonism and moral relativism of the youth culture of the time.⁷ But as Orthodoxy's stock rose in part through its rejection of contemporary values, the adjective “Modern,” suggesting at least partial validation of those values, became ever more problematic.⁸

Lamm, in the same 1969 piece that expressed his distaste for the term Modern Orthodox, introduced centrism into the debate. He wrote, “The challenge to our intellectual leadership is clear: to formulate the worldview of ‘modern Orthodoxy’ in a manner that is Halachically legitimate, philosophically persuasive, religiously inspiring, and personally convincing.” He conceded that this was “a tall order” but one “we must fill if the great centrist mass of American orthodox Jews is not to be pulled apart in all directions...” Lamm defined “great centrist mass” as those who both rejected the idea on the right that “Orthodoxy must retreat and wait for the Messiah until it speaks to mankind,” and those on the left willing to compromise with the “atavistic” sexual revolution of the 1960s, “a throwback to pagan debauchery,” as he described it. Lamm gave his “centrist” thrust biblical resonance by citing the Book of Deuteronomy's command that the Jewish people shall not “turn aside neither to the right nor to the left...”⁹ Refining his analysis ten years later, Lamm rejected an

⁶ The process whereby Conservatism gradually shed its Modern Orthodox associations and emerged as a separate movement is traced in Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). In retrospect, the decision to allow driving to synagogue on the Sabbath, documented in *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America*, vol. 14, 1950, pp. 112–88, signaled the final break.

⁷ Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 114–136; Chaim I. Waxman, *Social Change and Halakhic Evolution in American Orthodoxy* (London: Littman, 2017), pp. 73–103.

⁸ An illuminating parallel is the negative connotation the designation “liberal” took on in American politics around that time, as elements of the Democratic Party, beginning with the Coalition for a Democratic Majority set up after the 1972 election debacle, preferred to call themselves “centrist” or “moderate.”

⁹ Lamm, “Modern Orthodoxy's Identity Crisis,” pp. 6–8. The idea of nurturing a moderate Orthodoxy was already in the air at the time, as seen in Jerry Hochbaum, “Middle-of-the Road Orthodoxy: An Alternative to Left and Right Rad-

“Anything Goes” Orthodoxy at one extreme and an “Only One Way” approach at the other, settling instead on “A dialectic of discipline and diversity, a finite pluralism” in which all members accept Torah, “especially in its halakhic commitment, and yet respect each other’s singularity and differences in interpretation and style.” While granting that “such a communal Paradise does not exist,” he did not think it “a Pollyannaish dream.”¹⁰

Inventing Centrist

When Lamm started publicly referring to “Centrist Orthodoxy” a few years after becoming president of Yeshiva University, others sympathetic to his ideological orientation followed suit.¹¹ The new term caught on especially among Orthodox educators associated with Yeshiva University, for whom it was a way to ward off criticism from their Haredi counterparts who competed for students and funding in many communities with the claim that only the most intensive yeshiva education—and certainly not a modern one—could ensure Jewish continuity.¹² Indeed, Lamm’s initial public explanation of what he meant by Centrist Orthodoxy came in a 1985 talk before the YU-affiliated Educators Council of America. Titled

icalism,” *Jewish Life*, July–Aug. 1968, pp. 27–29. Lamm’s use of the word “centrist” may well have been influenced by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), which appeared the year he graduated from college. It argued for a rejection of both laissez-faire and a government-controlled economy, and in favor of a New Deal-style, regulated form of capitalism.

¹⁰ Norman Lamm, “Pluralism and Unity in the Orthodox Jewish Community,” *Jewish Life*, Fall 1979, pp. 41–46.

¹¹ For Lamm’s early use of the term see “So Says Dr. Norman Lamm: Authoritarian Judaism Losing Its Intellectual Independence,” *Jewish Post and Opinion*, Nov. 12, 1982, p. 4, and “Yeshiva U. President Urges that Two Orthodox Congregational Organizations Be Merged,” *JTA*, May 5, 1983. For its use by other rabbis, see Stewart Ain, “Rabbinical Council President Decries Holier-Than-Thou Attitude of Right Wing” (Rabbi Gilbert Klaperman), *Long Island Jewish World*, Mar. 1, 1984, p. 14; and “Orthodox Rabbi Urges Reform Movement to Drop Patri-lineal Descent Decision” (Rabbi Haskell Lookstein), *JTA*, Dec. 19, 1985.

¹² Mordechai Schnaidman, “Integration in Centrist Orthodox Day Schools,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 47, 1979, pp. 11–18, and Alvin Schiff, “The Centrist Torah Educator Faces Critical Ideological and Cultural Challenges,” *Tradition* 19, Winter 1981, pp. 275–89. In an extensive symposium on “The State of Orthodoxy” published in the Spring 1982 issue of *Tradition* (pp. 1–83), Robert S. Hirt, the only contributor to use the term Centrist Orthodoxy, did so in connection with Jewish education (pp. 36–39).

“Some Comments on Centrist Orthodoxy,” his remarks betrayed a certain ambivalence about the new term, suggesting that he meant nothing more than to rebrand Modern Orthodoxy for a changing market that was not particularly impressed by modernity, and not to launch a new iteration of Orthodoxy somewhere on the ideological spectrum between the Modern and Haredi camps. Lamm said:

We seem to be suffering from a terminological identity crisis. We now call ourselves “Centrist Orthodoxy.” There was a time, not too long ago, that we referred to ourselves as “Modern Orthodox.” Others tell us that we should call ourselves simply “Orthodox,” without any qualifiers, and leave it to the other Orthodox groups to conjure up adjectives for themselves. I agree with the last view in principle, but shall defer to the advocates of “Centrist Orthodoxy....”

Curiously, Lamm noted that he had two reasons for preferring the centrist label but gave just one, and even that was less a reason than a verbal shoulder-shrug. He said that it was “a waste of intellectual effort and precious time to argue about titles when there are so many truly significant issues that clamor for our attention.” There was little if any difference between “modern” and “centrist,” Lamm assured his audience: “In no way should the choice of one adjective over the other be invested with any substantive significance or assumed to be a ‘signal’ of ideological position.”

