

# Rabbi Lamm's Resilient Response to the Yom Kippur War

**B**y all accounts, the Yom Kippur War dealt a vicious psychological blow to the State of Israel and Jews across the globe. Many would agree with Rabbi Norman Lamm's depiction of the war as "a trauma of the order that Vietnam was for most Americans."<sup>1</sup>

Nor did R. Lamm offer this grim assessment as an armchair commentator who had developed his impressions solely from the comfort of his Upper West Side home. He wrote and spoke from firsthand observation. As detailed in two sermons, R. Lamm visited Israel at the end of 1973, some two-and-a-half months after the outbreak of hostilities.

During his visit, R. Lamm saw the country from many vantage points. He spoke with soldiers who had lost countless comrades. He went as close to the front lines as the Israel Defense Forces would permit. He walked the streets of numerous neighborhoods, encountering mostly women—the lion's share of young men was still on active duty—and bandaged warriors returned from the field of battle. He visited Yeshivat Har Etzion, where melancholy reigned: only about a third of the students were present; fully two-thirds were still on the front lines, where many of the yeshiva's students fell in combat. He knew soldiers who perished, especially on that fateful Yom Kippur day, October 6, 1973, when religious students were among the first to fall as they sought to hold the line along the Suez Canal.

R. Lamm spoke with a University of Tel Aviv professor whose students had been subject to sadistic torture at the hands of the Egyptians. When R. Lamm and his colleague spoke by phone, the professor broke down crying, describing the fragile psychological state of his students. They were in no shape to be attending regular undergraduate classes, he explained. What they really needed were emotional support and time to heal.

These firsthand observations, coupled with deep reflection, informed R. Lamm's thoughts on the painful questions of the day. He pondered the arrogance of Israeli generals who mistakenly claimed to have everything

1 Norman Lamm, *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith* (Ktav, 2001), vol. 2, 206.

under control, which cost the country dearly; the American and Israeli intellectuals who had declared their support for Israel but abandoned her during the war; the impotence the Israeli electorate described as they went to the polls on December 31, 1973, in the first election following the war; the frustration surrounding the peace accords, which were imposed by the United States and the Soviet Union just as the war had turned in Israel's favor and the I.D.F. was arrayed some 100 kilometers from Cairo; the meaning of a war that somehow simultaneously ended in decisive victory and indelible trauma; and the sheer confusion that gripped Israel in the aftermath of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Above all, for R. Lamm the war was a painful vindication of his brand of non-messianic Zionism and his philosophy of moderationism, which called for a balanced, level-headed approach to all problems of Judaism and public policy. Given the trauma and challenges surrounding the war, R. Lamm's response was particularly notable for its call for resilience, faith, and optimism, even in the face of terror. In particular, R. Lamm's sermons and published essays in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War emphasized six themes:

1. The value of appreciating and seeking out fragments of peace even in the midst of war;
2. The dangers of divisiveness and the critical importance of Jewish unity during and especially beyond wartime;
3. A preference for steady inspiration over meteoric transformation as a driver of lasting personal and national religious growth;
4. A desire to maintain the possibility for joy while in no way diminishing the enormity of individual and national tragedy;
5. The need to strike a healthy balance between meekness and arrogance; and, above all,
6. A vindication of a realist, non-messianic Zionism that refuses to apotheosize the State of Israel or prematurely declare the advent of the messianic era.

## **Peace and War**

On the second day of Sukkot 1973, just six days following the outbreak of hostilities, R. Lamm addressed the war in a sermon entitled "Peace in Pieces," which we will use to frame the first three themes enumerated above. Beyond the surface meaning of the sermon's title, namely that the Egyptian and Syrian invasions shattered the peace that predominated

2 See his January 12, 1974 sermon entitled "Reactions to the Yom Kippur War: Evaluations and Directions." All sermons cited in this essay can be found at the Lamm Heritage Website: [www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage](http://www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage).

just a week earlier, R. Lamm had something else in mind. Citing a midrash which teaches that “so great is peace, that even in time of war, one needs peace” (*Bemidbar Rabba* 11:7), he posited that even partial peace is a desideratum. Expressing skepticism as to whether “the classical ideal of total and universal peace ever really existed,” he declared it “more of a myth than a reality.” Even in the midst of war, partial peace, such as minimizing casualties and stopping a third front from opening on the Jordanian border, was important too.

