

with him about who I wanted and needed to be. He was there for me and I did not, or maybe could not, seize the opportunity. Even so, in that conversation, which was not our last, but was certainly our most intimate, he astounded me with his insight into who I was. He remembered the young fool who had joined the army at age eighteen, eleven or twelve years earlier, and then had come back to yeshiva seeking his way. At the time he did not directly offer his help. That was not his way – he was constitutionally incapable of intruding on another person's privacy in that way. In my case, he was right. If he had reached out to me, I would probably have run in the other direction. He nevertheless served as a supreme role model for me, a person to look up to and aspire to emulate. What I did not know then, and only found out when I was leaving, was that he saw me even then; he understood and cared about me, despite the hundreds of other students he had. I will miss him forever.

David Berger

WE WOULD ALL LIKE TO BELIEVE THAT GENUINE MASTERY OF Torah on the part of a believing Jew automatically brings with it a status of supreme righteousness. This certainly should be the case, and most of the time it probably is. Nonetheless, in a Jewish world of contentiousness, of ideological friction, of access to every position and even every casual comment regarding matters of the day issued by rabbinic scholars, this conviction can be sorely tested. At their cynical worst, some Jews, especially Modern Orthodox Jews, wonder if the coexistence of mastery of Torah and supreme righteousness is a realistic expectation.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein reinforced our faith in the ethical power of Torah. His control of the corpus of the written and oral Torah approached the absolute, and he personified integrity, concern for others, genuine, almost startling, humility – everything that the word *tzaddik* conveys. The combination of encyclopedic knowledge and humility is illustrated in a story.

I was told many years ago about his attitude toward setting aside some time for the rapid study of Gemara in order to gain familiarity with a broad range of material. He opposed such a so-called *sefer* in *bekiut*, which he characterized as studying so as not to understand. All study, he believed, should be *be'iyun* – with deep analysis and attention to detail. When some students objected with the argument that they wanted to gain a broad knowledge of the Talmud, he reportedly replied, “So study the entire Talmud *be'iyun*. I did it.” In his case, this response was not an affectation. The objectively

risible assumption that anyone could do what he did was taken for granted, or at least it was not rejected out of hand.

I've formulated the meaning of *tzidkut* in terms that have concrete meaning – integrity, concern for others, humility. However, in addressing the persona of Rav Lichtenstein, I need to add a term that I hardly ever use because of its elusiveness and frequent application to approaches that disturb me – spirituality. For all his embodiment of the learning associated with the ultra-intellectualized world of Brisk, anyone with even passing familiarity with Rav Lichtenstein encountered a figure suffused with the almost tangible presence of the Creator of the Universe. In a famous, brief essay on faith that has just been reprinted in *Leaves of Faith*, Rav Lichtenstein wrote that for him “the greatest source of faith has been the *Ribbono shel Olam* Himself,” and he went on to describe the intimate relationship that he so frequently experienced.

It is a commonplace among his students and acquaintances that to have seen Rav Lichtenstein daven on Yom Kippur was to understand prayer. I saw this davening at Yeshiva University before he moved to Israel, and his status as a man of prayer was underscored by his daughter at the funeral. One of the most moving moments for me as I watched the video was her report of his reaction a year and a half ago when he was brought by ambulance to the hospital as death appeared to loom. “*Beyadkha afkid ruhi*,” he declared, “*padita oti Hashem E-l Emet* – Into Your hand I commend my spirit; You have redeemed me O Lord, God of Truth” (Psalms 31:6), thus simultaneously commending his soul to God and pleading for divine mercy.

For the Modern Orthodox community, Rav Lichtenstein, like the Rav (his father-in-law, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik), served as a model for *Torah uMadda*, Torah and secular study or general culture. Unlike the Rav, Rav Lichtenstein also addressed the issue frontally, most notably in a lengthy essay in a volume in which I had the privilege to participate. But like the Rav, he did not directly engage specific intellectual difficulties that pursuit of secular disciplines can raise. Rather, his central approach underscored the ways in which such a pursuit can enrich the understanding and experi-

ence of Torah and faith. What spoke to him most was, of course, literature, and even though he was acutely conscious of the fact that many Torah scholars would look askance at his invocation of non-Jewish figures in presentations of aspects of the Jewish worldview, he did not shrink from doing so regularly and unapologetically.

I cannot vouch for the historicity of the following story, which comes in more than one form, but it is said that Rav Lichtenstein, in a Torah discourse where Rav Ovadiah Yosef was present, made reference to Dostoevsky. When he sat down, Rav Ovadiah purportedly turned to him and said, “I thought I knew all the great later authorities of the Ashkenazim.”

At a Gush dinner where Rabbi Nati Helfgott, then a teacher, was the alumni honoree, Rav Lichtenstein said something that would not have been said by a great rabbi at any comparable event in Jewish history outside of (possibly) Renaissance Italy: “As Aquinas said, teaching is the ideal synthesis of the active and contemplative life.”

