

Derashot LeDorot
A Commentary for the Ages
Exodus



Norman Lamm

DERASHOT LEDOROT

EXODUS

EDITED BY

Stuart W. Halpern

FOREWORD BY

Jacob J. Schacter

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Dedicated to the Memory of

Sara Lamm Dratch

שרה רבקה בת הרב נחום ומינדל לאם

Beloved daughter, mother, wife, and aunt

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

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Foreword

Jacob J. Schacter

One of the most desirable qualities in a preacher is the ability to observe the kind of audience before him and to speak for a length of time that will not cause them to grow weary of the sermon, for if they do so, the desired benefit will not accrue.... The congregation may consist of wise and learned people, or it may consist of ordinary people, or possibly even of a mixture of both categories. Now the preacher must speak in such a way that his message will be understood, gearing the content to his audience.... It becomes clear that the master of this art must be strong in God's sight, not a meek and self-effacing personality. He must have the heart of a lion and be prepared to reproach kings and nobles for their sins.... The qualities either necessary or desirable in the preacher include wisdom... admirable ethical traits... inner courage... and the wealth necessary to provide for his sustenance... The most important of these qualities is strength of character, not of body.

This passage from *Ein HaKoreh*, the earliest known Jewish treatise on preaching written in mid-fifteenth-century Spain by Rabbi Joseph ibn Shem Tov, highlights the importance of the preacher in medieval times and the qualities necessary for his success.¹

1. This work, still in manuscript, is cited and translated in Marc Saperstein, *Jewish*

His role was recognized as being central to ensuring a religiously practicing and ethically sensitive community and he was valued and respected for his contribution to the community's spiritual welfare.

But it is also true that, since time immemorial, the Jewish preacher faced a multitude of challenges. An older Spanish contemporary of Rabbi Joseph, Rabbi Shlomo Alami, wrote, "Look what happens when a congregation gathers to hear words of Torah from a rabbinical scholar. Slumber weighs upon the eyes of the officers; others converse about trivial affairs. The preacher is dumbfounded by the talking of men and the chattering of women standing behind the synagogue. If he should reproach them because of their behavior, they continue to sin, behaving corruptly, abominably."² The very first sermon in this volume begins by citing the rabbinic description of Rabbi Judah the Prince's second-century audience falling asleep during one of his presentations (Song of Songs Rabba 1:15). In a sermon delivered on *Shavuot*, the sixteenth–seventeenth-century Italian preacher Leon Modena noted that when God delivered the Torah at Sinai "there was thunder and lightning...and the sound of the *shofar* was very powerful" (Exodus 19:16) because "God knew the way of the Children of Israel, knew that some of them doze off and slumber as soon as they hear the voice of someone speaking words of Torah, as is the case to this very day among those who listen to sermons."³ And, for evidence of members of the audience speaking through a sermon, note the description of the early eighteenth-century Central European moralist, Rabbi Joseph Stadthagen, who described those who "clap and shout and shriek and stomp" while the sermon was taking place.⁴

Preaching 1200–1800: An Anthology (New Haven and London, 1989), pp. 387–92. See also p. 168.

2. R. Shlomo Alami, *Iggeret Mussar* (St. Petersburg, 1912; repr. Jerusalem, 1965), p. 27; Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 383–84.
3. R. Leon Modena, *Midbar Yehudah* (Venice, 1602), sermon 9, p. 48a; Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 410–11. See also pp. 53–54.
4. R. Joseph Stadthagen, *Divrei Zikkaron* (Amsterdam, 1705), 18a; Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, p. 53.

Other egregious behavior prior to and during the delivery of sermons reported in the sources include leaving before the sermon began or after it was already underway

In addition, preachers struggled to present original and relevant material suitable to a mixed audience of scholar and novice alike, especially when their responsibilities required that they preach every Shabbat and holiday and, in some cases, even every day (and sometimes more than once a day!), in addition to on the occasion of various life cycle events.⁵ Not everyone could boast what Modena wrote in his autobiography: “Even though for more than twenty years I have ... preached in three or four places each Sabbath, this holy community [Venice] has not grown tired of me, nor has it had its fill of my sermons.”⁶ This effort took a toll on the preacher as well. In his approbation to Rabbi Jacob Zahalon’s seventeenth-century *Or HaDarshanim*, Rabbi Israel Foa wrote, “How very much of his [the preacher’s] time is needed just to find even one rabbinic saying, and before long an entire day is gone.”⁷ And, finally, of course, preachers always wondered whether or not their presentations ultimately made a difference and often concluded, probably and regretfully truthfully, that they did not.⁸

and derisive laughter or shouted objections in the middle of the sermon. See Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 10, 52–55, 379 (from a responsum of Maimonides), pp. 385, 417–18.

