From the Moment Rav Lichtenstein zt”l’s Death Became Known... by Dr. Tamar Meir, translated by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Original Facebook post can be found here:

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From the moment Rav Lichtenstein zt”l’s death became known, I have walked about with a deep consciousness of mourning.

I did not merit being his direct student. I did not hear many of his lectures (although I was insistent on going whenever I had the opportunity). Nonetheless – I have the sense of having lost something significant and meaningful.

I tried to sharpen for myself what I received from him, to understand precisely what it is that I am mourning. I reached several understandings, but I will share only the most central, which became clearer to me in the course of the funeral.

Rav Lichtenstein saw me – by which I mean not me the individual, whom he certainly did not know, but rather me as a woman. I was not transparent to him, nor was I “woman,” but simply human. A subject. By “I,” I mean “we” – women.

Rav Lichtenstein made a space for us. He saw our presence in the aisles of the beit midrash as natural. He made it possible for us to enter the beit midrash both physically and spiritually, and I believe that there is a tight connection between these two possibilities.

I remember myself, a young student in Midreshet Nishmat, staying with several of my midrashah friends at the house of one of our rabbis, who also taught in Yeshivat Har Etzion. I remember how astonished I was when I realized that we would eat seudah shelishit in the yeshiva’s dining hall. No – this was not during the yeshiva vacation. The boys were present there, but also the families of the faculty, and also us – a group of young girls. And it was permitted for us to walk there, to walk about the yeshiva, the building, the gardens, in the dining hall, and not merely to be swallowed up in a women’s section hidden from the eye during prayer. What was most astonishing – no one stared at us, angrily or otherwise. No one related to us as distractions, averted their eyes, or fainted.

Simple – so simple. From then until today, every time I visit the yeshiva, or the adjacent midrashah, I pay attention to this. The presence of women in the building is something natural, whether they are passing through, working in the yeshiva, coming to ask a halakhic question, or in recent years – to be tested on their halakhic knowledge.

Many women came to the funeral. Many women saw themselves as his students. Today as well, at the time of the funeral, the presence of women in the yeshiva building was self-evident, and they were given a place of dignity. It was no accident that his daughter gave eulogies in the central hall of the yeshiva with the same naturalness. It was their place.

To the men among you: I assume that you do not know the feeling, which alternates between bafflement and degradation, that occurs when I am compelled for one reason or another to enter a
“male” religious space - I am not speaking here of times of tefillah and halakhic necessity. The sense is of a thick wall separating me from the beit midrash or beit Knesset. The perplexity of what to do when one needs a book, or to look for someone, or to ask. This is a bafflement that men generally do not feel in the reverse circumstances. The women’s gallery is not regarded as extra-territorial. Men teach in midrashot. Whenever necessary, they enter.

And I have not yet spoken of that moment, in which you begin to pray with no introduction or request, and in a moment turn the shared public space - which we were in but a moment before – into male territory that may not be entered, meaning that I must have somehow disappeared, or must do so immediately. Transparent, as I said above.

Rav Lichtenstein’s relationship to the presence of women in the beit midrash space as something natural did not end with permitting us to enter physically. Absolutely not. Much has been written, and more will yet be written, about his encouragement and support for women’s learning. About the education he gave his daughters, and his learning with them as a privilege, obligation, and aspiration, in a manner simple and self-evident. (How much awe, astonishment, and even jealousy I always felt when I heard Rabbanit Esti’s descriptions. How her words and those of Toni at the funeral warmed my heart.)

But I wish to describe another experience, one that emerged from the participation of various women in meetings with Rav Lichtenstein, and events I was present at. Exactly as he saw their presence in the physical yeshiva building, Rav Lichtenstein saw the presence of women in the world of learning, and the presence of Torah knowledge among women, as natural and clear. When he lectured to women it was evident that he related to them as knowledgeable and as living in the world of Talmudic discourse.

Even today, twenty years later, this is not self-evident. For years I have kept my feet away from lectures labelled “Lecture for women,” since in general I have found that in such lectures the speaker assumes that the listeners lack not only knowledge, but even common sense and the capacity to think. But not Rav Lichtenstein. He related to the intellectual achievements of women in Torah as something that was permitted and even necessary to assume its existence and possibility. As Rav Bick said at the funeral (regarding his study of literature and more): Not as permitted but as an obligation. So too in his personal dealings with women.

When he conversed with the woman of a house about the proper location of a mezuzah, he would not be satisfied with discussing the sugya with the husband, but would clarify it as well with the wife, looking her in the eyes. When he spoke to a bride about jewelry at the chuppah – not via her father or the groom, but directly with her. How simple – Woman. Human. Subject. And how much, to the point of pain, this is not self-evident.

Rav Lichtenstein in his greatness, integrity, and humanity, made a space for us. Not patronizing – including. He did not “advance us” – he believed in us.

His daughter Esti thanked him today in the name of the community of women for opening the doors of the beit midrash to them. With thanks and tears I join myself to her words, and I thank her as well, and Toni, for giving us the privilege of access to the awesome model of daughters’ education they merited.

May it be Hashem’s will that we too merit educating our daughters and students in this manner.

May it be Hashem’s will that our granddaughters will feel themselves at home in the world of Torah.