The Life and Learning of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein ZT”L

By Rabbi Ari Kahn

The following is, for the most part, a transcript of a talk given in Yeshivat Sha’alvim, approximately one week after the passing of Rav Lichtenstein. The written version has been slightly modified in terms of sequence and by the addition of footnotes.

What follows are some personal reflections on the life of our great teacher, Morenu V’Rabenu Harav Aharon Lichtenstein Zecher Tzaddik L’vracha. I will not call this a hesped, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, in order to eulogize another person, the speaker must be on the proper level, and so to be able to give a proper hesped for Rav Lichtenstein I would have to be on a level that far exceeds my own. When the Shulchan Oruch sets out the laws of hespedim, we are taught:

מצוה גדולה להספיד על המת כראוי.

"It is a great mitzvah to eulogize the deceased appropriately (in a fitting or appropriate manner)."

The emphasis seems to be on the word כראוי - “in a manner that is appropriate for the niftar.” If one cannot do it properly, it may be best not to do it at all. The Shulchan Oruch then continues, describing the objective of eulogy:

ומצותו שירים קולו לומר עליו דברים המשברים את הלב, כדי להרבות בכיה ולהזכיר שבחו.

The mitzvah, the objective of a hesped, is to bring people to tears; that is not my objective here today. Thirdly, the Shulchan Oruch instructs that a hesped should not overly exaggerate in praising the deceased:

ואסור להפליג בשבחו אף מידה.

For this reason, as well, this should not be considered a hesped: I will not exaggerate at all. I will simply share what I know of Rav Aharon; things I

observed and learned directly will be transmitted as such, as well as things I heard from others that I believe to be true.

I would like to begin by borrowing and paraphrasing two verses in Melachim Aleph, perek yud:

Malchim A: Perek: י-
אמרת קהת הנביא אשר שמעתי בא裏י על כלבר יהודה חכמה: ולא החכמה
כלבריה עד אשר באתי ותראתה עיני היום ולא חזיל חכמה חכמה יתוב.

It was a true report that I heard in my own land of your acts and of your wisdom. But I did not believe the words, until I came, and saw it with my own eyes; and, behold, I had not been told the half of it; your wisdom and goodness exceeds the report which I heard. (I Melachim 10: 6-7)

There are things that I will tell you today that you might think are no more than exaggerated tales, that will sound like wild posthumous superlatives. You might imagine that, in fact, I am giving a hesped, exaggerating just enough or perhaps a bit more than that. I assure you once again that this is not a hesped, and it contains no exaggeration whatsoever.

Before I speak about Rav Lichtenstein himself, or about the impact he has had, I should present my own modest credentials on this matter. I first met Rav Lichtenstein in 1978, when I was 17 years old. My conversation with him at that time lasted only a few seconds; Rav Aharon had come to give a shiur at the Gruss Kollel while I was studying at B.M.T. This brief conversation was made possible, in large part, by one of my most fortunate assets in life: My older brother, Rav Yair, was already a close and dedicated talmid of Rav Lichtenstein, and I continue, to this very day, to be the beneficiary of their close relationship. Rav Aharon has many more knowledgeable students than I, many students who studied with him longer than I, and many who, without a doubt, understood much more than I, but I had a certain zchut avot in this instance, and zchut ha’ach.

I myself had the zchut to become Rav Aharon’s student two years later, during the third of my post-high school years of study in Israel, when I learned in Rav Lichtenstein’s shiur at Yeshivat Har Etzion. I then returned to New York, where I learned in The Rov’s² shiur for three years. In 1984, I returned to Israel

² ‘The Rov,’ for me and thousands of others, was and always will be HaRav Yosef Dov haLevi Soloveitchik zt’l.
and I had the privilege of learning with Rav Lichtenstein for another three years in the Gruss Kollel.

My impression of Rav Lichtenstein remained unchanged, from our first brief meeting until the last time I spoke with him, 35 years later. He was, above all else, a combination of two striking features: He was one of the most modest people I have ever known, and at the same time one of the most intellectually brilliant. The only question we might ask is, which of these two features was foremost? Which was the defining, primary aspect? I am, as I have said, aware that you might suspect me of exaggeration; this is a well-known, even natural phenomenon when students talk about their teachers. The Gemara itself is not unaware of this phenomenon:

The question was asked: What is the name of the Messiah? Each student offered his own teacher as the ideal candidate; each beit midrash believed their rebbe to be the Mashiach - which is not necessarily a bad thing. Yet while I admit that I never contemplated the idea that Rav Lichtenstein could be the Mashiach - as I suspect is the case among the overwhelming majority of his students – I suspect that many of his students considered Rav Aharon worthy of a place on the Sanhedrin. Indeed, I suspect that anyone who has read the Rambam’s description3 of the qualifications for membership in the Sanhedrin:

3 רמב”ם הלכות סנהדרין פרק ב

Halacha 6

Just as the judges of a court must be on the highest level of righteousness; so, too, must they be unsullied by any physical blemishes.
would be hard pressed to conceive of a more worthy candidate. That is who Rav Lichtenstein was – to those who sat in his *beit midrash*, and to so very many others.

I would like to go back to the beginning, to gain perspective on this extraordinary person.

Rav Lichtenstein’s father, Dr. Yehiel Lichtenstein (son of Shmuel and Esther), was born in Kowel, Poland but was raised in Germany. Dr. Lichtenstein was a classic European intellectual; his doctorate, “Biblical Influences on the 17th Century French Playwright Jacques Racine,” 4 secured him a position in Switzerland.

Rav Aharon’s mother Bluma, daughter of Aba and Raizel (Ordman) Schwartz, was a “Telzer.” She was not simply born and raised in the city of Telz – she was born in the Yeshiva itself; the Yeshiva formed her inner

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An effort should be made that they all be white-haired, of impressive height, of dignified appearance, men who understand whispered matters, who understand many different languages so that the *Sanhedrin* will not need to hear testimony from an interpreter.

**Halacha 7**

We are not careful to demand that a judge for a court of three possess all these qualities. He must, however, possess seven attributes: wisdom, humility, the fear of God, a loathing for money, a love for truth; he must be a person who is beloved by people at large, and must have a good reputation.

All of these qualities are mentioned explicitly in the Torah. When relating Moses’ statements concerning the appointment of judges, Deuteronomy 1:13 mentions: ‘Men of wisdom and understanding.’ This refers to wisdom.

The verse continues: ‘Beloved by your tribes.’ This refers to those who are appreciated by people at large. What will make them beloved by people? Conducting themselves with a favorable eye and a humble spirit, being good company, and speaking and conducting their business with people gently.

When relating Jethro’s advice to Moses to appoint judges, Exodus 18:21 speaks of ‘men of power.’ This refers to people who are mighty in their observance of the mitzvot, who are very demanding of themselves, and who overcome their evil inclination until they possess no unfavorable qualities, no trace of an unpleasant reputation, even during their early manhood, they were spoken of highly. The phrase ‘men of power’ also implies that they should have a courageous heart to save an oppressed person from the one oppressing him, as Exodus 2:17 states: ‘And Moses arose and delivered them.’

Just as we see that Moses was humble; so, too, every judge should be humble. Exodus 18:21 continues: ‘God-fearing’ - the intent is obvious. It mentions: ‘men who hate profit,’ i.e., people who do not become overly concerned even about their own money. They do not pursue the accumulation of money, for anyone who is overly concerned about wealth will ultimately be overcome by want.

The verse continues: ‘men of truth,’ i.e., people who pursue justice because of their own inclination; they love truth, hate crime, and flee from all forms of crookedness.