Lamm proceeded to refute a common right-wing argument deployed against “our Centrist outlook”—that it introduced changes in Torah and Jewish law. Yes, he granted, there had been shifts of “emphasis,” but not “substance,” and these did not displace “a single fundamental of Judaism.” Ironically, Lamm justified them by going back to the very language he was seeking to replace, explicitly invoking “the modern experience,”

its openness, its critical stance, its historicism; the democratic experience which, most recently, has raised the serious challenge of the new role of women in family and society; the growth of science and technology, and the scientific method applied to so many fields beyond the natural sciences; almost universal higher worldly education amongst Jews...; the historically wrenching experience of the Holocaust; the miraculous rise of the State of Israel; and the reduction of observant and believing Jews to a small minority of the Jewish people—a condition unknown since the darkest periods of the Biblical era.

He then laid out a three-part platform for Centrism: “*Torah U-madda*, the ‘synthesis’ of Torah and worldly wisdom” as a welcome educational

goal and not just a reluctant concession to economic necessity;¹³ personal and communal moderation, temperance, and tolerance, in the spirit of Maimonides's "middle way," rather than self-righteousness and extremism; and "the centrality of the people of Israel," manifested in love for all Jews and for the State of Israel.¹⁴

While no equivalent Modern Orthodox platform had ever been framed, Lamm's three points could be read as elucidations of the description Charles Liebman had provided of Modern Orthodox Jews two decades earlier: "On the one hand, they seek to demonstrate the viability of the *halakhab* for contemporary life; on the other, they emphasize what they have in common with all other Jews rather than what separates them."¹⁵

The Centrist initiative evoked a variety of responses in the Orthodox world. A reporter described the February 1986 RCA Midwinter Conference as "a forum for defining and staking out a position of 'Centrist Orthodoxy'... in the face of the apparent ascendancy of Orthodox fundamentalism."¹⁶ Taking their cue from Lamm, some Modern Orthodox insiders sought to convey the impression of a broad consensus within non-Haredi Orthodoxy by minimizing—as Lamm did—the significance of the

¹³ See Lawrence Grossman, "The Rise and Fall of Torah U'Madda," *Modern Judaism* 41, Feb. 2021, pp. 71–91.

¹⁴ Norman Lamm, "Some Comments on Centrist Orthodoxy," in Lamm, *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith* (Hoboken, 2002), vol. 1, p. 41 (originally published in *Tradition*, 22, Fall 1986). Clearly, in coordination with Lamm, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein spoke at that same conference on "Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting." Since Lichtenstein was based in Israel and his approach to the subject was typically subtle and complex, his presentation attracted little attention until it was published almost two decades later in Reuven Ziegler, ed., *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God* (Jersey City: KTAV, 2003), pp. 220–51. Ironically, the Hebrew version at etzion.org.il translates "Centrist" as *Moderni*. On Lichtenstein's approach see Alan Brill, "An Ideal Rosh Yeshiva," *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God* and *Leaves of Faith* by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein," *The Edab Journal* 5, Tammuz 2005; and Alan Jotkowitz, "I am in the Middle": Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's Vision of Centrist Orthodoxy," *Hakirah* 22, 2017, pp. 49–66.

¹⁵ Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Year Book 1965*, p. 48, reprinted in Liebman, *Aspects of the Religious Behavior of American Jews* (New York: Ktav, 1974), p. 138.

¹⁶ Larry Yudelson, "RCA Struggles to Carve Out Centrist Orthodox Stand," *Long Island Jewish World*, Feb. 14–20, 1986, cited in "Rabbinical Council of America conference 1986—the last reign of the pulpit rabbis," kavvanah.blog/2014/05/04/rabbinical-council-of-america-conference-1986-the-last-reign-of-the-pulpit-rabbis.

linguistic innovation. The immediate past president of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) declared “center Orthodoxy, Modern Orthodoxy, [and] Religious Zionism” synonymous, and another past president described the rabbinical organization “as a Centrist Orthodox body, some of us a little to its left, some of us to its right.”¹⁷ And in perhaps the first published mention of centrism outside the Orthodox community, historian Marc Lee Raphael similarly referred to “signs of ‘centrist’, ‘modern,’ or mainline Orthodoxy’s revival...”¹⁸

Others, though, thought that “modern” and “centrist” were not synonymous and considered the replacement of the former by the latter of great significance, even while differing over whether it was an improvement or not.

For those attracted to the apparent principled steadfastness of the Orthodox right and finding themselves increasingly uncomfortable in a Modern Orthodox camp they considered compromised by immersion in secular values and a degraded American popular culture, the new centrist language was a welcome change. As the editor of *Young Israel Vienpoint* put it in 1984, many rabbis who once identified as Modern Orthodox

now call themselves “centrist” and find themselves preoccupied with justifying their ideological legitimacy to the right wing. They realize that there can be little further movement within the framework of *halachah* to accommodate feminism and other movements in contemporary society. The rabbis are ultimately constrained by the theological necessity to choose the divinely inspired Torah tradition as the highest truth, which must take precedence when in conflict with the lesser truths of man’s science, logic, and standards of morality.¹⁹

However, other rabbis—mostly older men—who saw modernity as a potential source of positive values had their doubts. Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, an eloquent advocate of Modern Orthodoxy who had been passed over for the YU presidency due, in part, to the community’s growing anti-modernist tendencies, did not directly criticize his successful rival. Yet Rackman, now president of Bar-Ilan University in Israel, undoubtedly had

¹⁷ Louis Bernstein contribution to symposium on “The Strength of Orthodoxy and the State of K’lal Yisrael,” *Jewish Action* Holiday Issue, Fall 1986, p. 12; Bernard Rosenzweig, “The Rabbinical Council of America: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Tradition* 22, Summer 1986, p. 6.

¹⁸ Marc Lee Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism: The Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Traditions in Historical Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 170.

¹⁹ Yaakov Kornreich, “Dialogue Brings Truth to Light,” *Sh’ma*, Oct. 5, 1984, p. 142.

