"I Have Set the Lord Before Me, Always "

Avi Kannai

Dear Community Members,

Several days have already passed since my brilliant and saintly rebbe-teacher, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l, head of Yeshivat Har Etzion, ascended to Heaven in a whirlwind. I’d like to share with you a few points about him. Naturally, innumerable memories, large and small, come to mind, and it’s impossible to relate them all. Besides, my rebbe was so multi-dimensional, his interests so wide-ranging, his knowledge so extensive, that there’s no simple way to capture his character or summarize his achievements. Moreover, I am still in the throes of bereavement, I feel that I’ve lost my anchor, still in a state of confusion, my thoughts in disarray. My rebbe was a master of the art of orderliness, so I apologize for my jumble.

My personal debt to Rav Lichtenstein is enormous, immeasurable. It’s impossible to encapsulate the breadth and intensity of his influence on me. I entered the yeshiva as a young boy of seventeen and left nine years later. His part in forming my personality cannot be overstated. Of course, any bit of Torah I might possess is mostly from him.

Like many others, I had heard before entering the yeshiva that Rav Lichtenstein had a methodical system of Talmud study. Not only that, but Rav Lichtenstein was known for providing his students with the tools to analyze a Talmudic discourse in depth on their own, and his methodology for teaching how to learn was unmatched. Learning "Reb Aharon’s ‘Derech Halimud’ ” (“Reb Aharon’s method of learning”) was what attracted many of the young students, from Israel and from abroad. Indeed, I can testify, like thousands of others, that he was unparalleled in that area. In a relatively short time, he bestowed upon his students, even those with relatively little background, the analytical tools that enabled them to apply the “Brisker technique,” to discern fine scholarly distinctions. When I arrived at the yeshiva I was capable of preparing a daf gemara (gemara page) in a basic way, with Rashi, Tosafot and Rishonim. However, as I often say, Rav Lichtenstein taught me how to read and write. Literally.

To repeat, that was what brought me to the yeshiva. But after all these years, it’s clear to me that we were exposed to something larger and far more significant, and this is ultimately the crux of the matter. What did we find to be so special in Rav Lichtenstein? What distinguishes him for me? What engendered his huge influence on me and on thousands of others? Why do we feel gratitude to Hashem for allowing us the privilege of having known him, of having lingered for a while in his presence, of being his students?

Never in my life have I encountered anyone other than my rebbe who lived twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, with absolute spiritual-existential consciousness of standing before HaShem. Rav Aharon saw himself as standing in front of his Maker, always. He never articulated this, but we could see it, always. Let me clarify this point a bit, as it's difficult to fully comprehend. I, for example, your faithful servant, can attest to my shame, that sometimes I take a break. Even then, of course, I try not to sin. But I take a break from standing before HaShem. I am not successful in living in constant awareness of standing before HaShem in this sense. But
that is how Rav Aharon lived his life. Can any of us even imagine the constant tension, the palpable feeling of actually standing before the Master of the Universe? And, as a natural, direct consequence, the sense of obligation and commitment, the responsibility, the sense of mission. That's what we saw with our own eyes, always! He never tired, never took a break, nothing was rote, unthinking.

Hence his extraordinarily diligence. He spent all his time learning, even if he had only two free minutes. And hence his Heaven-piercing prayer, like a son baring his soul to his father. Everything with maximal seriousness and profundity, from a persistent desire and striving to do it better, to serve HaShem as best he could. I recall the Rav long ago, making kiddush, getting an aliya, saying brachot, reciting kaddish, and filling with longing. Everything was said with care, deliberation, thoroughness. No stumbling, nothing superficial. And so Torah study must be thorough, too, as deep and comprehensive as possible, using one's full power. “'And to serve Him' - refers to prayer; 'And to serve Him' - refers to Torah study.”

And so the thing that attracted me and many others to study at Gush Etzion, Rav Aharon's rigorous method of Torah study, was only a symptom of something much more central and fundamental, yet inextricably part of the whole. It's said that King Saul went looking for donkeys and found a kingdom. In the inexperience of youth, we were captivated by the obvious, by what others said about him. We went looking simply for an outstanding Torah scholar, but found something much greater, a man whose entire life was holiness, a man of G-d, whose extraordinary diligence and learning were an integral part of the whole. Make no mistake: my rebbe was a master of Torah study in the full sense of the term, without exaggeration one of the foremost Torah giants of his generation, a scholar “from whom no secret was concealed.” I am reminded of the words of Rambam regarding R. Yosef Mi’Gash: "His heart was so deeply in the Talmud that anyone reading his words closely and observing the profundity of his intellect would be so terrified as to say that, in regard to manner and method, 'prior to him there was never a king.'" But all this was only part of something even more awe-inspiring. When one reads in the works of Rav Kook and others descriptions of someone who lives in holiness always, even when involved in secular matters, it seems impossible, a theoretical construct. But then the image of Rav Aharon comes before my eyes!