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personality and inspiration. Her father was the menahel of the famous Telz Yeshiva, and he – and his daughter Bluma – was inextricably connected to the Yeshiva. As a child, and then as a young woman, she knew many of the gedolim of Europe. She had lunch with Rav Elchanan Wasserman, and the Ponievicher Rov would come for dinner. All of the gedolim were friends of the family. Years later, when Rav Aharon first met Rav Soloveitchik in New York, the latter remarked: “Nu, of Aharon’s mama zogt dach Rav Dovid Lifshitz az zi iz a halbe rosh yeshiva (“Regarding Aharon’s mother, I heard Rav Dovid Lifshitz say that she is ‘half a Rosh Yeshiva’”). In fact, Rav Aharon proudly recounted that his mother actually published an article in a Torah journal – virtually unheard of for women at that time - under the anonymous sobriquet “a Bat Yisrael, yesterday and today.”

5 See Rav Aharon’s eulogy for his mother: “Ima,” in Alon Shvut Kesher Tiferet, no. 11 (Tevet 5747), p. 2 (available online at http://asif.co.il/?wpfb_dl=5818).

6 Ibid.; he is described as מזכיר הישיבה.

7 Rav Boruch Ber, Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky, and Rav Hutner, as well: “ראתה את ר’ ברוך בער ז”ל, בהיותם פליטי מלחמת העולם הראשונה במינסק סעדה עם ר’ אלחנן וסרמן הי”ד בשעת הכנסיה הגדולה בוינה; והיא היתה מיודדת, בראשית דרכה ובהמשך, עם כמה, אשר במרוצת השנים, דרך כוכבם בעולם התורה במקומות שונים. כד הווינא טליא, שמעתי את הרב מפונביז ז”ל, שאותו הכירה בזהותו הליטאית כ”ר’ יושא קולער”, קורא לה בשמה הפרטי; היא זכתה להערכה והערצה רבה מר’ יעקב קמנצקי ז”ל, ידיד נאמן למשפחה כולה; השתייכה לחוג שבו פעל מו”ר ר’ יצחק הוטנר ז”ל בראשית דרכו.

8 Ibid., page 3.

9 Ibid., page 9.
Rav Aharon’s mother had a brother who learned in Telz. When a new yeshiva opened in Switzerland, he was sent, along with a select group of Telz bochurim, to bolster the new yeshiva, to serve as a living example and role model of a “real” yeshiva student. When Bluma travelled to Switzerland to visit her brother, she met Yehiel Lichtenstein – and they married soon after.

Their children were born in France, in a time of great peril: As events unfolded all across Europe, R’ Yehiel heard rumors of what the Nazis had in store for the Jews. At that time, it was assumed that the children’s French citizenship would protect them from whatever lie ahead, but neither he nor his wife were French citizens. R. Yehiel was determined to do whatever was necessary to protect his family, and he set out to obtain French citizenship for his wife and himself. He heard from a relative that in the city of Marseilles, some 500 kilometers away from their home, it would be possible to obtain the necessary papers. He felt the situation was one of pikuach nefesh, mounted his bicycle on Shabbat, and rode 500 kilometers. Upon arrival at the appropriate office, his request for French citizenship was denied. This might have marked a dead end for their family, denying them the protection they thought France would provide and making them unable to emigrate to any other place of safety for lack of documentation. However, quite miraculously, someone at the office gave him a visa for the entire family to go to America. Although at the time this seemed like a far less desirable solution, it was actually the result of tremendous hashgacha (and perhaps the intercession of a relative of Bluma’s...)

Decades later, Rav Aharon’s sister Hadassa (Lichtenstein) Klamen wrote “A Grateful Letter to Harry: My family was fortunate to be among those to receive U.S. entry visas signed by Hiram Bingham Jr., American Vice Consul in Marseille, France. We arrived in the United States in January 1941, went on to become grateful, constructive American citizens and eventually immigrated to Israel, where we and our families live now.... I am only sorry that we cannot thank your noble father personally.... May G-d bless you and grant you and us the moral strength to go in your father’s footsteps.”


Also, the author mentioned that Hiram Bingham IV (Harry Bingham), Vice-Consul of the US Embassy in Marseilles, acted in defiance of his superiors, the clearly stated policy of the US State Department, and, ultimately President Roosevelt. He was dismissed from his position because he issued so many visas to save the lives of Jews.

http://www.hirambinghamrescuer.com/ 10 Hiram Bingham IV (Harry Bingham), Vice-Consul of the US Embassy in Marseilles, acted in defiance of his superiors, the clearly stated policy of the US State Department, and, ultimately President Roosevelt. He was dismissed from his position because he issued so many visas to save the lives of Jews.

named Joseph Shwartz). It is not difficult to imagine what would have happened to the family had they remained in Europe.

The Lichtenstein family escaped Europe on the very last boat out. They arrived in America on January 8th, 1941, the 9th day of Tevet, on a boat traveling from Lisbon.

Upon their arrival in the United States, the family moved to Baltimore, Maryland, and then briefly to Clarksdale, Mississippi, where they had a close relative who was a *shochet*. They then moved back to Baltimore (where they had more family – and more opportunities for a Jewish education for the

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13 See http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/show-manifest-big-image/czoxOTIoMDA0ODc5ODE5XzAwNTEwLmpwZyI7/2

14 Yehiel’s brother Mordka and Pessa Lichtenstein lived in Clarksdale with their son Aaron and daughter Rebecca.

15 Rav Aharon recalled that his grandfather was also a *shochet*. “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections,” http://etzion.org.il/en/my-education-and-aspirations-autobiographical-reflections-rav-aharon-lichtenstein-ztl: “My grandfather, a”h, was a learned person, a *shochet*, very attached to the Hebrew language.”
children). Rav Lichtenstein recalled those years in a review essay of a book by the Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Yisrael, Rav Aharon Feldman:

If I may intrude a personal vein, Rabbi Feldman’s persona arouses in me latent but very warm memories. We were classmates during 1942-1943 in the shiur of Rabbi Yaakov Bobrovsky\(^\text{16}\), zt"l, at Talmudical Academy of Baltimore— I, a spindly nine year-old immigrant of limited social skills and of dubious acculturation; he, a bit older, firmly entrenched in both a home of Lithuanian rabbinic stock and in his native American milieu. We were both eager, and bright; he, beyond that, to me, a tower of strength. He befriended me and invited me frequently to his home. I still fondly recall the chilling warmth of joint sledding in Druid Hill Park on Sunday afternoons. As my family moved to Chicago after a year, the friendship gradually dissipated. There was virtually no further contact of note—not even when, some years later, we both found our tents simultaneously pitched under the aegis of mori verabbi, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, zt"l, at Chaim Berlin. But the memory and the appreciation linger.”

