Rav Lichtenstein would interview students who had applied to the Gush. I had an interview scheduled to take place at YU in Rav Soloveihchik’s apartment. Upon getting there I found a note explaining that a change of venue had been necessary and providing details as to the new location. It was signed Aharon Lichtenstein.

I no longer remember where the interview took place or what we discussed but I will never forget the utter lack of a sense of self importance that the signature displayed.

At one point while I was in Yeshiva I had a halachik question. It involved an electric immerser, a fleishig pot and a parve soup. I asked Rav Aharon some question relating to the permissible future use of the immerser. He analyzed the issues for me and broke them down into seven separate halachic questions. He explained that if one were to paskin lechumra on each of the seven questions there would be a potential problem with the immerser. Then he looked at me with a look of confoundment and asked, “Why would you possibly want to paskin lechumra on all seven issues?” I no longer remember my exact original question, nor the seven issues, but I will never forget Rav Aharon’s confoundment that anyone might wish to find chumrot where they were not necessary.

During Yitzy Lichtenstein’s hesped, he mentioned that modesty and anger were closely related and since Rav Aharon’s modesty was absolute, he was never angry. I almost agree. I personally have seen Rav Aharon angry on two occasions but instead of contradicting Yitzy’s assertion I believe these occasions actually strengthen his point.

The first occasion was when Rav Aharon was relating a story that had occurred several years before. A student was completing his time in Yeshiva and asked to speak to Rav Aharon to discuss his time in Yeshiva. Rav Aharon agreed and when they met, the student asked if Rav Aharon would present his own view of the student’s stay. Rav Aharon then explained that in his first two years at Yeshiva, the student has been very studious and had accomplished a great deal. Following his army service, the student’s energy levels appeared to sag and his final time in Yeshiva was less productive. The student agreed with this assessment – in fact he seemed surprised that Rav Aharon had such intimate knowledge of his activities – and proceeded to explain. “In my first two years I was considering going into Chinuch and focused all my energies into learning. During my army service, I decided on a different direction. As I felt I already
knew enough to be a Baal Habayit, I allowed myself to relax and coast through my final time at Yeshiva.”

Both at the time and during the retelling of this story Rav Aharon was angry. The notion that anyone “knew enough” Torah was such anathema to him that he told us he hoped no one ever approached him regarding a shidduch for that student.

Clearly, this anger was not directed at a slight to himself which his modesty would not enable him to take offence at. However a slight to the Torah was something not to be countenanced.

The second occasion I saw Rav Aharon angry was when that anger was directed at myself. Rav Aharon was coming in to New York from Boston and I was to pick him up at the airport. Since my airport experiences were pretty much limited to Kennedy airport, that’s where I went. Unfortunately, the shuttle arrives at Laguardia and by the time I realized my mistake and hustled my way over, Rav Aharon was already waiting for me outside the terminal. I apologized for the delay explaining my mistake. Rav Aharon, said “But doesn’t everybody know that the shuttle lands at LaGuardia?” That was it, for the remainder of the ride we discussed various things and the subject of my delay never came up again. I was reminded of the midrash in Parshat Balak that explains that Hashem is angered for a split second once a day, Bilam’s talent was to know the precise time of this anger and use that knowledge to direct the anger against whoever he was hired to curse.

We are commanded to emulate God’s ways, even in anger Rav Aharon emulated God’s ways.

As we pulled in to Yeshiva University, we noticed Rav Dovid Lipshitz walking down the block. As was his wont, Rav Dovid walked at a leisurely pace as though without a care, or an appointment, in the world. Rav Aharon said to me, I was always a bit jealous at this ability of Rav Dovid’s to be so at peace with his surroundings. Rav Aharon’s nature was to schedule as many shiurim, meetings, interviews and publications as possible. He didn’t really want to be relaxed but he was able to see the good in paths that others had chosen even if he himself had chosen differently.

Both during Yeshiva and, even more so, on Shabbatot arranged for Bogrei Yeshiva, one of the highlights was the “Press Conference” held with the Roshei Yeshiva. During these press conferences, students or Bogrim were encouraged to
ask the Roshei Yeshiva any questions on their mind. The Roshei Yeshiva were represented by Rav Aharon, Rav Amital and Tova Lichtenstein. The most interesting answers tended to come from Tova. What was most noteworthy to us was the complete assumption of equality. No favors were being done, no one was being deferred to; these were three people all of whom had the experience, knowledge and good sense to be able to answer the kinds of question we were posing.

During Yamim Noraim at Yeshiva, Rav Aharon was in middle of a shiur after Maariv when the lights went out. He did not miss a beat but continued speaking for about twenty minutes until the lights went back on. At that time we saw that while most of us had remained in our seats, a few of the guys with Uzis had taken up positions at the entrances to the Beit Medrash in case the blackout was a prelude to a possible attack.

Rav Aharon had made the determination that the safest response to the lights out, whether due to accident or malicious intent was to continue speaking. No benefit would accrue to anyone by stopping to determine the cause of the blackout, those who needed to be concerned with security would do so, the rest of us would be best off continuing to learn.

We received another example of Rav Aharon’s ability to think on his feet one Shabbat when Rav Aharon was late to shul and the Gabbai gave him an Aliyah, not realizing that the Rav was in middle of davening. Rav Aharon accepted the aliya, and completed davening afterwards. After Musaf, Rav Aharon gave a shiur on the various issues involved in his decision to accept the aliya. The shiur went on for between a half hour and forty minutes and the most striking aspect of it was that we realized that all these issues had run through his head in the few seconds between the time the gabbai called him up and the time he decided to accept the aliya. It was also not lost on us that Rav Aharon might have chosen not to speak about it so as not to draw attention to his having been late in the first place which most people probably hadn’t noticed. The importance of teaching us what the issues were, however, far outweighed any potential discomfort discussing them may have caused. I no longer remember any of the issues but I’m still impressed at Rav Aharon’s insistence on teaching those issues.

One of my favorite recollections from Yeshiva involved Rav Aharon’s insistence on democratic process. Shiur was traditionally given on Monday and Thursday. It came to Rav Aharon’s attention that Friday morning seder was not always attended with the alacrity or consistency that it deserved. He therefore, was
inclined to move to a Sunday, Tuesday, Friday schedule. Not wanting to impose his will on the shiur, Rav Aharon called for a vote. The new proposal was voted down overwhelmingly. A few weeks later, Rav Aharon called for a new vote; this time the new proposal was voted down by a lesser margin. By the third vote, the proposal passed and the new schedule was adopted after following due democratic process.

My takeaway lesson from that is that the trappings of democracy have an importance of their own; even in instances when actual democracy is not the best way to achieve the desired results. This lesson has come in handy in situations at vaad meetings for school or shul where it is important both to get things done and to allow people a say in how these things get done. At times these two requirements are contradictory; at these times I recall Rav Aharon’s finesse and realize that while it is crucial to allow everyone to vote, sometimes license may be taken in determining the wording of the vote as well as the timing of it.

Rav Aharon once appeared on Popolitica, a talk show usually characterized by panelists screaming at each other. The topic was clearly one of importance to the Rav or he would not have agreed to come. Nevertheless, he absolutely refused to raise his voice or interrupt anyone, even if that person was in the process of interrupting him. At some point, Dan Margalit, the host, realized he would never hear Rav Aharon’s opinion if he didn’t intervene so he took the unusual step of asking the others to allow Rav Aharon to speak uninterrupted. I no longer remember what the discussion was about, but I’ll never forget the Kiddush Hashem caused by Rav Aharon’s refusal to be rude or loud to make his point.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from Rav Aharon for almost forty years. I will miss him.

David Koppel