From Aharon to Aharon: Immediate Reflections on the Death of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l

I.

I was once shown a letter that my father sent to a friend who was living in another city. Inter-alia, my father mentioned that he had recently attended the funeral of Rav Aharon Kotler. "There were 25,000 people there; I cried like a baby."

Since seeing that letter I've wondered why my father was so moved by the experience of attending Rav Aharon's funeral. Although he would refer to Rav Aharon as the "greatest man" he had ever met, my father was not Rav Aharon's student and had only spent a few Yamim Tovim in Lakewood. I think my father himself was surprised by the force of his emotions at the funeral and that is why he confided in his friend (a former hevruta who, like my father, had pursued a graduate degree in psychology).

I suspect that my father's reaction to Rav Aharon's death had two origins. Rav Aharon's funeral, which was attended by tens of thousands, was the first show of strength for an enduring American Orthodoxy. It exemplified the astonishing fact that not only had Judaism survived the Nazi effort to annihilate it, but the most refined and rarified component of Jewish civilization, Torah study as it was distilled in the great Lithuanian yeshivot, had been planted securely on American soil. Rav Aharon was a surviving remnant of the conflagration that had consumed my father's family and mourning Rav Aharon was a way for my father to mourn for all that had been lost in Europe. Second, undoubtedly, Rav Aharon's funeral evoked wistful feelings in my father for the idealism and innocence of youth, of roads not taken, and of the tragedy of finding oneself yearning for something one knows one cannot reclaim.

II.

This morning, I sat at my computer in a still sleeping house, with tears streaming down my face as I read the initial reports of the death of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l. Tears accompanied me throughout the day: I struggled to maintain my composure while sharing a few words of Torah following Shacharit, I choked-up while preparing to teach a Mishnah class at my sons' school, and I cried while reading eulogies from Rav Lichtenstein's students that appeared online during the course of the day. I've never been this strongly affected by the death of any public figure and that has pushed me to interrogate the source for the intense sadness that has hung over me today.

Rav Aharon was not a father-figure to me or a beloved personal mentor. I learned far more from reading his books and essays than I did from the relatively few personal interactions that I had with him. I have powerful memories of interacting with Rav Aharon, but they cannot explain the depth of my grief. A written hamlatzah that he wrote on my behalf has been of significant professional benefit to me, but that is not why I have been crying. I have identified three sources for the intensity of my response to today's sad news:

1. Rav Lichtenstein was a man who lived his values to a degree that is hard to fathom. His devotion to Torah study, his passionate cultivation of service of God (who can forget the haunting sound of his rendition of the Haftarah for Ta'anit Tzibur or his plaintive recitation of kaddish), and his gentle humility were not just aspirations but were the building blocks of his daily life. I am crying for the death of an intellectual and ethical role model, and also for the awareness of how far I have strayed from the idealism and intensity of the beit midrash.

2. As my teacher, Rabbi David Ebner, explained with such pathos and urgency to his students this morning, Rav Lichtenstein was the living and breathing example we could look at to see Modern Orthodoxy at its best. Rav Lichtenstein taught us that one could produce Torah scholarship of enduring value, teach students and involve oneself in the concerns of the community, and appreciate "the best that has been thought and said" by intelligent men and women of all faiths and nationalities. Who can we look to today who combines the sophistication, piety, and Torah scholarship of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein? Can our community survive without
such role models and without such guides? The burden that now falls upon Rav Lichtenstein’s students is formidable.

3. King Louis XV of France is reported to have said, “apres moi le deluge,” indicating his awareness that only the strength of his personality was preventing seismic upheaval from overpowering his kingdom. Contemporary Orthodoxy is beset by ideological turmoil, dissent, and the specter of schism. The personality, moral authority, halakhic gravitas, and ethical integrity of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein have kept the Orthodox community from splintering into irreconcilable factions. A contentious debate about some synagogue practice could be brought to an immediate end by invoking the authoritative pesak of Rav Aharon. Liberals trusted that Rav Aharon understood their values and were therefore willing to accept his authority when he ruled restrictively. Conservatives trusted Rav Aharon’s scholarship, piety, and authority and so were willing to accept lenient positions or halakhic innovations that he endorsed.

As one era comes to an end, another necessarily begins. May we help each other find inspiration in the example that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein left behind and may the memory of the righteous serve as a berakhah.

The funeral for Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt’l will be broadcast live, here, starting in less than one hour.