And he ends the review

Finally, if I may, I close as I opened— on a personal note. Dear Reb Aharon: That pair of juvenile prattling sledders is now well past seventy-five. Each has, besiyata diShmaya, in successive contexts, respectively, learned much Torah and has been blessed with the ability and the circumstances to enable reaching out and personally transmitting to others that which we have been endowed. It stands to reason and is, presumably, mandated by joint mission, that our worlds meet and attain mutual fruition. As we both painfully know, however, this occurs all too rarely. Must the walls that separate our communities and our institutions soar quite so high, the interposing moat plunge quite so deep? Shall we never sled again?\(^\text{17}\)

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16 Rav Bobrovsky was a student of Rav Baruch Baer Leibowitz. Rav Lichtenstein related that at that time he was in two shiurim simultaneously: He learned with students closer to his age in the shiur of Rabbi Tzvi Tabori, and with older students in the shiur of Rav Ya’akov Bobrovsky. See “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”

By the next year the family moved to Chicago. In his eulogy for his mother, Rav Aharon recounted that they lived in Chicago until, at the wedding of the daughter of a prominent member of the community, the bride walked down the aisle to “Here Comes the Bride.” Bluma Lichtenstein was silent, but when they came home she turned to her husband and declared “I cannot educate my children here.” She was convinced that they must leave that city and go to a place of Torah\textsuperscript{18} - this, despite the fact that her husband had not found work in Baltimore, and hence had moved to Chicago, and the world was in the midst of a war. Their children’s education and upbringing was of supreme importance.\textsuperscript{19}

Rav Aharon and his family arrived in New York when he was 12, once again uprooted and in unfamiliar surroundings – but his Bar Mitzva was attended by such illustrious figures as Rav Yitzchak Hutner, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, Rav Dovid Lifshitz – all of whom attended because of their relationship with his mother, Bluma (Schwartz) Lichtenstein of Telz. And who spoke at the Bar Mitzva? His mother, Bluma (Schwartz) Lichtenstein.\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps this sums up Rav Aharon’s formative family experiences: His father was an intellectual, a scholar, and above all else, an educator; his mother was fire, full of confidence and passion. She embodied midat hagvura.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} “Ima,” page 5.

“חיינו אז בשיקגו באמצע שנות הארבעים, אחרי שביקשנו בדוקות בעבור את ייסורים הקלות והארושיות ס全日ים בחרות

ב将继续ו את קורות נריה. סאמר,en גוועה brasile, ששם, את החתונה את החתונה, שћבריקת, חתונה של חליפה של סבב

מותינו, חותמה על חליפה של סבב muestra המהווה במיבת המובית, 차 comunità,่อน, יזדוק של כדור מלבני: "לא ירד מיום - מתפורר זו

יידידי. כי, תם הנאה סיכי פרנסת זוקק קיי בקהל פוריסי, פל פרוס.

\textsuperscript{19} “After that, we moved to Chicago, and for two years I was at Beit Midrash Le-Torah. Then my parents saw that Chicago didn’t have the kind of Jewish education that I needed. Despite the fact that their livelihood was better in Chicago than it had been in Baltimore – in Baltimore, it was almost nonexistent, and they knew moving to New York would be difficult – they felt that for their children’s education, they needed to do it. So we moved to New York when I was twelve. I was in Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin for four years, until I went to Yeshiva University.” “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”

\textsuperscript{20} “Ima,” page 4.

“משתתף לוור רוחני, בנסיעת בור-מוצפת, של, בכתות מורי, יצחק-חצר, מיטב, מיטב, זוכרים-לכל, חיילות, יוד-ליפשיץ, שלמי, ואמן, כמו, ואן, אחות, את.

“אך אל פזרו ענותיהombat מעניין أفא שתרשמון, ויה דמות, אוד מקורותニック לחיים-ברור, אוד-אמץ, אוד-

קנبرز משמר אורי. חייות-뮡-[var]ים השחורים של צחק-אוסני - שמי-שחורים על ידי-מעד-זבח-בזבח, על כל שחלותיו.

“אוחי אמא, או נוח岁月.”
home. This is not worth it,” but his mother responded: “Bluma Shvartz aina mevateret!” “Bluma Shwartz does not back down!”

It is hard to imagine the hardships Rav Aharon faced in his childhood or the manner in which he overcame the obstacles. Before leaving Europe, he had been ill, and was separated from his parents and missed an entire year of school. In the short time after their arrival in the US, he had attended public school for one year, and moved from Baltimore to Mississippi to Baltimore, changing schools twice, then moving to Chicago and then to New York! In his own words:

“I lost almost a whole school year because I was ill, and I was left in the hospital in Paris for six months, during which time my parents were elsewhere; that in itself was not an easy experience. At the end of that hospitalization, I was just turning seven, and I was reunited with my parents after almost eight months of separation. We went to a refugee camp... I was [in Chicago] for second grade, came back to Baltimore in June, and by that time I was moving up from third grade and entering fourth. In fourth grade, I was in public school. My parents thought it was important that I acclimate to the new culture. I skipped fifth grade, and in sixth grade I began to learn seriously, attending Chofetz Chayyim in Baltimore, and there I was in two shiurim simultaneously: one with Rav Zevi Tabory, z”l, the father of Rav Binyamim Tabory, yibbadel le-chayyim, learning Perek Ha-mafkid in Bava Metzia; the other with Rav Ya’akov Bobrovsky, z”l, where we learnt Bava Kamma. The pace there was different than what it is today. I was in sixth grade and the other fellows were in eighth grade, and we learned the first four chapters, up to daf 46, in the space of one year!

Despite the constant relocations and the language barrier, Rav Aharon graduated Mesivta Chaim Berlin’s high school at the age of 14. His own modest explanation for this achievement:

“I was, as a child, reasonably precocious; I advanced pretty quickly; I was able to enjoy certain benefits which other people didn’t have. I

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22 “Ima,” page 4.

23 “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”
was able, between high school and college, to take a year-and-a-half off to learn full-time. At that time, it was unusual, but I was young when I graduated high school.”

He spent the next two years in the Beis Medrash of Chaim Berlin, learning through Sha”s. He was far younger than anyone else in the beit midrash, and was precocious beyond his years, earning him the nickname “The babe.” He then went to Yeshiva University. Once again, at the age of 16-17, he was the youngest person in this educational setting, and, based on stories I heard Rav Lichtenstein tell over the years, he often saw himself as an outsider.

At YU, no one was quite sure what to do with him. His age made him ineligible for placement in The Rov’s shiur, so he was placed in the shiur of a prominent talmid chacham, Rav Moshe Shatzkes, the stepson and student of Rav Itzele Blazer, primary student of Rav Yisrael Salanter. Many of his fellow students did not understand Rav Shatzkes’s shiur, so Rav Lichtenstein gave a chazara (review) shiur. There was, however a “window of opportunity” in which Rav Shatzkes’s shiur and Rav Soloveitchik’s shiur did not overlap, so one day a week Rav Aharon attended The Rov’s shiur. Apparently, at the end of the semester, Rav Aharon took the exam in the Rov’s shiur as well as the exam for his full-time shiur with Rav Shatzkes. After the exams were read, The Rov asked, “Who is this Aharon Lichtenstein who received the highest grade in my shiur?” - despite attending only once a week and despite being the youngest person in the room by far. In fact, when I learned tractate Niddah with Rav Aharon, he mentioned that as a young man he had learned Niddah with The Rov, but when he went to a sefarim store to buy one of the Rishonim on Masechet Niddah, the proprietor chased him out of the store; it was unheard of for a talmid so young to be learning such material.

