For This You Have Been Created
A Tribute to my Rebbe, HaGaon Aharon Lichtenstein, zt’l

R. Yochanan b. Zakkai received the tradition from Hillel and Shammai. He was wont to say, ‘If you have studied a Torah a great deal, do not congratulate yourself, for it is to this purpose you have been created.’

Attempting, in any sense, to express myself after the passing Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zt’l, immediately stimulates a feeling of dialectical tension. On the one hand, producing divrei hesped in a forum which will largely be read on Shabbat, is not only generally unacceptable, but would be a profound and specific disservice to the legacy of a man whose life was consecrated, in the literal sense of the term, to fidelity to the halakhic system, and all which that entailed. On the other hand, given that Rav Lichtenstein’s spiritual depth, religious passion, exquisite personal sensitivity and refinement, vast Torah knowledge, massive general erudition, ethical rigor, personal discipline and integrity, indefatigable work ethic, limitless capacity for gratitude, command of language, and above all, singular humility, are not merely frighteningly beyond my own, but more to the point, beyond what I can truly comprehend, the possibility that anything which I write could begin to approach the halakhic definition of hesped seems, to put things generously, remote. If our shared concern is one of hesped on Shabbat, it seems we have very little to worry about indeed. Humbly, haltingly, and stimulated by my own personal debt of gratitude, I will try to proffer a few meager words of appreciation to the man who was my spiritual lodestar from my earliest youth, as he was to so many others.

Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai seems, to me, an instructive comparison, even though being placed in the same sentence as this giant of our mesorah would induce a reflexive, and immediate, combination of mortification and revulsion on the part of Morenu V’Rabbenu. The Talmud testifies that R. Yochanan b. Zakkai was first into the Beit Midrash everyday, and the last one to leave and turn off the lights2. He studied every single one of the chadrei ha-Torah, deeply, incisively, creatively, and beyond, addressing himself to the broader world of chochmah, of wisdom3. Rav Aharon was the greatest masmid any of us ever saw, both with respect to the time he put in to learning, and the intensity with which he worked in the Beit Midrash, yet his general erudition surpassed even his closest peers in Torah learning by a difference of kind, and not one of degree. Moreover, the Talmud describes R. Yochanan b. Zakkai as the model of solicitous kindness, taking care to greet everyone before they acknowledged him, Jew and gentile alike, and holding the door for his students as they entered the Beit Midrash4. Rav Aharon was the greatest champion of tzelem elokim that I ever saw or heard, both in principle

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1 משנה מסכת אבות פרק ב
2 תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות י.
3 תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוכה כח.
4 שם.
and in practice, and he was the most devoted rebbe, who took Chazal’s comparison between a teacher and a father with extreme seriousness.

Furthermore, R. Yochanan b. Zakkai was obviously, and deeply, engaged in the critical issues facing the Jewish people in his generation. For R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, this was of course the cataclysm of the destruction of the temple, whilst for Rav Aharon, it was the attempt to spiritually and physically rebuild from the cataclysm of the Shoah, and both the challenges and opportunities which statehood presented. Unlike the overwhelming majority, if not all, of the Talmidei Chachamim who could be considered of his stature, who were, at best, apathetic, to these ongoing transformations, if not outright hostile, Rav Aharon addressed these national challenges, engaged in public discourse, and tried to help us chart a course forward. Even more to the point, though, it was not merely that Rav Aharon engaged the issues of the day, as R. Yochanan b. Zakkai surely did, but his basic approach was precisely that of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, namely, ‘give me Yavneh and her wise men’. Rav Aharon passionately felt that the single most important way to address the challenges at the national level was to cultivate a deep and abiding ethic of serious Talmud Torah, sophisticated, nuanced, Talmud Torah, and to seek to inspire the entire Jewish people to a love of Torah. He, like his rebbe muvhak, and father-in-law, was unfavorably disposed towards laws of religious coercion, and deeply skeptical of its prospects. As far as the goal of attracting broader appeal, he was every bit a student of his namesake, a lover of peace, and a pursue of peace, a lover of all people, who yearned to draw them closer, from a position of love, to the Torah.

For R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, though, focus on the national issues of the day did not eclipse, or blind him, to the needs of individuals. In the very same breath that he asked Vespasian for Yavneh, as well as the preservation of the Davidic line, thus preserving Judaism’s eschatological aspirations intact, he asked for a qualified physician for R. Zakok, who had been fasting for the aversion of a catastrophe. In his final breath, R. Yochanan b. Zakkai told his students to always keep in mind the future redemption, and, in the same sentence, to remove the vessels from the home, lest his death cause the smallest financial loss through contamination of earthen vessels which cannot be purified. Rav Aharon too, like his illustrious forbearer, could see the entire canvass, ‘steadily and whole’, as Rav Lichtenstein so often quoted in the name of Matthew Arnold regarding Sophocles, and would never lose sight of the smallest personal concerns or anxieties. As he perceived of himself, in Milton’s phrase, ‘as ever in his great taskmaster’s eye, it was more than appropriate that his transcendence, his greatness, his עוניוות, was inextricably linked to his ידועות. When my father dropped a pencil in shiur, and was simply too afraid to pick it up, lest he interrupt Rav Lichtenstein in midstream, Rav Lichtenstein walked over and put it back on my father’s desk, with a gentle smile, without interrupting his presentation. When I accompanied my father, about two years ago, to ask Rav

5 See his collection of essays, Leaves of Faith, Volumes I and II, his collection of lectures concerning spiritual development, By His Light, as well as the recently published, מבkees פניך, ממשנה מסכת אבות פרק א. He is, to this day, the most prolific contributor to the Orthodox Forum. The recent edition of Tradition in his honor is the beginning of what will be decades of collecting and distilling his broader thought.

