The Gemora in describes a group of אמוראים of returning from Rav’s levaya. A complex issue of zimun arises for which they are uncertain of the halakha. Without clear resolution, רב אדא בר אהבה tears kriya a second time and cries out:

On one level, of course, רבי אדא בר אהבה’s statement is dramatic hyperbole – the zimun issue, while complex, was a relatively minor matter and undoubtedly, these אמוראים knew how to bench.

Yet, on another level that reflects the true measure of this Gemora, רב אדא בר אהבה’s outburst reflects an emotional state that we here tonight all relate to – of a talmid distressed at the loss of his Rebbe. It was not this particular halakha that we don’t know, it’s that our foundation for understanding all Halakha has been unmoored, our touchstone snatched from our grasp. Rav Aharon is gone, and we are so challenged, the wellspring of his Torah sealed off forever, our model for middot and emunah missing, our confidence that ignorance and intolerance will surely be vanquished by the overwhelming force of his Ahavat Yisrael and intellectual rigor shaken – we are so lost, we are so forlorn, kiviyachol, we no longer know even how to bench.

When Yoel asked me to speak this evening, I quickly pointed out that I was not among Rav Lichtenstein’s many notable and great talmidim, just one of literally thousands of loyal talmidim. Yet I reluctantly accepted this opportunity to express my deep, abiding and continuing sense of gratitude for my 35 year relationship with Rav Lichtenstein.

In his essay, “On the Teacher”, Augustine writes:

“Those who are pupils consider within themselves whether what has been explained has been said truly; looking of course to that interior truth, according to the measure of which each of us is able. Thus they learn, and when the interior truth makes known to them that true things have been said, they applaud...”

Let us consider this statement in its constituent parts:

First, Augustine’s student is bound by an obligation to “consider within themselves”. He is not a mere receptacle of information from the teacher.

Brash Americans we, especially those of us who had already started University, we were raised in an educational model that celebrated our brilliance and talents, extolled our privileges and took seriously the obligation of the institution to engage us. From our first day, Rav Lichtenstein set forth a profoundly different educational model. The opportunities for growth in Torah in Yeshiva were unparalleled, but the duties and obligations of development were squarely on our shoulders. Let there be no mistake, our success as students was dependent on accepting those responsibilities.
Second, Augustine argued that students must consider “whether what has been explained has been explained truly, looking to that interior truth”.

Here too Rav Lichtenstein emphasized our duty and obligation to examine the possibilities of the material – to critically analyze and to not presume knowledge. Volume – while important – was something we could accomplish on our own time. Learning required rigor, in order to arrive at what Augustine termed the “interior truth”.

But Rav Lichtenstein also made clear that we were not chemists being taught to cleverly mix and manipulate complex terms – we were Ovdei Hashem searching for understanding in text laden with Kedusha. We should rejoice – applaud in the words of Augustine – at the recognition of profundity, the identification of coherence and even the creation of chidush, but the entire endeavor was bound by our eternal obligation to Torah itself, the fear of its misrepresentation, the admonition against its perversion, the revulsion to the simplistic - the trivialization of Torah, or even worse, learning laden with agenda.

I mention these three themes at the outset:

- Our duties and responsibilities to Torah and Am Yisrael
- Our recognition of the complexity of Torah and humanity itself
- Our duty to respect for the Kedusha of Torah in its full complexity and the concomitant rejection of simplistic, agenda-laden learning

because these lodestars for a religious life became relevant to us, for the most part, only as adults, as we first were confronted with the challenges of finding a spouse, raising children, building a career, continuing to engage in Torah and of course, dealing with our own, and others’, inherent flaws and shortcomings as human beings.

This perhaps, is the essential point in my remarks tonight. We have all encountered religious leaders who possessed great charisma – but as I grew older, they and their views became progressively less relevant – and many cases, quite troubling. Rav Lichtenstein was hardly charismatic, and certainly did not offer me any direct advice as to what I must do. But, as I grew older – perhaps only as I grew older – his nuanced human and religious outlook first came into focus, becoming only more relevant and more meaningful.

Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein noted in her presentation at the Sheloshim that Rav Lichtenstein may have had more influence on Americans from Israel than were he to have stayed at YU. It is a fascinating thought, one that is certainly true when applied to me personally, but I wish to add one essential fact to that claim: It didn’t happen by coincidence.

Here we are at the Dinner – and of course every Yeshiva and midrasha has a Shabbaton and Dinner – not so 35 years ago. Rav Lichtenstein came to America at least twice yearly, and in large part to meet with talmidim. When he was home, he told us to call – after 11:00 at night in Israel, so we could reach him immediately. If he remained relevant, it was – as with almost everything in his life – the result of his conscientious and volitional effort.

This was particularly true for me with respect to the gracious access he afforded me in three arenas. The first was family matters – my parents, my children, my nephew – for which I will not detail here other than to note that many of us share an abiding appreciation for his compassion and empathy in this area specifically.
The second area involved women’s chinuch. Just over 20 years ago when a number of parents were not satisfied with high school options for their daughters, I was fortunate enough to arrange for Rav Lichtenstein to meet with a parent group on several occasions. Much of which he said is reflected in his iconic speech at the Hanukat HaBayit of Maayanot, but I wish to highlight one essential point.

Rav Lichtenstein’s view was that we should not teach our daughters as a defensive measure; rather we should teach our daughters out of respect: for their religious standing, their intellect, their equal status as Ovdei Hashem. Our curriculum should reflect that respect, and that meant serious Gemora learning. That sounds simple – the standard at Migdal Oz and generally in all high schools – but 20 years ago this was hardly a consensus view.

When I was president of a shul, I had the opportunity to hire Shayna Goldberg as the first Yoetzet in Teaneck. First, I called Rav Aharon. As a person who was defined by his measured response to nearly everything, he was positively effusive in his praise of Shayna, her intellect, mastery of material and humility. When I asked about communal reticence, he assured me that bringing Shayna would result only in greater Shmirat HaMitzvot, and encouraged me without hesitation.

I had the privilege of handling a number a legal matters for the Lichtensteins. One day, my loyal and dedicated secretary, Flora Matarazzo, came into my office to tell me that my friend, that very nice man from Israel, Aaron, had called. I told Flora that he was not my friend and to please refer to him in the future as Rabbi Lichtenstein. Flora then asked why I always stood at my desk when he called? I had never noticed.

I stood because, like most talmidim, I loved and also feared Rav Lichtenstein. I’ve spent some time considering what it was about this kind man who never threatened a fly that inspired fear. Ultimately, I realize that it was not him I feared, but my own recognition of unmet personal expectations that Rav Aharon’s very presence caused me to confront.

We were a brilliant group of students – truly brilliant minds – but each of acknowledged the obvious that we did not approach his almost other-worldly brilliance. Our intellect made us arrogant, he was humble; we used our gifts as an excuse for sloth, he knew everything and yet remained an incredible masmid; we claimed difficulty in davening, he, without recognizable sin, cried to the Ribono Shel Olam with perfect faith.

He never asked of us anything more than to accept our duties and responsibilities as Ovdei Hashem with integrity, and with Rav Aharon in the front of the Beit Midrash, our aspirations and objectives were clearly established, our unworthiness overt and laid bare.

Can it be? Can it truly be?