In this section, we celebrate the seventieth birthday of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. Rav Lichtenstein’s impact upon thousands of his talmidim is not due solely to his encyclopedic Torah knowledge. It is also due to his special sensitivity and refinement, which provides a model of an ish hashalem.

In the pages ahead, Shalom Carmy provides a taste of the Brisker method of lomdei and Rav Lichtenstein’s significant contribution to the unfolding of that derech halimmud (methodology). Yitzchak Blau provides a window into Rav Lichtenstein’s thought. Both of these writers—who are disciples of Rav Lichtenstein and talmidei chachamim in their own right—enhance our appreciation of this eminent Torah personality.

Moreover, I believed that Rav Lichtenstein’s shiur had trained me to think in a different way.

Because the canonical records of lomdei are virtually all documented, Krumbein is forced to concentrate on published material, despite the fact that formal writing does not always capture the creation of an original approach or its incubation in the classroom. Published exposition edits that process, omitting the superfluous, suppressing the false starts and often adapting the form to the expectations and needs of students. Hence the study of Brisker methodology requires recourse, not only to text, but also to oral transmission. Krumbein is conscious of these pitfalls, and offers a reasonable argument for his approach (which I will not discuss here). I mention these questions, both in order to whet the reader’s appetite for Krumbein’s articles, some of which are imminently available in English, and to justify my own mingling of memory with allusion to published work in what follows.

L et me note immediately that Krumbein’s proposals about the Rav have not passed uncritically. The most frequently expressed doubts arise from his choice of the central texts to be discussed. He has focused on the two volumes of the Rav’s Shiurim Lezech-er Avi Mor, consisting of public discourses delivered on Rav Moshe Soloveichik’s yahrzeit, rather than the earlier studies printed in Chiddushai HaGraam VehaGrid and Iggerot HaGrid. The youthful works are written in the traditional style of Brisker Torah; the yahrzeit lectures are more discursive. This may be nothing but a reflection of the difference between two purely “scientific” analyses, accessible primarily to fellow initiates, and the drama of the yahrzeit occasion, an exhibition of highly polished oral teaching, intended to clarify major sugya, while fascinates an audience of thousands. If Krumbein is right, however, the variety of styles manifests a crucial development in the Rav’s intellectual agenda: from the conventional approach, in which analysis is triggered by a local difficulty in the text of Gemara or Rambam to a more comprehensive vision, for which a broad range of logical or textual data provokes curiosity, and success is measured by resolving the original problems, but by the formulation of a theoretical perspective, naturally expressed in Brisker vocabulary, that uncovers the deep structure of the halachic area under discussion.

Over the course of my teaching career, it has become common for students, even beginning students, to spend significant time discussing the derech halimmud of their teachers. For me, and I suppose for most of my fellow students in Rav Aharon Lichtenstein’s shiur thirty-five years ago, speculation about method took a back seat to the challenge of mastering the material. This does not mean that we were oblivious to the nature of our training. We knew that the Brisker approach, in which we were being initiated, repeatedly conferred on its practitioners distinctive advantages in the analysis of Gemara and Besho’im. Many of us anticipated “moving up” to Rav Soloveichik’s shiur where we could experience its operation at the highest level. The occasions when our teacher quoted some original insight of the Rav, or the Rav in the name of his father or his grandfather, and our attendance at the Rav’s public lectures (for those proficient in Yiddish) at the Moriah Synagogue and elsewhere, offered a foretaste of that future.

