We would all like to believe that genuine mastery of Torah on the part of a believing Jew automatically brings with it a status of supreme righteousness. This certainly should be the case, and most of the time it probably is. Nonetheless, in a Jewish world of contentiousness, of ideological friction, of access to every position and even every casual comment regarding matters of the day issued by *talmidei hakhamim* [rabbinic scholars], this conviction can be sorely tested. At their cynical worst, some Jews, especially Modern Orthodox Jews, wonder if the coexistence of mastery of Torah and supreme righteousness is a realistic expectation.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein reinforced our faith in the ethical power of Torah. His control of the corpus of the written and oral Torah approached the absolute, and he personified integrity, concern for others, genuine, almost startling, humility—everything that the word *tsaddik* conveys. The combination of encyclopedic knowledge and humility is illustrated in a story I was told many years ago about his attitude toward setting aside some time for the rapid study of *gemara* in order to gain familiarity with a broad range of material. He opposed such a so-called *seder* in *beki’ut*, which he characterized as studying so as not to understand. All study, he believed, should be *be-iyyun*—with deep analysis and attention to detail. When some students objected with the argument that they wanted to gain a broad knowledge of the Talmud, he reportedly replied, “So study the entire Talmud *be-iyyun*. I did it.” In his case, this response was not an affectation. The objectively risible assumption that anyone could do what he did was taken for granted, or at least it was not rejected out of hand.

I’ve formulated the meaning of *tzidkut* in terms that have concrete meaning—integrity, concern for others, humility. However, in addressing the persona of Rav Lichtenstein, I need to add a term that I hardly ever use because of its elusiveness and
frequent application to approaches that disturb me. Spirituality. For all his embodiment of the learning associated with the ultra-intellectualized world of Brisk, anyone with even passing familiarity with Rav Lichtenstein encountered a figure suffused with the almost tangible presence of the Creator of the Universe. In a famous, brief essay on faith that has just been reprinted, Rav Lichtenstein wrote that for him “the greatest source of faith has been the Ribono shel Olam Himself,” and he went on to describe the intimate relationship that he so frequently experienced. It is a commonplace among his students and acquaintances that to have seen Rav Lichtenstein daven on Yom Kippur was to understand what prayer is. I saw this davening at YU before he moved to Israel, and his status as a man of prayer, an ish tefillah, was underscored by his daughter at the funeral. One of the most moving moments for me as I watched the video was her report of his reaction a year and a half ago when he was brought by ambulance to the hospital as death appeared to loom. “Be-yadkha afkid ruchi,” he declared, “padita oti Hashem E-l Emet”—“into your hand I commend my spirit; you have redeemed me O Lord, God of Truth”—thus simultaneously commending his soul to God and pleading for divine mercy.

For the Modern Orthodox community, Rav Lichtenstein, like the Rov [his father-in-law Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik], served as a model for Torah u-Madda, Torah and secular study or general culture. Unlike the Rov, Rav Lichtenstein also addressed the issue frontally, most notably in a lengthy essay in a volume in which I had the privilege to participate. But like the Rov, he did not directly engage specific intellectual difficulties that pursuit of secular disciplines can raise. Rather, his central approach underscored the ways in which such a pursuit can enrich the understanding and experience of Torah and faith.

What spoke to him most was of course literature, and even though he was acutely conscious of the fact that many Torah scholars would look askance at his invocation of non-Jewish figures in presentations of aspects of the Jewish worldview, he did not shrink
from doing so regularly and unapologetically. I cannot vouch for the historicity of the following story, which comes in more than one form, but it is said that Rav Lichtenstein, in a Torah discourse where R. Ovadiah Yosef was present, made reference to Dostoyevsky. When he sat down, Rav Ovadiah purportedly turned to him and said—and I thought I knew all the great latter authorities of the Ashkenazim. At a Gush dinner where Rabbi Nati Helfgott was the alumni honoree when he was a teacher and not yet a communal rabbi, Rav Lichtenstein said something that would not have been said by a great rabbi at any comparable event in Jewish history outside—possibly—of Renaissance Italy. “As Aquinas said, teaching is the ideal synthesis of the active and contemplative life.”

Rav Lichtenstein’s openness to the value of outside culture and his innate sense of tolerance did not mean that he was soft or even flexible when it came to issues that he saw as central to Judaism. He would not allow the expression of certain theological views in a volume of the Orthodox Forum. He firmly opposed the dominant forms of biblical criticism, and he was even critical of typical approaches to the academic study of Talmud in which a significant number of religious Jews engage. He once cited approvingly the sardonic reaction of a listener who had heard a lecture delivered by a religious scholar utilizing such approaches. The Talmud says that for everything that God forbade, he permitted something similar: כל מא דאסרין ל’חרמנא שרא ל’כותני. The listener reacted to the talk by saying,

כל מא דאסרין ל’חרמנא שרא ל’כותני. אסרין ל’ביבורא המקורה. שרא ל’ביבורא התלמוד.

