

*The Middle Road Not Taken:*

*The Religious Zionism of Rabbi Norman Lamm zt"l*

B'nai Israel/Chelkeinu Initiative

Tzvi Sinensky / 6 Iyyar 5783

1. **“The Royal Reach,” Kol Nidrei 1960**

If all Israelis will want for their country will be “normalcy” - nothing more than the usual appurtenances of statehood - then that is all it will get, and maybe less. Those are low goals indeed... Israel has a greater mission, a *Malkhut sha'al*. Israel must become, as its Prophets ordained, a holy people and a kingdom of priests, a beacon to the nations, an *am haShem*. Nothing less will do. We dare not settle for trivial aspirations.

2. **UJA Appeal, May 9, 1962**

Messiah is not here yet. I do not say that we must surrender our critical functions - that would be most unintelligent. Criticism, yes. But abandonment, never. You may find fault with your wife or your husband, but a mature person does not divorce his spouse merely because he or she is not perfect. You may find some defects in the character of your children, but if they are not 100% perfect you do not throw them out into the street. A tiny flaw in a diamond is no reason to throw it into the refuse can. What then? The answer is: perspective.

3. **“God, Man, and State,” April 23, 1966**

This is the crucial problem concerning the character of the State of Israel. Is it to be the symbol of seven, or the symbol of eight? Will it be just a natural state, or something higher, something nobler?... Only by fulfilling the symbol of eight, of loyalty to the covenant of God, of Torah, lies the way of *taharah*, of purity and rebirth, of joyous fulfillment of the historic dreams and prayers and prophecies of our history...

Such decisions are never made all at once. They involve long processes measured in historic time, certainly more than eighteen years. Many facts will determine the answer, and not the least of them will be the spiritual leadership in the state under the resolute stewardship of our distinguished and revered guest, His Eminence, Chief Rabbi Unterman, may he live and be well. Their enormously difficult task is to be both *responsive* to their fellow Israelis, and *responsible* to our Heavenly Father. Like the *Kohanim* in our Sidra, they must confront all Jews, the perfectly pure and the perilously impure. Sometimes it is their unhappy and tragic task to say to a man: *tamei*, impure, you must go out! Yet their greater and nobler task is to teach this same *tamei* to return, to bring Jews back into the historic community of Israel, to train all Jews in the way of the Torah's *taharah*. It is by no means a simple duty; it is, in fact, unenviably difficult. Our hopes and good wishes and our prayers for divine guidance and blessings go to Chief Rabbi Unterman and his distinguished colleagues in this historic mission.

4. **“O Jerusalem,” Shavuot, June 15, 1967**

In our days those who are wise have sensed [the Messiah's] approach, those who can hear with the inner ear have heard his footsteps, those who can see with the inner eye have perceived the first rays of his coming. And the Jewish tradition has taught us that we can, by our conduct and our actions, bring on the Messiah before his appointed time.

5. **“The Yom Kippur War,” Seventy Faces, Vol. 2, pp. 216-217**

I prefer to view the events of our time as providential and not (necessarily) messianic. I accept that the rebirth of the national homeland, after the vicissitudes of our history, and especially on the heels of the Holocaust was a “miracle,” in that it defied all predictability and probability.

*I accept the State as an act of redemption, but not every redemption is necessarily Messianic.*

6. **“The Curtain Rises,” Rosh Hashana, October 6, 1967**

In attempting to understand these events in theological terms, I would rather not speak the language of messianism and redemption. Overloaded with centuries of sentiment, and so abused by repetition these past twenty years, terms such as *at'chalta di'geulah* (beginning of the Redemption) and *ikvata de'mashichah* (Messianic Era) inspire but do not clarify...

7. **“The Religious Meaning of the Six Day War,” Tradition 10:1, Summer 1968**

We are, I think, going very far astray if our two participants from Israel declare so positively and, to me, with shocking dogmatism, that we are presently in the midst of *yemot hamashiach*... Speaking of an era instead of a personality as the Messiah smacks more of 19th century progressivism than it does of the original Jewish concept. I'd like to remind you that the Messiah according to the interpretation of our Sages, will come only *behesech hadaat* (by distraction). The more we talk about him, the less likely he's going to come.