On the Friday evenings when I attempted to convey to my father, z”l, a man who brought to his learning nothing but his sturdy common sense and the conviction that the Gemara ought to be comprehensible, a particularly luminous Merrill of Brisker Torah, I often stumbled in explaining precisely how the novel analysis associated with Brisk amplified my father’s understanding, and then the chiddush crumbled in my unskilled, adolescent hands. The young talmidim shared a kind of boot camp humor regarding the obligatory terminology, the skeleton keys rumored to open every lock: the conceptual discursions, categorizations and formulations we produced, unlike those of our teachers, seemed too facile to resolve real difficulties; judging by the results, they were. These moments of questioning, however, referred not to the derech halimmud itself, but to our grasp of the method and our progress in its deployment. Gaining competence, as the method became second nature, some of us became curious about the scope of its achievement, its limitations and its prospects. During my years in the Rav’s shiur and since then, my friends and I pondered the relationship between the methods and results of Brisker learning and Jewish philosophy and theology, especially in light of the Rav’s own contributions. Some of us considered the place of historical and literary analysis within a framework in which the Brisker conceptual approach remains the primary avenue to the apprehension of devar Hashem. The passage of time also brought home to me that, in significant respects, the Brisker derech taught by Rav Lichtenstein was not quite identical to that transmitted by his teacher and father-in-law. This realization came belatedly, when, after years of hearing the Rav, I was exposed to Rav Lichtenstein’s shiurim again. What had previously appeared to be nuances of presentation, stemming from varying pedagogical emphasis, I now perceived as differing orientations toward fundamental Brisker insights. I am not alone in these discoveries. As we have reflected on our intellectual trajectories, our understanding of the influences that formed us tended to converge. Much credit is due to my classmate Rabbi Elyakim Krumbein. In a series of brilliant articles, he has attempted to trace the unfolding of the Brisker approach from Reb Chaim to the Rav, and from the Rav to Rav Lichtenstein. His generalizations about the Rav and Rav Lichtenstein are reflected in my remarks below.

SpecialSection

Something New in Beit Hamidrash

By Shalom Carmy

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L et me note immediately that Krumbein’s proposals about the Rav have not passed uncritically. The most frequently expressed doubts arise from his choice of the central texts to be discussed. He has focused on the two volumes of the Rav’s Shiurim Lezech-er Avi Mor, consisting of public discourses delivered on Rav Moshe Soloveichik’s yahrzeit, rather than the earlier studies printed in Chiddushai HaGraam VehaGrid and Iggerot HaGrid. The youthful works are written in the traditional style of Brisker Torah; the yahrzeit lectures are more discursive. This may be nothing but a reflection of the difference between two purely “scientific” analyses, accessible primarily to fellow initiates, and the drama of the yahrzeit occasion, an exhibition of highly polished oral teaching, intended to clarify major sugya, while fascinates an audience of thousands. If Krumbein is right, however, the variety of styles manifest...
In the daily shiurim I heard from the Rav, the usual point of departure was the text itself, usually the Gemara, a phrase in Rashi or Rambam's codification. As far as I recall, the Rav did not typically begin with the chakirah; he did not commence by posting conceptual alternatives about the laws that would then be confirmed or refuted by the textual data. The chakirah emerged because his attempts to subject the text to a close reading seemed to invite it. To the average student, the opening discussion did not offer a clear idea of where the chakirah was headed, i.e., what organizing principle we would arrive at by the end of the treatment. There were the memorable times when the Rav re-entered the classroom a day or two after delivering an impressive and audacious overview of the sugya. He then would present the subject from the beginning. Sometimes the trigger for renewed examination was some phrase in a Rishon that he had overheard the first time around; often, however, he was driven by the conviction that there was more to the subject or to the text than he had succeeded in exhausting earlier.

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Occasionally, as the hours passed, and the Rav laboriously produced one formulation after the other, only to reject each one in turn, he gave the impression that he was groping in the dark as much as his students, but that being infinitely better informed, intelligent, and persevering, he would manage to find his way anew in spite of all obstacles.

Part of this display was almost certainly pedagogical. It is a tribute to the Rav's acting skills that when, after two or three hours of struggle, he finally recollected that he had discussed something pertinent to the matter with his father, and triumphantly exclaimed that insight to elucidate the problems facing us; one often did not catch on that he must have known this point all along. Of course it would have been less labor-intensive had he given us “the answer” right at the outset; but doing so would have denied us the opportunity to experience the yeiyah, the strenuousness of Torah, first-hand (well, maybe second-hand).