Lamm and Centrism in mind when he insisted in a 1982 newspaper column that Modern Orthodox Jews “are the standard bearers of the authentic tradition.... They do not compromise it or falsify it.” Regretting the “apologetic” tone recently adopted by those in that camp, Rackman insisted that the modernists were often more meticulous in their adherence to Jewish law than their antagonists when it came to behavior toward one’s fellow man.²⁰ Rabbi Walter Wurzbarger was even more outspoken, asserting that Lamm’s avoidance of the word “modern” showed the influence of worldwide cultural trends that produced the Moral Majority in the United States and Islamist fundamentalism in the Middle East, which “hold out the promise of a safe haven offering protection from the corrosive ‘acids of modernity.’” He doubted that Lamm’s approach could attract many Jewish seekers of alleged Orthodox authenticity since the latter were likely to distrust centrists for not going far enough in their rejection of modernity and for making “wishy-washy compromises” with universalistic liberal values. To succeed, he wrote, Lamm’s program “must vindicate itself by demonstrating that its position reflects an authentic religious vision rather than a concession to expediency.”²¹

The Orthodox right wing did indeed attack centrism for stopping halfway. *The Jewish Observer*, Agudath Israel’s monthly, acknowledged that centrists had correctly perceived the dangers of “a rush toward modernity,” but complained that this insight had not led to a reassessment of relationships with the non-Orthodox movements. Centrists, like modernists, still spoke of reaching a *modus vivendi* with Conservative and Reform Judaism on conversion standards, an issue high on the community agenda at the time. Such compromise, however, was out of the question, the magazine stated. Only by ending its accommodation of “deviationist groups,” most specifically by withdrawing from the multid denominational Synagogue Council of America, could centrist bodies gain the approval of the right, a demand that the latter had been making of the Modern Orthodox since the 1950s.²²

²⁰ Emanuel Rackman, “Modern Orthodox Jews Keep Authentic Tradition Alive,” Nov. 26, 1982, in Rackman, *A Modern Orthodox Life: Sermons and Columns of Rabbi Emanuel Rackman* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2008), pp. 168–71.

²¹ Walter S. Wurzbarger, “Centrist Orthodoxy: Ideology or Atmosphere?” in *Year Book: Religious Zionism, 1985–86* (Jerusalem: Mesilot, 1985), p. 7.

²² “Centrists: Between the ‘Right Wing’ and Whom?”, *The Jewish Observer*, Apr. 1984, pp. 34–35. On the beginnings of the dispute over membership in the Synagogue Council see Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism*, pp. 152–53.

Centrism and Pluralism

In March 1986—just five months after his public rollout of Centrist Orthodoxy—Lamm explicitly addressed the fraught issue of interdenominational Jewish relations at a conference seeking answers to the question, “Will There Be One Jewish People by the Year 2000?” Sponsored by CLAL (The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership), an organization created by former YU professor and Orthodox proponent of Jewish religious pluralism Rabbi Irving Greenberg, it featured addresses by such well-known figures as Elie Wiesel and Charles Silberman, and presentations by the heads of the rabbinic seminaries of the Jewish movements. The two-day event, held in Princeton, New Jersey, drew a large attendance and considerable media coverage because of growing concern about incompatible standards for conversion; the Reform movement’s recent “patrilineal” decision accepting the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as Jews; the rising number of Jewish divorces without issuance of a *get* (Jewish document of divorce); revival of the divisive “who is a Jew” controversy in Israel; and incendiary rhetoric from some sectors of Orthodoxy seemingly denying the Jewish identity of the non-Orthodox, all of which could lead to schisms within the Jewish people.²³

Lamm had championed Jewish unity long before he made it a pillar of Centrist Orthodoxy, speaking out consistently for continued RCA and OU membership in the Synagogue Council of America.²⁴ In 1981, when he became the first denominational leader to address the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, Lamm was reported to have “electrified the audience” by showing how love for Torah must go hand-in-hand with an inclusive love for all Jews.²⁵ But fully aware that his role at the CLAL conference would be carefully scrutinized by right-wing critics, Lamm agreed to speak only if he did not have to be in the room for the rest of the program, and so would not appear together with the leaders of the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist seminaries.

²³ For contemporary reports of the gathering see “Reform, Conservative and Orthodox: Are They One?” *Jewish Post and Opinion*, Apr. 2, 1986, pp. 15–16, and “Calling for a Truce in the War of Incivility,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, Apr. 18, pp. 40–41.

²⁴ Irving Spiegel, “Orthodox Jews Back Unity Role; Delegates Reject Proposal to Quit Synagogue Council,” *New York Times*, Nov. 22, 1966, p. 38; “Orthodox Rabbi Urges Creation of a United Orthodox Council,” *JTA*, Dec. 3, 1974.

²⁵ “Rabbi Norman Lamm Tells G.A.: Dare Not Exclude Anyone from House of Israel,” *Jewish Post and Opinion*, Nov. 20, 1981, p. 7. The text of his talk, “A Story of Two Loves: Creating Jewish Leadership and Jewish Community,” is in Lamm, *Seventy Faces*, I, pp. 123–34.

In his conference address titled “Unity and Integrity,” Lamm stressed that for him religious pluralism did not extend to “anything goes,” and that the Orthodox, who considered Torah of divine authority, could not be expected to legitimize positions clearly outside halakhic boundaries. Even so, he continued, no Jew, no matter how nonobservant, could be excluded from the Jewish fold. Lamm proceeded to address the religious status of non-Orthodox Jews and their rabbis in a way sure to disturb Orthodox leaders to his religious right. Since the non-Orthodox movements were “vital, powerful, and dynamic,” he said, their leadership had functional validity; to the extent that they were sincerely religious, they had spiritual dignity; and yet their denial of the transcendent authority of Jewish law denied them “Jewish legitimacy.” Criticizing some in his own Orthodox camp for incivility toward the non-Orthodox, he urged the latter to avoid responding in kind. To deal with the interdenominational rifts that threatened to split the Jewish people, Lamm urged creation of a national *bet din* (Jewish court) to handle conversions and divorces, its judges to be appointed on the basis of their rabbinic scholarship and halakhic observance irrespective of denominational affiliation—although he acknowledged that most of the qualified candidates were likely to come from the Orthodox community.²⁶