6 תלמוד בבל מסכת גיטין נ: ממשנה מסכת אבות פרק א.

7 תלמוד בבל מסכת ברוכי ח:
Lichtenstein an extremely sensitive, and deeply personal, halakhic dilemma, his response was an object lesson in the highest degree of personal care, intellectual humility, and deep love for his *talmidim*. When I took leave of Yeshivat Har Etzion on the day before Tisha b’Av, and went to thank Rav Aharon for everything, he turned the conversation around and expressed concern for my future development in learning.

As indicated in the mishnah above, R. Yochanan b. Zakkai was a *mekabel* of the mesorah, he was able to receive. More impressively, he managed to receive from individuals who had profoundly different personal styles, Hillel and Shammai. Rav Aharon was a *mekabel* as well, deeply rooted in his mesorah, in the world of the Lithuanian yeshivot from which he emerged, in the world of Rav Huner, Rav Ahron Soloveichik, and, at a different plane, his father in law, and rebbe mvhak, the Rav. Likewise, he was remarkable in his ability to absorb from different sorts of people, to see that which each person had to offer, people even more different in approach than Hillel and Shammai. Most of his students, myself included, became acquainted with Milton, F.H. Bradley, Cardinal Newman, Milton, Professors Bush and Trilling, only through him. And, even if we knew, at some level, Shakespeare independently, how many of us had so deeply applied the message of King Lear, to our personal observance of kibbud av v’em in the way in which Rav Lichtenstein did? And, unlike many in the Centrist Orthodox world, whose frustration with the ideological commitments of Chareidi giants prevented them from properly appreciating their erudition and personal piety, Rav Aharon simply, and unapologetically, revered Rav Shlomo Zalman⁹, Rav Aharon Kotler, and Rav Moshe Feinstein. Indeed, Rav Aharon was the wise man, par excellence, who learned from every person¹⁰.

Yet, in the final analysis, it is the triple clause in the mishnah above which will remain my framework for ongoing appreciation of my childhood hero, and my adult role model: ‘if you have learned a great deal of Torah, do not congratulate yourself, for it is to this end that you have been created’. Rav Aharon, quantitatively and qualitatively, in breadth and reaching to bottomless depths, learned a great deal of Torah. Yet, he was the most self-effacing person, Jewish or non-Jewish, that I will ever meet. Self-congratulation was not part of his moral universe. Echoing his beloved Ramban’s¹¹ perspective about the prohibition for a king to be arrogant, that while it is prohibited for any person to be arrogant, the Torah localizes the prohibition to its discussion of monarchy for the king is at greatest risk due to his elevation station, Rav Lichteinstein had more to be smug about than anyone who I will ever meet, and was, nonetheless, the most modest person I have, and likely, will ever meet. When R. Yochanan b. Zakkai was on his deathbed, he wept, and expressed deep concern to his bewildered Talmidim that he was not worthy of a portion in the World to Come. They cried out to him, ‘light of Israel, the great hammer, the strong pillar’, how can you be so uncertain? R. Yochanan b. Zakkai’s lack of self-righteousness was the strongest indicator of his righteousness, and his capacity for self doubt the greatest testimony to his wisdom. And, so it was with Rav Aharon.

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⁹ See Rav Aharon’s stirring hesped for R. Shlomo Zalman published in Leaves of Faith. R. Lichtenstein would often express complete admiration for R. Kotler’s dynamism, and R. Moshe’s balance and equanimity. There were others as well. Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky comes to mind.

¹⁰ אבות ד:א

¹¹ רמב”ם על התורה, דבורי מ: צ.
This modesty was not merely an achievement of character, nor the direct result of a lifetime of immersion in Rambam’s Mishneh Torah in which extreme humility is mandated, which it certainly was, but more importantly, it was reflective of a deep ideological commitment encompassed in the third and final clause of the triad in the mishnah above, ‘for it is to this purpose that you have been created’. Rav Aharon believed, in every cell of his body, with every fiber of his being, with every drop of his blood, sweat, and tears, that man was created to serve His Creator. As such, if he had achieved a great deal of Torah, and he did, and so much more, there was nothing, in his mind, for him to boast about. He was merely, as he said so often, manning ‘his station and its duties’.

For those of us who saw him, albeit across a yawning chasm, we have inexpressible gratitude to Yotzer Ha-Adam. Rav Yochanan b. Zakkai said, ‘praised is one who was raised in Torah, and whose toil was in Torah, who generates nachat ruach for his Creator, who is raised with a good name, and who departs this world with a good name.’ May our memories of this giant, whose toil was in Torah, who came of age with a sterling reputation, and who left this world with an angelic one, stimulate us toward the work to which he dedicated his every breath.