This week we lost a giant, a torah luminary, an extraordinary human being, Rav Aaron Lichtenstein, ZT"L.

He possessed unparalleled erudition and brilliance, unmatched perseverance in study, and piety. He was firmly rooted in the tradition of Brisk, traditional intensive Talmud study. A rarity for a Talmid Chacham of his stature he received a PhD in literature from Harvard and become a champion of women’s learning in the orthodox world. His daughter Esti is the Rosh Beit Midrash of Migdal Oz. His daughters both eulogized him from the podium in the front of the Beit Midrash in Gush on Tuesday and that was a given. He managed to balance his learning and commitment to the yeshiva with his roles in the public sphere and in the family domain.

He was a yachid bedoro, singular in his generation, like Rav Soloveitchik before him, and I was privileged to be his student, to study for two years in his yeshiva and for a year and change in his shiur.

I could spend hours developing each of those attributes but this is not the time. Rather I would like to focus on one more characteristic that he possessed.

To get there I want to look at the source for the customs of mourning that we practice during the Omer period. We mourn for the deaths of Rabbi Akiva’s students.

The Talmud in Yevamot relates that 24000 of his students died because

They did not treat each other with respect.

You wonder, is that reason enough for a plague to wipe them out?

How could Torah scholars have been so disrespectful?

Why did Rabbi Akiva not teach them to be better? After all he is the author of ve’ahavata lereacha kamocha – zeh klal gadol batorah.

To my surprise there is not much discussion of these questions but I found one fantastic source – responsa Lehorot Natan by R. Natan son Geshtetner who was born in (1932) in Hungary and emigrated to Bnei Brak after the Shoah.

He suggests that the Gemara singles out this cause of death to teach us that Rabbi Akiva’s students were perfect and righteous, tzadikim, in every regard but this. And the Gemara comes to teach us that even if you are a talmid chacham and a tzaddik is some areas, your study will not protect you if you are not kind to people.

He then suggests that Rabbi Akiva’s motto veahavata lereacha kamocha – zeh klal gadol batorah is a response to this episode, something he learned from the death of his students. Rabbi Akiva now understood that this is the ש蛔 הת роли תן תול ממקה – the principle upon which all else rests.
We must learn he writes that we must treat each other with kindness in both word and deed. And we must recognize that this is not a nice idea or a midas chasidus, something which is beyond the halacha – rather we are commanded to be kind and nice. It is a halacha codified in the Shulchan Aruch.

That is how RAL lived. He respected every person he came into contact with, from his co-rashei yeshiva to the janitors who worked at the Yeshiva. He was as meticulous in this area as he was in keeping Shabbat or eating kosher. It was something to behold! Forget lashon hara, never an unkind word! Ever!

Rav Geshtetner adds another related idea which I think helps explain how someone can attain that level of respect for others.

There is another version of the story in the Midrash Rabbah to Chaye Sarah which has a different cause of death.

There the death is attributed to “stinginess” in Torah. He explains that there is a certain jealousy which inspires one to learn which is good. But when the jealousy results in a desire to be better than “x”, to know more than “x” or have “x” know more than you, it becomes detrimental.

I think what he means to say is – when studying Torah becomes the level you attain and what is does for you and not about study to serve God and know his Torah it is terrible. When ego begins to creep into the equation it begins to sully the Study and I believe leads to seeing yourself as better and more deserving than others and that leads to disrespect and disaster.

RAL learned torah as an eved hashem. Comically he did not see himself as better than others or more worthy or deserving. I say comically because he stood head and shoulders above us, he towered over us in his greatness.

But he never learned to be better or to attain any kind of status. In the only arrangement of its kind, he served as co-rosh yeshiva for 40 some odd year with Rav Amital TZ”L because it was never about him. His eulogizers were his children, a co rosh yeshiva and a student of 50 years. Not one dignitary was called to speak!

Like Moshe Rabbeinu he was Anav mikol Adam- a paradigm of humility in its true sense.

Like Moshe Rabbeinu who told God in the Korach episode - I took not one donkey from them, he never expected anything because of his position.

He carried his own books to class. He waited online for his food, tray in hand, with everyone else. It never crossed his mind to have someone bring the Rosh yeshiva food.

One of the commentators to that Gemara in Yevamot suggests that the student had to die because they were the teachers of the entire generation and a whole generation would learn to treat each other without respect and thus they had to die.

RAL taught generations and thousands of students by example.

As Rabbi Moshe Taragin said in his interview this week on Israeli radio, If he wasn’t such a great Torah Scholar, he would have been the nicest guy you have ever met!