A personal reflection on the loss of Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, ztl

It is nearly impossible to assay the impact of mori vrabbi Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, ztl, on my development as a person and as a Jew. In any number of the various "press conference" question-and-answer sessions that I was privileged to attend, Rav Aharon, ztl, would summarily reject any question that invoked the phrase "to what extent," or any variant thereof, since this could not be answered in any precise manner. Now, still in the grip of personal sadness over his passing, the inaccurate formulation of the question comes tumbling out: to what extent did Rav Aharon inform, educate, and shape my worldview? The very attempt to articulate a response feels woefully inadequate, doomed from the outset to fall far short of the mark. How can words convey the deep impression he etched on my soul?

Calling a friend in Israel before Shabat who was very close to Rav Lichtenstein, both to express condolences and to commiserate in our common grief over the loss of our teacher and master, he noted the uncanny symmetry between the parshat hashavua, Acharei Mot - Kedoshim, and Rav Aharon's passing: First, the very fact of a double parsha, a juxtaposition of the bein adam lamakom and bein adam lachaveiro themes that dominate each of the respective parshiyot. These conjure in the mind's eye not only a ready image of Rav Lichtenstein subjecting every facet of each of these components to his characteristically sharp analysis, but also to our knowledge that beyond mastery of the subject matter lay his mastery of kiyum hamitzvot within both of these realms; Second, the leining of avodat yom hakippurim itself, with all of its attendant complexity, centered on what Rav Ezra Bick, a ra"m at Har Etzion, identified in his eulogy as the raison d'etre of our rebbi: avodat Hashem. Rav Aharon was a person of total devotion, total focus, total attention to detail in this singular quest; Finally, the emotional resonance of the words "bzot yavo aharon el hakodesh," followed shortly thereafter by the charge of "kedoshim tihiyu," give rise to the realization that he exemplified these verses-in his utter humility, he might claim them as no more than an aspirant, but to me he was a lodestar of kedusha. As I heard Rav Lichtenstein formulate it: the peaks and the plateaus, the poetry and the prose, the mystique and the minutiae, are all part of a life that must be sanctified. What Rav Aharon stressed in a homiletic context about halakhic living generally could equally be said of him personally, tmidim ksidram umusafin khilchatam.

During my shana alef at Yeshivat Har Etzion, it seemed as if I mostly encountered Rav Lichtenstein as a blur: he would enter the Beit Midrash practically in a half-run, speed-walking to get to his mako' at the right of the Aron Hakodesh. A helpful older student pointed out that apparently Rav Aharon did so in order to minimize the possibility that students in the midst of their learning would notice him, and thus interrupt their learning in order to stand in the presence of their rabbi. To me, this already encapsulated the combination of fiery energy and total humility that characterized Rav Lichtenstein, ztl.

For some reason I can no longer recall was it a result of a lottery between students, or of someone in the administration who pitied me, or perhaps of Providence-my seat was in the very first row of the right-side of the Beit Midrash, physically closest to Rav Aharon. Over the course of that year, it was a privilege to watch him daven and learn. The passion and utter dedication to Talmud Torah was somewhere between inspiring and overwhelming. In this cynical era, it is hard to verbalize how Rav Aharon could both enthrall and terrify at the same time. Yet each spellbinding talk, with its broad sweep and piercing depth, left me more in awe than before, and equally left me all the
more drawn to his Torah. This same blend of fiery energy and humility was evident in how he
davened, as he stood ramrod straight during the Amida, like a soldier at attention. On occasion
there was an almost imperceptible sway, and then a return to his previous posture. Witnessing his
energetic devotion on both counts made a deep impression.

There was another devotion that Rav Lichtenstein, ztl, modeled for his students, and this one less
obvious within the Beit Midrash on a daily basis, but no less legendary. In more than one of those
"press conference" sessions, he related that when someone once asked him how he finds the time
to regularly learn Torah with each of his children at every step of their education given his public
role and myriad responsibilities, he responded: "If I do not have time for this, what should I have
time for?" This unstinting commitment to his family was evident in the words spoken by every
single one of his children at his levaya. Rav Baruch Gigi, one of the current Roshei Yeshiva of
Har Etzion, related his amazement at a meeting of educators a few years ago when Rav Aharon
responded to the question of what he considers his greatest accomplishment in life, and he said
simply: "my family." Rav Lichtenstein was not only an adam gadol in the public square, but within
his own family as well, as husband, father, and grandfather.