Fundamentally, the Rav's mode of teaching was a living synthesis of different approaches to the text; yet when you have finished analyzing it, the text is not fully exhausted; it remains intrinsically richer than the analysis, hence irrelevant to any one conceptual grid. It is precisely for this reason that the Rav, and other, and so dramatically, produced validity of the theory is a prolonged affair; meanwhile one's perspective is constrained by its point of origin in the consciousness of the theorist. The more detached survey of possible answers I discovered in Rav Lichtenstein's lectures confirmed the student with a range of conceptual options from the very beginning of his, or her, interpretive undertaking. The student who is not a genius has more reason for confidence that his efforts bring him closer to truth.

We are now fortunate to have in print a substantial and growing body of Rav Lichtenstein's Talmudic teachings. In addition to dozens of articles composed by him in classic rabbinic style, there are four volumes of lectures compiled by students at Yeshivat Har Etzion. The first two books of Shiurei Rav Aharon Lichtenstein tackle the recumbent maaserot Tzavah and Zeraim, providing an overview and introduction to the daunting laws of purity and of sacrifices. The series has recently moved on to more familiar topics: one volume works through Rambam's treatise on indirect tortfeasance (dina degermi) and the four basic claims of the halakhah pertaining to false imputations (halakhot de'al she'at ha'arah). These books are distinguished by a colloquial style uncommon in the yeshivah world. In the preface he contributed to the third volume, Rav Lichtenstein comments on the advantages and drawbacks of standard rabbinic writing, contrasted to the manner of these lecture reconstructions, not failing to remark on the corresponding development of seventeenth-century English prose style from Burton and Milton to Dryden.

The distinctiveness of these lectures is not merely their stylistic accessibility. They are of great use to students because Rav Lichtenstein managed to address the sugya most needed to attain a good grounding in the subject rather than concentrate on passages where he has something original to say. In doing so he is fulfilling Rav Kook's dictum that our age demands sophisticated introductions. What is truly new and important here, however, is the structure of the shiurim. They translate onto the page, and thus inject into the world of lomdei the analysis of “possibilities” that I encountered long ago.

In retrospect, Rav Lichtenstein's distinctive mode of presentation is important for three reasons. First, it objectifies the halachic analysis that applies the form given to it by the Rav. The Rav's method, as I perceived it, leaped with intuitive genius from a localized reading to the status of a general principle. Such an insight is, of course, vulnerable to verification or falsification as the reader tests it against other relevant statements in the corpus. Acquiring the comprehensiveness required to confirm conclusively the one after the other, differing approaches to the same material. Where the statements interpreted are exceptionally ten, there is always the possibility of multiple reconstructions; where a Rishon is discursive (think of a typical passage in Ramban's Milhamot), the existence of separate strands of analysis is almost compulsory. In moving from the initial stages of the Gemara's inquiry (the Avea amina) to the conclusion, the conceptual framework also alters. Unless one wishes to take one possible construction as normative, and to dismiss the value of earlier stages in the saga, the result of a Brisk-oriented investigation is a field of possible interpretations, some of which take on central importance in comprehending the whole, while more peripheral themes can still be heard as undernotes, so to speak. For the Rav's audience, this truth was conveyed through a series of perspectives, with one construction replacing the other, sometimes better, always different. In Rav Lichtenstein's analysis, the student encounters the potential plurality of approaches to the sugya, not consecutively, but in immediate simultaneity. Such an education better equips you to apply this aspect of learning on your own. Lastly, the bibliographical explosion of the past few decades—even if we limit ourselves to the publication of new manuscripts of Rishonim—conflicts the contemporary lektor with an expanded array of preceptual options. The method purports to disclose principles underlying the text; yet when you have finished analyzing it, the text is not fully exhausted; it remains intrinsically richer than the analysis, hence irrelevant to any one conceptual grid. It is precisely for this reason that the Rav, and others, and so dramatically, produced...
My debt to Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, whose student I have been for many years,qualifies me from the objectivity required of a reviewer. Yet the volume itself, Leaves of Faith, a collection of eleven articles, serves as a model for dealing with this dilemma. For all the awe with which Rav Lichtenstein holds for his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, he questions the validity of some of Soloveitchik’s formulations. For all the passion that animates his ideals and positions, Rav Lichtenstein remains a keen critic of methodologies as to how to combat them. Thus, he advocates a difficult struggle to find the proper proportion of two competing ideals. It is not enough to be ambivalent or to compromise. The challenge is to serve one’s people in the army; combining intense focus on Torah studies and gaining the insights granted by Western literature; thinking about methodology and maintaining the romance and mysticism of his religious vision in this world.

