‘I am going to have to end our conversation early because Rav Aharon Lichtenstein’s funeral may be immediate and I want to make sure I get there...’ I was shocked into silence, ‘Benji? Are you there?’ The most piercing conversation I have had with one of our consultants in Israel. Rav Aharon, the man who had always challenged physicality, at eighty-one years young, had finally moved beyond it.

I find it hard to write about this to begin the newsletter. Everyone is busy and I imagine not many feel like reading too much. Yet a mere few paragraphs can never do justice to touching the tip of the iceberg of a giant among men, one of the greatest teachers in the world. While he was the teacher to so many – he was also my teacher and inspired me to be a teacher. Rav Aharon recited sheva brachot and signed the ketuba at mine and Renana’s wedding, gave us wisdom and advice at key junctures in our lives, gave shiurim to the masses and sat a step in front of me for my last four years of Yeshiva, still serving as an inspiration for much of what I and so many do on a daily basis. My Rosh Yeshiva has passed away and the new term at Moriah has begun. And so, even for a moment, I thought I would share a short reflection.

Renana, my father and I were privileged to have a private lunch with Rav Aharon a few years ago. The conversation moved to sport. In all the shutim (question/answer sessions) and shiurim (lessons) I heard Rav Aharon deliver; I never saw a topic that he did not have a chiddush (innovative thought) on. When my dad started on rugby, I thought this would be the exception. Rav Aharon was born in France, moved to America when he was seven, received smicha from his future father in law, the famous Rav Soloveitchik, received a PhD in English literature from Harvard, served as a Rosh Kollel at Yeshiva University and then came to take up the post with Rav Amital as the Rosh Yeshiva of Har Etzion (known to many as ‘the Gush’). Rugby just didn't seem to be one of those things he would have encountered along the way. Yet he proceeded to tell us intricate details about Rugby's origins in England in the eighteen hundreds. He then started to describe the different positions and explain how it is a great sport educationally, as it offers each body-type a place in the team, a parable for life. My father was involved in professionalizing the sport, my brother plays internationally, I grew up on the sport, and yet my Rosh Yeshiva was teaching us about ‘the game they play in heaven’ – that was Rav Aharon.

Another time, one of the rabbis from the Kollel Gavoha (senior learning group) approached Rav Ahraon and asked him to give a shiur on an obscure topic that is seldom learnt in the yeshiva world. He asked if he could deliver it in a few weeks, giving Rav Aharon the time to research (although most advanced scholars would require months to research such a topic). As always, Rav Aharon agreed. He attempted to grasp his pen, however, he had recently fallen and wasn’t able to, so I leaped from my seat to give him a hand. He told me to go back to my learning, however, I insisted, as I took a pen and paper from my adjacent desk to scribe for him.

Rav Aharon closed his eyes and began to pick the well-used, yet mint condition books off the shelf of his encyclopedic mind, reciting the sources on this intricate
topic without a moment’s preparation: ‘source one, tractate X, this word’ – a pause, as if he was reading the passage – ‘to that word. Source 2, classical commentator y, this word to that word.’ And so he proceeded to cite close to twenty different sources, throughout the Bible, Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud, a host of Midrashim and classical commentaries. Every so often I had to disturb his trance, to make sure I got all that he was saying in time, or disturb my own trance, overwhelmed by the awe I was experiencing.

The only thing that exceeded his exceptional intellect and erudition, were his sense of humanity and humility, his sense of social responsibility and tenacity. I remember watching him carry piles of books as he ran from place to place, never wasting a second on the one hand, and yet he made as if he had all the time in the world as he patiently stood behind students in line in the dining hall or in my first year at the Yeshiva, he always stopped to let other cars in. When he spoke to you, he made you feel like there was no one else around and yet, at Kol Nidrei, when he would shout through tears, venislach... ‘And all the congregation of Israel are forgiven...’ it was as if he was carrying the burden of our people on his shoulders. In everything he did, he straddled the space between collective and individual, secular and sacred, human and divine, real and ideal. Whereas most avoid the complicated, he found comfort in complexity and inspired us to do the same.

‘Hillel says: be among the students of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them close to Torah.’ Like his namesake, Rav Aharon’s love of peace, led to his pursuit of peace – his love of people is what brought them closer to Torah. Like the famous candles that Aharon kindled, Rav Aharon’s legacy of moderation and menschlichkeit and his undying commitment to am yisrael, eretz yisrael and torat yisrael, will continue to illuminate the world around us.

-Rabbi Benji Levy