R. Lamm added in the name of R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook that unlike truth, which the Talmud calls the *seal* of God, peace is identified as the *name* of God. Why? Truth, like a seal, is absolute. By its very nature, it is all or nothing. But peace is more like writing a name: one letter, carefully composed, follows another and another until the name is complete. This is because “when it comes to peace, there we cannot expect all at once. There we must try for even a letter, even a vowel, even a syllable. We must strive even for peace in pieces.”

Having stressed the importance of any degree of physical peace, R. Lamm turned to a second level on which the partial attainment of peace is desirable: between Jews and fellow Jews.

## The Quest for Unity

The quest for Jewish unity without uniformity dominated R. Lamm's thought and public addresses across numerous decades. Despite the euphoria and impressive show of Jewish unity that emerged in Israel in the wake of the Six Day War, he rued that this unity had collapsed, giving way to a series of divisive internecine debates on topics such as Who is a Jew, post-high school national service for young women (*sherut le'umi*), and job security for Sabbath-observant laborers.<sup>3</sup>

In 1973, the war naturally united Israelis in their desire to defeat a common enemy and in their collective anger at the perceived arrogance and consequent lack of preparation of the government and military establishment. Noting the new spirit of unity, he urged:

Between 1967 and Yom Kippur of 1973, it seemed at times that the State of Israel and the Jewish people would be rent apart almost irrevocably by various struggles, factionalisms, and animosities. It is a pity that it takes a war to bring us together. . . . This time we must insist that the relations between Jew and Jew remain supreme even when we are not threatened by the missiles of the enemy (“Peace in Pieces”).

3 See his sermon “Kulturkampf: The Religious Situation in Israel Today,” delivered January 29, 1972.

Unfortunately, R. Lamm was later compelled to acknowledge that his vision did not come to fruition. In one of his 1995 eulogies for Yitzhak Rabin, he was still bemoaning the fact that “the political culture of Israel is too loud, too intemperate.”<sup>4</sup> And in his 1999 eulogy for Yosef Burg, a Mizrahi politician with whose moderate vision R. Lamm deeply identified, he confessed: “Truth to tell, in the end [Burg] did not prevail. Moderation took back seat to more radical and extremist views that began to dominate both his Religious Zionist political camp and our Orthodox community generally.”<sup>5</sup> Still, during the Yom Kippur War and at other key junctures, R. Lamm seized the opportunity to trumpet the value of cooperation as loudly as he could.

## Religious Inspiration

In “Peace in Pieces,” after discussing Jewish unity, R. Lamm turned to a third type of peace: that between God and His people. After the dazzling miracles of the Six Day War, Israel had squandered a golden opportunity to forge a long-lasting religious revival. This was a particularly painful loss for R. Lamm, who had spoken out repeatedly against the anti-religious sentiment that dominated Israel’s elite ruling class in the State’s early years.<sup>6</sup> Yet while he was disappointed that the post-Six Day War spiritual rejuvenation was short-lived, he was not overly surprised. He observed:

What is quickly won, is quickly lost. A year after the 1967 war, there was hardly a souvenir left of the feeling of spiritual exaltation which so gripped the entire country. The religious renaissance simply never materialized.

This was consistent with his admonition to rabbis not to be overly impressed by adulation or big crowds. Instead, he urged, “pay more attention to the *kol demamah dakah* in the heart and mind of each Jew you will encounter . . . the ‘still, small voice’ is constant and enduring.”<sup>7</sup>

4 *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 226.

