On a Short Wedding Wish to the Lichtensteins from the Pen of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg

By Shaul Seidler-Feller

I

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, zts"l, the late, lamented, “irreplaceable”[2] gedol ha-dor of the Modern Orthodox and Religious Zionist communities,[3] has been characterized by those who knew him as a larger-than-life – indeed, angelic[4] – leader whose complete command of every facet of Torah learning was matched only by his sterling character and superlative (almost Hafets Hayyim-like) piety.[5] One of the things that struck me most, however, in listening to and reading several of the eulogies delivered or published after his passing was precisely how genuinely human this prince among men was in his personal and family life. Mrs. Esti Rosenberg, one of Rav Lichtenstein’s daughters and the head of the Stella K. Abraham Beit Midrash for Women – Migdal Oz, used the biblical metaphor of “a ladder set up on the earth, whose head reached unto heaven” (Gen. 28:12)[6] to capture how her father managed to radiate both a rarefied aura of sanctity and, crucially, a true humanity that extended to such mundane matters as doing most of the laundry in the house,[7] getting the kids ready in the mornings,[8] helping them with their homework in the evenings,[9] coming to learn with them after seder twice a week,[10] making sure to eat dinner with them almost every night,[11] washing the dishes after Shabbat had ended so that his kids would not fight over whose responsibility it was,[12] attending their performances in the Ezra youth group or at school,[13] teaching them how to ride a bike,[14] playing Scrabble and chess with them,[15] taking an interest in their friends,[16] buying them gifts and clothing during his visits to the States,[17] etc. – all of them activities that might be undertaken by normal devoted fathers but that I think we usually, rightly or wrongly, do not associate with people of Rav Lichtenstein’s intellectual caliber and spiritual stature. Indeed, in the words of Rabbi Avishai David, a student of Rav Aharon’s, “Rav Lichtenstein was a normal gadol ba-Torah, a very normal gadol ba-Torah.”[18]

And, of course, the same level of devotion was manifest in his relationship with his wife, Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein (nee Soloveitchik). Rav Aharon’s children reflected at the levayah on the mutual respect and unwavering support each partner showed the other,[19] while his students described some of the (ever-modest) manifestations of their affection for one another.[20] Dr. Lichtenstein herself summed it up best in a video produced in honor of her husband’s eightieth birthday when she said, “He invested both intellectually and emotionally in our children. And he invested in our marriage as well – he was not only a family man but also a husband.”[21]

II

It is in this context, then, that I wish to digress for a moment and travel back in time to the Lichtensteins’ wedding, the point at which this whole story started, by way of a unique text discovered by Menachem Butler in a volume on the shelves of Yeshiva University’s Mendel Gottesman Library of Hebraica/Judaica. The year is 1959, and Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg (1884–1966), famed prewar rector of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin and author of the Seridei esh compendium of responsa, halakhic novellae, and topical essays, is living out the last stage of his life in Montreux, Switzerland. Meanwhile, across the ocean in the United States, Rav Lichtenstein has just received semikhah from Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, having completed his doctorate in English literature at Harvard two years prior,[23] and is engaged to be married to Tovah Soloveitchik, daughter of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rav Aharon’s rav muvhak.[24] The couple originally planned to wed Tuesday night, 22 Kislev 5720 (December 22, 1959), in the Dorothy Quincy Suite of the John Hancock Building in Boston, the bride’s hometown (see Fig. 1).[25]
In anticipation of the joyous occasion, to which he apparently could not arrive in person, Rav Weinberg sent an inscribed volume of *Yad sha’ul*,[26] a collection of essays compiled in memory of his beloved *talmid muvhak* (and the person primarily responsible for bringing him to Montreux in the first place),[27] Rabbi Saul Weingort (ca. 1914–1946),[28] who had passed away following a tragic train accident while on his way to deliver a *sh’ur* at the *yeshivah* in Montreux.[29] Through some serendipitous twist of fate, it is this copy of the *sefer* which made its way into the open stacks of the Gottesman Library. The dedicatory text (see Fig. 2) and my translation thereof follow:
משרה מもらえות
של הרהיה ד"ר אָחָר לְכַטּוּשְׁתּוֹ
עָבִי
מרת טוֹבָה סֹלוּבּוֹטִי יִלְּלָנוֹת
בְּחֹזֶה
שָׁל בָּאָם הָרַד הָוְהֶפְּרָאָר
יִדְּי הַבֶּנֶון הָבֶּלְדוֹל מַמְּאָאָי
מהּרְיָדָה לְלוֹלְבוּטִי [30] שֵׁלִיתְא
שַׁעָׁהֲיָא בָּמְדֵי בְּבָשָׁהֲו מַעְלָהְת
בִּכְיָא תָּלוּד הָרְכֵי שֵׁנָה מְשִיך
יוֹרִי מְשַׁהוּג הָיוֵי יִבְּבָרָך
מַעְשִׁי הָרְכֵי הָבִּים הָאָלִימָי
סְנֵמִי מַמוֹשְׁרוֹמ יָמְלָלוּשִׁי בָּכַל
דְּרִי הָיִם, הָהָבִּיט אָשָׁר יוּמו
יוֹ לֶשֶׁ הָלְמַרְאָר בֵּיָרָאָל
ולְמַכְוָּא טוֹבָה שְׁמַמְתָּו שִׁלְּוִי
לָזִירָה הָדָלָלוֹמ.
A gift and token of friendship presented on the occasion of the marriage of the ga’on, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, to his soul mate, Ms. Tovah Soloveitchik[31] – may their years be long and good – the formative years of this generation’s pride and splendor, my friend, the great ga’on and Luminary of the Diaspora, our teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. ha-Levi Soloveitchik – may his years be long and good, amen – which is set to take place, under a lucky star and at an auspicious hour, on 22 Kislev [5]720. May it be His will that this precious couple be blessed from the Abode of Blessing with long, good, and joyous lives and with success in all of their endeavors. And may the home that they build be of fame and of glory in Israel [see I Chron. 22:5] and a source of eternal delight and happiness for their distinguished parents.