One person in the audience later reported that when Lamm, during his presentation, identified as a “centrist,” a young man sitting nearby whispered to a friend, “Boy, is he going to catch hell when he gets back to Yeshiva University!”²⁷ In fact, Lamm’s centrist embrace of interdenominational cooperation generated opposition from many points on the Orthodox institutional spectrum—though his name was usually kept out of the discussion. OU President Sidney Kwestel, who placed the entire blame for Jewish disunity on non-Orthodox rejection of Torah, insisted that all halakhic personal-status issues remain under Orthodox control, and called for strengthening ties with right-wing Orthodoxy and disengaging from the heterodox groups.²⁸ In April 1987, when Rabbi Milton Polin, president of the RCA, joined with his Conservative and Reform counterparts in signing onto a pre-Passover “Statement of Jewish Unity,”

²⁶ A version of Lamm’s talk under the title “Seventy Faces,” almost identical with the “Unity and Integrity” text distributed at the conference, was published in *Moment*, June 1986, and subsequently in Lamm, *Seventy Faces*, I, pp. 135–49. Lamm’s proposed *bet din* was never implemented.

²⁷ Alfred Fleishman, “Orthodoxy Coming to Terms,” *Jewish Post and Opinion*, May 12, 1993, p. 9.

²⁸ *Jewish Action*, Winter 1986–87, p. 65–68.

criticism came not only from *The Jewish Observer* but also from RCA members, and he yielded to pressure to withdraw from participation in a planned Jewish interdenominational program in Boston.²⁹ At the RCA annual convention that year, Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik, younger brother of the now incapacitated Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and his successor as senior *rosh yeshiva* at YU, castigated the Jewish Unity statement and all other forms of cooperative endeavor with non-Orthodox rabbinic bodies, implicitly condemning Lamm, president of his own institution. “What kind of common dialogue can there be,” Soloveitchik asked, “between Jews *sblemim be-emunah* [of perfect faith] and Conservative and Reform rabbis?” And he denied that the position of his brother—universally acknowledged as the RCA’s authority—was any more liberal than his own.³⁰

Lamm responded to his critics with a strongly worded address, “Centrist Orthodoxy: Agenda and Vision, Successes and Failures,” delivered at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue on March 22, 1988, which was reported in *The New York Times*. Prefacing his remarks by stressing that he spoke as president of YU’s rabbinical seminary—and hence as Soloveitchik’s employer—Lamm expressed far greater criticism of those to his religious right than of those to his left. He accused “the ultra-Orthodox” of “triumphalism,” the belief that “We are winning, therefore we are right.” Lamm asserted that Centrist Jews differed in no way from the rightists in their adherence to Halakhah as “the authoritative norm for daily conduct.” He restated the three ways in which Centrism differed from Haredi Orthodoxy: openness to secular culture as embodied in Yeshiva’s Torah U-Madda (Torah and general knowledge) curriculum; the priority of Jewish peoplehood and Zionism; and a tolerant and moderate approach to differences of opinion. It was in regard to that last feature—moderation—that Lamm asserted his own camp “needs an injection of courage right now”:

Moderation should never be confused with indecisiveness. On the contrary, a lack of self-confidence in one’s most basic commitments

²⁹ “One People, One Torah, One Voice: An Editorial Statement,” *The Jewish Observer*, May 1987, pp. 19–22; Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld, “The RCA and the ‘Torah Community,’” letter to the editor *ibid.*, pp. 33–34; Rabbi Milton Polin, “From the President’s Desk,” *Rabbinical Council Record*, Sept. 1987, pp. 3–4; Judith Antonelli, “Orthodox Leader Pulls Out of Unity Meeting,” *Boston Jewish Advocate*, May 14, 1987, pp. 1, 18.

³⁰ Larry Yudelson, “After the Rav: RCA Rabbis Listening for Master’s Voice,” *Long Island Jewish World*, May 29–June 4, 1987, p. 20.

is often expressed in extremism. Only one who is sure of what he stands for can afford to be moderate. A strong heart can risk being an open heart.

While chastising Reform Judaism for abandoning Halakhah and Conservatism for “tampering” with it, Lamm repeated his earlier designation of both as “valid groupings” that “possess spiritual dignity,” and urged that they be treated with respect even when disagreeing with their views.³¹

Praising Lamm for “forcefully delineating a new, affirmative path for centrist Orthodoxy,” the YU student newspaper welcomed this “return to moderation.”³² Expressions of satisfaction came from outside the Orthodox world as well. Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, executive vice president of the (Conservative) Rabbinical Assembly, told a reporter that “the centrist Orthodox have not been our problem.” Rabbi Alexander Schindler, president of the (Reform) Union of American Hebrew Congregations, wrote Lamm: “This is the kind of voice that I and many others have been longing to hear. You express the kind of Orthodoxy that I was taught to revere.”³³

Fire from Right and Left

Right-wing Orthodoxy—the chief target of Lamm’s critique—could hardly ignore such a full-barreled assault in the pages of the nation’s newspaper of record. Agudath Israel chose to respond through Professor Aaron Twerski, whose rabbinic beard and Hasidic garb had not hampered his career as a respected professor at leading law schools, providing living proof that an Orthodox Jew did not have to demonstrate centrist leanings to succeed in America. Indeed, Twerski began an “open letter” to Lamm by asserting that while he and others like him “do not embrace Western culture,” they were not “country bumpkins” ignorant of it. He asked how Lamm could possibly call the non-Orthodox movements “valid groupings” while at the same time denying them religious legitimacy, and wondered, tongue-in-cheek, whether the “spiritual dignity” Lamm ascribed to them had any Jewish significance or was meant to equate a non-Orthodox rabbi to “a Jesuit priest, or to a Tibetan monk’s search for nirvana. . . .” He concluded with a challenge to Lamm:

³¹ Ari L. Goldman, “Jewish Moderate Urges Believers to Take a Stand,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1988, p. 16.

³² “Welcome Return to Moderation,” *Commentator*, May 17, 1988, p. 2.

³³ Goldman, “Jewish Moderate,” p. 16; Andrew Silow Carroll, “Call For Orthodox Moderation Earns Praise from Reform Leader,” *JTA*, March 27, 1988.