5 Available at the Lamm Heritage Archives under the “Eulogies, Tributes, and Special Addresses” tab.

6 See, for example, the following sermons: “Grandeur: A Jewish definition” (April 30, 1960); “Some First Impressions of a Visit in Israel” (January 16, 1971); “A Day of Good Tidings” (April 22, 1961); “Israel Independence Day: U.J.A. Appeal” (May 9, 1962); “Aspects of Creativity” (April 27, 1963); “Our Dependence Upon Israel’s Independence” (1966); “God, Man, and State” (April 23, 1966).

7 “Elijah as a Model for Rabbis,” *Hag ha-Semikha* Address (March 26, 2006), in *The Spirit of the Rabbinate* (RIETS, 2010), 90.

He held out hope that this time, things might proceed in a better direction:

Perhaps now it will be different. Most unfortunately, this is not going to be a mere 6-day war. It is going to be much more difficult. The casualties are already greater than they were in the entire 1967 war. But when it is over, and we will have prevailed (with the help of God), maybe then the slower pace of victory will produce a different attitude: not one of sudden seizures of religious insight which will, like a flash, illuminate and vanish quickly, but a slow understanding, a mature development, a profound realization that we are totally alone in the so-called "Family of Nations"; that in the long run, after we have relied upon each other as Jews, and after we have secured ourselves militarily and politically, ultimately *ein lanu le-hishaen ela al avinu she-ba-shamayim*, we have only God in Whom we can trust.

Concurrent with the hope that the new stirrings evoked in R. Lamm, he simultaneously expressed concern that many were now unnerved by the slow pace of progress in the war—just six days in! He noted that "because 1967 produced such a brilliant and quick victory, many of us are today depressed by the slower and more agonizing pace of events." Yet here too he insisted that we must take the long view. There is no reason or excuse for despair. If we did not disappear during the years of the Holocaust, we will certainly not do so now. We have not been restored to "a Most Favored Nation Status in the divine economy" for naught—and we dare not surrender that status after all we have achieved.

In a sermon delivered on January 5, 1974, titled "The Mood in Israel," delivered immediately following his aforementioned visit to Israel, R. Lamm noted that during his trip, he had indeed detected a new sense of pained spiritual exploration among secular Israelis. The changes did not add up to a religious renaissance, but they were meaningful nonetheless. Noting that the new religious stirrings were far more inchoate than those of 1967, when Hallel was recited by crying paratroopers at the Kotel, he explained:

I feel that what is now going on is, perhaps because it is slower and more halting, something that is more profound and lasting than the euphoria of six years ago. It is a deeper, sadder, larger view of the tragic dimension of life, and with it comes a search for meaning. And the search for meaning is already a religious and spiritual quest.

In "The Mood in Israel," he went on to offer a rich portrait of this new religious search. When he visited Israel in 1970, he felt a disconnect when he spoke with secular troops on religious themes. He had difficulty

relating to the soldiers, whom, he sensed, were anxious to be considered “normal,” more so than to connect to God and religion. But, he continued,

it is different today. I was asked to address troops, first in the Canal and then in Syria, but the “full high alert” prevented that. Instead I went to the Bikaah, on the Jordanian front, nearly half a kilometer from Jordanian soldiers. A hassidic band played and another speaker and I addressed the troops. Our themes were Israel as the *am ha-nivhar*, the Chosen People; *emuna* or faith; not wasting their special talents; questioning, searching. I found them not only receptive, but also participating. And in the dancing there was sheer ecstasy. Here were 300 soldiers, combat engineers, who took time out from laying mines and anti-tank traps, 80% or more officially “non-religious,” who sang and danced to such songs as *am Yisrael hai*, and other, new melodies both from America and Israel, with the abandon that comes from *deveikut*, or religious fervor. As one visitor pointed out, it was like a Hasidic wedding, without a bride and a groom.

Sadly, by his own later assessment, Israel did not do enough to actualize this new religious spirit, and to learn the proper lessons of 1973.<sup>8</sup> But his call for religious renewal encapsulated well his preference for religious evolution to religious revolution.

## Mourning and Rejoicing

On Sukkot 1973, as the war continued to rage and the extent of Israeli casualties had become widely known, a number of congregants approached R. Lamm with an elementary yet distressing question: “How can we be happy on this Simchat Torah?” This became the title of his Shemini Atzeret sermon on October 18, 1973.