Jehiel Jacob Weinberg
Montreux, 8 Kislev [5]720 [December 9, 1959]

I think this text is historically significant for at least two reasons. First, while I am unaware of any subsequent contact between the Lichtensteins and Rav Weinberg following the wedding,[32] this message certainly attests to a longstanding relationship of mutual regard between Rabbis Weinberg and Soloveitchik, two leading rashei yeshivah whose formative years were spent in both the Lithuanian yeshivah world and the German academy. We know from other sources that they first met while the Rav was a student at the University of Berlin in the 1920s; according to testimony cited by Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, the Rav audited classes at Rav Weinberg’s Seminary during the 1926–1927 academic year.[33] Their encounters extended well beyond the classroom, however,[34] and even though Rav Weinberg was generally not enamored of the Brisker derekh ha-limmud espoused by Rav Soloveitchik and his forebears,[35] these two intellectual powerhouses maintained a deep appreciation for one another throughout their lives[36] – as can certainly be seen in Rav Weinberg’s above inscription.

The second issue that I wish to discuss here relates to the date of the wedding itself. As of 8 Kislev 5720, Rav Weinberg, quite justifiably, thought that it would take place two weeks hence. However, that very evening, December 9 – the same night the Rav delivered the aforementioned (n. 35) hesped for his uncle, Rabbi Isaac Ze’ev Soloveitchik (1886–1959) – Rav Soloveitchik “informed his family that he had been diagnosed with colon cancer, and would be returning to Boston the next day for surgery. His daughter Tovah and her fiancé R. Aharon Lichtenstein postponed their wedding (which had been set to take place in the coming days) until a few weeks later, so that the Rav could participate.”[37] Thus, the wedding was not actually held until Tuesday night, 27 Tevet 5720 (January 26, 1960) (see Figs. 3 and 4),[38] something Rav Weinberg could not have predicted at the time he penned his wishes to the young couple.
Due to illness in our family, the marriage of our daughter Tovah to Aharon Lichtenstein has been postponed from Tuesday, December 22, 1959 to Tuesday, January 26, 1960.

The wedding will take place, please God, at 6 p.m. in the Dorothy Quincy Suite of the John Hancock Hall, 355 Stuart Street, Boston.

We hope that you will be with us at that time.