After he finished college, The Rov “hijacked” him to Boston and assured him that they would learn together there. Not only did Rav Aharon learn with

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24 “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”
25 During this time one of his teachers was Rav Aharon Soloveitchik: “I entered the shiur of Rav Ahron Soloveitchik, 21, at the relatively young age of fifteen.”
27 “Rav Hillel Zaks, a grandson of the Chafetz Chaim and friend of Rav Aharon from Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, recounted that Rav Aharon stood uniquely above his peers even as a teenager. (In Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, his status as a child prodigy earned him the nickname “the babe,” a moniker which followed him to Yeshiva University.)”
27 “As it turned out, I managed to learn a great deal of Torah in Boston. I covered a lot of ground. Partly, it was the learning itself, since I was learning Torah about six hours a day when I was in graduate school; but
The Rov, he became part of the Rov’s inner circle, and eventually married the Rov’s daughter Tova. He attended Harvard, it is my understanding that Rav Lichtenstein was the youngest PhD in English literature in the history of Harvard. 28

After completing his PhD, he returned to New York. He taught in YU and also taught English Literature at Stern College. When I was in his home, I noticed on a plaque hanging on the basement wall from Stern College, naming him “Best Professor of 1968.” Subsequently, when he became Rosh Kollel in YU, he gave up his teaching position in Stern College. 29 It had become abundantly clear that he was not just a successful young Rosh Yeshiva/ Rosh Kollel; he was the heir apparent. His future was assured.

And then he received a letter from Israel, an unsigned letter penned by Rav Yehudah Amital, offering Rav Aharon a position as Rosh Yeshiva in Har Etzion, a young new yeshiva in the recently-liberated Gush Etzion. 30 The choice was far from obvious: Leaving the United States meant sacrificing the ability to be exposed through the learning to the Rav, in his home environment, was priceless. He would learn with his three children, his son-in-law, Professor Yitzchak Twersky, z”l, and myself. In addition to that, he learned with his son, Rav Haym, and to some extent with Professor Twersky as well, and I was admitted to join that group as well. In the first year that I was in Boston, early in the year we learned matters related to the yamim nora’im and Sukkot; then we learned the entire masachet Beitzia; then we finished all of Berakhot; in addition to which, Rav Hayim, Rav Yitzchak and I learned Bava Kamma, up to daf 13 and Zevachim, up to daf 9. That is probably more than I could have accomplished staying at YU! “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.” 28

“If you had come to speak to me when I was early in my junior year at YU, I probably was oscillating between going to Lakewood and staying at YU. Those were the choices that I was considering, not going to graduate school at Harvard. The thought of going to graduate school was in my mind as an option among other options; but going to Boston was not in my mind at all. That came out of the blue! The Rav was the one who suggested it, and, initially, it threw me for a loop; I had never even thought of such a thing. It meant leaving a yeshiva environment, leaving one’s home, and I wrestled with that for a while. It was not as if I was negotiating, but the Rav was anxious that I should do this, so I said, “If I go, would I be able to continue learning with the Rav, and join the Rav’s family study?” He used to learn with his family, and I do not want to say that I exacted a price, but to me that was a condition. When that was thrown in, I decided to go.” “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”

“I got part of what I wanted, and when I came back in 1957, I was made the Rav’s assistant, delivering review lectures and grading examinations. In 1961, they opened up the Kollel; it was a small group then, and I was put in charge. From 1961 to 1963, I was head of the Kollel, the Rav’s assistant, and a teacher at Stern. [In 1963, Rav Lichtenstein began to give a college-level shiur in addition to his shiurim in the Kollel.] What I always had in mind, as far as what I wanted to do on a long-term basis, even when I was at Stern, was that I would be a teacher of Torah.” “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”

The offer was first extended in 1968: “My mother-in-law passed away in 1967, and the offer to become head of Yeshivat Har Etzion came in 1968. I said, “I cannot begin to consider it at this point; I cannot leave the Rav alone.” He didn’t live in New York – he lived in Boston with my sister-in-law – but he came to New York every week, and ours was the home to which he came. However, as time wore on, my wife and I made the decision. It took another three years, and we moved in 1971.” “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”
opportunity to be the closest thing America had to a chief rabbi or *mara datra*. It meant forfeiting the leadership of modern (“centrist”) orthodoxy. Instead, Rav Aharon chose to go to a little yeshiva on the West Bank.

At that time, the yeshiva had no facilities of any kind: the present complex, *beit midrash*, dormitories, a library, offices – were not even a dream. Rav Aharon’s choice was motivated by the purest Zionism - *ahavat zion*. He wanted to be a part of the process and not a spectator from overseas. He made a choice that not many in his position would have made: He chose a small, relatively unknown yeshiva over the flagship institution of modern orthodoxy.

Having looked closely at his biography, we are now perhaps more familiar with the contours of his life story; we know where he came from, but all of these events do not explain who he was. We have merely established that he was, to wildly understate it, very smart. That is what made him an outstanding student. But what made him an outstanding teacher? What was his method? What was his educational legacy? As I mentioned earlier, I learned for 3 years in The Rov’s shiur and four years in Rav Lichtenstein’s shiur, and if I may, I would like to describe the difference between the two.

The Rov was the greatest *ba’al masbir*. He could explain anything, any concept, any sugyah. Perhaps it is hyperbole, but people said that a 12-year-old with 6 weeks of Gemara background could understand what the Rov was saying. The Rov was uniquely capable of taking the most complicated things in the world and making them sound impossibly easy. By making “simple” distinctions and creating “basic” categories (*gavra* versus *cheftza*), he would cut through all confusion and illuminate the central issue. Everything would fall into place; everything became easy. Rav Lichtenstein, on the other hand,

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31 Rav Lichtenstein’s acknowledgment of his success at YU was typically understated: “I was situated at YU; I had a regular shiur by then. In fact, I had gradually moved up from freshman, to sophomore, to a senior shiur; I was in charge of the Kollel.” “*My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.*”

32 “We lived in Chicago for two years, from when I was ten to when I was twelve. In the summer between those two years [1944] – I had just turned eleven – I joined the Shomer Ha-dati youth movement in Chicago, and the counselor was Gershon Schwimmer. He was one of the older students at the yeshiva; I think he was seventeen. (Later on, he received a doctorate in education at Northwestern; he then made aliya and taught at Kefar Ha-Ro’eh and at Mikhlelet Yerushalayim.) His influence upon me, in terms of the ultimate desire to live in the land of Israel, was extremely powerful. He was a very charismatic person, and we had a wonderful group of only eight people; almost all of those eight went on to make their mark on Jewish-American life. That feeling, that I wanted to live in the land of Israel, was very clear.” “*My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.*”
would take the easiest thing in the world, the thing that looked simple and straightforward, the thing you were certain you understood completely, and show how impossibly complicated it actually is. This, of course, made Rav Lichtenstein’s shiur very complex, very difficult. If we understand why this was so, we may begin to understand more about the man.

I have met many talmidei chachamim, but I have never met anyone who knew Sha”s and Rishonim the way Rav Lichtenstein did. First and foremost, the breadth of his knowledge was unsurpassed. He was familiar with all Rishonim – those that appear “on the page,” that are easily accessible, as well as Rishonim most of us have never heard of. Rav Lichtenstein approached a sugya by presenting one question: “What are the possible understandings of this sugya?” Even when the sugya appeared straightforward at first reading, there could be four, five, six possibilities. He would then line up the Rishonim, grouping them into those possibilities. When a possibility was put forward that was not found in the Rishonim, he would ask, “Why not? Why was this possibility not suggested by any of the Rishonim?” The process then moved on to further categorization and subdivision, examination of the practical differences between the various approaches; determining the “nafta minot” between the different approaches.

This methodology is unique. Most Roshei Yeshiva learn a sugya by posing a difficult question that arises from that sugya, and giving a brilliant answer that clarifies and explains all the factors. By either raising or resolving the problem – or both - the Rosh Yeshiva displays his own brilliance, and his students leave the shiur duly impressed and in possession of the rebbe’s unique insight.

