This past Shabbat, the RJC had a program about R. Lichtenstein; here is an edited version of what I said (it will also soon be posted on Times of Israel). – Nasanayl Braun

Acts of Love and R. Aharon Lichtenstein, zt”l

During a shiva call to the Lichtenstein home—which was, for me, the epitome of what Kohelet meant when he said טוב ללכת אל בית אבל מלכת אל בית משתה, it is better, meaning more effective at focusing us on what’s important to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of celebration—Dr. Tova Lichtenstein said that the efforts made by students of her late husband’s (to come to the funeral or the shiva) were acts of love. It got me to thinking about the nature of the love various students had, the aspect of R. Lichtenstein that stimulated that love in them.

There are students—and other than those who have made public comments on the issue, I will leave out names, to respect their privacy—for whom R. Lichtenstein’s Torah seems to have been paramount. More than one student has devoted much of his own time in Torah study to recording, editing, publishing, and analyzing R. Lichtenstein’s many shiurim, his many classes on pure Talmudic topics.

These students resonated with that which took up the bulk of R. Lichtenstein’s time, effort, and interest, was the warp and the weft of his existence, the teaching of which was his primary focus.

Other students highlighted other pieces of R. Lichtenstein when speaking of what moved them about him. This is not to say that they denied any of the other parts—as Prof. Chaim Saiman quoted his chavruta, Joshua Weinberger, saying, one of the remarkable elements of the reminiscences of R. Lichtenstein that poured out after his passing was how fully coherent they were, how clearly they were talking about one integrated person, even as they focused on different elements.

For example, R. Chaim Navon, a rabbi in Modi’in and regular columnist in Makor Rishon, applied to R. Lichtenstein words he had quoted from R. Yechezkel Abramsky’s eulogy for R. Isser Zalman Meltzer—that even had R. Isser Zalman not known any Torah, his personal qualities would have made him one of the most impressive people in Jerusalem. For R. Navon and many others, the brilliance and encyclopedic knowledge easy to see from afar were in fact outshined, up close, by his character, humility, altruism, concern with being helpful to those around him.

Another student told me that what hit him to say about R. Lichtenstein was his resistance to the talk of atchalta de-geula, to the tendency in some segments of the Zionist world to insist that events in Israel are necessarily signs of the advent of the Messianic redemption. For this student, himself now a Ra”m, a teacher in a Yeshivat Hesder, R. Lichtenstein was bothered by that talk because it made it seem like the redemptive process was now inevitable when he, R. Lichtenstein, was always
concerned with seeing the necessity of human input. That emphasis on human autonomy, of our ability to have input into our futures, was the piece of R. Lichtenstein’s legacy that fueled this student’s sense of love for his rebbe.

Someone sent me a recording of R. Yosef Zvi Rimon, a Ra”m at Yeshivat Har Etzion, rabbi of the newer community of Alon Shvut, and founder of two philanthropic organizations, one of which finds jobs for people uprooted from their homes in the Gaza pullout (JobKatif, which is beginning to branch out to other underemployed communities) and one that looks to increase and improve the public’s engagement with the study of halachah in a sophisticated and enlightening way.

In the audio, he told the story of being a fourth or fifth year student at Har Etzion, confident in his plan of becoming a doctor, when R. Lichtenstein called him into his office. He spoke at length about the importance and value of medicine, as a career and as a way of helping others, concluding, “but you should go into the rabbinate/education."

That was what stood out for me, as well, R. Lichtenstein’s being a person I turned to more than once for life advice, and received advice that challenged me to move not only outside my comfort zone, as they say, but way outside. It would take me time, and struggle, to follow that advice—and sometimes I wasn’t ready to do so—but I always knew that R. Lichtenstein was someone who would, lovingly and judiciously, identify the best course of action, the ideal to follow if I was able.

Not all of us have such people in our lives, people whose judgment we trust, whose insight we respect, whose pronouncements we take extraordinarily seriously, even when they ask us to do that which seems beyond us. I have been blessed with more than one such person, but R. Lichtenstein was my rebbe muvhak in this quality.

I didn’t in any way do all he wished from his students, but one key to my act of love after his passing, as Dr. Lichtenstein put it so well, was his periodic invitation to leap from where I was to a place that—when I have managed to do it—has always turned out to be the better place to be, made me better than I had been.

Yehi Zichro Baruch.