Rav Lichtenstein's openness to the value of outside culture and his innate sense of tolerance did not mean that he was soft or even flexible when it came to issues that he saw as central to Judaism. He would not allow the expression of certain theological views in a volume of the Orthodox Forum. He firmly opposed the dominant forms of Biblical Criticism, and he was even critical of typical approaches to the academic study of Talmud, sometimes characterized as Talmud criticism, in which a significant number of religious Jews engage.

Even in dealing with rigorously Orthodox circles, Rav Lichtenstein did not allow his openness to varied approaches to blunt his expression of sharp criticism when he felt that principle required it. On the one hand, he expressed unalloyed reverence for Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. On the other, Rav Lichtenstein's discourse on *daat Torah* in the sense of unalloyed rabbinic authority led him to affirm in vigorous terms that a public talk by Rav Shach, at a politically critical moment, was deeply misguided because of his lack of familiarity with Israeli realities in the secular community. He was open, he was tolerant, but he could also be firm and uncompromising.

Assessing Rav Lichtenstein's impact requires some comparison with the giant who was his father-in-law and with the man who invited him to Yeshivat Har Etzion and served as his co-*rosh yeshiva*. The Rav was a figure for the ages as both a *talmid hakham* and a philosopher. The main sentiment that he inspired was awe. A select few individuals were genuinely close to him and were no doubt able to develop more intimate sentiments as well. Nonetheless, even for them, I think that what predominated was awe. Rav Amital was an impressive *talmid hakham*, but in his case, the dominant response inspired was love.

Hazal tell us that *et Hashem Elokekha tira* – you must fear the Lord your God – includes *talmidei hakhamim*, or better, is channeled through *talmidei hakhamim*. I think we would be justified in saying the same about *ve'ahavta et Hashem Elokekha* – you must love the Lord your God. You can learn to love God from the experience of loving *talmidei hakhamim*. Rav Lichtenstein, who was a towering *talmid hakham* and a figure who, for all his reserve, afforded some degree of access to his person and personality, inspired both awe and love, though perhaps at a slightly lesser level in each case than his teacher and his colleague respectively.

As to influence, the Rav's emerges out of the works of a world-class thinker and affects large numbers of Jews through his elite students and popularizations of his teachings and writings. Rav Lichtenstein's massive output and personal example made him a guide and mentor in a way that was more direct and, I think, even exceeds the everyday impact of the Rav, at least during the latter's lifetime. To some degree, I am reminded of what my father, who was among other things a folklorist, wrote in an article on folk tales about Rashi, published twenty-two years after a similar article about the Rambam. Legends about the Rambam, he said, reflect the *yirat kavod*, the awed reverence, that the people felt toward a figure who inhabits the highest, largely inaccessible circles; legends about Rashi reflect a greater degree of familiarity, a sense of greater comfort with a beloved father-figure and teacher of stellar character

(“Rashi beAggadat haAm,” in *Rashi: Torato veIshiyuto*, ed. Simon Federbush [New York, 1958], pp. 147–48).

Back in 1969, when Rav Lichtenstein was still at Yeshiva University, he unknowingly caused one of the sharpest and most amusing criticisms to which I was ever subjected by a student. I had just begun my teaching career, and I had to read a New Testament verse to my class. At the time, my only New Testament was part of an old, crumbling King James Bible lent to me by my father. When I took it out to read the verse, a student declared, “His New Testament looks like Rav Lichtenstein's Rambam.” About twenty-five years later at a Gush dinner, I told this story to Rav Lichtenstein, who reacted with considerable amusement. I ask myself if I would have told a comparable story to the Rav, and my answer is an unequivocal “No.”

The day after Rav Lichtenstein's *petira*, I was speaking with Rabbi Yosef Blau, who remarked that people use the word “irreplaceable” loosely, but in this case, it is true. I replied that I had not asked Rav Lichtenstein many questions, but on several occasions, when there was more at stake than technical *halakha* and a great authority with real *daat Torah* was needed, I called him in Israel. On those occasions and many others, I wondered who else I could have asked, and the agonizing answer was, “No one.” A similar comment was made to me by Prof. Shnayer Leiman after Rav Lichtenstein was consulted at our urging regarding a very sensitive decision that confronted the editors of the forthcoming Rabbinical Council of America Siddur.

Our community is blessed with great *talmidei hakhamim*. This is not to diminish their great stature and the great honor that they are due. I have asked them questions and will, with the help of God, continue to do so. But sometimes clichés are indeed true. Losing the constellation of remarkable learning, broad horizons, profound judgment, exemplary humanity, and closeness to God embodied by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein leaves us an orphaned generation. May his merit protect us.

A Life Steady and Whole

Recollections and Appreciations of
Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *zt"l*

EDITED BY

Elka Weber and Joel B. Wolowelsky

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