“For everything that God forbade, he permitted something similar. He forbade Bible criticism. He permitted Talmud criticism.”

Even in dealing with rigorously Orthodox circles, Rav Lichtenstein did not allow his openness to varied approaches to blunt his expression of sharp criticism when he felt that principle required it. On the one hand, he expressed unalloyed reverence for Rav Shlomo
Zalman Auerbach. On the other, Rav Lichtenstein’s discourse on *da’at Torah* in the sense of unalloyed rabbinic authority led him to affirm in vigorous terms that a public talk by Rav Shach at a politically critical moment was deeply misguided because of his lack of familiarity with Israeli realities in the secular community. He was open, he was tolerant, but he could also be firm and uncompromising.

Assessing Rav Lichtenstein’s impact requires some comparison with the giant who was his father-in-law and with the man who invited him to Yeshivat Har Etzion and served as his co-rosh yeshiva. The Rov was a figure for the ages as both a *talmid hakham* and a philosopher. The main sentiment that he inspired was awe. A select few individuals were genuinely close to him and were no doubt able to develop more intimate sentiments as well. Nonetheless, even for them, I think that what predominated was awe. Rav Amital was an impressive *talmid hakham*, but in his case, the dominant response inspired was love. Chazal tell us that *et Hashem Elokekha tira*—you must fear the Lord your God—includes *talmidei hakhamim*, or, better, is channeled through *talmidei hakhamim*. I think we would be justified in saying the same about *ve-ahavta et Hashem Elokekha*—you must love the Lord your God. You can learn to love God from the experience of loving *talmidei hakhamim*. Rav Lichtenstein, who was a towering *talmid hakham* and a figure who, for all his reserve, afforded some degree of access to his person and personality, inspired both awe and love, though perhaps at a slightly lesser level in each case than his teacher and his colleague respectively. As to influence, the Rov’s emerges out of the works of a world class thinker and affects large numbers of Jews through his elite students and popularizations of his teachings and writings. Rav Lichtenstein’s massive output and personal example made him a guide and mentor in a way that was more direct and I think even exceeds the everyday impact of the Rov, at least during the latter’s lifetime. To some degree, I am reminded of what my father, who was among other things a folklorist, wrote in an article on folk tales about Rashi published twenty-two years after a similar article about the Rambam. Legends about the Rambam, he said, reflect the *yirat kavod,*
the awed reverence, that the people felt toward a figure who inhabits the highest, largely inaccessible circles; legends about Rashi reflect a greater degree of familiarity, a sense of greater comfort with a beloved father-figure and teacher of stellar character (“Rashi be-Aggadat ha-Am,” in Rashi: Torato ve-Ishiyyuto, ed. by Simon Federbush New York, 1958, pp. 147-148).

Back in 1969, when Rav Lichtenstein was still at Yeshiva University, he unknowingly caused one of the sharpest and most amusing criticisms to which I was ever subjected by a student. I had just begun my teaching career, and I had to read a New Testament verse to my class. At the time, my only New Testament was part of an old, crumbling King James Bible lent to me by my father. When I took it out to read the verse, a student declared, “His New Testament looks like Rav Lichtenstein’s Rambam.” About twenty-five years later at a Gush dinner, I told this story to Rav Lichtenstein, who reacted with considerable amusement. I ask myself if I would have told a comparable story to the Rov, and my answer is an unequivocal “no.”

The day after Rav Lichtenstein’s petirah, I was speaking with Rabbi Yosef Blau, who remarked that people use the word “irreplaceable” loosely, but in this case it is true. I replied that I had not asked Rav Lichtenstein many questions, but on several occasions, when there was more at stake than technical halakhah and a great authority with real da’at Torah was needed, I called him in Israel. On those occasions and many others, I wondered whom else I could have asked, and the agonizing answer was, “No one.” A similar comment was made to me by Prof. Shnayer Leiman after Rav Lichtenstein was consulted at our urging regarding a very sensitive decision that confronted the editors of the forthcoming RCA siddur.

Our community is blessed with great talmidei hakhamim. This is not to diminish their great stature and the great honor that they are due. I have asked them questions and will with the help of God continue to do so. But sometimes clichés are indeed true.
Losing the constellation of remarkable learning, broad horizons, profound judgment, exemplary humanity, and closeness to God embodied by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein leaves us an orphaned generation. May his merit protect us.

*The event at which this talk was presented may be viewed at* [http://www.ustream.tv/channel/yeshivat-har-etzion](http://www.ustream.tv/channel/yeshivat-har-etzion)