Rav Lichtenstein responds with a passionate portrayal of the vibrancy and excitement of Talmud study, where the student enters “a pulsating bet midrash, studded with live protagoni-sts...initially as witness and subsequently as participant.”

In an interesting shift from the abstract world of ideas covered in most of the essays, this volume also includes a practically oriented address to rabbinic alumni. Here, Rav Lichtenstein raises significant pragmatic issues such as salaries of mechanchim and the need for them to take sabbaticals. He suggests that we currently overburden our halachic professionals and that this benefits them. The short essay adds a focus on the significance of language and an argument for the primacy of the humanities over the sciences.

Rav Lichtenstein maintains that every choice in life includes its own pitfalls, and it is judicious and humane to consider the detrimental consequences of a decision making) insensitive to human needs is not just bad but deadly. He illustrates this with a passionate portrayal of the vibrancy and excitement of Talmud study, where the student enters “a pulsating bet midrash, studded with live protagoni-sts...initially as witness and subsequently as participant.”

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Much has been written about the moral and intellectual decline of academia in recent years. In light of our ongoing exploration of the spiritual challenges facing Orthodox youth on campus, we thought it proper to revisit Rav Aharon Lichtenstein’s 1997 essay, “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,” where he presents a penetrating, wide-ranging analysis of Torah Umadda.

In this seminal essay, Rav Lichtenstein himself acknowledges the fact that the “academic scene has changed” in the years since he received his Ph. D. from Harvard. Considering the students and the university atmosphere surrounding them in 2004, does Rav Lichtenstein still believe that all should heed the Ramban’s admonition to “accept truth from whomever it comes?” Does Torah Umadda apply in a postmodern world?

To further this important discussion, we are publishing an analysis of Rav Lichtenstein’s essay by William Kolbrener, who examines the essay in relation to the contemporary academic scene. At the same time, we offer Rav Lichtenstein’s insightful answer, supporting his thesis with keen intellect, refinement and an appreciation of another view.

TORAH UMADDA: A Voice from the Academy

By William Kolbrener

Reflecting upon his youth in Berlin, he felt very much alone with his problems and anxieties. I walked alone in the evenings through the magnificent streets. I admired the solidity of the architecture, the overwhelming drive and power of a dynamic civilization. Suddenly, I noticed the sun had gone down; evening had arrived. From what time may one recite the Shema in the evening, only then to hear the sound of the culture of Athens in the reverberating echoes of Goethe’s famous poem.

Heschel’s reflections upon his youth in Berlin reveal a mind striving for synthesis—immersed both in the languages of what we might call, following Matthew Arnold, Jerusalem and Athens. For as he marvels at the magnificent solidity of Berlin, the inheritance of the culture of Athens, he remembers Jerusalem and the obligation to say Shema in the evening, only then to hear the sound of the culture of Athens in the reverberating echoes of Goethe’s famous poem.