In responding that we must rejoice despite our state of mourning and abject fear, R. Lamm discerned four elements in joy (*simha*). First, *simha* is a function of faith (*emuna*). He cites R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, who explains the phrase in Psalms 126, “*az yomeru va-goyim*,” “then it is said among the nations,” to mean that other nations only find faith *after* salvation has occurred, whereas the Jewish people maintain faith even when the distress

8 See his remarks in “Remembering the Six-Day War: Then and Now,” *TRADITION* 40:2 (2007), 7–13, especially on p. 9: “But that was not to be. Instead, we returned to our wonted ways. In 1973 and again in 2006 [the Second Lebanon War], when defeat and disaster stared us in the face, we should have understood that this was another God-given opportunity to turn to Heaven and pray that He break through His hiddenness and turn to us His ‘Shining Face’ so that we might rededicate ourselves to the spiritual heritage of our people—a heritage which includes confidence but not overconfidence, hope but not haughtiness—which justifies the hopes and sacrifices suffered on its behalf.”

remains acute and salvation tarries. We can rejoice precisely because we maintain our faith in times of crisis. Second, the Almighty's guiding hand has given us the gift of perspective. Many of us were rightly disturbed, he noted, by the unwarranted cockiness of the Israeli spokesmen in their initial reactions to the Yom Kippur attack. Despite this overconfidence, R. Lamm noted, the Israelis are not fools. He astutely noted: "Consider how wise is their perspective. They know that although the situation today is not as good as in 1967, it is better than in 1948! And it is a million times better than in 1940, or 1941, 1942, 1943 or 1944." We can rejoice because history has taught us to maintain perspective and not equate immense challenges with irreversible catastrophes.

Third, even in the happiest of times, *simha* necessarily issues from the complexities and ambiguities of life. Had this not been the case, we would have no right to rejoice again after the Holocaust. The Mishna in *Avot* (1:7) which teaches, "*al titya'esh min ha-pur'anut*," is best understood not only as a charge to refuse to assume the inevitability of suffering, but also as a call not to give up hope as a result of punishment. Whether or not we experience suffering is not up to us. But whether we respond with hope or despair is in our hands. Fourth and finally, *simha* itself is a vessel with which to battle evil. "If we give in now to depression and despair and gloom," R. Lamm declaimed, "we will hand a psychological and spiritual victory to Sadat and Faisal, to Malik and Fulbright. But when we dance on Simchat Torah, that is the greatest expression of Jewish defiance."

The common denominator among these themes, particularly the first three, is R. Lamm's recognition of the complexities of life generally and of mourning and celebration in particular. If our long history has taught us anything, it is that no joy can be absolute, just as mourning must pave the way toward the eventual possibility of rejoicing again. Whereas in the wake of the Six Day War he saw the need to stress the dangers of overindulging in messianic euphoria, he now found tragic occasion to emphasize that plunging ourselves into national mourning in the midst of a war is equally perilous.

### **Arrogance and Meekness**

Even as the Yom Kippur War still raged, Israelis were gripped by an acute sense that the military and government had misled them with their bragadocio. This precipitated a national reckoning that shook the country to its core. Mirroring the psychological cloud that had enveloped Israel, in a lecture delivered in April 1974 and subsequently published under the title "The Yom Kippur War" in a book bearing the same name, R. Lamm warned that Israeli statehood had become synonymous with excessive pride. To be sure, the New Jew or *Homo Israeli* was needed to protect the State from her enemies, but it also posed grave dangers. Morally, militarism

was in danger of becoming a value in its own right, not just a means for protecting the country. Psychologically, Israelis' boundless faith in their leaders had been shattered. "Dying illusions are painful," R. Lamm wryly remarked, "and also enraging."<sup>9</sup> Existentially, military unpreparedness had placed the nation in mortal danger.