Your lecture... was most disturbing. In the guise of a call for moderation, you in effect misled the broader public in regard to the Torah view on basic issues, and you maligned the 'Ultra-Orthodox' camp in the process.... Torah Jewry has the right to ask that as president of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and spokesman for 'Centrist Orthodoxy,' you make the positions you espouse unequivocal and clear. The public has a right to know that behind the silk language of diplomacy lies acceptance of the harsh reality that *halacha* confers no rabbinic status whatsoever on Conservative and Reform rabbis.... Dr. Lamm, are you there with us?³⁴

Lamm responded in a subsequent issue of the magazine by claiming that Twerski had gotten the wrong impression from the *Times* report. His acceptance of non-Orthodox groups as "valid," Lamm explained, meant nothing more than "de facto recognition" in the same sense that the Torah sometimes referred to pagan priests as "priests"—although he now wished he had "chosen a less equivocal and ambiguous word than 'valid.'" And as for "spiritual dignity," all he meant was that many non-Orthodox Jews were "religiously sincere."³⁵ Twerski, though, had the final word. If, he asked, the *Times* had misreported Lamm's speech to give the impression that he endorsed the legitimacy of the non-Orthodox streams, why had he not immediately demand a retraction? Twerski proceeded to pin Lamm to Irving Greenberg and his explicitly pluralist CLAL, at whose major conference Lamm had appeared to legitimize the non-Orthodox by proposing establishment of a *bet din* made up of rabbis from all Jewish denominations. Twerski biting chastised Lamm: "the Conservative and Reform leadership has been writing the music of 'pluralism'; Greenberg has furnished the orchestration; and, sadly, you wrote the lyrics."³⁶ Explaining to an interviewer that he had "anticipated a strong reaction when I criticized certain policies of the right wing," Lamm let the matter drop.³⁷

³⁴ Aaron Twerski, "Open Letter to Dr. Norman Lamm," *The Jewish Observer*, April 1988, pp. 6–9. Nowhere in their correspondence does Twerski refer to Lamm as "Rabbi." An even sharper right-wing rebuke of Lamm, conveyed by Rabbi Mordechai Gifter in an address on Apr. 5, 1988, and circulated by audio recording, is excerpted under the title "Gifter Slaughters Lamm for Passover," in Zev Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2016), pp. 355–58.

³⁵ Norman Lamm, "An Open Reply to Professor Aaron Twerski," *The Jewish Observer*, June 1988, pp. 13–16.

³⁶ Aaron Twerski, "A Rejoinder," *ibid.*, pp. 17–26.

³⁷ "The Commentator Interview: President Norman Lamm," *Commentator*, Nov. 22, 1988, p. 6.

He turned his attention instead to a critique emanating from the other ideological extreme of Orthodoxy, conveyed to him privately rather than publicly. Greenberg, his host at the CLAL conference, complained to Lamm that his adoption of the “centrist” term seemed “a way of trying to distance himself from the left wing of modern Orthodoxy, i.e., people like me.” And he asked:

What does the term “centrist” mean? If you mean that the center is located in the middle of the Jewish people, with fifty percent to its right and fifty to its left, then that is where Orthodoxy would be. If you mean by “centrist” that modern Orthodoxy should station itself halfway between Yitz Greenberg and the Satmar Rebbe, then you turn Orthodoxy into some lunatic fringe—because more than ninety percent of the Jewish people is to my left.

Greenberg felt that Modern Orthodoxy should constitute the bridge between the Orthodox and the rest of the Jewish community, not, as he feared Lamm’s centrist designation signified, a group of slightly secularized fellow travelers of the Haredim.³⁸

At the 1989 RCA convention Lamm sought to clear up what he considered a misinterpretation of Centrism by denying both of Greenberg’s proposed 50-yard-line hypotheticals. Without mentioning Greenberg by name, Lamm said he had never envisioned “that we locate ourselves midpoint between Orthodoxy and assimilationism and claim that territory as our religious home,” since that was to abandon Torah Judaism. Neither was it his intention to stand at the center “between Satmar and the few intellectuals who presumably constitute the Orthodox Left,” which would require “walking about the religious terrain with a yard-stick, calipers, and a pocket calculator.” Rather than seeking such a mathematically determined center, Lamm explained that by centrism he intended “moderationism,” a word he coined to invoke the “middle way” that Maimonides advocated for individual behavior. On the communal level, Lamm said, this entailed mutual respect, tolerance for dissent, consideration of all reasonable opinions—sometimes choosing one direction and sometimes another—and above all, avoidance of extreme solutions that all too often led to fanaticism. Urging his fellow Centrists to drop their overly “apologetic and defensive” posture, Lamm noted: “Our problem is a pedagogical one: how do we educate our people to be reflective and yet passionate,

³⁸ Irving Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God: Jewish Teachings to Perfect the World, Conversations with Rabbi Irving Greenberg, as Conducted by Shalom Freedman* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), pp. 111–12.

civil and yet committed, enlightened and yet spirited.”³⁹ To buttress his case for cooperation with the non-Orthodox, Lamm separately published a detailed halakhic analysis making the case that “the overwhelming majority of non-observant and non-religious Jews in our times” were not heretics in the eyes of Jewish law and were thus “fully within the Jewish people.”⁴⁰

Immoderation Rampant

Lamm’s promulgation of moderationism neither mitigated the ongoing attacks from his rightist critics nor prevented an escalation of infighting within the Centrist/Modern Orthodox world. Even as Agudath Israel continued to accuse Lamm of legitimating heresy by promoting a joint *bet din* for conversions,⁴¹ rabbis on the YU faculty spread the identical charge against their president and his centrist philosophy, eleven of them signing a letter denouncing Lamm’s position that was leaked to the press. Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik went so far as to compare such a *bet din* to the sin of the Golden Calf.⁴²

The OU leadership too sided with Twerski rather than Lamm. President Kwestel echoed Agudath Israel by blaming the intensification of polarization within Orthodoxy on “so-called Orthodox groups euphemistically known as ‘Centrist’” that taught “the flawed and erroneous premise that for the sake of Klal Yisrael [unity of the Jewish people], the Torah community must somehow recognize the non-Torah movements as legitimate expressions of Judaism.” He argued that the OU should leave the Synagogue Council and, instead, help create a united Orthodox front.⁴³

³⁹ “Lamm’s Moderationism Talk Convention Program Highlight,” *Rabbinical Council Record*, Oct. 1989, pp. 1, 4. A revised version of Lamm’s address under the title “Centrist Orthodoxy and Moderationism: Definitions and Desiderata,” is in Lamm, *Seventy Faces*, I, pp. 54–64.

