Memories of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, z“l
by Herb Cohen, Beit Shemesh, May, 2015

I was a student in Rabbi Lichtenstein’s class in 1965-66, and then in 1967-1970 I was in the YU Kollel when he was the Rosh Kollel. Being in his presence then and in subsequent encounters left an indelible impression on me.

Rabbi Lichtenstein’s shiur was unlike any I had ever attended before. He was the first teacher of Torah that I knew who posted all his sources in the morning so we could methodically prepare for the shiur later that day, a shiur that typically lasted 1 1/2 hours.

Rabbi Lichtenstein entered the class with a stack of seforim, which to my young and impressionable mind meant we were involved in a serious intellectual endeavor, not just learning how to decipher a text. To absorb what he said, I had to review the shiur every evening. To do that I brought in a bulky reel-to-reel tape recorder and taped every class in order to review the shiur that night. I was not the only one to tape the shiur; other students also placed their tape recorders on the desk.

I occasionally met Rabbi Lichtenstein in the cafeteria. He did not make small talk. He ate quickly and then left to continue his academic work. From time to time, I saw him from a distance play basketball with some students at the outdoor court of YU, but I was too much in awe of him to associate with him in a casual way.

I remember visiting him in his Washington Heights apartment on some occasion when he invited the class to his home. I was impressed with the fact that there were pictures of his sons on display wearing little league baseball uniforms. I never saw that in the home of a Torah teacher before that. I had occasion to
ask Rav Meir why his father displayed such photos so prominently. “He wanted us to be normal,” Rav Meir responded. To me this was a quiet statement of his father’s open approach to the secular world of which sports was a part.

I was an English major at YU and was taking a course in American Literature, where I read Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*. I saw Rabbi Lichtenstein in the elevator and asked him what he thought of the novel. He told me that he does not read anything less than 100 years old. It was an answer that I did not expect and it stayed with me for the balance of my life whenever I had to decide whether a book was worth reading or not. It reminded me that what is popular today may be of little value tomorrow, and that one should value every moment and prioritize how one’s spends time in secular learning, focusing on the study of the “touchstones” of great literature as articulated by Matthew Arnold.

Later on when I was studying for my doctorate, I was considering doing my dissertation on contemporary American writers, such as Norman Mailer; but I knew that Rabbi Lichtenstein had written on the Cambridge Platonist Henry More and that he favored such 17th century literary giants such as John Milton. I asked him why he chose to write about these great authors of the past. He told me that he felt closer to such writers because they were men of faith who shared many of the same assumptions about G-d and the world that he did. If he were going to spend time in secular research, it would make sense to spend that time studying a world that was more akin spiritually to his own. Again, without telling me what to do, he was persuasive and I eventually chose to do my dissertation on George Herbert, a 17th century poet and clergyman who also shared many of my understandings about faith and G-d.
Perhaps my most important encounter with Rabbi Lichtenstein took place in 1989 after I lost my wife. I was very fragile emotionally and was involved in an extremely challenging situation professionally in Atlanta where I had been for many years. A person whom I regarded highly made some statements to me that totally unsettled me and I did not know how to respond to his comments. I needed advice and the only one who could give it to me was Rabbi Lichtenstein. Over the years, I kept in contact with him but infrequently; but now I felt I needed to talk to him directly, not by phone or mail.

I contacted him and told him that I wanted to talk to him and we made an appointment. Although my trip to Israel involved a number of tasks, the main reason I went was to converse with Rabbi Lichtenstein face to face. I remember walking into his home and being taken aback by the fact that he had no “rabbi’s study.” Coming from the United States where it was common practice for rabbis to have a private room for consultations in the home, I was surprised. I put this out of my mind once Rabbi Lichtenstein invited me to sit on the couch in the living room. There I shared my situation with him. After listening to me, he gave me an entirely different way to perceive my situation. A great psychological burden had been lifted and I left both comforted and relieved.

I learned from Rabbi Lichtenstein how to be an exemplary human being, making Torah the foundation of the spiritual life while respecting the value of secular learning to enhance one’s Torah worldview. Moreover, his daily synthesis of Torah learning and Torah living has been and will continue to be a beacon of inspiration to me and to my family as we continue to navigate a complex world.