This was never Rav Lichtenstein’s way. His shiur was not designed to showcase his own brilliance. His shiur was an act of tzimtzum; he would neither raise the question nor provide the answer. Rather, in every shiur, he would analyze the opinions of the Rishonim, break them down, work out the nafta minoyt between them. I believe – and I am sure many others who experienced his shiurim firsthand would agree - that you could stop him at any point in any sugya in Sha”s – all six Sedarim, including Kodshim and Taharos - and he would be able to lay out for you, on the spot, not only the Gemara, the opinions of the Tannaim and Amoraim, not only the classic Gemara-Rashi- Tosfot structure of the sugya, but all the Rishonim, how they lined up into different approaches to the sugya in question, what each of the Rishonim said specifically, and what
the *nafka mina* was between the different opinions. He saw each *sugya*, and the Talmud as a whole, as a building, while others saw a page of Gemara, a question and an answer. His process was multi-dimensional. The way he approached a *sugya*, the way his mind worked, the way he learned and the way he taught us to learn, was to always consider all the possibilities. Most of us, if truth be told, do not approach anything that way – not in life, and certainly not in learning. Most of us look at the Gemara, learn and investigate the *sugya* until the point we think we have a grasp on *pshat*. On a good day, we notice a *machlokes Rishonim*. Rav Lichtenstein saw the Gemara – every page, every *sugya* - in a much more sophisticated manner. He saw *Sha’s* in all of its complexity, sought out the tensions rather than the easy resolutions. Thus, while The Rov’s brilliance was to make everything clear through an analysis that created harmony, Rav Lichtenstein was uniquely gifted in showing us how the light refracted through the solidity of the *sugya*, as it were. He never “played the game” of asking the hard question and then giving the brilliant answer; instead, he challenged us to see every *sugya* from all possible vantage points.

What did this mean for his students? Those who prepared properly before the *shiur*, with the help of the sources he provided each week for the following week’s *shiur*, would already know 95% of what would be said in the *shiur*. If, however, you did not spend your week diligently preparing – collecting the raw materials for the building he would construct in the *shiur* – you could hope to follow only 5% or less of what he said in the *shiur*. The sources were points along the intellectual process he had mapped out, stages in constructing an organic, multi-dimensional understanding of the *sugya*. If you prepared, you “got it,” if not, you would be overwhelmed by the layers upon layers of complexity compounded by complexity. He illustrated and applied this same approach to learning, week after week, month after month, year after year.

Rav Re’em Hakohen, Rosh Yeshiva of Otniel and a dedicated student of Rav Aharon, himself a man of great learning and superb mastery of Talmudic literature and scholarship, said that in his opinion there never was a *Rishon* or *Achron* who knew how to read a text as sensitively as Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. Rav Re’em added that before Rav Aharon arrived in Eretz Yisrael, no one knew how to learn. For decades, the practice in yeshivot had always been to learn Gemara, Rashi and Tosfot, to then look at the Rosh and Rambam, and with that to conclude that the *sugya* had been mastered, and move on. Rav Aharon’s arrival revolutionized the study of Talmud: He taught
an entire generation – more precisely, three generations - how to learn. He raised the bar, opened up a completely new world of sophistication, and set wholly different goals for himself and his students. Those who prepared for his shiur week after week learned much more than the individual sugyot; we learned the derech, the method; we learned to approach learning as he did. It was hard work, it required rigor, but Rav Aharon taught us how to learn.

To be sure, Rav Aharon’s shiur seemed extraordinarily complex to those who had not followed the sources and prepared for the shiur; however, this complexity was, in fact, the result of Rav Aharon holding back. Rather than resolving all conflicts or questions with brilliant displays of his unique genius, he taught us – methodically, uncompromisingly - how to learn, one sugya after another. But this rigor, this multi-faceted view of the subject at hand, was not limited to the curriculum. Rav Aharon’s process of considering any and every question from all its possible sides spilled over to other areas. A student or colleague might spend months researching a topic or grappling with a problem - in learning or in life - before discussing it with Rav Aharon, and then quickly realize there were three, four, or even many more sides he had never considered.

This brings me to the other aspects of Rav Aharon’s personality: What made him an invaluable resource, what made him not merely a great teacher but a great rebbe, a role model for midot and halichot? How is it possible that a person of this unfathomable intellectual capability could be equally revered for the aspects of his leadership that had little or nothing to do with learning per se? Reading or listening to many of the hespedim, one cannot help but notice that almost everyone focused on his midot, on hesed, tzedaka, bein adam lechaver. I believe that until I met and observed Rav Lichtenstein, until I actually got to know him, the stories that I had heard about Rav Yisrael Salanter had seemed far-fetched. After seeing Rav Aharon’s behavior – over the course of decades, in so many different situations – I began to understand a very surprising truth: If there can be a Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, if such a person can actually exist and walk among us, then the legends about Rav Yisrael Salanter were not exaggerated. It may surprise some people to learn how great a talmid chacham Rav Yisrael Salanter was: He was so great in terms of his hesed that his brilliance in learning has become somewhat eclipsed. I was reminded of this when so many of Rav Lichtenstein’s maspidim spoke of his greatness in the interpersonal realm. I began to suspect that Rav Aharon’s intellectual stature was so formidable that few, if any, entertained the fantasy of emulating his
brilliance. Perhaps they hoped to emulate his behavior instead, thinking this might be a more realistic goal, but soon discovered that he was no less than the Gadol haDor in hesed and bein adam lchavero. In this sphere, too, he was far beyond anything we had ever imagined.

Let me share some personal, first-hand recollections:

The first time I laid eyes on Rav Aharon, I saw an image that is probably seared into the minds of many, many people. I was privileged to study with him when he was in his prime (I studied with Rav Gustman, The Rov, and Nechama Leibowitz when they were already quite elderly and in declining health). He seemed not only young, but youthful. He looked like an athlete (my brother was still playing basketball with him at the time – which, he told me, Rav Aharon did with all of his strength. Rav Lichtenstein believed that whatever you do, you must give 100%). Thus, Rabbi Menachem Genack recalled that while vacationing in Onset, where many students came for the summer to study with The Rov, Rav Aharon remarked, “I find it unethical that people exert themselves only on offense but not on defense.”

A tall man who stood absolutely straight, he was dressed like an American yeshiva bochur: clean-shaven, wearing a hat and jacket, carrying more books than seemed humanly possible, and moving more quickly than seemed possible considering the weight of those books. He moved toward the beit midrash, nearly running, with some 20 books in his arms, quickly and with purpose, bounding up the stairs. He never walked at a leisurely pace; when he was not actually running, he walked briskly.

When he entered the room, he began the shiur immediately; there was no small talk, only total dedication to Torah. His hatmada was almost beyond belief: While studying at Harvard, he learned Torah as much as he could each day, never losing sight on the religious and intellectual anchor of his inner world.

I mentioned earlier that Rav Aharon’s father, Dr. Yehiel Lichtenstein, was an educator. After years of moving from place to place in the US, later on in his life Dr. Lichtenstein taught in the Brooklyn branch of Yeshiva University’s high schools, BTA and Central– where both my father and my sister studied with him. Imagine: A European scholar, an intellectual of the highest order,

33 Rabbi Menachem Genack, “Rav Aharon Lichtenstein: A Personal Reminiscence” http://www.mesora.org/jewishtimes477.pdf “It is not ethical to play just offense and not defense.”