⁴⁰ Norman Lamm, “Loving and Hating Jews as Halakhic Categories,” *Tradition* 24, Winter 1989, pp. 98–122.

⁴¹ “Sherer tells Yeshiva U. ‘don’t connect with HUC,’” *Jewish Post and Opinion*, Dec. 13, 1989, p. 41.

⁴² Jonathan Mark, “Yeshiva U’s Lamm: A Rabbi Under Siege,” *New York Jewish Week*, p. 24; Josh Fruchter and Tommy Werzberger, “The Making of Jonathan Mark’s ‘Siege,’” *Commentator*, Oct. 5, 1989, p. 6; Josh Fruchter and Daniel Oshinsky, “Rabbis’ Letter Leaked,” *ibid.*, Nov. 9, 1989, pp. 1, 8.

⁴³ Sidney Kwestel, “Appropriate and Inappropriate Legitimation,” *Jewish Action*, Fall 1988, p. 9; Kwestel, “Truth, Peace and Ahavas Yisroel,” *ibid.*, Spring 1989, pp. 63–66; Kwestel, “President’s Message,” *ibid.*, Fall 1989, p. 12.

The OU moved to purge its membership to facilitate such a rapprochement with the right. The organization, which as late as the 1960s had included many synagogues that lacked a *mehitzah* (physical separation) between men's and women's sections and had sought for years to coax them to install such dividers, informed those congregations in 1985 that it would expel synagogues that refused to conform. Explaining the move, Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, the executive vice president, declared that *mehitzah* "has become a weathervane of whether the congregation takes its Orthodoxy seriously or not."⁴⁴ In response, several rabbis serving in such pulpits and others sympathetic to them founded a new rabbinic group, the Fellowship of Traditional Orthodox Rabbis (FTOR), which held its first conference in August 1988. The fifty rabbis in attendance, about half of them also members of the RCA, called themselves centrists to denote their dissent from what they considered Orthodoxy's "turn to the right." Norman Lamm, who had coined the centrist label for that very purpose, declined comment. Both the OU and the RCA urged the new group to disband.⁴⁵ In 1990, the RCA notified its members who also belonged to FTOR that they risked expulsion, but reversed course under the threat of lawsuits. Another example of the turn to the right that year was the decision of the RCA *Va'ad Ha-Kavod*, a tribunal consisting of its former presidents, to investigate charges against Irving Greenberg for publicly suggesting that Christianity had much to teach Judaism and that Jesus was a "failed" rather than a "false" messiah, and for allegedly participating in non-Orthodox services as part of CLAL's interdenominational activities. Adverse publicity eventually convinced the RCA to drop the matter.⁴⁶

In his keynote address to the 1993 RCA convention, Rabbi Lamm

⁴⁴ Elena Neuman, "Thriving Orthodox Movement Split Between Strict and More Permissive," *JTA*, July 16, 1990.

⁴⁵ Andrew Sillow Carroll, "New Centrist Group: A Splinter or a Branch?" *JTA*, Sept. 9, 1988.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Mark, "Modern Orthodox Rabbis Claim Assault from RCA Right Wing," *New York Jewish Week*, July 13, 1990, pp. 4, 29, and letters to the editor *ibid.*, July 27, 1990, pp. 22–23; Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), pp. 33–35; Zev Eleff and Seth Farber, "Antimodernism and Orthodox Judaism's Heretical Imperative," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 30, Spring 2020, pp. 254–57; Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, "Modern Orthodoxy and the Road Not Taken: A Retrospective View," in Adam S. Ferziger, Miri Freud-Kandel, and Steven Bayme, eds., *Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy: The Road Not Taken* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), pp. 34–35.

fiercely denounced the burgeoning extremism, declaring, “Much of Orthodoxy today is in the grips of a straightjacket on personal autonomy and independent thought imposed on even the most learned and distinguished who yield all too easily to blatant terrorism.” He told the rabbis: “Anyone who submits to this kind of a threat ought to get out of the rabbinate and seal his mouth forever from uttering any opinion on anything other than the weather. The rabbinate must never become the sanctuary for moral cowards.”⁴⁷

The next year, prospects for more harmonious relations among the Orthodox factions improved when the Synagogue Council of America disbanded due to lack of funds and diminished interest on the part of its constituents. Relieved now of the constant need to justify its membership to Orthodox separatists, the OU believed that the closure “rid the Torah community of a gratuitous problem.” A leading OU rabbi celebrated the occasion by pronouncing the traditional *Shehecheyanu* blessing thanking God who “granted us life and sustenance and enabled us to reach this time.” Agudath Israel, too, expressed hope for better intra-Orthodox relations.⁴⁸

The disappearance of the Synagogue Council, however, hardly muted the battle within Orthodoxy. At YU, Norman Lamm’s decision in 1995 to allow student-activity fees to be used for gay clubs at three of the university’s graduate schools so as not to risk the withdrawal of government funding—even while he maintained that homosexual acts were contrary to Jewish law—drew not only the ire of the *Jewish Observer* but also a letter of protest signed by twenty-four members of his own rabbinic faculty.⁴⁹ The next year, the Young Israel network of Orthodox synagogues, originally Modern Orthodox but now strongly influenced by the separatists, rebuffed a proposed merger with the much larger OU on the grounds that the latter still included four member congregations without *mehitzaot* and was insufficiently answerable to rabbinic authority. Young Israel proceeded to adopt Star-K, a private company, as its kosher certification

⁴⁷ “President of Yeshiva University Calls for Renewed Rabbinic Leadership,” YU press release, June 16, 1993.

⁴⁸ Saul Bernstein, *The Orthodox Union Story: A Centenary Portrayal* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), p. 359; *American Jewish Year Book 1996* (New York: AJC, 1996), p. 163; Rabbi Shmuel Bloom, “Synagogue Council of America (1926–1994): A Post-Mortem,” *Jewish Observer*, Feb. 1995, pp. 28–31.