At the same time, R. Lamm warned that a spirit of "sadness, depression, and pessimism" had supplanted the state's swagger. The pendulum had swung from one extreme to the other. But neither side was healthy, and none was consistent with the value of *emuna*, which both curbs excessive self-reliance and instills confidence that a positive outcome will ensue. As he put it: "Both arrogance and despair have the same provenance: a lack of faith."<sup>10</sup>

One year on, by *Kol Nidrei* night, 1974, the Israeli psyche had further deteriorated. Many described themselves as stricken by a profound sense of national despair. In his sermon that evening, entitled "Diffidence and Indifference," R. Lamm warned against the pitfalls of both Israeli arrogance leading up to the war and the new pervasive national insecurity, associating each attitude with the gravest sins of Jewish history. He cited an insight of R. Barukh HaLevi Epstein in his *Barukh she-Amar (Tefillot ha-Shana, Am Olam, 367)*, who relies on kabbalistic sources in establishing that there were two paradigmatic sins of the Jewish people: the brothers' sale of Joseph and the Golden Calf. The former, R. Lamm argued, was an outgrowth of fraternal arrogance. The temerity the brothers demonstrated in selling their brother into slavery evinced an appalling arrogance that imperiled not only their brother but their family. On the other hand, the sin of the Golden Calf was borne of the Jews' insecurity. Had they believed in their ability to worship God independently, the Jews would not have panicked at Moses's delayed descent and would not have felt desperate to manufacture an intermediary. Both indifference and diffidence, then, are archetypes of religious catastrophe. If the sale of Joseph represented Israelis' indifferent mindset leading into the Yom Kippur War, the Golden Calf was the model for the Jews' diffidence a year later. Both extremes, stressed R. Lamm, were liable to lead to disaster. A healthy medium was the only viable way forward.

## Non-Messianic Religious Zionism

Above all, the Yom Kippur War was a vindication of R. Lamm's vision for a non-messianic brand of Religious Zionism.

In the wake of the Six Day War, and to a lesser degree as early as 1948, many Religious Zionists had begun to proclaim the arrival of *reshit*

9 Appeared in *The Yom Kippur War: Israel and the Jewish People*, ed. Moshe Davis (Arno Press, 1974), republished in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, chap. 49, quote at 207.

10 *Ibid.*, 218.



*tzemihat ge'ulatenu*, the beginning of the messianic period of redemption. Along with so many others, R. Lamm was initially caught up in the excitement.<sup>11</sup> But soon after, he warned against the dangers of creating a practical program on the basis of messianic speculation or any attempt to read the political landscape through the prism of a predictive theological framework.<sup>12</sup> He cited Maimonides' admonition against calculating the end of days<sup>13</sup> and was chagrined by rabbis who attempted to "play prophet" long after the cessation of the prophecy. He firmly disagreed, insisting that while the messianic impulse was psychologically and religiously understandable, it was also dangerous and wrong-headed in its practical application to contemporary affairs. Consistent with this standpoint, he took the unpopular step of omitting the phrase *reshit tzemihat ge'ulatenu* in the Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel on Shabbat morning.<sup>14</sup> He insisted on taking a wait-and-see approach. We are not prophets, he reminded his congregants, and to confuse the sage for the prophet is foolish and dangerous. If Moses could only see God's back, as it were, can we dare claim that we see His face? That we can foretell His plans?

In part to guard against the excesses of this messianic outlook, and without questioning the core belief in the advent of the Messiah, R. Lamm developed an alternative theological framework for thinking about contemporary events, which we will describe in brief. Reflecting on the Holocaust and the return to Israel, he developed a theological framework in which God interacts with the world and the Jewish community in particular through three lenses: *hester panim* (God's hidden face), *nesiat panim* or *he'arat panim* (God's raised face or His illumination), and an intermediate category that he termed a "dream state" in which we are in a semi-waking state when we can once again dream of fully experiencing the divine,<sup>15</sup> or simply "neither here nor there," the title of one of his classic sermons.<sup>16</sup> The Holocaust is the exemplar par excellence of an era of *hester panim*. This framing enabled R. Lamm to avoid the theological challenge posed by those who claimed that God was absent during the Holocaust: He was present but, for reasons we cannot fathom, His presence was obscured.

