My Rebbe Harav Aharon Lichtenstein

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I have reflected over the past few days about the passing of my mentor and role Model Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein ZTDL. As a young 18 year old I arrived at the famous Yeshivat Har Etzion, woefully out of my depth, and entered into a world that would transform my thinking, philosophy and mould me into the person that I am today.

As an English speaker I was drawn to Rav Ahron who always had the time to answer my questions. Many a time I would fret and spend the entire morning building up the courage to ask him a question. Not because I was afraid of him, it was rather a sense of awe, but because of a feeling I was wasting his precious time with a question that I could have asked anyone in the Beit Midrash. On the other hand a chance to ask a question and build a connection with him would ultimately trump my nerves.

Asking a question was never a simple procedure, for Rav Lichtenstein would spend time analyzing the question. So many times one asks a question and receives an answer, but is left frustrated for the answer did not answer the question. I learnt from him the importance of seeking to understand exactly what was being asked. And only when he and I understood what was being asked did he offer an answer. Many a time he would present the different sides to the issue and one had to push him to give a definitive answer.

I remember asking him questions relating to my position and he would not answer. Rather he would advise me to refer back to the local rabbis. When I asked why he wouldn’t give me an answer his response, although at the time frustrating, was incredibly wise. He could not answer because he did not have all the facts, only what I had presented to him, and maybe I was missing a key part to the description that would impact the answer. Only now, many years later do I appreciate the wisdom of this approach.

For Rav Lichtenstein nothing was black or white. Life is complex and one needs to acknowledge that complexity. Anytime he discussed a topic there were the two hands. On the one hand X but on the other hand Y. Thesis, antithesis and ultimately a synthesis.

I remember that when I would ask a question, he was totally focused on me. This was incredible and he made you feel important. I remember reporting on what was happening in Australia, I had come to see him for chizzuk— for a pep talk and to be inspired. He responded that hearing the accomplishments of his Talmidim gave him the chizzuk to do what he does. I remember floating out of the Beit medrash.

To experience a Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in the presence of Rav Lichtenstein was a privilege. His calling out of the Tekiah notes which resounded throughout the Bet Midrash and penetrated ones very being, to his complete devotion in prayer. I had never seen someone daven
an Amidah for the length of time that he did. Watching his hands as he re-enacted the seder haavodah the service of the Kohein Gadol, made me realize that the image I had had of the Kohein Gadol was flawed. My Kohein Gadol was clean shaven with big glasses!

His dancing on Simchat Torah, Purim, Yom Haatzmaut and Yom yerushalayim and the Friday evening gush shuffle. I remember when Rabbi Tabory’s father was spending Simchat Torah at the Yeshiva, he was an elderly man and would approach each Torah and kiss her with his Tallit. He then did the same to Rav Lichtenstein. If one kisses a Torah scroll shouldn’t one kiss the living scroll as well?

My enduring memory of Rav Lichtenstein was his hatmada and strength, running to the shiur with his arms filled with books, his sitting in the front of the Bet Midrash tongue in cheek as a he worked through a problem and his incredible shiurim.

Of course the most frightening words were Lewin Tomar– this meant that for the Shiur you were to read and explain the Gemara. Many a time, I remember slinking in the chair hoping that he wouldn’t see me, as I hadn’t prepared well enough.

Rav Lichtenstein inspired by example. When he spoke we listened. His humility, sensitivity, erudition and worldliness was a mark of a man who was, as described in the Talmud, an Ish haeshkolot– a bunch of grapes a person who possessed all areas of knowledge.

Yeshivat Har Etzion is a unique Torah institution. We were blessed to have two Roshei Yeshiva, Rav Amital and Rav Lichtenstein, who each respected the other and viewed the other as The Rosh Yeshiva. Although they may have disagreed on approaches to philosophy, halacha and many other issues, we were taught to appreciate the position of the other, to argue with respect. And although the issue may become heated, never became personal.

I remember during the Oslo talks how the Rashei Yeshiva would argue in favour and Harav Meidan – one of the oldest and respected students and current Rosh Yeshivah – would later that night respond to what was said. However he never spoke in the Bet Midrash out of respect for the Rashei Yeshivah and would argue the points. The Rashei Yeshivah never forced their position on us. We were to debate the topic and arrive at our own conclusion.

The relationship and mutual respect displayed by the two Rashei Yeshiva was an enduring lesson that is sorely missing in our world.

I was blessed to study and be moulded by man who encompassed it all. A man of incredible erudition of Talmud and all of Jewish texts. A PHD graduate from Harvard University in English literature. Who used the skills and texts mastered in his secular studies, to enhance his understanding of Tanach, Talmud and Jewish philosophy. A man filled with honesty, integrity, love of Israel, its land and people and her Torah.

When Rav Amital passed away we were comforted in knowing that we still had Rav Lichenstein. But now he too is gone and we feel as orphans who have lost their parents. Ashreinu we were blessed to have had such teachers.