Heschel’s reminiscences provide an opportunity to consider the question of Torah Umadda—that is, the question of the relationship between Torah and secular learning. To be sure, volumes have already been written on the question, and I can promise no new interpretations of sugyot, nor any new historical insights about the manner in which the issue has been treated by the different sages in the Jewish tradition—who have either championed or taken up arms against the cause. My motivation for addressing the subject emerges out of my own experience, first as a graduate student at the English Department at Columbia University, as I struggled to integrate what were, for me, the newly discovered languages of the Jewish tradition within the framework of my secular studies. Later, I would take those struggles further, in the context of yeshivat and kollelim in Jerusalem (some of the former actively advocate the idea of Torah Umadda), as a lecturer at Columbia University and UCLA in the United States and at Ben-Ilan University in Israel, where I continued to negotiate between the sensibilities and ideals represented in the cities of “Athens” and “Jerusalem.” My struggle, then, has not only been personal, but professional. The current essay thus addresses the issue empathetically from the perspective of the posek (halachic decisor) or the community leader, but rather from my own perspective—that of a university lecturer.

Out of the recent discussions of the issue, emerging either from within the actual context of the university or the discourses and genres native to it, have ended by advocating—with whatever qualification—the contemporary pursuit of Torah Umadda. More serious reservations about such a pursuit have been expressed not so much in the languages of the scholar, but rather in the more straightforward and, for some, less accommodating languages of the posek. Responding to this phenomenon in his 1997 article, “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,” Rav Aharon Lichtenstein argues that those who oppose the contemporary pursuit of Torah Umadda have either championed or taken up arms against the cause. As a means of furthering the discussion of “a major hashkafic issue,” he warned in conclusion, “Whoever does not know this material,” he warned in conclusion, “will find it difficult to answer these questions—and hence, is inclined to dismiss them glibly” (267). Given the accidents of my own training and scholarly background, I may be one of a handful of people who are “left,” as Rav Lichtenstein puts it, “to lend a sympathetic ear”—if the prerequisite for such a sympathetic reading means relating to the full range of references which he marshals from both literary and sacred sources (290). (As a matter of my own professional training, I would probably not emerge from “direct experience,” not only of the traditions of Western literature and philosophy, but also of the contemporary university, both as a researcher and instructor. Having said that, I do not come to “damn” secular studies, and certainly not the abstract ideal of Torah Umadda, they do not emerge I hope, out of glibness or lack of familiarity with the literary traditions which he evokes, but rather out of a strong sense of the disparity between the ideal of Torah Umadda and its actual practice in the contemporary university. Rav Lichtenstein argues that those who oppose the contemporary practice of Torah Umadda should lend as “careful an ear” to “those who, out of their direct experience, have covenanted secular studies, as to those who have damned them” (267). My own reflections on Torah Umadda also emerge from “direct experience,” not only of the traditions of Western literature and philosophy, but also of the contemporary university, both as a researcher and instructor. Having said that, I do not come to “damn” secular studies, and certainly not the abstract ideal of Torah Umadda, which has a provenance, but to provide a different voice on the possible promise held out by its contemporary applications—a voice from the academy.

The present essay can provide nothing like a full elaboration of the details of Rav Lichtenstein’s work. Speaking schematically, however, his article views Judaism as having the capacity to perform a dual role—providing, alternative
ly, a pragmatic "supplement" or, in its more ambitious conception, a spiritual "complement" to the life of the ben Torah. To the extent, as he writes, that madda "is a recognizable feature of Jewish community life and a hallmark of halakhic realization, it is an integral element of Torah existence" (232). But further than the pragmatic necessity that talmidim chachamin (Torah scholars) and posekim consult secular wisdom in determining matters of pekudei (halachic decisions), madda has also pragmatic applications in dealing with what he calls, "the broader social scene," and the confrontation between "the normative halakhic order" and "an often intractable human reality" (233). In this sense, madda becomes a pragmatic means of "reaching out to a community that is itself 'suffused with secular values and sensibility'" (254). Awareness of "the Zeitgeist," he affirms, "is a fortiorti essential to other aspects of communal life." Such an awareness "can be vital toward illuminating both the present scene," as well as the "ramifications of prospective courses of action" (256). In the modern world, Rav Lichtenstein implies, madda becomes a kind of prerequisite for communicating with those outside of the fold. As he explains: Witten a relatively homogenous ghettoized community Torah leadership and madda could communicate effectively with its constituents and accurately assess its needs and situations. The situation is quite different when a cultural gap—at times, a chasm—divides the shepherd from his flock. In an age, unlike Lycidas, in which the sheep may not even realize they are being, ministering, imbibing the wisdom of the ancients. Pleistocene people are no longer able to understand the sensibility and language far greater (235).