11 "O Jerusalem" (June 15, 1967). In that initial sermon, delivered just days after the Six Day War, he spoke in explicitly messianic terms, declaring that "in our days those who are wise have sensed his 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." But he changed his tune in the months and years to follow.

12 "The Religious Meaning of the Six Day War: A Symposium," *TRADITION* 10:1 (1968), 7–9.

13 *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2, based on *Sanhedrin* 97b.

14 See *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 244.

15 "The Curtain Rises" (October 6, 1967).

16 Delivered on March 9, 1968. For an extremely similar treatment, see also his Yom Yerushalayim "Address to College Youth" (May 26, 1968).

In the wake of the establishment of the State of Israel, he argued, we were blessed to emerge from that dark period of *hester panim*. But we were still far from a period of *nesiat panim*, which he described as a time when “Israel is dear to God and His providence does not leave us. He is accessible to our call and our prayer, and we are able with but normal human effort to experience His Presence in our lives. Our hearts possess the possibility of song.”<sup>17</sup> We remained encircled by enemies, who declared war and sought to annihilate us on the very day the State was founded. The fledgling country’s economy was precarious at best. The dominant Israeli ethos and political leadership was rabidly anti-religious and the prospect of building a viable state was terrifying, even if exhilarating.

Even after the Six Day War, notwithstanding the open miracles and conquest of holy sites and large swaths of territory, matters were far from simple. The Israeli economy remained weak, international support for Israel was still tepid, and the Arabs were back at work plotting our extermination. Anyone asserting that the Arab-Israeli conflict had come to an end was delusional. Things were better, countless times over, but the period of *he’arat panim* had not yet dawned.

These categories carried practical ramifications. It was impossible to hold anyone responsible for non-observance of the *mitzvot* during the *hester panim* of periods such as the Shoah. Similarly, during times of *he’arat panim*, such as the Exodus and the Sinaitic Revelation, our free will had nearly been stripped from us and we lacked full-fledged freedom in choosing to observe the *mitzvot*. Caught in between these extremes are times when things are far from perfect but nor are matters completely dire. At the time of Purim, for example, God intervened on our behalf to stave off the threat of genocide, yet His presence remained obscured and we remained in exile. This, suggested R. Lamm, is the true meaning of the Talmudic tale that God held Mount Sinai over the Jewish people’s heads like a barrel. At Sinai, God’s presence was overwhelming. It was a time of *he’arat panim*. The Jews therefore had little choice but to accept the Torah at that time. But the Gemara concludes that Purim, when God’s presence was no longer clearly manifest, was the ideal time for the Jews to recommit themselves to Torah and *mitzvot*. Thus, the Jews’ renewed acceptance was truly meaningful and was viewed as a legitimate foundation for accepting the Torah. Nowadays too, R. Lamm contended, we are “neither here nor there.”

Against this backdrop, we can understand why the Yom Kippur War was so theologically significant for R. Lamm. To his mind, the debate as to whether we could declare with certitude that the post-Six Day War-era was a time of *he’arat panim*—and more to the point, whether we could

17 “The Curtain Rises,” *ibid.*

assert with confidence that any stage of the messianic era had definitively arrived—was by all reasonable accounts decisively resolved by the Yom Kippur War.

The setbacks of 1973 now become quite problematical for those who persisted in ascribing a Messianic dimension to the State. It . . . is reasonable to assume that if success proves the truth of a proposition—if 1948 and 1967 are the validations of the Messianic claims for the State of Israel—then failures prove the opposite.<sup>18</sup>

The error-riddled start to the war; the utter collapse of Israeli confidence in the government and military; and the long trauma of the nation as it emerged from the war, victorious but scarred, demonstrated beyond any shadow of a doubt that intellectual modesty and level-headed public policy decision-making were the orders of the day.

