

Achrei-Mos/Kedoshim literally means, after the deaths of the holy ones.

When we read these sections of the Torah, it is an apt time to reflect on the amazing people that have left our world. Particularly on the heels of a devastating pandemic, we have lost so many luminaries over the last year.

In this spirit, I'd like to share a tribute to Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, whose first Yahrzeit will be next month.

I've read many moving tributes to this great thinker and transformative leader. What is unique to my perspective is it's from a distance.

Although a graduate of Yeshiva University and its affiliated rabbinical seminary, I wasn't a close student of Rabbi Lamm nor did I have a close personal relationship with him.

I did have a number of personal encounters with him over a span of thirty years and think there is a powerful common thread that binds those interactions.

When I was 21-years old, I was entering the semicha program at Yeshiva University.

There was a dinner in honor of the incoming class of students. My maternal grandfather was very devoted to the institution. It was his pride and joy and naturally he developed a relationship with Rabbi Lamm. Although Rabbi Lamm was a decade his junior, my grandfather revered him.

My mother encouraged me to introduce myself to Rabbi Lamm. It was an incredibly intimidating prospect for me to approach such an important figure.

I sheepishly approached and shared that I had regards from my grandfather. Rather sternly, Rabbi Lamm sent me away with a powerful lesson. He remarked, "I don't care who your grandfather is, make a name for yourself."

This was my first formal interaction with Rabbi Lamm and it set a tone. It alerted me to his tremendous focus and his drive that each person should reach their greatest potential without any shortcuts.

My next recollection was soon after during a dorm talks program. In those days we would come to the Morgenstern lounge on an evening and hear from Rosh Yeshiva and other distinguished faculty.

On that particular evening, we had an up close and intimate discussion with Rabbi Lamm.

One comment in particular still stands out in my mind almost 30 years later.

He shared that one evening he came out to the hallway of his apartment on Central Park West in Manhattan. There was one other apartment across from him on the floor and he encountered his neighbor. They exchanged pleasantries and the neighbor introduced himself as Harrison Ford.

Rabbi Lamm shared with the audience that the name made zero impression on him. Harrison Ford was in his prime starring in the biggest films of the day. Only later on sharing the encounter with a family member, it was pointed out that his neighbor was a legendary actor.

Rabbi Lamm was completely nonplussed and also disinterested. He didn't have time to waste with the contemporary entertainment culture and was communicating to us that it wasn't a value we should have either. I recall being astounded at the young impressionable age I was at. It made a real imprint as to the single-minded focus he had.

Fast forward a few years and I became an assistant rabbi in Fair Lawn, NJ as part of my rabbinical training. Those years proved formative in my desire to become a communal rabbi.

The community suffered a number of tragedies during my five-year tenure. One particularly difficult one was the disappearance of a young man named Josh Bender z'l. Josh was a college student at Yeshiva University at the time of his disappearance. After a week of searching, Josh's body turned up in the Hudson River.

Rabbi Lamm came to deliver the first eulogy at the overflowing funeral. This was March of 1998. He told a story of a prolific writer who authored 20 plus books in his illustrious career. When the writer was prompted as to how he accomplished so much he responded that he had a friend that died very young and that he was living for both himself and his friend. He therefore had to accomplish double the amount in his lifetime.

Rabbi Lamm gave a charge to all the students gathered at the funeral that they had to pick up the slack for Josh. I was in my mid-20s at the time and found the message incredibly motivational and compelling.

As I listened to the eulogies delivered for Rabbi Lamm at his funeral something astounding hit me. It was the other side of the story. When Shalom Lamm once asked his father why he was so driven and never wasted time, Rabbi Lamm answered that when he was in first grade at Yeshiva Torah Vodas, he had a best friend Joshua Kaufman z'l who passed away. He was haunted by this tragedy and lived life with a fear that he too would not live a long life. Shalom went on to say that he thinks his father would want Joshua Kaufman z'l to be remembered at this occasion.

Upon hearing that eulogy, I couldn't help but wonder if Rabbi Lamm was speaking of himself all those years earlier at the funeral of another Josh, Josh Bender z'l. I can't know for sure, but I have a sneaky suspicion that the eulogy delivered that day was much more powerful and personal than anyone initially thought.