Joseph and Tonya Soloveitchik

Reception in honor of the groom at 5 p.m.
In any case, returning to the present after our brief historical sojourn, it seems to me that, aside from all he taught us about avodat Hashem, lomdes, morality, and how to live as deeply committed Jews in the modern world, Rav Lichtenstein also modeled what it means to be a “totally devoted” family man.[39] As Rabbi Menachem Genack, who began his undergraduate studies at Yeshiva College when Rav Lichtenstein was already a rosh kolel in RIETS, remarked, “Rav Aharon’s gadlus batorah is well-known, but less celebrated is his gadlus as a father and as a son, his commitment and dedication to his family. Rav Aharon was always learning, but nevertheless managed to spend time with all of his children.”[40] Indeed, anyone who sees the pictures of Rav Aharon and his family featured in the aforementioned video will immediately understand what Rabbi Mayer Lichtenstein meant when he said that his father fulfilled the talmudic principle of ner hanukkah ve-ner beito, ner beito adif (Shabbat 23b).[41] With this background, it should not surprise us that, when asked, “What are you most proud of having accomplished during these years of service?” Rav Lichtenstein answered:

> Looking back over the past 50 years, what I am proudest of is what some would regard as being a non-professional task. I’m proudest of having built, together with my wife, the wonderful family that we have. It is a personal accomplishment, a social accomplishment, and a contribution – through what they are giving and will give, each in his or her own way – in service of the Ribbono shel Olam in the future.[42]

I think the lesson for us, his students, is clear. May we be zokheh to rise to the challenge of carrying forth all aspects of Rav Lichtenstein’s multifaceted legacy for many years to come.

* I wish at the outset to express my appreciation to yedidi, Reb Menachem Butler, ne’im me’assefei yisra’el, for furnishing me with the opportunity, as well as many of the bibliographical sources (including the primary text itself!) required, to compose this essay. Additional thanks go to his fellow editors at the Seforim Blog for their consideration of this piece and, generally, for their great service to the public in maintaining such an active and high-quality platform for the serious discussion of topics of Jewish interest. Finally, I am indebted to my friends Eliyahu Krakowski, Daniel Tabak, and Shlomo Zuckier for their editorial corrections and comments to earlier drafts of this piece which, taken together, improved it considerably.

[2] Dr. David Berger quoted Rabbi Yosef Blau as describing Rav Lichtenstein in this way and went on to characterize him in similar terms here (listen at about 1:04:40). Rabbi Ezra Schwartz said in effect the same thing here, and in some ways went even further (listen at about 58:00).
[3] For evidence of how strongly his loss has already been felt in the Modern Orthodox/Religious Zionist communities, one need only peruse the ever-expanding number of articles and tributes that have been cataloged on the Yeshivat Har Etzion websites here and here.
[4] One set of verses to which maspidim kept returning when describing Rav Lichtenstein was those that appear in Malachi 2:5-7, together with the rabbinic interpretation thereof: “If a given rabbi can be compared to an angel of the Lord of Hosts, let them ask him to teach them Torah, and vice versa” (Hagigah 15b, Mo’ed katan 17a). See the hespedim of Rabbis Mayer Lichtenstein here (listen at about 7:50), Mordechai Schnaidman here (listen at about 23:00), and my friend Mordy Weisel here (listen at about 5:05). Similarly, others have described him as angelic without specific recourse to the verses in Malachi; see the hespedim of Rabbis Mosheh Lichtenstein here (listen at about 9:25) and Avishai David here (listen at about 1:03:25).
[5] So according to Rabbi Mordechai Schnaidman here (listen at about 16:00); see also Yosef Zvi Rimon, “Keitsad magdirim gedol dor?” JobKatif (May 4, 2015). Similarly, Rabbi Ari Kahn compared Rav Lichtenstein to Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810–1883) here (listen at about 9:00 and 48:55), and Mrs. Esti Rosenberg said that the stories people tell about her father remind her of those told about Rabbi Aryeh Levin (1885–1969); see her interview with Yair Sheleg: “Yaledah ahat mul 700 otobusim,” Shabbat: musaf le-torah, hagut, sifrut ve-omanut 927 (May 15, 2015).
See the hesped of Mrs. Tanya Mittleman, Rav Lichtenstein’s youngest, here (listen at about 10:15).

See the hesped of Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot here (listen at about 46:55).

See the hesped of my friend David Pruwer here (watch at about 18:50).

See the hespedim of Rabbis Mosheh Lichtenstein here (listen at about 4:50), Mayer Lichtenstein here (listen at about 12:35), and Assaf Bednarsh here (listen at about 14:05), as well as the video produced in honor of Rav Lichtenstein’s eightieth birthday here (watch at about 9:25 and 11:35) and that of a public conversation between Rabbi Benny Lau and Rav Aharon and Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein on the topic of “Education and Family in the Modern World” held in Ra’anana on May 13, 2012 here (watch at about 27:45 and 28:55). See also the recently-released essay “On Raising Children,” The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash (May 2015), based on a sihah delivered by Rav Lichtenstein in July 2007.

