I Intro:

Birshut ḳinḥat yechasṭiyyim...and yeshivat har etzion, our hosts...

I appreciate the opportunity to share some thoughts and feelings about morenu Harav Lichtenstein z”l. Although we are in the aftermath of the sheloshim, the sense that our community has been significantly diminished by his petirah remains palpable. This feeling transcends personal sentiment and nostalgia, although the pain of personal irrevocable loss for his family first, and, then his extended banim-talmidim, certainly remains raw, profound and intense, as well.

What accounts for this feeling- elusive and almost inchoate as it is? The loss of one of the rare hakhmei hamesorah of any generation necessarily engenders this instinctive, yet visceral reaction. In the normal course of life and human emotion bekhi precedes hesped, but for the truly impactful and irreplaceable manhigim, (like Sarah imeinu-bereishit 23:2), reviewing and articulating their legacy- hesped, also adds a new layer of bekhi, as it reopens the wound, further accentuates the magnitude of the loss, and, worse, perpetuates and even engenders anew uncertainty, even existential crisis- how will we proceed in the vaccum. But, additionally, it highlights the mysterious sense of present instability and the sense of being diminished that is independent of future concerns and that we should try to identify.

The departure and absence of any great talmid hakham stimulates the cycle of bekhi-hesped-bekhi. Yet, by definition, each member of this rare club or cadre, and Morenu Harav Lichtenstein z”l particularly exemplifies this, is singular in his accomplishments, persona and legacy. It behooves us-as individuals and as a community- to reflect upon and try to better articulate these characteristics and qualities and motifs, which themselves become part of the mesorah of torat and kelal yisrael, so that we can facilitate and secure the continued impact- neutralizing the sense of diminution- through the vibrancy of the demut deyukno of our rebbi, le-dorei dorot.

Tonight’s remarks do not constitute an effort to assess or even put into perspective Rav Lichtenstein’s massive contribution in Talmud torah, hashkafah, or leadership, each a formidable task, requiring time and thoughtful analysis, best reserved for an appropriate time. His incredible range-breadth and mastery and nuanced positions militate against a cursory account. Instead, I speak unabashedly as an immensely appreciative talmid, whose course and aspirations were transformatively impacted by the substance of his learning and teaching,, and, perhaps even more, by the enduring experience of rebbe-talmid, and the ethos of his persona-ishiyut-gavra.

I came to YHE at a very young and impressionable age. I was immediately enthralled by Rav Lichtenstein’s torah- its sweep, depth, and the kavod and hibat ha-torah and yirat shamayim implied by its content and style-mode of presentation. I was even more captivated-
enchanted even- by his ishiyut-persona-his humanity, empathy, passion and integrity. These were not themes I could then articulate, but I recall vividly experiencing and processing them intuitively. It was self-evident from the outset that we were in the presence of a singular gadol be-yisrael. Rav Lichtenstein was hardly a flashy or “charismatic” personality (in modern parlance, at least). Indeed, he was someone who be-shitah-be-ikaron was wary of guru-esque influence. But, and partially because of that substantive posture, he was the most enduringly impactful and compelling role model.

It was self-evident to his talmidim that his staggering intellectual virtuosity- and his mastery of the vast corpus of torah and torah ve-hakhmah-western civilization, replete with complexity, subtlety, and nuances, was mobilized to facilitate an experiential and spiritual journey of “lifnei Hashem”. It was equally clear that this objective-telos was rooted in and driven by the simple fundamental (though never simplistic) and compelling values of yirat shamayim, ahvat Hashem, and ahavat yisrael. Rav Lichtenstein’s synthesis of classical learning and innovative terminology-vocabulary and his expansion of Torah’s inner agenda-both narrowly and its application to values and broader life-was exhilarating. His persona-gavra of empathy, humanity, and humility, and his consistency and constancy, his balanced and seamlessly integrated approach to a broad torah life- was compelling. It was immediately obvious to his talmidim that his achievement as a sophisticated thinker-hakham, and oved Hashem, a rebbe par excellence, remained rooted in his continued identity as an idealistic talmid of his rabbeim, an exuberant yoshev beit hamidrash-even a perennial yeshiva bahur, who continued to be totally captivated by devar Hashem. His face would shine and his eyes would light up when he recounted his experiences or impressions as a devoted talmid to his rebbeim- the Rav, Rav Hutner, and Rav Aaron Soloveitchik.