The next year, my mentor's Rabbi Benjamin and Shevi Yudin were honored by the shul on a motzei Shabbos for 30 years serving the community they founded. I was tasked with picking up Rabbi Lamm from the Upper West Side and delivering him to the celebratory events of the evening.

Rabbi Yudin wasn't the type of rabbi to be impressed by dignitaries, but I could tell that it was meaningful to him to have Rabbi Lamm participate. He even prepared a special office that he infrequently used for Rabbi Lamm to rest in upon his arrival.

The car ride was the chance of a lifetime. I was able to pepper Rabbi Lamm with an array of questions and try to understand better how he operated.

Two things stand out from that conversation.

Rabbi Lamm shared that he was meticulous to write down every speech he delivered word for word. He said he got this from Rav Soloveitchik z'l. He explained to me that despite how brilliant the Rav was, he still wrote everything out. Rabbi Lamm formulated this as an expression of "Kavod," honor for the audience. A rabbi must always be meticulously prepared.

The second aspect was how he would spend his summers at that juncture of his career in the Catskills, cut off from the world so that he could progress in his writing uninterrupted. The quiet was essential in pursuing his many academic and scholarly goals.

Before our arrival, I shared that he was slated to be the final speaker of the evening, a place of great honor. He would have none of it. He insisted that I rearrange the entire schedule which included finding him a new driver home (as I was slated to be a speaker) as he wanted to speak first. He explained to me that he didn't have a moment to waste with so many pressing communal demands and couldn't spend the entire evening in Fair Lawn. It made a profound impression upon me as to the value of time. You do what you need to do, but then you must get back to your mission.

My next encounter with Rabbi Lamm was many years later when he had stepped down as president of YU and was serving as chancellor. We both attended the YU Purim Chagiga and I shared a ride home with him to the Upper West Side where I had just begun serving as the rabbi of the Young Israel.

I explained to him the complicated and delicate dynamic of my serving in tandem with Rabbi Emmanuel Gettinger z'l.

Rabbi Lamm opened up to me about his time serving at the Jewish Center with Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung z'l. To my surprise, he commiserated with me about the challenges of a young aspiring rabbi having to navigate sharing a pulpit.

I recall him being adamant that it was critical that I forge my own identity, that I publish, speak in different venues and ensure that I'm laying the groundwork for my next position. This caught me by surprise as I had just begun in this position. Yet, Rabbi Lamm was a realist and he saw the obstacles for what they were. In that brief discussion he was helping me see bigger. There was an entire Jewish world to be impacted upon and a young rabbi shouldn't be held back.

As a rabbi in Manhattan, just a few blocks from the Jewish Center and with some members who had grown up listening to Rabbi Lamm, it wasn't lost on me that I often gleaned from his artistic sermons. As many have pointed out, his sermons are as relevant today as they were when delivered more than a half century ago. The applications and contexts are a bit different, but the underlying messages are timeless.

Very often, I would spin the "vort" used by Rabbi Lamm in my own sermons. Often the ideas were of a chasidic bent and unless familiar with Rabbi Lamm's eclecticism, you wouldn't have guessed they emanated from him. My very best sermons were often built on his.

After completing my almost decade long tenure at the Young Israel, my family remained on the Upper West Side for an additional two years. In that period, we frequently davened by the Jewish Center and that meant seeing Rabbi Lamm regularly, but in a diminished state. The years had taken their toll and he was no longer the powerhouse that I knew in my youth and early rabbinical career.

He was always dignified, and we would at times exchange pleasantries. Sadly, this wasn't the same man that I introduced myself to before entering the semicha program.

Seeing him in his later years was a reminder that we are all fragile and that life can take cruel turns.

It was a stark reminder of the message that Rabbi Lamm always communicated in all my experiences with him, "Carpe Diem," seize the day. As Rabbi Lamm's great mentor Rabbi Soloveitchik z'l once commented, we are all actors on a stage, and when our time is up, we must exit the stage.

The Jewish world has lost an indomitable leader in the most troubling of times.

May the Jewish world continue to be inspired by his legacy for many years to come.

We look forward to spending beautiful, inspirational and quality time with you at YICBH!!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Dovid M. Cohen