See the video produced in honor of Rav Lichtenstein’s eightieth birthday here (watch at about 11:25), as well as the hesped of Mrs. Tanya Mittleman here (listen at about 19:05) and Mrs. Esti Rosenberg’s interview with Yair Sheleg, “Yaledah ahat mul 700 otobusim.”

See the hesped of Mrs. Tanya Mittleman here (listen at about 11:00). Similarly, Rabbi Julius Berman relates in his hesped here that when Rav Aharon would stay at his house during visits to the States, he would always wash his own dishes when he had finished eating (listen at about 20:30).

See the hespedim of Mrs. Esti Rosenberg here (listen at about 3:05) and Mrs. Tanya Mittleman here (listen at about 19:20), as well as the video produced in honor of Rav Lichtenstein’s eightieth birthday here (watch at about 11:15).

See the hesped of Rabbi Shay Lichtenstein here (listen at about 23:00). See also the hesped of David Pruwer here (watch at about 18:45), as well as Rav Lichtenstein’s “On Raising Children.”

On Scrabble, see the hesped of Rabbi Shay Lichtenstein here (listen at about 4:40). On chess, see the video produced in honor of Rav Lichtenstein’s eightieth birthday here (watch at about 12:20).

See the hesped of Mrs. Tanya Mittleman here (listen at about 19:10).

Ibid. (listen at about 10:30).

See his hesped here (listen at about 16:50).

See the hespedim of Rabbi Mayer Lichtenstein here (listen at about 16:15 and 17:30), Mrs. Esti Rosenberg here (listen at about 13:35 and 15:25), and Mrs. Tanya Mittleman here (listen at about 21:30); see also that of my friend Noach Lerman here (listen at about 37:35).

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh recounted here that when Rav Lichtenstein would call his wife on the phone, he would address her as “darling,” rather than “rebetsin” (listen at about 14:35). (Dr. Lichtenstein herself reminisced here about how her husband would sometimes jokingly address her as “Mrs. L.,” and she, in turn, would call him “Reb Aharon” [watch at about 1:10]). Noach Lerman talked here about how Rav Aharon would open the car door for his wife when they drove somewhere (listen at about 34:25). Similarly, see the video here for a picture of husband and wife going rafting together (watch at about 12:22) and, of course, the dedication Rav Lichtenstein inscribed at the front of his two-volume Leaves of Faith (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 2003–2004): “To Tovah: With Appreciation and Admiration.”


In the course of the aforementioned (n. 10) public conversation on the topic of “Education and Family in the Modern World” here, Dr. Lichtenstein recalled that at the berit milah of the couple’s firstborn son Mosheh, her father, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993), sensing that Rav Lichtenstein harbored grand aspirations to save the world, spoke about the importance of the father’s role in raising his children and not leaving the job solely to his wife (watch at about 26:00). See Rav Aharon’s parallel account in “On Raising Children,” as well as his comment there that “I feel very strongly about the need for personal attention in child-raising, and have tried to put it into practice.”
[22] Watch here at about 12:15. Incidentally, during a different part of that same public event in Ra’anana, available here, Rav Lichtenstein commented on the role of children in strengthening the emotional bond between partners (watch at about 35:15; see also 53:55).


[24] According to my friend Jonathan Ziring, in an e-mail communication dated May 28, 2015, the Lichtensteins first met, by chance, at the home of Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik (1917–2001), the Rav’s brother and another major influence on Rav Lichtenstein. The Rav would later encourage Rav Aharon to court his daughter, and the rest, as they say, is history.

[25] Image courtesy of Naftali Balanson’s Facebook page, as brought to my attention by Rabbi Jeffrey Saks.


[28] The date of Rabbi Weingort’s birth seems somewhat controversial. Rav Weinberg himself, in “Le-zikhro,” 4, estimates that his student was born in either 5673 or 5674 (1913 or 1914), whereas the frontmatter of the Yad sha’ul volume gives the precise date 12 Kislev 5675 (November 30, 1914); Marc B. Shapiro, Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884–1966 (London; Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999), 161, claims he was born in 1915; and the website of the Yad Shaouel koel in Kokhav Ya’akov, opened in 2011 and dedicated in Rabbi Weingort’s memory, concurs with Shapiro.


[30] Most readers are probably familiar with the more common Hebrew spelling of “Soloveitchik” with a final kof. Rav Weinberg, however, generally preferred ending the name in a gimel (except, strangely, in the case of the Rav’s daughter Tovah).