The answer is suggested by the Talmud (*Hagigah*, 5a) where Rava speaks of an intermediate stage between *hester* and *nesiat panim*, a transitional period between God being incommunicado and His full communication with Israel. *Af-al-pi she'histarti panai mimenu, ba-halom adaber bo*. The intermediate stage is characterized as a dream state. God does not yet call to us openly and unequivocally -- but neither is He silent; He speaks to us indirectly, as if in a dream. For this, as the Psalms taught us, is the way redemption will take place: *be'shuv ha-Shem et shivat tziyon, hayyinu ke'holmim* -- the reunification of Jerusalem and the return of Israel to Zion is symbolized by the dream. God addresses us, but we must make the effort to listen carefully and wisely. We are in a semi-waking state, emerging from the long night and preparing for the dawn of redemption. Our eyes have seen the silhouette of His Presence, and our ears have heard the rustles of His unfolding glory.

8. **“Address to College Youth,” Yom Yerushalayim, May 26, 1968**

Till now, we have lived through *hester panim*, when God seems to have abandoned Israel and the world, and our loyalty to Him and to Torah was sustained by faith and faith alone. At Sinai, and again in the days when the Messiah will have arrived, our loyalty will be one of complete and full knowledge, being confronted by the revelation of the Almighty. In neither case, neither that of God’s total withdrawal, *hester panim*, nor His full revelation, His *nesiat panim*, are we endowed with true freedom. And when there is no total freedom, there man cannot be assigned either full blame or full credit.

But today we are in an intermediate stage. There is no coercion - for God has revealed Himself nowadays more than ever before in the history of the Diaspora; yet, not in a manner that can be called coercive, for it is still possible to offer alternative, secularistic, and naturalistic interpretations. Hence, for the first time in living memory we have complete religious options. We can claim the excuse neither of God’s forcible presence, nor of His tragic absence. And therefore our *shemirat ha-mitzvot* is a more genuinely free decision. Therefore too, we have more opportunity to reach out to others, we have something to tell them about. And most important, we have a greater moral responsibility for our own faith, our own *emunah*.

9. **“The Yom Kippur War,” p. 208**

Daniel Elazar has observed that many Diaspora Jews, having lost faith in God and Torah, have begun to apotheosize the State of Israel. I subscribe to his assertion of the existence of this “Israelolatry.” We have contributed to this dangerous attitude which has made the State an end in itself. In true religious fashion, its worshippers have attributed to their idol the qualities of power, wisdom, and benevolence to an absolute degree. Like all objects of faith, Israel has been exalted beyond criticism. The danger is that, ultimately, the idol will be found to have clay feet. And when that happens, the devotees will blame not their own gullibility but the limitations and inadequacy of their idol.

10. **“Remembering the Six-Day War: Then and Now,” Tradition 40:2, Summer 2007**

We must not be lulled into Messianic delusions or, alternatively, into extravagant self-confidence, and certainly not into yielding to despair. All extremes lead us to distort reality and leave us open to fatefully wrong decisions. Because History is merciless and unforgiving.

The Sages (Avot 1:6) gave us sage advice in the following cryptic statement: “*al titya’esh min ha-puranut*,” literally, “do not despair of punishment.” When things are going well, do not imagine that it will always be that way; *puranut*, bad news, is always possible, like a tense leopard about to spring on its prey. I suggest that the same brief passage can be read, with equal justification, as: “do not despair because of punishment,” i.e., do not imagine that because life is full of threats and injustices, that *puranut*, bad news, will always be your lot.

## **11. Our Dependence Upon Israel's Independence, 1966**

We Orthodox Jews, whose position in Israel is expressed by the word "Torah," have been spared, largely, the crises of the other two. Our love for Israel is independent either of political or economical conditions. Our program is not merely one of supporting an economy or creating a government machinery. Our purpose depends neither upon votes nor upon funds, though it may include both. Therefore, neither independence nor peace nor security constitute a threat to our relationship to Israel, for these do not represent the fulfillment of our goals. Our end is nothing less than the Messianic vision of the גאולה שלמה, the complete redemption, a term which includes a spiritual renaissance of the Land of Israel and the People of Israel according to the Torah of Israel, and, ultimately, the spiritual regeneration of all mankind in universal peace and justice.