In Israel, it’s the parasha of acharei mot kedoshim this week, and no doubt many will connect the name of that parasha, literally meaning “After the death of the holy ones” to the passing this week of one of the great Talmudists, scholars, and pietists of our times, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, zecher Tzadik Livracha.

Who was this man who had a 3.5 hours of eulogy? Who was this man who brought 10,000 people to his funeral? Who was this man whom I shed many tears for this past week?

Born in France in 1933, he fled the Vichy government in 1941 and his parents settled right here in Clarksdale, Miss where his father was a shochet. Later he settled in NY where he became both a student of the rightist rosh yeshiva, rabbi Yitchak Hutner z’l of the Chaim Berlin Yeshiva and the late Rav Soloveitchik, z’l of Yeshiva University, whose daughter, Dr. Tova Lichtenstein, he married.

At a young age he received a PhD from Harvard in English literature writing some masterpiece of a dissertation on Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist. He taught English Lit and headed a Kollel at YU until he became partners in the Yeshiva of Har Etzion where I attended years ago. He developed a methodology of rigorous analysis of Talmud which was so clear that he has literally hundreds of students who actually mimic his method every time they teach Talmud. He applied this analysis across every page of the Talmud using the vast array of medieval resources now available. He could analyze a passage in the Talmud from 5 or 6 different perspectives, and then analyze two or three different ways of looking at each position. His lectures went on for hours, out of a sense of deep passion and commitment for high level Talmud torah and study.

His embrace of English literature was part of his philosophy that what is created by man can be sacred, his belief that literature was a testing ground to explore the in’s and out’s of human experience which are worthy of exploration, because to understand the complexity of human experience is to understand the tzelem elokim, the image of G-d with which everyone is endowed. So he would sprinkle every lecture with a bit of Mathew Arnold, Paradise Lost, or even switch into French to quote Albert Camus.
He believed in complex thought, that there are often competing ethics that one has to weigh in evaluating any question. He believed in the importance of the ability to express oneself, to flesh out and use our human gift of speech which is the essence of our unique human endowment.

His lectures reflected hard work, hours of preparation, and an amazing mind.

He was always ready to teach. Once during my college years, he was staying at the YU dormitory in his father in law’s apt. and there was a fire alarm which caused us all to leave the building at 1 am. Some of us, about 100 students gathered to learn torah in the beit midrash. So I somehow, audaciously, and youthfully asked the rabbi if he would grace us with a lecture. After thinking about it for about 3 seconds, he asked for a moment to gather his thoughts and delivered one of his usual masterpieces. Although the all clear sign went off, he continued to lecture until 2 am when he finished his thoughts.

The Meiri describes what he calls an Ish ha’eshkolot, a person possessing clusters of all good things, as one who exemplifies shlemut hamidot and shlemut hachochmot, both wholeness and integrity of character and of completeness in all the various wisdoms. Many this week said that this is exactly what the rabbi was, a repository of wisdom in the broadest sense and a repository of the finest character a person could have. And despite the rabbi’s overwhelming scholarship, it is oddly, or not so oddly, the realm of midot that everyone is coming out with and discussing this week.

Two stories tell us about what animated him perhaps the most. One night he was at a wedding of a relative of mine and he asked to talk to a certain woman. He explained to her that although she surely doesn’t remember him, he remembers that 50 years ago when he came from France dressed in short pants and being ostracized and completely out of place in America, she was the only child who played with him.

Or the time he got most angry and animated the entire year I was in Yeshiva was in the aftermath of some older students in Yeshiva pulling rank and asking not to have to share rooms with the Australian students. He became enraged on the pulpit and recalled the bitter taste still in his mouth from the time some children in summer camp took away the ping pong table from him only because they were
born a few years before him. He was ohev et hamesharim, he loved and pursued justice and saw its violations in the smallest interactions of life.

He was so unassuming, so kind. Once the entire entourage of soldier students fell asleep listening to his lecture and allegedly, he continued his lecture so the sleeping soldiers could get some much needed rest. This was him. Selfless.

The parasha this week is all about some form of ancient or Jewish leprosy. But it’s not only the topic this week but it is the centerpiece of vayikra, Leviticus. Until this week we spoke of rituals and sacrifices, animals to eat and not eat, the pure and the impure. Next week and beyond we will speak of laws of holiness of Yom Kippur, of morality, of kedoshim, of the cohanim, of the holidays and special years. But smack in the middle of the ritual and moral parts of the book is a discussion of leprosy of sorts.

So we need to understand what is it all about and why is it so central? We usually say that this form of leprosy came only to those who speak lashon hara, but the sages mention another cause which could be the root cause of lashon hara, and that is gaava, haughtiness. He who thinks he is superior may well slander others as a way of dismissing another human being. The central thought of this book of ritual and holiness is appreciating the value of every person.

Rav Lichtenstein appreciated the equal value of every person and he showed it. This week all his followers are discussing the story of the screw, that once a student lost a screw for his glasses and as he crawled on the floor he found Rav Lichtenstein next to him trying to help. He said a Judaism in which one Jew doesn’t help another is one of which he wants no part, no matter how frum the person is.

He once told a flight attendant in his humble way that “It may be necessary for me to get out of my seat so as to wash my hands for the eating of this bread.” The flight attendant said to this rabbi who had no beard, “I don’t know sir; you will have to ask a rabbi.”

Asked why he has faith? He said it’s due to the people he knew. Hearing about Rav Chaim soloveitchik and his sleepless nights worrying that perhaps someone had left a baby for rescue at his door, constantly getting up to check the door, this reassured him of his faith. How does being inspired by others answer questions of
faith? The answer is that if others can maintain integrity, modesty, humility and faith, all together, so can I. The humility of some of his mentors taught him to know that he doesn’t have to have the answer to everything and this allowed him to live with questions about his faith, in intellectual humility.

Rav Lichtenstein showed that a person can be morally virtuous, humble, maintain tremendous integrity. It can be done. In an era of rabbinic expose’s and religious phonies everywhere, here was a man who showed that morality and integrity were enhanced and animated by his commitment to torah.

Rav Lichtenstein was the rabbi’s rabbi. He was a role model for all that is virtuous. He represented the ultimate in learning, the maximum in middot tovot and he modeled greatness and modesty at the same time.

Rav Amital, his harmonious partner in heading the Yeshiva for about 40 years, used to say that if a person had met Rabbi Eliezer Hagadol it changed who he is. Having met Rav Lichtenstein, z’l, it changes the possibilities in this world. It’s mechayev, it obliges. As Hillel obliged other poor people to study, as Rebbe obliged other wealthy people to study, Rav Aharon z’l obliges us to find torah, to develop our use of language, our analysis of the torah, to appreciate every human being, to strive for greatness while remaining humble. Rav Lichtenstein represented all of our dreams of what torah could mean for our lives. May his memory inspire us to live in his shadow, to dream of his greatness and to continue to be inspired by his living lessons. One of the Rabbi’s great lessons was that to simply aspire to faith is to be a mevakesh Hashem, a seeker, to simply long for Israel is part of being a lover of Israel and to aspire to be a ben Torah is our first step on the path to that goal. TNZB’H.