34 Rav Aharon only admitted to learning 6 hours a day, and admitted that there times he was quite concerned about his distance from full-time Torah learning at this point in his life.
found himself teaching high school Hebrew and French in order to support his family. These American teenagers were ill-equipped and ill-disposed to appreciate the man who stood before them; they were, in general, inattentive, disinterested, and often disrespectful toward the father of the Gadol haDor. Years later, when I was a talmid in Har Etzion, Rav Aharon’s parents were by then elderly people, and the years had taken their toll. However, if you would have seen Rav Lichtenstein’s Kibbud Av v’Em for his parents, it would not have made a difference if you knew anything about his intellectual or pedagogic accomplishments – for that matter, it would not have mattered if you knew whether or not he could hold a Gemara the right way up: Simply watching the honor with which Rav Aharon treated his parents, the way he took care of his parents, would have left you – as it did me - in awe. Simply watching Rav Aharon’s behavior was enough to convince everyone who was lucky enough to observe it, that we were in the presence of greatness, that we had the privilege of observing the personal behavior of a great man.

His father was by then blind, and almost completely deaf. Rav Aharon would walk with him, hand in hand, slowly and carefully. The elderly Dr. Lichtenstein had never been a tall or athletic man (the immigration manifest when he came to America listed him as 5 feet 3 inches tall); Rav Aharon, who stood well over 6 feet tall, would take his father by the hand, and, speaking to him in Hebrew, as he had for his entire life, they would walk. When they arrived at a staircase, Rav Aharon would call out loudly, crouching down near his father’s ear with no self-consciousness or embarrassment, “ABBA SHEVA LA’OLOT!” – “Father, seven steps up!” In the beit midrash, Rav Aharon stood next to his father, and would daven in his ear, shouting at the top of his lungs as if no one else was present. He had one job to do, to take care of his father, and he applied himself to it with the same all-encompassing concentration and enthusiasm as he did to every task he took upon himself.

When the yeshiva once ran into financial difficulty, the idea was suggested that those who were “least necessary” should be let go. Rav Aharon objected; he argued that those who earn the lowest salaries need their jobs the most, and would have the hardest time finding employment elsewhere. The ethical thing, he explained, would be to fire those most capable of finding new

35 See “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections” http://etzion.org.il/en/my-education-and-aspirations-autobiographical-reflections-rav-aharon-lichtenstein-ztl : “My father, a”h, was very devoted to Jewish education. He was raised in Germany and went into Jewish education at the age of twenty, teaching until the age of seventy-two.

36 Ibid.
employment, or, at the very least, to cut the salaries of those who draw the highest pay. He immediately offered to have his own salary reduced - an offer the hanhalah did not accept. This finely tuned sense of ethics guided him every step of the way.

Rav Aharon’s students, very simply put, loved him, but I don’t know if he ever knew how much and how well we loved him. It was the purest type of love: Anyone who truly loved Torah had to love Rav Aharon. Anyone who loved middot had to love Rav Aharon. Anyone who respected authentic Avodat Hashem had to love Rav Aharon. Anyone who respected authenticity had to love Rav Aharon. He had all of these traits, coupled with profound humility, which was evident in everything he did - from the way he thought to the way he gave shiur to the way he conducted himself, from his dress and comportment to his absolute refusal to accept any preferential treatment. Some poignant stories and remembrances illustrate this extreme humility:

When Rav Aharon was inducted in the IDF, Rav Amital went to pay him a visit on his base. Rav Amital, who was an officer, visited the base and asked to see “The Rav Lichtenstein.” “Rav who? What Rav?” was the response. Rav Amital made a few quick inquiries, and discovered that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, Rosh Yeshiva of Har Etzion and one of the leaders of the Hesder movement, was in the kitchen, washing dishes. When it was made clear to the base commander exactly who it was that was washing the dishes, the kitchen didn’t want to let him go: He was the best dishwasher ever to serve in the IDF. Like everything else he did, Rav Aharon invested every bit of himself, heart and soul, 100%, into the task he had been assigned. He had no expectation that he would be assigned any more lofty position, nor did he feel that his assignment was in any way demeaning. (Subsequently, I heard that he himself would wash the dishes after Shabbat dinner at home so that none of the other members of the household would grow to resent Shabbat.)

On more than one occasion, when driving with Rav Amital, Rav Aharon was stopped and questioned; to those not familiar with them, it seemed clear that Rav Aharon - clean-shaven and in “regular” clothing - was the Rosh Yeshiva’s driver. It never dawned upon outsiders that he himself was a Rosh Yeshiva - but he knew who he was, and he had a very keen awareness of his abilities, his calling, and his mission. He knew that his task was to teach and spread Torah. Real anavah - real modesty – does not mean that a person devalues their own worth; real modesty means that despite being self-aware, an anav does
not believe that he or she deserves special treatment. A story is told about Rav Moshe Feinstein, who was seen travelling on the subway one evening. When a surprised *talmid* asked, “Where is the Rosh Yeshiva going?” Rav Moshe explained that he was on the way to the wedding of a child of one of his former students who had passed away. The family had sent an invitation as a courtesy; they did not imagine that Rav Moshe would actually attend – and most certainly did not dream that he would use public transportation to get there. Rav Moshe understood how happy it would make the *hatan* and *kalla* to see him, but it never occurred to him to ask that they arrange for him to be escorted or transported in any way. He knew full well what the impact of his attendance at the wedding would be; he simply did not consider asking anyone else to be inconvenienced on his behalf. Rav Moshe knew he was the *Gadol haDor*; he knew his presence would bring honor and joy to the family. The family in question would most certainly have been honored to arrange for transportation, but Rav Moshe was an *anav*; he knew who he was, was aware of the power of his position, but did not think he deserved special treatment.

So, too, Rav Aharon knew who he was. He was fully engaged in the world around him, and knew his place in it and the responsibility that place engendered. On the other hand, he would not even let his *talmidim* carry any of the dozens of books he invariably brought to *shiur*. Once, a *talmid* intended to do just that: He placed his own *sefer* on top of the pile of Rav Aharon’s books, but before he could pick up the pile, Rav Aharon headed off - carrying his own books, and the student’s Gemara as well.

When my father came on aliya over 20 years ago, he went to see Rav Lichtenstein. They had been friendly when they were younger, had been in college together. Even then, my father tells me, there was a sense of awe when one spoke to the 19-year-old Aharon Lichtenstein. Despite this awe, upon arriving in Israel, my father paid Rav Aharon a visit. At the very beginning of their conversation, my father asked: “How should I address you? What should I call you?” Rav Aharon considered the question for a moment, and replied: “Call me Aharon.” They had been, and continued to be friendly. And so, my father called him “Aharon,” and they were, in fact, good friends – to the extent that such a friendship was possible: For the next 20 years my father diligently attended Rav Aharon’s *shiur* in the Gruss Kollel. My father often drove him to and from *shiur*, and I believe the enjoyment of their relationship was mutual. Nonetheless, from the moment my father began attending the *shiur*, he could
no longer call him “Aharon” – only “Rebbe.” “Call me Aharon,” he had said, with nonchalance, with no airs about him, like an old friend in a rekindled relationship – but my father knew that he was in the company of the Gadol haDor – and you just don’t call the Gadol haDor “Aharon,” even if he himself doesn’t think he deserves any honor.

Rav Aharon had self-awareness; over the years, he came to understand that his intellectual gifts surpassed those of others, but he felt he was put on this earth to learn and teach Torah, so that is what he did. And when you learn and teach Torah for 81 years, 15, 16, even 17 hours a day with diligence, day after day, year after year; and when you give shiur - always holding back, keeping your own chidushim to yourself and sacrificing the spotlight for pedagogical purposes, to enable your students to learn how to learn; when you give more shiurim than seems humanly possible - each one deep, fully developed and polished to perfection, complete, a masterpiece, ready for publication; and when you raise a seemingly impossible number of students - and not just students, but leaders – and despite all of this you don’t think you deserve anything more than anyone else – only then do you reach the level that Rav Lichtenstein, in his modesty, attained.