In the introduction to his *Ketav Hitnazelut LeDarshanim* (*Work In Defense of Preachers*), sixteenth-century Rabbi David ben Menasheh Darshan noted that he wrote this book because “some people deride preaching.... May the mouths of the scoffers be stopped up, for they are headed straight for perdition.” See Rabbi David Darshan, *Shir HaMa’alot LeDavid* and *Ketav Hitnazelut LeDarshanim*, translated and annotated by Hayim Goren Perelmuter (Cincinnati, 1984), pp. 121–22. He too acknowledges the need for the preacher “to wake up those who are dozing off.” See pp. 123, 127.

5. Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 27–28, 412, 414. A manuscript of sermons by the Italian R. Isaac Hayyim Cantarini contains two sermons for many of the Torah portions, one delivered at the Shabbat morning service and one at the afternoon service. See Marc Saperstein, “Italian Jewish Preaching: An Overview,” in David B. Ruderman, ed., *Preachers of the Italian Ghetto* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1992), p. 25.
6. Mark R. Cohen, trans. and ed., *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena’s Life of Judah* (Princeton, 1988), p. 95.
7. Henry Adler Sosland, *A Guide for Preachers on Composing and Delivering Sermons: The Or ha-Darshanim of Jacob Zahalon* (New York, 1987), pp. 72–73, 161. For strategies to overcome the fatigue of listeners, see pp. 106, n.; 127. For appealing to a mixed audience, see pp. 124–25.
8. Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 46, n. 5; 61; 403.

Twentieth-century America brought with it a new set of problems. Immigrant rabbis were forced to preach in English with, sometimes, sad results. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan records in his journal the challenge that one of his predecessors faced in the pulpit of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on New York's Upper East Side. Having completed building its beautiful new structure in 1902, the congregation's leaders wanted "a fashionable" synagogue "which [could] boast of English speaking modern rabbis." The incumbent Yiddish speaking "Reverend" tried to meet this request by reading a prepared English sermon once a month. But one Shabbat morning, Kaplan records, mischievous youngsters stole his text, leaving him humiliated and embarrassed.⁹

But an even greater challenge faced by Orthodox rabbis throughout the century was the need to present traditional Judaism in a way that would be relevant to a population that was clearly and inexorably abandoning tradition. In his well-known analysis of Conservative Judaism first published in 1955, Marshall Sklare wrote that "Orthodox adherents have succeeded in achieving the goal of institutional perpetuation to only a limited extent; the history of their movement in this country can be written in terms of institutional decay."¹⁰ And, as late as May, 1964, widespread assimilation threatened the integrity of the traditional community to such an extent that *Look Magazine* ran an article titled, "The Vanishing American Jew," which specifically predicted the imminent disappearance of Orthodoxy in this country.¹¹

But traditional Judaism has, thank God, continued to exist and even flourish as we enter the twenty-first century, thanks to a handful of talented and gifted rabbis – led by Rabbi Norman Lamm – who were able to present its values in an authentic, meaningful, and culturally sensitive and sophisticated way. With linguistic elegance, deep Jewish

9. Jeffrey S. Gurock and Jacob J. Schacter, *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York, 1997), pp. 40–41.

10. Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (Glencoe, 1955), p. 43. This statement continued to appear in both later reprints of the work (New York, 1972, and Lanham, New York and London, 1985).

11. Thomas B. Morgan, "The Vanishing American Jew," *Look Magazine* (May 5, 1964).

learning, impressive worldly erudition, profound cultural attunement, clever turns of phrase, and emotional empathy, Rabbi Lamm presented Orthodox – and Jewish – values clearly, proudly, articulately, and unself-consciously from 1952 through 1976, the years during which he delivered the sermons included in this volume, as he continues to do up until today. With humor, passion, kindness, and wise homiletical insights, he challenged and inspired his audiences to be more serious about their commitments to Jewish faith and practice, as well as to be more conscious of their obligations to the world at large. His English was impeccable, his message was relevant, everyone was riveted by his presentations and he demonstrated a lesson that is particularly important today, in an age where the art of homiletics has fallen into disfavor and is not taken seriously by either rabbi or congregant alike.¹² Yes, sermons do matter, they can make a difference. Carefully prepared and properly delivered, they can have a real impact.

