Aharei Mot haRav Aharon: On the Legacy of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l

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It was no simple feat, but Michael Eisenberg finally mustered the courage to ask Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, zekher tzaddik l’vrakha, may the righteous person’s memory be a blessing, a halakhic question. He nervously approached Rav Lichtenstein’s seat at the front of the Yeshivat Har Etzion beit midrash and asked what the Rosh Yeshiva thought about copying music from one cassette to another. Rav Lichtenstein replied “you bought it, you made a kinyan [legal transaction], so you deserve the right to do what you like with it.” He paused. “But you will not win a medal for ‘kedoshim tihiyu.’”

Last week, Rabbi Amnon Bazak related a speech Rav Lichtenstein gave many years ago on Shabbat Aharei Mot, read a week ago in Israel and this week in all other locations. Rav Lichtenstein, in his typical booming voice, asked what the connection is between the death of Aharon’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, mentioned at the beginning of the parsha and the ritual service described directly afterwards. To answer, he presented two inappropriate aspects of Nadav and Avihu’s fatal “esh zara,” “alien fire” (Leviticus 10: 1) described a few chapters earlier in Parshat Shemini that underscore the sons’ ignorance of their responsibilities as priests of the nation.

First, Nadav and Avihu offered a private sacrifice that focused solely on themselves and their respective individual relationships with God. Although the service described at the beginning of Aharei Mot includes a personal sacrifice offered by the Head Priest, the crux of the offerings lies in begging God to forgive the sins of the entire nation of Israel. By juxtaposing the deaths of Aharon’s sons with the atonement service for the nation, the Torah highlights the improperly selfish focus of the Nadav and Avihu’s offering. Second, the sons were too enwrapped in the spirituality of the moment to perform a proper service in accordance with the Torah’s strict guidelines. Offering sacrifice is a powerful religious activity that often can distract from proper halakhic observance. As a result, the priestly procedure is lengthy and complex to assure proper balance of law and religious high, something Nadav and Avihu disregarded.

The responsibility of kehuna, priesthood, requires one to be both a messenger of the people and of God. By focusing on themselves and foregoing proper technical procedure, Nadav and Avihu fail to meet both their communal and Divine duties. In extension, being any leader in a religious society requires unwavering dedication to the people and the law, a quality I quickly learned was the entire essence of my former Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l.

What I knew about Rav Lichtenstein before two Mondays ago was already mind blowing; I had heard much about his beautifully woven and eloquently delivered classes, his commitment to Religious Zionism and Torah uMadda as an ideal, his courtesy and humility amongst others and himself. I had seen him most days from my seat in the Yeshiva beit midrash, marveling at his thirst for sitting amongst his students, despite his physical weakness. I treasured the words he said to me when I first introduced myself to
him at lunch eight months ago, “work hard and learn well.” But people often do not fully comprehend the value of the gift they receive until it is no longer; despite my tremendous appreciation of my Rosh Yeshiva, it was not until his unfortunate passing two weeks ago that I began to truly recognize the messenger of God that was Rav Lichtenstein.

Mishna Avot 1: 2 quotes Shimon the Righteous as teaching “the world stands on three things: Torah; avoda, work; and gemilut hasadim, acts of kindness. Rav Lichtenstein, recognized by many as the heir to the Brisk dynasty of Talmud scholars, spread his carefully structured, Harvard English Literature PhD-integrated hiddushei Torah to both the American and Israeli communities. In terms of avoda, Rav Lichtenstein was known to have an uncompromising work ethic, with the exceptional ability to teach his brilliant ideas on minimal sleep without ever taking an afternoon nap.

Nevertheless, it is his gemilut hasadim that is most astonishing to me. The stories of Rav Lichtenstein’s acts of kindness are infinite in both number and quality. The verse Rav Lichtenstein invoked in his answer to Michael Eisenberg is interpreted by Nahmanides as the prohibition against being a “naval b’reshut haTorah,” “a degenerate within the limits of the Torah.” The verse, which begins this week’s second Torah portion, forbids one from acting in a manner that is halakhically acceptable yet morally reprehensible. The response to Michael Eisenberg’s inquiry was, as Mr. Eisenberg described in his eulogy, “a halakhic answer with an ethical qualifier”—the Rosh Yeshiva never failed to teach that simply because one can do something does not mean he should.

Many recount tales of classes in which Rav Lichtenstein would treat the most foolish of questions with utmost sincerity and respect. Some report of nights in his home where he would sport a genuine smile while giving charity to those he believed were making lifestyle mistakes. Others detail the extra time he would spend in Yeshiva before Rosh haShana thanking every Rabbi, kitchen staffer, maintenance worker for their tireless labor. All note his clear devotion to God and adherence to and promotion of strict halakhic observance. As messengers of God, Nadav and Avihu failed to maintain the immense love of God’s Law and Humankind a priest must exemplify and Rav Lichtenstein championed. No one, especially God, was considered a stranger by Rav Lichtenstein; while Aharon’s sons offered an alien fire, Rav Aharon’s fire was warm and intimate, continuously burning in the Holy of Holies yet spreading to the innumerable communities he affected.

Rabbi Beni Lehman describes Rav Lichtenstein as a juggler, constantly yet carefully considering all of his values in every task he undertook. However, Rabbi Moshe Taragin disagrees: a juggler carries individual balls, while Rav Lichtenstein balanced his principles on one ball, viewing them all as interrelated and inseparable from each other. Although I first understood “work hard and learn well” as a recommendation for Yeshiva success, I now realize it is a challenge to become even a fragment of the tough laborer and intellectual mind that is Rav Lichtenstein. Ashrenu sh’zakhinu, we are fortunate to have merited living in a world of Torah, avoda, and gemilut hasadim greatly supported by the Israelite nation’s Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l.