There were other aspects of his personal comportment that were a source of inspiration to me, and to so many others: To see him dance on Friday night after davening was to witness holiness. With all his being, he would dance, singing the words of each nigun with intense kavanah. Some of us don’t even notice that the nigunim we dance to have words! He had more kavanah while dancing than most of us have at Ne’ilah. I apologize if this sounds like a hasid talking about his rebbe, but Rav Aharon’s dancing, like his davening, were charged with such kavanah and hitlahavut that it left an indelible impression of holiness on us all. This, too, was one of the ways that knowing Rav Aharon made all the stories of gedolim I had heard seem possible, seem true.

Rav Aharon would give so much tzedaka that it often led to misunderstandings: His son told me that once someone knocked at the door of their home and asked for assistance. Rav Aharon gladly gave the man some money, but the person asked for more. It gradually became clear that the poor person was under the impression that Rav Lichtenstein was a wealthy man with a foundation set up to provide for the poor. It never occurred to him that

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37 “I was, as a child, reasonably precocious;” “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”
this was a Rosh Yeshiva, living on a Yeshiva salary. The man said, “This is your tzedaka. What about money from the foundation?”

In addition to his largesse, he would engage his visitors in conversation. He would make practical inquiries to help the person get a job, training or education. He once remarked, “My grandchildren will not be able to support your grandchildren. We must break the cycle of poverty.” Still, there were people who called and asked for their ‘weekly allowance.’

He had so many students, it would have been only natural if he had lacked the time or emotional energy for them all; this was most definitely not the case. He was totally dedicated to his students, despite physical distance and intellectual disparity. The last time I spoke with Rav Aharon was at a celebration in honor of his 80th birthday. Hundreds of students stood in line, hoping to say a word and wish him well (especially after his previous illness). He saw me among the crowd, took my hand and said, “I am extremely pleased to see how productive you are, producing works rooted in text and rooted in values.” I was surprised that he knew what I was up to, but I should not have been; despite his age and his failing health, he kept abreast of what his students were doing, and he had the kindness to encourage them with beautiful, thoughtful words. We had all come to honor our rebbe, and he took the time to bestow honor and praise on his students. Knowing Rav Lichtenstein, these were words of the highest praise, because these were his highest goals: Fidelity to the text and to Torah values.

Rav Aharon was, by nature, very shy. He sometimes mumbled, making it difficult to understand him, and people who spoke to him one-on-one often were forced to ask him to repeat himself a few times so they could understand what he was saying. Some may have misread his shyness, and thought he was aloof; he was not aloof at all. When he spoke publicly he overcame his natural shyness, and he was always approachable. However, as many of his students can attest, people thought twice about approaching him because they didn’t want to disturb him or his learning. There was a sense of awe, a sense of standing in the presence of greatness: “How can I waste his precious time?”

One of my fellow talmidim in the Yeshiva had devised a way to speak with Rav Aharon without disturbing him or stealing his precious time: He would hitch a ride with him to Jerusalem, enjoying Rav Aharon’s undivided attention for the 45 minute journey, and then turn around and take the bus back to the Yeshiva. Years later, I unwittingly did my friend one better: I was travelling
to New York on a Saturday night El Al flight. I settled into my seat with a Gemara, figuring that I would learn daf yomi (followed by a movie to help me fall asleep)... and Rav Lichtenstein sat down beside me – in coach, not first class, not business class. With only an empty seat between us, we had hours of uninterrupted time to converse (Thank God I had my Gemara with me!).

At the time of this fortuitous flight, I was leading a weekly habura/shiur on Rav Hutner’s Pahad Yitzchak. I had studied in Mesifta Rabbi Chaim Berlin as a teenager, and so had vivid memories of Rav Hutner, but I had never had a personal relationship with him. I had observed him speak, but was unable to understand his “ma’amor,” which was delivered in Yiddish. Interestingly enough, the group of Israelis with whom I was learning Pahad Yitzchak had chosen this text precisely because it is written in beautiful Hebrew; we were enjoying it immensely, both for the content and for the accessibility of the language. In addition, I told Rav Lichtenstein, I was happy to be able, after so many years, to study the works of his rebbe as I connected them mentally to the visual experience I remembered from my youth: Finally, I could understand the content of what had once been, for me, just a “show.” Upon hearing this, Rav Lichtenstein became animated: “But the show is the thing,” he cried. He then proceeded to do a Rav Hutner imitation, all the while explaining the pedagogic strategy Rav Hutner had employed: “First, Rav Hutner always gave his shiur in a room that was too small for the number of students. In order to lend the shiur a sense of importance, he preferred that the room be crowded, to the point of ‘standing room only.’ Rav Hutner would be sure to arrive late, when people were already getting anxious: He would burst into the room and make his way through the assembled, expectant crowd to the desk in the front of the room.” At this point Rav Lichtenstein not only recalled and recounted the scene, he reenacted it: “And then, Rav Hutner would sit at his desk, take off his glasses, throw them on the table, and hold his forehead in his hand, rocking back and forth, back and forth, slowly, in absolute silence.” As he said this, Rav Lichtenstein acted out the scene, removed his own glasses, and threw them down on the tray-table, and held his head with his hand. “And the tension would rise to a crescendo. And then, suddenly, the words would burst forth and the talk would begin!” This reenactment was one of the most hilarious things I had ever seen: Here, at 20,000 feet, was Rav Lichtenstein doing a Rav Hutner impersonation, but it was not intended to be comical or disrespectful. Rav Aharon recalled the mannerisms of his revered teacher and recreated the scene with simultaneous pedagogical commentary and explanation.
I personally did not maintain as close a relationship with Rav Aharon as I could have over the years; I simply did not want to bother him. But I always knew that if a really serious question arose (and they did on occasion), his shoulders could bear the burden. He would give me a clear answer, a well-reasoned and unassailable decision. There would be no second guessing; his was a Torah-mandated answer. It was comforting to know he was only a phone call away.

When I wrote my second book, my brother, Rav Yair, read through an advance copy and noticed that Rav Lichtenstein was not among those who had given haskamot for the first book. He was upset, and he gave me mussar: “Why don’t you ask Rav Lichtenstein?” “I don’t want to bother him,” I said, to which my brother responded, “I will go and bother him.” The haskama Rav Aharon wrote was beautiful and important, but also somewhat embarrassing: He referred to me as “Rabbi Ari Kahn,” but signed his own name “Aharon Lichtenstein.” He was too modest to use official stationery of any kind; the haskama was written on plain white paper, but his secretary handed it to me along with a blank sheet of stationary, with the understanding that these two pages should go together. She had already become accustomed to his modesty.

These were his personal midot—anava, humility, generosity, hatmadah, respect for parents and teachers, dedication to students—and he acted upon them in every aspect of his life. His personal midot formed the personality of the Yeshiva, and impacted each and every student who learned there. His midot were translated into the spiritual life of the Yeshiva, as well its social and political awareness, the mission and raison d’etre of the Yeshiva. Rav Lichtenstein himself recounted a seminal moment, in which midot crystallized into a mission:

A couple of years after we moved to Yerushalayim, I was once walking with my family in the Beit Yisrael neighborhood, where R. Isser Zalman Meltzer used to live. For the most part, it consists of narrow alleys. We came to a corner, and found a merchant stuck there with his car. The question came up as to how to help him; it was a clear case of perika u-te’ina (helping one load or unload his burden). There were some youngsters there from the neighborhood, who judging by their looks were probably ten or eleven years old. They saw that this merchant was not wearing a kippa. So they began a whole pilpul, based on the Gemara
in Pesachim (113b), about whether they should help him or not. They said, “If he walks around bareheaded, presumably he doesn’t separate terumot u-ma’asrot, so he is suspect of eating and selling untithed produce...”