[32] It should be noted that Rav Lichtenstein served as coeditor of the rabbinic periodical Hadorom during the mid-1960s and, as such, may have been involved in editing some of Rav Weinberg’s last publications to appear during his lifetime. (For a partial bibliography of Rav Weinberg’s oeuvre, see Michael Brocke and Julius Carlebach, Biographisches Handbuch der Rabbiner: Teil 2: Rabbiner im Deutschen Reich, 1871–1945, vol. 2 [Munich: K. G. Saur, 2009], 639-640 [no. 2657]. For a fuller inventory, see Shapiro, Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy, 239-246.) Discovery and analysis of any potential remaining correspondence between the two during this period remain scholarly desiderata.


As an aside, and as far as I can tell, allusions to a “Rabbi Moses Soloveitchik” in Rav Weinberg’s published works, excluding those made in the above letters, generally refer not to the Rav’s father (1879-1941) but to his Swiss first cousin (1915-1995), son of Rabbi Israel Gerson Soloveitchik (1875-1941), son of Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik (1853-1918).

[36] Indeed, Rav Weinberg would consistently refer to the Rav in writing by his honorific rabbinic handle, “Ha-g[αon] r[abb[ι] y[osef] d[ov],” or a variant thereof (as in our case); see his Seridei esh, 2:196-201 (sec. 78), at p. 198 (dated 29 Adar 5716 [March 12, 1956]), and idem, Kitvei ha-ga’on rabbi yehe[il yakov weinberg, zts’l, 219 n. 4. According to Shapiro, Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy, 163, Rav Weinberg also contacted the Rav after the War to seek his assistance during his long recovery.

For the Rav’s part, the postwar written record with which I am familiar is a bit more reticent, although Rabbi Howard Jachter reports the following in the context of a discussion of the prohibition of kol ishah and Rav Weinberg’s now-famous lenient ruling on the question:

Interestingly, I asked Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in July 1985 whether he agrees with this ruling of Rav Weinberg. The Rav replied, “I agree with everything that he wrote, except for his permission to stun animals before Shechita” (see volume one of Teshuvot Seridei Eish). Rav Soloveitchik related his great appreciation of Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg. Rav Shalom Carmy later told me that Rav Soloveitchik and Rav Weinberg had been close friends during the years that Rav Soloveitchik studied in Berlin.


[38] Fig. 3 is courtesy of Naftali Balanson’s Facebook page, as brought to my attention by Rabbi Jeffrey Saks. Fig. 4 derives from the video produced in honor of Rav Lichtenstein’s eightieth birthday here (watch at about 1:03). (I am indebted to Rabbis Dov Karoll, Jeffrey Saks, and Reuven Ziegler for confirming some of the details of the Lichtenstein wedding for me.)

[39] See the interview with Rabbi Dov Karoll on Voice of Israel here (listen at about 2:55). See also the hesped of Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein here (listen at about 5:15). Similarly, at a sheloshim event held at the Hechal Shlomo Jewish Heritage Center in Jerusalem on May 18, Mrs. Esti Rosenberg, in speaking of her father’s self-identification with the Levites as the prime exemplars of ovedei Hashem par excellence, commented that just as the Levites were netunim netunim to Aaron and his sons in Parashat be-midbar (Num. 3:9) (which also happened to be Rav
Lichtenstein’s bar mitzvah parashah), so was Rav Aharon completely dedicated to his family. See the video [here](watch at about 11:40). And for a visual representation of just how central avodat Hashem was to Rav Lichtenstein’s core identity, see the photograph of his matsevah posted to Yeshivat Har Etzion’s [Facebook page].

[40] From a forthcoming article to be published in *Jewish Action*.

[41] See his hesped [here](listen at about 10:30).

[42] See Rav Lichtenstein’s interview with Yaffi Spodek: “Reflecting on 50 Years of Torah Leadership,” the [YUNews blog](October 11, 2011). Similarly, see this [video](produced in honor of Rav Lichtenstein receiving the Israel Prize in 2014 (watch at about 10:20), as well as the hespedim of Mrs. Esti Rosenberg [here](listen at about 8:45) and Rabbi Baruch Gigi [here](listen at about 16:30) and the former’s interview with Yair Sheleg, “Yaledah ahat mul 700 otobusim.” Finally, see Rav Lichtenstein’s sihah “On Raising Children,” where he states unequivocally: “There are very few people about whom it can […] genuinely be said that there is something objectively more important in their life than raising children.”