Rav Lichtenstein:
Thoughts and Reflections on a Life of Simplicity
By Rabbi Sam Iser

Great individuals represent greatness in many ways. I hope only to mention some of the aspects of Rav Lichtenstein’s life which touched me and I experienced, but they are just a small prism of his magnitude.

Rav Lichtenstein believed deeply that it was important to recognize the complexity of life, the complexity of people, the complexity of Jewish values, and of one’s emotional/spiritual experience of the world. In analyzing gmarra he would always show how many ways there were to learn a sugya, how many different angles you could take on any given din. When it came to social or political topics he was constantly emphasizing the grayness of decision making and of the many elements which went into any one issue. The rosh yeshiva was wont to give very long answers to questions that he was asked because he thought there were so many factors which had to be mentioned and dealt with when any particular point was brought up. A humorous story; in Gush there was a cadre of bachurim who had mental and social handicaps like Downs syndrome etc. whom they had a special program for where they learned a bit and worked and volunteered the rest of the day. While I was in yeshiva they arranged a question and answer session with Rav Lichtenstein for these bachurim. One of the bachurim, I believe his name was Dovid, asked a question and Rav Lichtenstein, unable to avoid getting involved in a long discussion of the complexity of the issue launched into his normal lengthy monologue, even for this group of handicapped youth, only to be interrupted with the cry ‘Rabbi I just want a yes or no answer!’ Upon hearing this story, many of us bachurim thought to ourselves that we sometimes felt the same way too, but Rav Lichtenstein was too much of a proponent of recognizing complexity in life to ever avoid flushing out everything as far as he could. It is therefore quite ironic, that amongst all of the people I ever have ever met in my life, I think that Rav Lichtenstein was far and away the most simple.

He had the temimus of a young child, in emunah, in midos, and in basically everything. When I was in gush they scheduled a session with a psychologist to try and highlight for bachurim issues in human psychology to be sensitive to and as part of the session they had this psychologist interview the rosh yeshiva. He asked him if he had ever had challenges in his life, expecting the answer to be ‘of course, everyone has challenges, even great Rabbis’ only to be greeted by Rav Lichtenstein’s response ‘Baruch Hashem, really not so much, my life was pretty straight sailing from the beginning.’ His life was pashut, his personality was pashut, because he made it as such. We make our lives complex to a large extent because we create desires, goals, and interests which we pursue which often lie in conflict one with another and then we have challenges and struggles. Rav Lichtenstein’s simplicity derived from the fact that he had only one ratzon, one will- to fulfilling the ratzon Hashem. He was so tamim, so simple, because his spiritual and emotional life were so unified and pure.

It is said of the Chazon Ish that he didn’t pick up a finger without consulting whether his movements conformed to the details of every halacha in Shulchan Aruch. Of
Rav Lichtenstein I would venture to say similarly that he did not lift a finger if he didn’t think the movement would accord with ratzon Hashem. He was someone who you could see in his eyes, hear in his voice, and sense in his actions a complete and unending devotion of all of his energies to fulfilling the ratzon Hashem in whatever ways necessary.

On the one hand, Rav Lichtenstein shared many similarities which we find with tzadikim throughout the doros. He famously stood up throughout Yom Kippur, he gave a shiur in avodas hayom beiyun with pilpul at night for the tzibur and stayed up throughout the whole night of Yom Kippur learning. His vidui took longer than anyone else in the beis medrash, although no one could fathom him having done any sins throughout the year. He was machmir personally on many things, including for example that he would not eat pas habah bekisnin alone without eating it with a hamotzi because of sfeikos of kevias seudah bizman hazeh e.g, whether a croissant with coffee in the morning would be kevias seudah. He slept four hours a night and learned the rest of the day when he wasn’t dealing with klal issues. When he would eat shule shudos with the yeshiva, although he was an exemplary litvak, you could see him swaying with his eyes closed during the zemiros and you had the sense that he was in different world. When Rav Lichtenstein said kadish derabannan as he was wont to do in the yeshiva you could hear in his ‘ba’agala ubizman kariv veimru amen’ a genuine cry for the geulah, and this was multiple times a day. I often wondered to myself how anyone could do any chet after having heard his kadish derabannan.