The fact that a 16 year old’s impressions cohere with and are deeply reinforced by a decades-long relationship, speaks to Rav Lichtenstein’s consistency, integrity, and special stature as a rebbe. I feel strongly, as do all his talmidim, that this relationship was pivotal, defining in my life. For his talmidim, Rav Lichtenstein was the paradigm for understanding and integrating many challenging facets of torah life. He certainly embodied for us the notion of vesheenantem le-vanekha – that talmidim are to be nurtured as spiritual children- a role he executed with diligence, generosity, and kindness. I am grateful for the opportunity to express personal hakkarat hatov for all of the guidance, direction, and impact I was privileged to enjoy throughout the years.

I would like to briefly explore the reverse side of this concept of vesheenantem le-vanekha-the notion that a rebbe is also perceived as a father- with Rav Lichtenstein zt”l’s contribution and persona as a model to better comprehend and assimilate this concept, as well as to further accentuate his enduring impact.

Il Notion of parental relationship, and link to schekhinah-
The Rambam- t.t. 5:1 based on BM- formulates the role of a rebbe muvhak as a parallel to the parental model-quote. It is significant that he does this in a substantive halakhic context that even assesses the normative consequences of a competition between the two “fathers”. While we are all familiar with this paradigm in the other direction- a rebbe’s obligations and posture toward his talmidim rooted in וָשִֹנַתְם לְבָנִיךָ (that is less difficult to fathom...and actually cited by Rambam in ch. 1 re. obligation to teach all of kelal yisrael), the notion that a non-biological rebbe, even an impactful one, is a “father” requires clarification, at least reflection!! After all, many of the salient characteristics of the parental contribution that triggers kibud av are blatantly absent: the biological dna (and implications for impact of nature) the creation-shutaf link. Even the nurture factor in the parental dynamic seems largely inapplicable and therefore uncompetitive to the role of a biological father. How can one compare the impact of literal child rearing- the investment of quantitative time, the influence exerted in all of the formative phases of childhood growth, the consistent and constant sharing of experiences and molding of values and persona that typifies that relationship with that of a rebbe? The rebbe model in comparison seems much attenuated. Yet, the halakhah is not given to hyperbole.

Moreover, Rambam seems to compound the problem by significantly expanding this already difficult halakhah, integrating it with other unrelated gemarot that equate rebbe muvhak with Shechinah itself!!-text

Moreover, the link between the two sections in the Rambam’s ambitious formulation is introduced with “לפי הזה”-a tacit admission of novelty, but with a claim of justified logic!

The Rambam in Sefer ha-Mizvot, aseh 209- extends these themes by noting that independent mizvot establishing kavod and yirat rabbo in the minyan taryag are redundant because of the compelling character of these equations and consideration! Which model is it-parenthood or Divinity? Moreover, how can the philosophically purist rambam (see hil. Teshuvah etc.) theologically justify the link between human rebbe muvhaks and the Divine presence of the shekhinah? [See also Bach, YD, hilkhot t.t.- that it is the same kiyum as kevod shamayim literally!]

It is also extremely telling that this link to the shekhinah is limited to rabo muvhak and therefore evidently radiates from the relationship between rebbe and talmid, rather than the status or stature per se of the talmid hakham!

I believe, however, that the explanation is very basic and for me, it stems from my own experience as a talmid of morenu Haav Lichtenstein zt”l.

III Dimensions of the parental and shekhinah relationship

A special rebbe muvhak is, indeed, one whose contribution and impact justifies the parental mold and paradigm, albeit paving a course for בַּעֲשׂוֹת. This is true on the most basic level, as he transmits the mesorah-substantive and methodological- of devar Hashem, the
found many ways to inspire a love for Torah life. In this sense, he, too, is a shutaf-creator who shapes personalities and destinies. Moreover, his approach is not limited to conveying information; his mode and approach to teaching and mentoring is designed to impact his talmidim’s fundamental values, commitment, and the charting of their own course in Torah life. He must not only teach the content of devar Hashem, he must also communicate, especially by unself-conscious example and personal posture, the axiological import and defining role of devar Hashem in life, often most effectively through osmosis. In this capacity, he also serves as a halakhic authority and hashkafic guide in navigating Torah life, especially in complex, and new situations.