The mandates of talmud, presumably not only to the unaffiliated, but to the affiliated and the nominally observant, makes "understanding the secular mind" an important precondition for ministering to the needs of the community (236). But even more than providing the means for addressing the pragmatic needs of modern life, it is madda's function to pique in another, more spiritual role for madda—that is, as a spiritual "complement." As he writes, "hokhmah can inform and irritate our spiritual being by rending out its cardinal Torah component ... by expanding our spiritual and intellectual horizons through exposure to other areas of potential religious import" (257).

Before moving on to address these latter more ambitious notions—that is, spiritual—claims for madda as a comple ment, I would like to provide a framework of understanding what Rav Lichtenstein calls the "Zeitgeist." By his own lights, pragmatic realities are crucial; in my own view, they are even precedent. There are, I think, two reasons to hesitate at the enterprise of Torah Umadda as Rav Lichtenstein conceives of it. 1. The nature of our students and the contemporary culture in which they find themselves and 2. More fundamentally, the nature of the university and the forms of attention and inquiry that it encourages. My first hesitation emerges from the very text, cited above, which Rav Lichtenstein employs to forward his argument. The simple question emerges: Lycidas!! Our age is certainly unlike that of Milton's poet, a shepherd of yesteryear (who stood as a figure for a classmate who died at sea), but for whom does the reference to Milton's great poem provide anything like a meaningful resonance? This may seem like a local, if not a minor, point to make, but it stands for demonstrating the disparity between Rav Lichtenstein's conception of the current zeitgeist and the actual facts of the matter. Which is to say, even assuming that understanding the zeitgeist would be an indispensable component of relating to an ungenerate "flock," does knowledge of Milton's poetry actually lead to the desired worldview? Rav Lichtenstein's own prose provides an unbelievable range of literary and philosophical reference. But when Rav Lichtenstein asks, "Can anyone read R.W. Chambers's Man's Inconquerable Mind without feeling both humbled and inspired by the high intellect and what he would be surprised to discover that a book named after one of his poems is suffused with 'religious humanism'?

Indeed "Lycidas" seems very foreign to a contemporary sensibility. In my own experience, when addressing a group of students from a Modern Orthodox yeshivah in Jerusalem, I was surprised at the resistance that I had elicited through my comments about Torah Umadda (which reflected some of the reservations that I am mentioning here). The casual gathering that I was, I pressed harder to find them interested in understanding the "academic scene" to the pursuit of secular studies. For one, as it turned out, most of those present had been, at some time or another, talmidim (students) of talmidim of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Though most of them did, in fact, stand up for that, I could not help but think that in rearing the academicians to whom he devotes "one more letter" (24) to understand the sensibility and language far greater (235)....
of Torah into its mere "the death of the author." Rav Lichtenstein's works all give the sense—whether he is occupied in Torah or midrash—a profound and personal meaning to be encountered. In the postmodern academy, the very attitude—call it that of the secular humanist or that of the classicist—has been deemed outmoded, and replaced: The hermeneutics of suspicion reigns. One cannot help but point out the irony that a postmodernist methodically repudiates a commitment to cultural difference, entails nothing like a real openness to different cultures. Rather than actually being receptive to the voice of different cultures, some of the advocates of multiculturalism simply repeat their critical mantra—wholesale or selective—on their own value systems on texts which they never really encounter. A pedagogy that pretends engagement with difference and with other cultures is narcissistically enclosed and disengaged.