⁴⁹ “A Letter That Should NOT Have Had to Have Been Published,” *ibid.*, Summer 1995, pp. 30–32; Binyamin Jolkovsky, “Sages of Yeshiva Issue a Dissent on Lamm’s Law,” *Forward*, July 17, 1995, pp. 1, 4.

agency, in direct competition with the OU, which, it claimed, had lower kashrut standards.⁵⁰

Even in the absence of the Synagogue Council, Modern/Centrist fear of seeming to countenance non-Orthodox forms of Judaism continued to affect its policies. In 1997, the OU refused to participate in “Shabbat Across America,” a broad-based project to encourage Jews to observe the Sabbath, because it might appear to condone non-Orthodox forms of Sabbath observance, even though many individual Orthodox synagogues took part. In 1998, the OU declined to be part of Jewish Web/Net Week that linked over 600 Jewish websites, because participation might seem to associate the organization with non-Orthodox sites. The RCA president that year turned down an invitation to a joint study session with non-Orthodox rabbis at the Council of Jewish Federations General Assembly. And the basketball league of New York yeshiva high schools refused to admit the (Conservative) Solomon Schechter schools, one principal explaining that he wanted his students to associate only with those “who share our philosophy of Judaism.” Meanwhile, Lamm’s association with ongoing efforts to devise an interdenominational mechanism for facilitating conversions to Judaism in Israel earned him the sobriquet “hater of God” from a leading Agudath Israel sage.⁵¹ Eventually, even Lamm succumbed to the rhetoric of delegitimization, predicting, in 2009, “with a heavy heart,” that “we will soon say Kaddish on the Reform and Conservative movements.”⁵²

A Proliferation of Centrism

Lamm’s promotion of Orthodox centrism as updated Maimonidean moderationism not only failed to moderate the religious climate, but it also opened the door to others who—against his clearly stated wishes—reified Centrism into a separate form of Orthodoxy different, ideologically and behaviorally, from both the right-wing Haredi and the Modern varieties, though opinions differed widely over its exact nature.

⁵⁰ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Young Israel Resists Effort by OU Head to Merge Agencies,” *JTA*, May 28, 1996; Stewart Ain, “Unholy Alliance?” *New York Jewish Week*, Jan. 26, 1996, p. 7.

⁵¹ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Streams Join Forces to Promote Shabbat Experiences for Everyone,” *JTA* Mar. 28, 1997; *American Jewish Year Book 1999*, p. 180; Mendy Ganchrow, MD, *Journey Through the Minefields: From Vietnam to Washington, An Orthodox Surgeon’s Odyssey* (Silver Spring, MD: Eshel Books, 2004), pp. 198–201.

⁵² Matthew Wagner, “Non-Orthodox Judaism Disappearing,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 10, 2009, jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/Non-Orthodox-Judaism-disappearing.

Journalists reporting on the impressive growth of Orthodox communities found the term useful because it helped them lay out a taxonomy of Orthodoxy's divergent forms. For example, an extensive 1989 account of Orthodoxy in Baltimore—said to have the largest percentage of Orthodox Jews of any American city—divided the community into four segments. The right wing, dominated by the “yeshiva world,” according to the authors, “tend to separate themselves from the rest of society... are generally passive when it comes to the secular State of Israel... and are wary of modernity.” The centrists, in contrast, are portrayed as “open to secular culture, unabashedly Zionist, and tolerant of varying opinions.” Orthodoxy's left wing is associated with the few “observant feminists” in town, and Modern Orthodox is described as a “nebulous term” that may be synonymous with centrism in some cities but in Baltimore meant the nonobservant, nominally Orthodox.⁵³

Social scientists professionally attuned to changing trends and novel terms to describe them, quickly picked up the nomenclature as well. First out of the gate were sociologists Samuel C. Heilman and Steven M. Cohen, whose 1989 book *Cosmopolitans and Parochials* sought to define the distinctions between what they considered three forms of Modern Orthodoxy—nominal (relatively nonobservant), centrist, and traditional (highly observant)—on the basis of answers to a questionnaire completed by some 1,000 self-identified Modern Orthodox Jews in the New York area. Respondents were asked about their Jewish ritual practices (ranging from Sabbath observance to not eating on the little-known fast of the Tenth of Tevet); belief in such tenets of Judaism as the existence of God, revelation, and the coming of the Messiah; friendship patterns with Orthodox and other Jews; giving to Jewish causes; the Jewish education of their children; leisure pursuits; political and social opinions; and attitudes toward premarital sex. The book described the centrists, those with scores in the middle range, as “sitting at the epicenter of the crossroads of the traditional and contemporary worlds,” a situation they manage “by compartmentalizing their lives.” Heilman and Cohen called them “an aggregate of the ambivalent”—hardly what Rabbi Lamm could ever have imagined when he conceived Centrism.⁵⁴ The book drew criticism for employing

⁵³ Arthur J. Magida and Gary Rosenblatt, “Orthodox Judaism: A Surge to the Right,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, June 9, 1989, pp. 52–53.

⁵⁴ Samuel C. Heilman and Steven M. Cohen, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), quotations on pp. 209–10.

an allegedly skewed and unrepresentative sample and for positing a “centrist” category lacking “conceptual coherence.”⁵⁵ The search for a sociologically meaningful category of centrist Orthodox Jews continued.