I wrote R. Soloveitchik a letter at that time, and told him of the incident. I ended with the comment, “Children of that age from our camp would not have known the Gemara, but they would have helped him.” My feeling then was: Why, Ribbono shel Olam, must this be our choice? Can’t we find children who would have helped him and still know the Gemara? Do we have to choose? I hope not; I believe not. If forced to choose, however, I would have no doubts where my loyalties lie: I prefer that they know less Gemara, but help him.38

That is a mouthful from a Rosh yeshiva, but for Rav Lichtenstein, when all was said and done, decency, midot, came first. Without decency, learning is barren, a mere intellectual exercise.

Rav Lichtenstein was the straightest, most honest human being I have ever met, which may account for the fact that his influence was far more limited than it should have been: Who could dare bring questions regarding business transactions to Rav Aharon? Before posing the question, you could be sure how the answer would be framed: You must do the right thing, the decent thing. People were probably embarrassed to pose some of these types of questions to a man whose ethical standards were so high. Who would want to live up to Rav Aharon’s values and expectations? Who could? His moral and ethical compass was exact, absolute; he would not deviate one iota in his personal conduct, and this set a standard the rest of us only pray to approach.

This brings us to the question of Rav Aharon’s long-term influence. One can only wonder what would have happened if he had stayed in America. How would that community have been impacted? What would have happened had he not come to Israel? Although “what if” is surely a game of guesswork, I believe that ultimately his impact was greater, having made the choice to come to Israel, than it would have been had he remained in the United States.

Yeshivat Har Etzion, born of the unparalleled cooperation between Rav Aharon and Rav Yehudah Amital, attracted Israel’s best and brightest young

38 By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, ed.(Alon Shvut: Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2003), page 249.
men (and later women in Migdal Oz). Rav Aharon’s methodology, his rigorous approach to learning and absolute dedication to Torah values, forged these outstanding young students into an intellectual elite that continues to impact every level of Israeli society, in the fields of education, medicine, law, business and academia, and of course in terms of religious education and Torah study at every level.

In a tragic sense, though, Rav Lichtenstein was underappreciated in his lifetime. The National Religious camp did not consider him “Zionist” enough; he lacked the requisite Mercaz Harav credentials. He was never “religious enough” for the religious, nor was he “secular enough” for the secularists; the hair-splitting list could go on and on. If the secularists would have fathomed how great a humanist Rav Lichtenstein was, there would have been crying and mourning in the streets of Tel Aviv on the day of his passing. But he was a real humanist, not an opportunist; he did not take a particular position in order to further any particular agenda. There never was a political agenda.

One illustrative example of how this “problem” set Rav Aharon apart from, and often at odds with other National Religious leaders appears in “Leaves of Faith.” In “A Rabbinic Exchange on Boruch Goldstein’s Funeral,” Rav Aharon decried the religious community’s response to the murder of Muslim worshipers, which included a hero’s funeral with glowing eulogies for the perpetrator of the Machpela Cave massacre. Rav Lichtenstein penned a letter questioning how, after committing such a heinous act, and in the wake of such chilul Hashem, the perpetrator could receive such lavish praise. Rav Aharon wrote from a very personal place, and not as a Rosh Yeshiva or public figure; he did not believe his opinion deserved more weight because of his own personal standing. Rather, his personal moral compass compelled him to speak out:

“It is impossible, from a personal and moral stance to remain silent.”

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39 “Likewise, I experience frustration with regard to my position within the Israeli public scene. I have been active to some extent in the political arena, but with little success. I think mine has been a moderating voice, in certain respects a positive one; but, by and large, the religious Zionist community has, I think, been taken over, politically and sociologically, by people who have misguided values, and that is not a good feeling. First, I am, politically speaking, almost a lone wolf. Second, it pains me, not for myself – I’m not ready for the Knesset, no matter what – but I am pained for our society.” “My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections.”

His protest (written to the heads of the yeshivot hesder who had remained silent) was met with derision. Who was Rav Lichtenstein to raise such issues? As someone who had expressed willingness to accept a peace process and, by extension, accept terrorists as “partners,” it was Rav Lichtenstein who, in their minds, had been guilty of a terrible chilul Hashem. His political opinions placed him beyond the pale; as far as they were concerned, he had no right to speak about this issue.

Their response is astounding, not only for its unmitigated chutzpah, but because it displayed the respondents’ inability to respect or even consider any approach that differed from their own, causing them to become smug and self-righteous. Rav Lichtenstein, however, neither abandoned his moral position nor allowed them to derail the debate. If, he responded, they take issue only with him, the messenger, and not with the message he hoped to convey, why was the entire network of Roshei Yeshiva Hesder silent? Why had they not taken a moral stand in the matter of Boruch Goldstein, when they were quite capable of speaking out - quickly and loudly - in other matters?

Rav Aharon was the voice calling out in the wilderness, attempting to open the eyes of his colleagues to the moral imperatives of decency and humanism. Sadly, they could not understand him.

Rav Aharon’s Zionism did, in fact, differ from that of much of the National Religious camp: While so much of religious Zionism is based on ideology, his vision was tempered with pragmatism. The debate might have played out something like this: One side would say, “We own every inch of Eretz Yisrael,” a position with which Rav Lichtenstein would fully and readily agree. His question would be, “What price are you willing to pay in order to hold on to every inch?”

He related an exchange he had had with a hitchhiker he had picked up along the road to Jerusalem. When the young man realized that his driver was none other than Rav Lichtenstein, he decided to “educate” him as to the error of his political opinions. “Seeing me in the car was like waving a red flag in front of a bull... Don’t you know that Eretz Yisrael is ours?” he asked. Rav Lichtenstein asked this fellow only one question: “How many lives are you willing to sacrifice in order to hold on to Eretz Yisrael? 10? 100? 1000? 10000? A million? Every Jew? One Jew would remain and live in Eretz Yisrael hashelayma – does that seem equitable? Logical?”
The fact that he was prepared to even consider such a question caused ideological purists to be upset with him, but Rav Aharon approached this issue the way he approached every issue: He looked at every problem from all possible perspectives. They dismissed his opinion, accused him of *chilul Hashem*, they were unable to hear, and even less, to understand his demand for decency. They overlooked his greatness.

Without Rav Aharon in it, the world has lost so much *hatmada*; the world has lost so much *hesed*; the world has lost so much *tzedaka*; the world has lost so much *kavanah*. It is absolutely impossible for any one person to fill the vacuum created by his passing, but if every single person resolves to learn a little more - or a lot more, and if every one of us *davens* with a lot more *kavanah*, if every single person decides to do a lot more *hesed*, and if every person gives a lot more *tzedaka*, we can begin to talk about filling the void.

To conclude, I urge you to do one more thing: Many people have said that The Rov was easy to understand when he spoke but was difficult to read. Rav Aharon, on the other hand, was often difficult to understand in person, but his written legacy is accessible. I urge you to read, and to learn. Rather than listening passively to those who feel compelled to speak about him, as I and so many of his *talmidim* do, open his *sefarim*. Read the articles. Connect to his great *neshama* through his own words.

May his memory continue to be a blessing.