Moreinu Harav Lichtenstein zt”l magnificently embodied these functions.

Zakhnus, that our rebbes Torah was unusually comprehensive and broad. Rav Lichtenstein taught all sedarim and all topics. He taught the big kelalim and arcane or pragmatic peratim. And he taught them all rigorously and suffused with yirah and exuberance. His range was astonishing. It was not until I left YHE that I realized this was not the norm. And he taught all topics as topics from a shas perspective. I refer not only to the parallel sugyot, but to the one’s his personal mastery and unique perspective linked them too, as well. The image of our rebbe dragging his shas to each shiur, and effortlessly integrating its presence into the themes is indelibly etched into all of our memories. We used to joke that it gave new meaning to ashrei ish sha-ba lekaan vetalmudo beyado. Again, it was not until some years later, that it dawned on me that this was not typical for magidei shiur. Not the mastery, and certainly not the capacity and will to integrate and provide unique perspective. Topics were analyzed comprehensively, and rigorously, as well. The range of rishonim, parallel sugyot, and even specialty or exotic rishonim- itur, raavyah, manhig, geonim- was part of this comprehensive aspiration to master kol ha-torah in devar Hashem and the values and spiritual connection to the Ribbono shel Olam that they provided.

This greater hekef was not primarily quantitative. The capacity to project a larger landscape for the topic, and to structure the issues, and their interrelationships, as well as to juxtapose positions to illuminate one another, turned quantitative mastery-hekef into qualitative depth. By changing the background and landscape you sometimes alter the substance! His recently reprinted articles on hefker and lishmah and others exemplify this hekef, and its comprehensive-innovative contribution, as did typical shiurim. I began my own tenure as a talmid experiencing a masterful assessment of the massive and complex theme of ein adam makneh davar shelo ba leolam, but that unforgettable initial exposure could easily have been interchanged with almost any other beginning point. This comprehensive approach and mode of presentation, grounded in mastery and toil, produced hidush-innovation and insight.

His comprehensiveness and rigor in torah and halakhah- classically and narrowly defined- was applied equally to his hashkafic sihot, and to his integration of torah and western
civilization, as well. Ve-od hazaon la-moed. Moreover, Rav Lichtenstein eschewed compartmentalization. His approach was seamlessly holistic in his torah, and in his torah vehokhmah. [I believe that the combination of these particular central characteristics has important implications for evaluating Rav Lichtenstein’s contribution to brisker lomdut generally, and particularly for assessing his halakhic and intellectual portrait vis a vis that of his rebbe muvhak, the Rav zt”l. ve-ein kaan makom le-haarikh.] One could fathom from Rav lichtenstein’s lomdut and hashkafah and persona why the torah was necessarily both hatumah as well as megillah nitnah (gittin 60a). Our rebbe’s persona and approach illuminated why the Rambam (based on the Yerushalmi) insisted that to render decisions in any speciality of halakhah, one had to be comprehensibly knowledgeable, rau lehorot bekol hatorah kulah (Sanhedrin 4:8), a walking sefer torah who is defined by but also transcends the sum of its parts (image of makkot 22b).

Rav Lichtenstein’s methodological focus was also innovative. His approach was apriori-mapping out the topic and the likely interrelationships in anticipation of the actual material and diverse views. This had both a methodological purpose, and probably also reflected his intellectual orientation and style, but also his torah comprehensiveness- to be attuned to all potential insights. His relentless analytical mode of examining possibilities, and stripping them down to isolated assumptions in an effort to more accurately pin down their essential character.-, his openness to multiple tracks within in a single topic or theme reflected comprehensiveness, exuberance and entailed, I believe, a hashkafic motif about the range of eilu veeilu and the breadth of halakhic themes that requires further elaboration.