As I have said, this is the source of the intensity of his prayer and his Torah study. It also explains his unimaginable humility. It never occurred to the Rav that he was extraordinary. Humility, pure and simple. How could this be? If a man is G-d’s servant, if he sees himself as always standing before the Absolute Infinite, he cannot take pride in his own self-worth, cannot condescend toward others. And that is indeed how my rebbe thought of himself: "I'll tell you the truth - I'm just a simple Jew." Naturally, this self-image had a major effect on how he related to others, and there are innumerable anecdotes that illustrate this. But it also had striking implications for his interaction with HaShem, in terms of prayer and Torah study. How can I forget the piercing intensity of his cries to Heaven when saying Tehillim when his parents fell ill? The Rav stood before G-d, always. Conscious of obligation, always. But it wasn't a one-way conversation. He did not believe in monologue. His view on prayer was as far apart as East and

1 Sifri Devarim 41
2 Rambam's Introduction to his Commentary on the Mishna.
3 Mevakshei Panecha, p. 106
West from the view of prayer as merely the fulfillment of an obligation, akin to reading a page out of the phone book. He lived in full awareness of total dependence. "A simple Jew recites Tehillim, studies Tehillim. When does he recite Tehillim? Specifically in times of distress, of national distress, of family distress." Existentially, the Rav felt that whatever strength he had came from G-d, even in matters of faith, and that the encounter with G-d could happen even on a crowded bus.\(^5\)

His humility influenced his Torah learning, too. While following the 'Brisk' tradition of learning, he structured his shiurim differently from his predecessors. The Rav would review all the laws that appeared in the Gemara, submitting each to a comprehensive analysis, both conceptual and juridical. Consequently, he would present all the various ways of understanding each law, and then examine how each understanding fit into the give-and-take in the Gemara, the Rishonim, and so on. This system is impressive in its breadth and depth but carries a price. When a Rosh Yeshiva of the classic school presents twenty different challenges in a given section of study, and then resolves them all in one swoo by raising a new approach to interpreting the section, everyone is astounded by the brilliance, the novelty, the ingenuity. But the method used by Rav Aharon will have already incorporated the novel solution among the options considered at the outset, as one possibility among many. Of course, when reviewing the section of study, my rebbe would point out that the “novel” approach has the advantage of solving various difficulties. But one can't deny that in presenting the material in this way, the effect of brilliance and ingenuity is lost. But for my rebbe, the humble man of truth, this didn't even come into consideration. This was the most comprehensive and penetrating method of Torah study. What different does it make if, as a consequence of his method, he might be perceived (undeservedly) as less innovative and brilliant?

Standing before G-d always had a direct impact on his resilience, stability and fortitude. Things that were going on without, or within, had almost no effect on the quality of his shiurim, or on his work ethic. I tremble when I recall when, in the middle of a daily shiur in Gemara, he was informed that his father was in critical condition (and indeed his father passed away that day or the next). He returned to the shiur, finished explicating the idea properly, and only then apologized that he had to leave and go to his father's bedside. The Rav was suffused with self-criticism, always striving for more, for perfection. It was also the bar he set for us. I recall a discussion we had, toward the end of my studies in the yeshiva, when I consulted with him about my future and he said to me something like, "If you plan on going to university, then no less than a doctorate!" There was no room for laziness or mediocrity. But with all that, with all the self-criticism and the striving for perfection, he was always charged with energy, fire, never discouraged. His stability and his resilience were like an anchor that kept all of us steady, that still keeps us steady.

When a student encounters such a phenomenon, when he comes face-to-face with a person who stands before G-d always, it instills awe in him, automatically. "Gone is the man before whom I trembled,"\(^6\) in the truest sense of the word. The awe we had as his students was an awe of the exalted, knowing we were in the presence of a man whose whole being proclaimed, "I have set

---

\(^4\) Ibid.


\(^6\) Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan, 24.
the Lord before me, always." But for me, at least, the feeling lasted, accompanying me at critical moments, even years later. I recall being at a party at my place of work, a wholly secular environment. The party atmosphere was open and free, lively, full of energy. I must admit that I was tempted to join the revelers. In a side room, I happened to meet another alumnus of the Gush, with whom I hadn't shared any thoughts about the Yeshiva or the Rav in previous months. I said to him: "You know whom I'm thinking of?" He figured it out right away. “At that moment an image of his father appeared in the window,” as simple as that.

