
Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, a French-born and American-raised leader of Modern Orthodox Jewry, will receive the Israel Prize in Jewish religious literature this year. The 80-year-old scholar was born in Paris, but grew up in the United States, where he was ordained at Yeshiva University, studied under his father-in-law Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, and received his PhD in English literature from Harvard. In 1971, he moved to Israel at the invitation of Holocaust survivor Rabbi Yehuda Amital to join him at the helm of Yeshivat Har Etzion, a religious Zionist yeshiva in the West Bank region of Gush Etzion. (The area had been inhabited by Jews until they were massacred in 1948, and was resettled after the Six Day War in 1967.)

As dean of the yeshiva, Lichtenstein has educated generations of Israeli and American Orthodox leaders in a humanistic tradition that seeks to combine religious learning and striving with the intellectual fruits of the secular world. His writings in Hebrew and English have become staples of the Modern Orthodox bookshelf, and under his leadership, Har Etzion has opened both an academic teacher’s college and a sister seminary at Migdal Oz run by his daughter Esti Rosenberg, which launched an advanced Talmud and Jewish law institute for women in 2013. Har Etzion’s Virtual Beit Midrash, one of the earliest efforts to teach Torah over the internet, now reaches thousands of subscribers.

Lichtenstein has also distinguished himself on the Israeli scene for his dovish political stances. Together with Amital, he supported the Oslo Accords and subsequent peace process. (A founding father of the religious peace party Meimad, Amital would serve as a minister without portfolio in the government of Shimon Peres.) When several prominent religious leaders in the settlement movement eulogized Baruch Goldstein after he massacred Muslim worshipers in Hebron in 1994, Lichtenstein famously rebuked them. Drawing on his vast Talmudic and halakhic erudition, he has also defended the right of the Israeli government to cede territory under Jewish law, publicly inveighed against price tag attacks against Palestinians, and refuted the rationales for rabbinic bans against selling Israeli land to Arabs.

The Israel Prize will be awarded on May 6, Israel’s Independence Day.