His striking methodological focus, including the a priori component, certainly came, obviously intentionally, at the expense of a more dramatically appealing style of presentation. Typically, this might consist of a question-heavy or problem-identifying introduction, closely followed by an exploration and rejection of tantalizing solutions, climaxing with a punch-line that solves initial queries and resolves a host of issues in one fell swoop. Certainly, Rav Lichtenstein’s ambitious objective to present the full range of halakhic discourse on a topic, rather than merely to resolve particular difficulties or challenging positions, precluded this classical formula. But I presume that a fundamental educational orientation was particularly reflected in these issues of style and presentation. The heavy methodological concentration stemmed from our rebbe’s torat hesed, as it facilitated and invested in the future growth of talmidim by providing them mechanisms to progress independently. Moreover, it contributed to cultivating an additional dimension of independence, that of personal initiative and hidush. Rav Lichtenstein believed passionately in “haamidu talmidm harbeh” (avot 1:1) and in the theme of “she-te-hei hashelhevet olah mei-elehah (rashi, bamidbar 8:2), in the sense of providing the tools for students to find their own voice and niche. In any case, the structural and methodological component was a true hallmark of his shiurim and lectures. It manifested itself in a certain style of
presentation and analysis, but it particularly also cultivated a derekh hahashivah, a halakhic and hashkafic mode of thinking that had broader aspirational implications.

The hibat ha-Torah was singular as well. The meticulous preparation and organization of each presentation - the amal and yegiah that were inscribed on his very visage, the mental energy expended in the rigorous analysis [and of all possibilities] - left no doubt that, that nothing was more important or inspiring, a powerful lesson that never needed additional articulation. The expanded canon of the topic, including the singular use of exotic rishonim in the pre-data base era, cited earlier, was ringing testimonial to, especially as understood by R. Yonah and R. Hayim Volohiner (Ruah HaChaim) [avot 1:4] as an unquenchable thirst that merely whets the appetite for more. It is surely no coincidence that moreinu Harav Lichtenstein zt”l often invoked and was strongly drawn to the Rambam’s (SHM, aseh 3) compelling depiction of Avraham Avinu as the paradigm of an ohev Hashem, one whose infectious enthusiasm and exuberance to share torah with others derived from an overflow of his own intoxication with the Ribbono shel Olam and his torah.

His singular capacity and willingness to engage broader themes and challenges - classical issues, and, of course, the interface between modernity and Torah - in an effort to expand the arena and impact of avodat Hashem, driven by the faith in Torah’s relevance and the conviction that one could with hatmatdah and depth adduce these perspectives, distinguished him in our generation even among other hakhmei mesorah. His integrative and holistic approach to these topics were a model of sophistication that was animated by the basic values of yirah and emunah. His moral clarity and ethical sensitivity manifested unequivocally in these complex subjects and set a standard for the torah world.

But as we experienced with our rebbe, the parental model of rebbe muvhak also presupposes transformative impact on religious sensibilities and the cultivation of a clear spiritual orientation that cannot be limited to specific content-tokhen, methodology, hibat hatorah, or even broader hashkafah only. One must also transmit and convey the transcendence of devar Hashem - both as content, and as a framework for spiritual odyssey. It is crucial that learning torah also engender a religious experience - the Ramban’s notions of devar hashem as sheimot shel Hakadosh Barukh Hu - in its varied meanings (intro to perush al hatorah, and omitted aseh of birkat hatorah in SHM). It is in this respect, that the rebbetalmid bond particularly forges a new identity and reality. The gemara kidushin’s (30b) rousing depiction of the emotional roller coster associated with the מלחמה של תורה that is so central to that relationship - the stakes and emotional vacillations - capture this motif. Vayelkhu sheneihem yahdav of the akeidah refers also to the journey of rebbe and talmid, the voyage through the peaks and valleys of devar Hashem. The moments of specific and broader breakthroughs in limud ha-Torah and avodat Hashem, insights, illuminations, and consequential interactions with the rebbe, can and should be as formative and memorable as parental-child milestones. Shared vision and the conviction of common destiny redefine relationships in parental terms and forge personalities. I venture
to speculate that every one of Rav Lichtenstein’s talmidim has their own vivid memories, experiences, and milestones that fit this parental model and pattern.

