I don’t know what we will do at the next Gush Shabbaton without R’ Ahron to carry our tune

–Jonathan Wiesen

I hope you don't mind if I share some thoughts and reminiscences. In times of public tragedy it helps personalize the event. With your permission I'd like to open up and express some of my own feelings; perhaps some of you might identify with these ideas, and at the very least it will be personally cathartic – "for there is a redemptive quality for an agitated mind in the spoken word and a tormented soul finds peace in confessing."

I don't usually consider myself an overly emotional individual, and am generally able to maintain composure in public. Moreover over the last ten years my contact with R' Lichtenstein has been minimal, related mainly to brief episodic greetings and the occasional chance encounter. I would never have predicted that the news of his passing would cause unrelenting emotional turmoil – I literally find myself tearing up constantly, my mind wandering, remembering and missing this Torah Giant. Despite the great physical and practical distance between us, apparently a connection with R' Lichtenstein remained. What is it that keeps tugging at my heart strings and dragging me into a borderline bipolar state?

First, the tragedy strikes me as a communal disaster of epic proportions. R' Lichtenstein was the unquestioned Gadol Hador for our community. The power of his presence, the sphere of his influence, the pervasiveness of his reputation spanning the spectrum of Orthodox Jewry (I remember going to a shiur of his with my more right wing cousins, who were going to hear "the shver of rav yushev beir") is unparalleled. Adding to the enormity of the tragedy, we are left wondering who will take over his place. R' Bick mentioned the description of Eliyahu hanavi's departure – but who in this metaphor is Elisha? Who is left to pick up the ateret that was left behind? What struck me as remarkable during the
hespedim of his children was the warmth and love with which they all spoke of their father. R' Moshe once commented to us that "as good as a Rosh Yeshiva that you think my father is, he is an even better father," and friend of mine joked that the one thing his children appreciated from the levaya was recognizing what a terrible father they had. It conceivable that an incredible intellect may emerge who can lock himself in a room and know as much Torah as R’ Ahron. However I sincerely doubt that we will ever encounter a genius talmid chacham of his stature, who can somehow be "m'shichmo v'maalah gavohah mikol yisrael" and simultaneously excel existentially in this world – being PhD educated at Harvard, acting as a committed communal leader and, most importantly, a sincere and dedicated family man whose family loves him. R’ Amital once explained that R’ Issur Zalman Meltzer, even had he not known a single word of Torah (“afilu lo yadah klal uklal”) would have been the most outstanding Jew of his generation. We can certainly say the same of R’ Ahron, whose personal character traits were unmatched. He excelled in every aspect of his existence, and set the bar exceedingly high for his talmidim.

Moreover, I have come to see that R’ Lichtenstein wasn't really as far away as I had come to believe. I thought long and hard how to convey the enormity of the tragedy to my daughter who is only 8. I explained to her that she currently has a teacher in school, R' Tzvi. I then asked "do you know who R' Tzvi's teacher was? Do you know who taught that teacher? And who taught that teacher? At the end of that chain is R' Lichtenstein. He was your teacher's teacher's teacher." The world I live in is literally a R' Lichtenstein construct. He was the rebbe muvhak of almost all teachers in our school, and his Torah and philosophy molded our community. I have come to understand that every day I encountered R’ Lichtenstein’s influence, and the loss of that primordial power is immense.

Finally, I was always comforted by knowing that there was a malach hashem, one of the 36 great tzadikim who was (relatively) accessible. One of my favorite vortes of R’ Lichtenstein captures this point perfectly. The gemara in the beginning of
brachot explains that if tragedy strikes a community they should be mefashfesh b'ma'asav. If it continues then they should attribute it to bitul torah. This sequence is perplexing, R’ Lichtenstein exclaimed. If the community has already done a thorough cheshbon hanefesh in step 1, surely they would have unearthed the great sin of bitul torah – what is accomplished in step 2?!? Thus it can’t be that step 2 involves the sin colloquially referred to as bitul Torah – interrupting one’s existing Torah learning. Rather it describes a situation where an individual could have learned, but chose not to. It does not represent an overt sin, but rather UNMET POTENTIAL. R’ Lichtenstein’s natural talents were immense, and his potential almost limitless. Yet he somehow was able to actualize his potential and succeed at realizing his tafkid in life.

R’ Bick described R’ Ahron as one who was perpetually being commanded. Everything he did had a purpose, was principled and served a greater specific function. Perhaps my favorite article by R’ Lichtenstein is the third article in “By His Light,” where he describes the verse in Bereisht of “vayetaav elokim et ha’adem” as an existential commandment and motivation – we live lives of tzivuy, of meaning, of purpose! How many times have we heard R’ Ahron decry the description of a reshut as a “jump ball,” an equivalent act. Maariv is a reshut – is it possible that chazal were indifferent to whether we davened maariv or not? Of course not! A dvar reshut an opportunity, the ability to actualize potential, to further our avodat hashem. I often struggle with my purpose, my motivation; R’ Lichtenstein’s entire being was wholly and completely dedicated to one goal, the actualization of avodat hashem.

It was comforting knowing that there was a singular individual, a true malach hashem who I could point to and be comforted knowing that there are those who can be mefashfesh b’ma’asehem and not find the sin of bitul torah more broadly defined.

I wholeheartedly relate to the sentiment expressed by many that the future generations may grow up not knowing what a true gadol is, but, in the spirit of
the ateret eliyahu, at least we will be able to transmit, if not experientially then at least verbally, what it was like to be in a gadol’s presence. I think we all felt an aura of greatness surrounding R’ Lichtenstein. But Along with the great awe and experience I think we similarly appreciated his humanity and ability to draw us in. How we used to pull an extra table into the shiur room so that we could essentially sit on top of him during shiur, how he happily hosted us for Shabbat so that we could witness first hand the incredible and humble "way of life" of a gadol, how we would tremble before asking him questions yet always be met by a warm smile and open mind to our thoughts, and, finally recalling the shy but warm smile and greeting that would always welcome us when we returned to yeshiva or encountered him at the Gush dinners. I remember at one dinner, after waiting an eternity to speak with him, I asked him about a puzzling Rambam regarding tnai kaful. Without hesitation R’ Ahron launched into a 5 minute description of the Rambam’s motivation and an analysis of whether the Rambam was truly basing tnai kaful on the conditions set by bnai gad u’reuven. As we parted ways I thanked him and he remarked “It’s great to see you, and it’s even better to see that you are still learning.”

Finally, one of the post poignant moments that I can recall was from a Gush alumni shabbaton in New Rochelle. We had shalosh se’udot separate from the community and began to sing Om Ani Chomah. I can still see R’ Lichtenstein’s intense face, eyes closed, complete focus and concentration while singing the first verse... only to be met by awkward silence... none of us knew any of the other words!!! Without missing a beat R’ Ahron picked up precisely where we left off, filling in the missing words, singing the words slowly and out loud so that we could join in the tune despite our deficient knowledge. He was again picking us up where we failed, without hesitation, without regret, without condescension but rather with sincerity, love and passion. By singing with us he was in essence carrying us. I don’t know what we will do at the next Gush Shabbaton without R’ Ahron to carry our tune, to fill in the missing words of our song. But I can at least hope that we will still all be singing together.