In the fall of 2010, Rav Aharon, ztl visited our shul, Congregation Or Torah of Skokie, where it
remains a great privilege to serve as the rabbi. My concern in advance of his visit was that the
members of the shul appreciate the significance of our forthcoming encounter with greatness by
welcoming this Torah sage on the Sunday night following Parashat Chayei Sara with due reverence
for his stature. In the Shabbat Drasha, I quoted from a summary by Rav Eliyahu Blumenzweig of
a sicha that, lhavdil, Rav Aharon, ztl, delivered at Seuda Shleesheet in 5732, on the subject of the
statement by Hazal that the common speech of the forefathers' servants is more beautiful than the
Torah taught by their descendants:

_We find two types of instruction in the Torah. One type is presented in the form of mitzvot,
stipulating the various actions which a person must perform or refrain from performing. The
second type is embodied in the character of those people whose actions, behavior, and way
of life is meant to guide us. Sometimes the practical example set by a living character directs
and influences us to a much greater extent than the mere codification of that lifestyle in the
form of mitzvot. This is particularly true of the mitzvot pertaining to interpersonal
relationships, where it is often difficult to lay down precise and accurate guidelines. The
Torah does not leave it entirely to the individual's discretion to decide how to behave towards
others, but at the same time we are also not given a complete list of specific instructions
regarding every situation which might arise during the course of our lives._

_The study of a real, live character, in all its detail, including all his behavior (in every
situation, and in moments of crisis and change) as well as the impression and influence which
he leaves on those around him, provides one with a complete picture which he can strive to
emulate._

While I do not have the temerity to claim any "complete picture" of Rav Lichtenstein, ztl, per se,
whatever elements of a picture I can claim as having gleaned, remain a deep source of inspiration.
As Rav Lichtenstein, ztl, would later write regarding his own faith, "in my case, at least, the critical
factor is indeed 'who' rather than 'what,'" focusing on the "key persons" beyond his parents who
influenced his commitment and his faith. To me, beyond the decisive role of my own parents and
grandparents, Rav Aharon, ztl, was such a key person: attending his shiurim; listening to how he
answered questions in those so-called "press conferences"; reading his seminal articles that
provided much guidance on issues of faith, observance, and direction about navigating the modern world as a committed Orthodox Jew; knowing of his great dedication to his family; and, especially, numerous personal interactions that exuded his great sensitivity and understanding.

On the subject of pictures: a couple of years ago, a non-Orthodox congregation invited me to speak on the subject of "What is Orthodox Judaism?" Recalling how Rav Lichtenstein sources his own faith in his spiritual mentors, I too made recourse to mine. Freely admitting to the audience that Rav Aharon would bristle to learn that I was possibly titling him toward some kind of crass "celebrity status," I handed out wallet-size copies of his picture, and proceeded to explain that Orthodox Judaism believes in a Mesora, a sense of intergenerational transmission, meaning that the Torah she'be'al peh ultimately lives, not in sacred books but in sacred people, v'chaye olam nata btocehinu. And this man, I tried to explain, is a walking Sefer Torah, an embodiment of the whole of Jewish Tradition.

It is said that when Lincoln passed away, after Stanton sobbed, he declared "now he belongs to the ages." But Rav Lichtenstein, ztl, already belonged to the ages during his lifetime. This was evident in each encounter with him, a sense that this person is the standard bearer of the Mesorah, a living link to Moshe Rabeinu.

And this is what begets the terror now that he has left the world: how are we supposed to emulate his example?

There is a paradoxical element to the bracha in the Amida known as "al hatzadikim." We begin with a list of categories of righteous people, finally including ourselves among them in our plea for mercy, and then we pray that our portion be forever connected to those who trust in Hashem. Yet, in the following phrase, as if recoiling at having the temerity to include ourselves among the greats, we declare "v'lo neivosh, ki becha batachnu." On a certain level, we are praying that our connection to spiritual greatness not become the source of our shame if we are held up in comparison in the Heavenly Court.

On one of his visits to Chicago a few years ago, there was a meeting for rabbanim at the CRC, in which we got to ask Rav Aharon ztl questions. The subject was a painful one, but one which reflected his moral courage in becoming involved in protecting victims of abuse at great personal emotional cost. I can still vividly remember the moment when, in answer to a particular question I had asked him, Rav Aharon looked me straight in the eye and opened his reply with the statement "you and I are both mechanchim." I remember feeling woozy for a moment: in what way does Rav Lichtenstein think we belong in the same sentence? V'lo neivosh, ki becha batachnu. May my portion be with him, but may Hakadosh Baruch Hu not transform this association into a source of my shame in being held to his standard, and coming up short of the bar.

It is hard for me to describe the degree of loss I feel at his passing.

When someone attempted to appropriate the legacy of Rav Soloveitchik, ztl, for their own agenda in the pages of a newspaper, Rav Lichtenstein wrote a pointed reply in his inimitable style, including among the closing sentences the observation that, "for decades, sui generis sage that he was, the Rav bestrode American Orthodoxy like a colossus, transcending many of its internal fissures." The same could be said of Rav Aharon, ztl. For so many years, he learned and taught inside the Har Etzion building, which is artistically designed to look like a great eagle. There was a majestic grandeur about Rav Lichtenstein, reflecting both beauty and awe. Thus, as the designation was applied to the Rambam and a select number of other sages throughout Jewish
History, I believe that it is also apt for Rav Aharon, ztl: he was *ha-nesher hagadol* of our generation, a great eagle of Torah. While in a physical sense he soared heavenward beyond the horizon and even further out of reach, his legacy of conviction and passionate intensity as an *adam gadol* remain palpable.

*Zeher tzadik li'vracha, tehei nishmato tzerura bitzror hachayim.*