Someone who stands before G-d always cannot be other than a man of truth. And as people said of my rebbe, he was exactly the same, inside and out. Such was his character, his behavior, the way he analyzed the Talmud, the way he considered all matters, both intellectual and practical. Let me illustrate by referring to two of the Rav’s essays, one on the importance of military service for b’nei Torah (Torah people),8 the other on incorporating secular studies into the world of the ben Torah.9 As you would expect, each is exemplary in the manner in which it considers the issue, both comprehensive and acute, examining it from every angle. The reader is struck with the extraordinary breadth and depth of his knowledge of Jewish sources, but no less, particularly in the essay on secular studies, with the breadth and depth of his knowledge of Western philosophy and literature. "His heart was so deeply in the Talmud and Wisdom it was terrifying." But what is truly unique about the essays is his uncompromising honesty. While the Rav has a particular point of view he champions, no one puts forth opposing views the way he does, frankly, with no dissembling, fully acknowledging the potential costs caused by adapting his approach to the issue discussed. This complexity, honesty, and sensitivity were traits I encountered when I was privileged to consult with him, a few years ago, on a matter involving women’s participation in the synagogue. He made it clear to me that, in this case, it was not a matter of halacha but rather of halachic policy. He laid out the various considerations on every side of the issue. Then he referred to an essay on the subject written by a well-known and respected rabbi. “This rabbi is a friend of mine,” he said, “but this article is terrible. And why is it terrible? Because it isn't honest. He makes halachic arguments that he himself doesn't implement in other contexts. He should have said frankly: “This is not a halachic matter, but I oppose doing this or that because of considerations of halachic policy!” Honesty, integrity, transparency. But what struck me most at that meeting was the extent of his sensitivity. In the course of our talk he said to me, “Believe me, when I approach questions such as these, I first try to imagine myself on the other side of the mechitza. It's possible that in the end I will take a conservative approach, but I truly try as best I can, although it’s impossible to do so completely, to see myself in the women's situation.” How many halachic adjudicators or yeshiva heads would attempt such an exercise, or even think of it?

This sensitivity, which is inextricably bound up with his traits of honesty and humility, with seeing himself as a simple man, made my rebbe into an exemplar of kindness and ethics. What an ethical man he was! What an exquisitely developed moral consciousness he had! His entire being was ethics. He would always cry out to protect the exploited, the oppressed, to forcefully protest an injustice, even on a national level. He loathed the tiniest indication of egotism,

---

7 Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 36.
9 Tova Chochma im Nachala, in 'A Priestly Kingdom and a Holy Nation', 5749, pp. 25-43
practical or ideological. But beyond ideology, we saw his acts of kindness, how he fulfilled his moral obligations, on a daily basis. How could one forget the respect he showed for his father? How could we forget what a man of Tzedaka he was? I'll never forget one talk in which he chastised us because some of the students complained about one of the most dedicated members of the staff. I remember the Rav roaring: “If there is anyone about whom it can be said, ’in the day the draught consumed me and the frost by night,’ he is the one!”

Much more deserves to be said and written--and I'm sure that much has already been said and written by others--about his tremendous, far-ranging influence in Israel and abroad on various important issues. About his ability to make his voice heard in various fields by a broad section of the public, due to the respect he had earned among bnei Torah and the non-observant alike. I could go on and on about the love of Eretz Yisrael that I absorbed from him, from his Aliya, his dedication to Israel, his love of the Ramban (“I admit that regarding the Ramban I am biased”), and from my vivid personal memories, from his pain at every parcel of Jewish land that we were forced to part with, even when, with heavy heart, he felt it was the right thing to do. But these words are long enough already, and all I wanted to do was, with awe and trembling and tears, to bear witness as a student to the awe-inspiring spectacle of a human being who lived in full awareness of "I have set the Lord before me, always."

On the Rav’s 80th birthday I walked up to him, among all those celebrating, and, with much emotion, thanked him for everything he had given me personally, which, as I said, is immeasurable. His dedication to his students was immeasurable. Now I wish to thank you once again, rebbe, though I know it can never suffice. I thank HaShem for the privilege of having been his student, of lingering for a while in his presence and trying to absorb inspiration from one of the nefilim, a true giant. This privilege comes with much responsibility, obligation and commitment.

---

10 This is the reason for his reservation from Adam Smith