Rabbi Carmy is a Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Bible at Yeshiva College

This is the text of a hesped delivered by Rabbi Carmy at Yeshiva University with minor edits and additions made by his student Avraham Wein. All edits and additions were reviewed by Rabbi Carmy.

To say anything satisfactory about what R. Lichtenstein stood for and achieved as an intellectual figure, a marbitz torah and as a leader is impossible in a few brief moments. I will limit myself to a personal perspective and rely on what I have written and spoken about elsewhere.

When I came to yeshiva over 45 years ago, one of the most urgent questions in my mind was whether traditional Judaism was capacious enough to accommodate all human wisdom. In R. Lichtenstein’s shiur I learned the answer to that question.

When I came to yeshiva, one of my greatest fears was that concentration on intellectual brilliance and erudition led to narrowness, self-centeredness and smugness. From R. Lichtenstein’s shiur I learned the truth: There is no more powerful motive for humility, for honesty, and excellence in middot than striving for excellence through Torah lishmah, while pursuing wisdom wherever it is found, when it is conjoined with and subservient to genuine yirat Shamayim. Day after day I saw this in shiur, I saw it in the liberal arts course and outside the classroom. I saw enacted the Mishna: מתקימת חכמה, לתקימת חכמה ח useMemo טורא שירא，则, and eventually it sank in. He hooked me.

Much has been said about R. Lichtenstein’s relentless attention to the complexity of human affairs, that nothing can be simple, and I will not disagree with that assessment. But I also learned from R. Lichtenstein that painstaking analysis need not lead to paralysis. To the contrary: If you really hold fast to the primacy of avodat haShem, yirat Shamayim, and keep the right priorities steadily in mind, many crucial life decisions become easier rather than harder.

I once confessed to R. Lichtenstein various doubts about my potential as a mehannekh. Almost two hours later, after a thorough and very frank exploration of my strengths and potential limitations. Most importantly he feared that I was by nature a shy person, and believe me when I tell you that I took that seriously and worked on myself. Now after these two hours, he had induced me to overcome these limitations. But then, after he had brought me around, R. Lichtenstein saw fit to warn me to bear in mind other impediments beyond our control. I said: “Rebbi, how can I handle this?” and he answered, simply and decisively: “Shalom, either you have ברוח או you don’t!” Sometimes it takes two very intense hours to arrive at a very simple conclusion, and the ability not only to make things complicated but to cut to the bone and clarify what has to be simple, can help a student make a decision that gives total direction to their lives.
Earlier in my time at yeshiva, I made my commitment to Orthodoxy, to *yirat Shamayim*, to religious truth. (That was not a foregone conclusion.) In my mind I was opting for a sacrificial path: I had chosen duty over inclination, truth over happiness. R. Lichtenstein valued truth; he knew that spiritual growth is impossible without *yissurim*. Nonetheless he thought I was drawing the contrast betweenفة עבדה and having a happy life more starkly than needed. He thought that inclination and duty should coincide, and the predominant mood of *avodat haShem* ought to be an inexhaustible sense of joy and accomplishment. He did his best to convince me of this.

Eventually Rebbi prevailed, not by power of argument, but through the example of his life. You watch a man grow—a man who already bestrides your world like a colossus, and decade after decade, you see him march, from greatness to greatness. It’s the same man, with the same ideals: only you see him advancing, persistently and palpably, step by step, bringing his personality into line with his ideals. How can you see such a human being and not be attracted, and not want share his way?

About 20 years ago, I witnessed a private conversation between R. Lichtenstein and his rebbi, R. Ahron Soloveichik. I cannot describe the beauty, the joy that emanated from these two gedolim, one in the full magnificence of his powers, the other fighting inch by inch against the diminution of his. I thought of Tennyson’s line: “One equal temper of heroic hearts/Made weak by time and fate but strong in will.” After a minute or two I looked away -- It seemed improper for me to intrude further upon the intimacy of their glory. But the sheer radiance of those moments will accompany me forever.

R. Lichtenstein’s was something that, if you didn’t see it, you would literally not believe it. And he liked to refer to his father in other contexts as well. When I began teaching, R. Lichtenstein offered me his father’s formula for teaching: “Set high standards and be tolerant of what you get.” This represents his approach fairly well. He challenged us to aspire to religious, ethical, intellectual excellence, and he persisted, often subtly and with enormous gentleness, occasionally more bluntly but always with love, even when he found room for improvement.

Yesterday morning when I got the first phone call my first reaction was: “Now there is nobody left who understands what I want in life and also knows what I ought to want.” There are friends who know you, but rarely are there people who can also see the trajectory between who you are and what you can and should be.
But Hazal say that עדין קדוש במותו אינך צדיקם. A day later I realized that R. Lichtenstein’s promptings will not be stilled, and I pray that he will always lead me forward and direct me to do my best with the abilities I have.

מורי ורבותי, let me say a word to the members of our learning family: We are orphaned but not abandoned. Rabbi’s goal was not to have us circle him in orbit. It was not about him, it was about serving the Ribono shel Olam. We have no choice. The only way that we can live, and the only way that we can continue to be תלמידים, is to follow that path.

For our teachers too, there comes a time when they must turn to you and say: “We have done what we could for you, we have done everything we could for you, and now it is for you to carry on.” If you heard Rav Aharon’s summons to the passion of Torah, to wisdom, to the service of our fellow bnei Torah and klal Yisrael and our concern for humanity, if you heard this call, it will continue to reverberate.

May our fellowship of talmidim, with the inspiration of our now absent teacher, “with deliberate steps and slow” make our way through the world and together meet the challenges and opportunities of the future:

“One equal temper of heroic hearts/To strive to seek to find and not to yield.”