Besides personal tzidkus he took on great responsibilities towards the talmud torah of the klal. At his peak, which even includes his mid seventies when he could not get around that well, he would give shiur klali in the yeshiva, two shiurim per week for his personal yeshiva shiur, each for a full two hours, a shiur beiyun for the kollel for metzuyanim at gush and a shiur for the Gruss kollel. In the summer he would also give chaburas afternoon seder to bachruim in masechtas the yeshiva would not otherwise do in its routine, like horiyos. This would oftentimes mean giving iyun shiurim in four different masechtos in any given week since the kollel for metzuyanim, the yeshiva, and the Gruss kollel were not often if ever learning the same thing. I am not sure if there is another rosh yeshiva in the world who has done this, or does do this. He learned first seder and second seder in the yeshiva beis medrash and would take questions from bachurim during seder. It is said in his younger years when the rebbetzin was out of town that he would learn in the yeshiva at night until the wee hours of the night.

His shiurim were not dedicated to saying chidushim but to teaching his general Talmudic methodology, how to learn a gmarra, how to ask questions on a gmarra and he was an excellent educator. He produced generations of talmidim who followed in his methodology, deploying it in their own unique ways as well. His methodology is shown through the many shiurim of his the yeshiva has published but it was expressed even more clearly in shiur when he would harp again and again on the same points of methodology until the talmidim had them clear.

He took on responsibilities for the klal both in Eretz Yisrael, where he moved because of his commitment to the klal, and in America, taking phone calls until the wee hours of the night. Despite being a tzadik of the make of an artscroll biography, he was involved somewhat in politics and was viewed very positively by many public thinkers and players in Israeli secular society. As is well known, Rav Lichtenstein was educated
and extremely well read, as well as being a proponent of gaining and using secular knowledge towards advancing one’s spiritual development. Though always with both feet solidly in the yeshiva, he was always involved in different projects outside of the yeshiva and the yeshiva world in general as well.

On a personal level, although he seemed to some to be distant at times, Rav Lichtenstein was a very caring Jew and Rosh Yeshiva. I remember him crying when he started to say tehillim after the yeshiva heard about the terrorist attack in the merkaz harav high school. I remember the warmth of his hand when talmidim would come around on Shabbos to shake his hand, and the gleam in his eyes. He had a sense of humor, though he was not particularly funny himself, and would try to say a purim dvar torah every year which revolved around some humorous topic but was almost always too complex for what a purim shtick dvar torah should be. At the mesibos for channukah and purim he would host at his house he would always invite one of his neighbors, a talmid, who was very funny to carol the members of the shiur with jokes. He was humble more than one can imagine. When his legs were still good he would get up on his own every time to get himself sefarim in the beis medrash, though there was a line of talmidim whom would have loved to do it for him. He was very thankful for any small favor you did for him and treated everyone with great respect. I remember one year bein hazmanim watching him walk home from yeshiva and pass by a table merchant in Alon Shvut selling arba minim and he went over to him just like any other person off the street to look at his wares.

Rav Lichtenstein’s talmudic methodology will be carried on by his students. His social vision, by the institutions he helped found and others which sprouted up as well. It is his spiritual character, his temimus which we have really lost. The image of someone so deep in his understanding of the world, so involved in the varieties of human experience, and yet so simple and univocal in avodas Hashem is something which we can not replace. What we can try to do ourselves is to try and be a bit simpler, to try and ignore some of our desires for money, for honor, for physical satisfaction or whatever it may be. By becoming just a bit more tamim ourselves, we can try to bring more temimus into the world, to make up for what was lost.

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