And, remarkably, the messages of these sermons continue to be relevant even sixty plus years after they were delivered. The three elements that Rabbi Lamm identified in 1952 as central in defining “What Makes a Jewish Song Jewish” (*Beshalah*; February 9, 1952) perfectly describe the ongoing relevance of his sermons: 1) that it have meaning for all times; 2) that it be able to inspire and awaken; 3) that it inspire future generations toward a specific religious goal. Indeed, *Look Magazine* vanished but, thanks to the efforts of Rabbi Lamm and others, Orthodoxy continues to grow and prosper.

Rabbi Lamm has been a distinguished leader of American Orthodoxy for more than six decades. A visionary leader, gifted orator, multi-faceted intellectual, and powerful thinker, Rabbi Lamm has devoted his life to the Jewish community. I had the great personal privilege of serving as rabbi of The Jewish Center in New York City where Rabbi Lamm had previously been the rabbi for some seventeen years. Right before I left the synagogue in June, 2000, I asked Rabbi Lamm to

12. Rabbi Lamm bemoaned this fact in his “Notes of An Unrepentant Darshan,” *Rabbinical Council of America Sermon Anthology 1986/5747* (New York, 1986), 1–12; reprinted in his *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith*, vol. 2 (Hoboken, 2002), 94–107.

deliver a public lecture there on a Shabbat morning. He began by saying that he felt he had little choice but to accept my invitation because, after all, I was a *shechter* (a ritual slaughterer, a pun on my last name based on its Yiddish and Hebrew pronunciation) and he was a *lamm* (pun on lamb, his last name).

Indeed, this *shechter* has always had the utmost respect and affection for this *lamm*. Like his many admirers, I have appreciated how his “royal reach” has embraced those who have both “faith and doubt,” and how the profundity of his teachings has illuminated many of the “seventy faces” of Judaism, especially “*Torah Umadda*.” His thoughtful writings have contributed to our understanding of both Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin’s “*Torah lishmah*” as well as “*the religious thought of Hasidism*.” His works have constructed a “*hedge of roses*,” protecting and enhancing the “*treasury of tradition*,” the “*halakhot vehalikhos*” of Jewish life, lore and practice. Collectively, they comprise a “*library of Jewish law and ethics*,” constituting a “*royal table*” bedecked with the bounty of traditional Judaism and serving as guides to contemporary Jewish life. In a lifetime of service to *Kelal Yisrael*, this “*man of faith and vision*” has valiantly toiled to ensure that the members of the Jewish community model the values of a “*good society*,” governed by the value of “*shema*,” or respectful listening. His many written works as well as his first orally delivered “*derashot ledorot*,” some of which are presented here, have created “*festivals of Jewish faith*” and serve as enduring testaments to the relevance and vitality of traditional Judaism.

One verse in the biblical book that bears his name, *Naḥum*, describes Rabbi Lamm’s tenacious and passionate efforts on behalf of our community: “Man the guard posts, watch the road, gird your strength and gather much vigor” (*Naḥum* 2:2). In a lifetime of service to the Jewish people and, in particular, the Orthodox community, Rabbi Lamm has manned the guard posts of our tradition, carefully watched the road taken by American Jewry to ensure that it reflect Jewish values, girded his prodigious intellectual strength, and gathered his vigor to make certain that his generation, our generation, and generations yet unborn will enjoy a meaningful Jewish future.

May *HaKadosh Barukh Hu* grant Rabbi Lamm many more happy years of good health and sound mind to continue his very important

work and to enjoy together with Mindy and all the members of their extraordinary and wonderful family.

Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter is University Professor of Jewish History and Jewish Thought and Senior Scholar at the Center for the Jewish Future, Yeshiva University. He is a former rabbi of the Jewish Center, as well as the founding editor of The Torah U-Madda Journal.

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 Exodus, from among the numerous *derashot* given by him between the years 1952 and 1976 in both Congregation Kodimoh in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Jewish Center in New York, New York.

In our contemporary world, a world that is still un-redeemed, Rabbi Lamm's insights into the book that details the redemption of the Jews from Egypt are no less relevant and inspiring than they were when they were first presented. Whether discussing values in child-rearing, leadership, ecology, *menschlichkeit*, *chutzpah*, or what constitutes a "Jewish song," Rabbi Lamm's sharpness of thought, sermonic sensitivity, and exegetical eloquence are truly timeless in providing guidance, direction, and intellectual illumination for our own time.

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 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 assistance of Rabbi Ari Lamm, Kayla Avraham, and Yigal Gross, as well as 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 Jacob J. Schacter for his wonderfully informative, personal, and characteristically 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.

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