R. Lamm went further, arguing that belief in Israel, among both secular and religious Zionists, had transmuted into a form of “idolatry.” He approvingly noted Daniel Elazar’s observation that many diaspora Jews, having lost faith in God and Torah, had begun to turn the State of Israel into an idol. R. Lamm agreed: “We have contributed to this dangerous attitude which has made the State an end in itself.”<sup>19</sup> Decrying “Israelolatry,” he sought to restore a basic commitment to God, Torah, and *mitzvot*, in which the State of Israel played an essential but more circumscribed role. In this conception of statehood, it would be legitimate and important to criticize Israel as appropriate, lest “the idol will be found to have clay feet.”<sup>20</sup>

Of course, R. Lamm’s concerns did not dissuade those committed to a messianic reading of statehood from continuing to propound their views after the events of 1973. Far from it, noted R. Lamm; they were just required to introduce greater creativity and ingenuity into their conceptual schemes. Some asserted that the Yom Kippur War represented the apocalyptic struggle between Gog and Magog. They substantiated this claim by pointing to the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union, the two major international superpowers of the day, had lent their support to the Israeli and Arab sides, respectively. Others claimed that the events of 1973 provided additional evidence for the supernatural nature of the Israeli army’s powers. For these messianists, the fact that the I.D.F. succeeded despite the grim prospects, ironically provided even greater evidence for the ultimate invincibility of the Israeli military. A third group at least took the events seriously and subjected their messianic speculations to real critique. Instead of acknowledging that we cannot offer messianic

18 *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 214.

19 *Ibid.*, 208.

20 *Ibid.*, 209.

claims, they instead emphasized that the messianic era had dawned, but will only rise *kim'a kim'a*, a bit at a time, much like the rise of dawn.

But for R. Lamm, all these variations on messianic Religious Zionism, which were always wrong-headed, had now been proven entirely untenable. The very need for such casuistry when Jewish tradition provides categories that do not demand intellectual acrobatics or life-and-death decisions based on supernatural speculation, demonstrated that messianism was always a dangerous rabbit hole from which the Religious Zionist community would be hard-pressed to find its way back out.

R. LAMM CONCLUDED HIS JANUARY 5, 1974 SERMON with the following anecdote. Ephraim Holland, who shared his story directly with R. Lamm, emigrated with his young family from the Lower East Side and became an Israeli citizen. When war broke out on Yom Kippur, he was assigned to the reserves. Stationed near Kantara, along the Suez Canal, he was on the front lines during the first hours of war. The more enemy soldiers he and his brigade picked off with their machine guns, the more Egyptian troops swarmed over the canal: some 50,000–60,000 in total. In short order, most of his comrades were wounded or killed.

The commander ordered them to withdraw. Each was permitted to take one item. Most took an Uzi, but Ephraim took an Uzi and a *tallit*. Ephraim and 22 fellow soldiers became separated from the others. After trudging through the desert for a day-and-a-half, they found themselves caught in a firefight between Israeli and Egyptian troops. Both sides thought Ephraim's band of soldiers belonged to the enemy, and opened fire. The soldiers desperately tried to contact their comrades by transistor radio, but they could not establish a connection. At what seemed like the last moment, Ephraim unfurled his *tallit* and began to wave it in the direction of the Israeli troops. When they realized what it was, the Israelis got out of their tanks and motioned for the soldiers to come, and Ephraim and his comrades were saved.

R. Lamm conveyed this report as an inspirational story at the end of a sermon. But the anecdote's optimism also conveys something of his larger response to the Yom Kippur War. His messianic skepticism notwithstanding, he displayed fierce optimism in the face of the terrifying, grim scenario posed by the Yom Kippur War. He stressed the value of grasping for pieces of peace; saw opportunities for unity and sustained national religious growth; insisted that we experience joy even in the face of mourning and tragedy; denounced despair to be as pernicious as arrogance; and, precisely due to his non-messianic Zionism, refused to see the war as representing a radical shift in the divine economy that portended doom and gloom.

In the end, even as Israel experienced the Yom Kippur War as its Vietnam, R. Lamm was prepared to honor and mourn that suffering—so long as we did not permit our national suffering to lead us to surrender to despair.