It was not until 2017 that a more sophisticated portrait of centrism emerged from the Nishma organization under the direction of research and marketing professional Mark Trencher. Nishma worked with a sample of almost 4,000 Jews across the country who called themselves Modern Orthodox. Instead of categorizing them on the basis of responses to a questionnaire, it asked them to self-identify as either Open Orthodox (12 percent), Liberal Modern Orthodox (22 percent), Modern Orthodox (41 percent), Centrist Orthodox (14 percent), or “Right-wing Centrist Orthodox (tending toward Yeshivish)” (11 percent). Respondents were also asked about their theological views, observance patterns, the importance of Orthodox practice in their lives, their opinions on the role of women in Judaism and whether gays should be accepted as synagogue members. Responses correlated almost exactly with the self-identifications, the proportion of those supplying the most traditional answers rising steadily from the more left-wing categories to the center and on to the right. Perhaps the most significant finding was that 39 percent of the entire sample said they had become more observant over the past decade and 23 percent less observant, evidence both of growing polarization in the Orthodox community and its overall move to the right.⁵⁶

The Jewish day-school world also found the distinction between Centrist and Modern Orthodoxy a valuable explanatory tool. In the late 1990s, the Avi Chai Foundation sponsored *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States 2000*. It would go on to fund and publish three more such reports, at five-year intervals, by 2014. Alongside Hasidic, Habad, yeshiva-world, non-Orthodox, and nondenominational community schools, the *Census* categorized Centrist and Modern Orthodox schools as two separate types, the major difference between them being the coeducational schooling provided by the Modern, in contrast to the separate-gender set-up of the Centrist. Also, the Modern schools, unlike the Centrist, “generally” used Hebrew for Jewish studies, emphasized the significance of the State of Israel, took “a modernist approach to contemporary issues, such

⁵⁵ David Berger, “Modern Orthodoxy in the United States: A Review Essay,” *Modern Judaism* 11, Dec. 1991, pp. 261–72.

⁵⁶ *The Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews Summary Report*, Sept. 28, 2017, <http://nishmaresearch.com>. Samuel Heilman came to a similar conclusion when he revisited his centrists in a work whose title indicates what he thought happened to them and their children: *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

as feminism,” and included “marginally Orthodox and non-Orthodox students.”⁵⁷ A decade later, the third *Census* added the “intensity” of Jewish studies as another distinguishing mark of Centrist schools, and—with probably unintentional irony—girls studying Talmud as an identifying feature of Modern Orthodox institutions.⁵⁸ Both that *Census* and the final edition in 2014 reported the reassignment of a number of schools from the Modernist to the Centrist categories, a shift the author ascribed to changes in the schools—most notably separation of the sexes at earlier ages—made necessary by the desire of Modern Orthodox parents to give their children a Centrist education.⁵⁹

By then the Centrist label had also taken on another function—a pejorative way to designate trends in the Orthodox community that one found unserious, even counterfeit. Depending on one’s ideological preferences, Centrism could be “just a form of Charedi Judaism that speaks English passably and wears Western clothes,” or else “Torah and popular culture” for wealthy Jews who were fixated on “the NCAA playoffs and Netflix movies” and whose children spent their leisure time at “birthday parties, play dates, and continuous recreation.”⁶⁰

Second Thoughts

“The semiotics of being Orthodox have never been more complex,” a 1994 JTA report began, noting that while “centrist” had been gradually replacing “modern” over the previous ten years, “not everyone is happy about it or even sure what it means.” Jews, apparently, like many other Americans, were “growing increasingly suspicious of anything smacking of modernity,” and “no matter how liberal an interpreter of Jewish law

⁵⁷ Marvin Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States* (Avi Chai, Jan. 2000), p. 8.

⁵⁸ Marvin Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States 2008–09* (Avi Chai, Oct. 2009), p. 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 12; Marvin Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States 2013–14* (Avi Chai, Oct. 2014), p. 8.

⁶⁰ Rabbi Michael Chernick, “Condemning Unfairly: A Reply to Avrohom Gordimer,” *Jewish Link*, Sept. 24, 2015, <https://jewishlink.news/features/9700-condemning-unfairly-a-reply-to-avrohom-gordimer>; Alan Brill, “The Emerging Popular Culture and the Centrist Community,” in Yehuda Sarna, ed., *Developing a Jewish Perspective on Culture* (Jersey City: KTAV, 2013), pp. 39, 37.

someone may be, they describe themselves as centrist” to avoid identification with the left.⁶¹ Four years later journalist Samuel G. Freedman drew an analogy to the rise of political conservatism in the United States, writing:

The very term “Modern Orthodox” has become so pejorative—it is to observant Jews what “liberal” is to Democrats—that even its practitioners prefer to call themselves “centrist” or “traditional.”⁶²

Rabbi Rafael Grossman, rabbi of the Baron Hirsch Synagogue in Memphis and a past president of the RCA, opined that while “the majority of Jews identifying as Orthodox are centrist... none can clearly assert what centrist Orthodoxy is about.”⁶³ Richard Joel, who succeeded Lamm as YU’s president, evinced similar puzzlement, responding to a question about centrism by recalling that someone once told him that “a centrist is someone who agrees with me.”⁶⁴

By then, however, it made little difference: Rabbi Lamm, who found the words Modern Orthodox so objectionable thirty years earlier, had already disowned his replacement for it and reverted to the original brand. Telling a reporter in 1994 that he regretted the confusion, Lamm declared, “I wear the name ‘Modern Orthodox’ as a badge of honor.” Eight years later Lamm published two volumes of his essays, including those through which he had introduced and elucidated Centrist Orthodoxy. He explained in the introduction that he had, indeed, avoided the term Modern Orthodox “for a while” because it seemed “as if we were boasting of our modernity when, indeed, we were hardly uncritical of it even though we stand for engaging it openly and forthrightly.” He had introduced Centrist Orthodoxy in its place “intending not a mathematical mean between two extremes, but... Maimonides’ principle of moderation.” Since his intentions continued to be misunderstood,

I have therefore reverted to the term Modern Orthodoxy. I assure the reader that there was and is no difference in my mind between the two, and I apologize to the sociologists and other pundits for having wasted their time and intellectual effort as they labored to define the differences between the two.⁶⁵ ❧

⁶¹ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “The Changing Orthodox World—What’s in a Name: A Lot,” *JTA*, Dec. 30, 1994.

⁶² Samuel G. Freedman, “Yeshivish at Yale,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 24, 1998, p. 34.

⁶³ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Modern Orthodox Jews Engage in Public Search for New Identity,” *JTA*, Feb. 3, 1999.

⁶⁴ Mindy Schiller, “The Middle Man: A Conversation with Richard Joel,” *World Jewish Digest*, Aug. 2008, p. 51.

⁶⁵ Cohen, “The Changing Orthodox World”; Lamm, *Seventy Faces*, I, p. 1.