Furthermore, like a biological parent, the trust and faith one has in a spiritual mentor-rebbe muvhak, is a cornerstone of stability and a foundation for basic values and beliefs. Moreinu Harav Lichtenstein z”l noted often that faith and other Torah values under pressure can be bolstered significantly by the trust we cultivate in those who have abundant faith and greater insight. The role of the ilan gadol in this issue cannot be overstated. In our community, in our generation, we looked to Rav Lichtenstein z”l to bolster our confidence, to help fortify our own bedrock of faith and values. Our Rebbe, perhaps without his awareness, because of his colossal integrity and intense yirato hakodemet kehakhmato, notwithstanding and because of both his broadness and openness, has been an inspirational and influential force in this calculus. For this reason, among many others, his petirah leaves not only a hole, but a sense of uncertainty, even instability.

There is a further, final dimension, as well. The interaction of rebbe and talmid provides a framework and relationship that facilitates a critical spiritual objective-telos, the feeling and link to transcendence. Talmidim of Rav Lichtenstein felt that they were in the presence of a gadol be-yisrael, without qualifications. Despite and especially because of his zeniut, modesty, and unself-consciousnesss, there radiated a certain special quality of greatness, inchoate, ineffable, numinous. But it was something more. You felt-intuited as a deep conviction- that you were in the presence of someone who, himself was, with all of his humanity, empathy, and lack of pretension, and even disdain for special treatment, ubiquitously “lifnei Hashem” as a constant and consistent oved Hashem. By extension, being lifnei a “lifnei Hashem” conveys and concretizes spiritual greatness and even transcendence, and its accessibility.

This is the principle of rebbe muvhak keshekhinah! [Indeed, it is the foundation of the mitzvah of “u-bo tidbak”, especially as expanded by the Rambam SHM (aseh 6) beyond his formulation in hilkhot deot 6:2]

There is nothing mystical about this touch of transcendence. Certainly yahadut emphatically rejects vicarious spirituality. But the role of special hakhmei mesorah, and particularly the institution of rebbe muvhak plays a vital role in yahadut. It is a cornerstone in avodat Hashem! It does not substitute for the individual attainment-aspiration of “lifnei Hashem”, but concretizes it and inspires it and also allows for different manifestations of this elusive but crucial motif of kedushah.

This notion [and even the actual identification with “et Hashem Elokekha tira”- lerabot talmidei hakhamim” {see, especially the commentary of the Bakh on Tur YD etc.}] - poses no challenge to theological purity, but is a recognition of the process that concretizes a kesher with the Divine, and allows for constructive transference in the subtle, elusive quest for transcendence and spirituality.
Let us return briefly to the difficulties in the Rambam’s formulation, cited previously, including the transitional word “lefikah”. If it is possible to engender a parental-type relationship through Talmud torah and avodat Hashem despite the formidable differences between spiritual and biological relationships, it is only due to the existential bond generated by devar Hashem, the experience of Talmud torah mediated by the profound multidimensional way that rebbe muvhak impacts his talmidim. This linchpin perspective is predicated on and the basis for the link to the shekhinah. Thus, the Rambam’s precise portrayal that the rebbe’s status as a ‘father’ presupposes and further reinforces his special stature as a link and paradigm to the shekhinah.

Indeed, in light of our analysis, “me-vio leolam haba” here may have broader spiritual and transcendent meaning as well, as the Rambam (SHM and see Ruah Hahayim on Avot) seems to indicate! The reference is not merely to ultimate reward in the after-life, but to an appreciation of transcendence itself! Indeed, our rebbe gave us some glimpse of greatness and transcendence- olam haba- in this world, especially as his personal style and halakhic orientation was one which sought to elevate this-worldly life. We were able to witness and participate, if only peripherally, in his journey of “lifnei Hashem”. In the process, this enable us, his talmidim, to begin to chart our own path.

The feeling of being diminished reflects precisely that beyond the ache of physical and even irrevocable loss, there is a palpable sense of being less connected with greatness and especially transcendence, modeled by and sometimes accessed through the rebbe muvhak. There is, however, a dimension of nehamah, as well. While the loss of a great man and mentor is more painful, his unforgettable persona, values and hashkafat olam are enduring.

Ashrein she-zakhinu le-rebbi she-hevianu le-olam ha-ba- be-olam ha-zeh, and whose continued impact, through his torah and hashkafah and demut deyokno, will continue to flourish.