Having said all of this against the hermeneutics of suspicion, there may be pitfalls awaiting those who remain committed to midrash in the current generation, for even the older values of the secular humanist may have their dangers. To be sure, we can find much to value, for example, in relating to Milton's prose (Rav Lichtenstein and I, again, as a meta-statement, can only be purblind). We may read with approval the passage which Rav Lichtenstein cites from Of Education:

"...the end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to God that which, through some of that knowledge to love him, as instanced in the very moment, by possessing our souls of this true virtue, which, being united to the human and to the divine at once, makes up the highest perfection (cited on 250)."

Or, we may take solace in Milton's description of Samson's blindness, as Rav Lichtenstein himself did when his father lectured on the humanistic or human elements of his poem, but upon his profound Christian commitment as well. As a result, any reading of Paradise Lost that would account for the author's intention in writing such a poem into account is Milton's continued Christocentric references, and a version of salvation history that is radically antithetical to normative Jewish accounts. The very first lines of the poem affirm that the "rav of our first parents" will be overcome, finally not only through learning (as per the passage above from Of Education), but through the agency of "one greater man." Miltonic typology—the literary means of assimilating Judaism under the rubric of Christian figures and Christian history—recurs as a poetic strategy throughout the poem. By the end of a semester-long course on Milton's work, one of my more religious students confessed to feeling almost suffused by the sheer act of composition of religious and Christian perspectives as a means of coming to terms with and understanding the epic voice of Milton's poem.

Of course, Rav Lichtenstein writes throughout his work of the necessity of evaluating literature from a definitive, moral and theological standpoint, and further that religious "teachers should scrutinize their reading," especially those "works of imagination" that have "their own explicit ethical and theological standards." For a university instructor, incorporating such a strategy would entail affording students the sense of the dissolved by the disciplines (285) and that of the texts which they encounter. The university, as it is currently conceived, even a religious university, does not always allow students, within the structure of a classroom, to foreground their own "moral and theological" perspectives. Rav Lichtenstein may have an overly simplistic notion of the moral and theological standpoint, for the very act of comparison often jades a sense of uniqueness, "laying a relativistic pluralism to bear its head." Comparative studies, he continues, without the requisite sense of the singularity of Torah, "can be both doctrinally and experientially unsettling" (270-77).

My experience in the university certainly confirms Rav Lichtenstein's fears. Two representative examples: A religious student informed me that she studied the Oration on the Mind, and found herself outside of, and unaddressed by, the tradition which she had once counted herself a part. A graduate student from an American university wrote me that after having immersed himself in Rav Lichtenstein's philosophy, he decided to pursue his research in an academic framework. In the process of that research, in the context of a university philosophy department, however, he would find himself questioning the foundations of what he called "Orthodoxy." For him, the rabbis' constant need to maintain the "necessity" of an academic context, embracing the perspective and standards of academic disciplines led to finding himself no longer addressed by the tradition, but looking at it, analyzing it from outside. In this sense, the perspective implicit in the contemporary university could turn the figurative function of turning the learning of Torah into its mere study.

Even when Torah is not on the curriculum, the perspective implicit in academic study can have its impact. For the contemporary university—with its "votaries of objectivity" (the philosophy department, for example)7 and its "votaries of subjectivity" (the Hebrew department, for example)—calls "the votaries of objectivity" provide a more threatening example to labor long and engrossing hours in order to eat lamb chops, drive a Volvo, or vacation in St. Moritz, but illicit to devote those hours instead to exploring, with Plato or Goethe, "views of thought and experience" (270). Indeed, I share Rav Lichtenstein's concern that his student may be, if not completelyalborged to labor long and engrossing hours in order to eat lamb chops, drive a Volvo, or vacation in St. Moritz, but illicit to devote those hours instead to exploring, with Plato or Goethe, "views of thought and experience" (270). Indeed, I share Rav Lichtenstein's concern that his student may be, if not completely

For Rav Lichtenstein, engagement is the given; the risks of Torat Umadda a matter of "detail"; and the problems associated with the pursuit of midrash more likely "innocuous" (265). I would suggest, however, that what Rav Lichtenstein himself considers to be the basic starting point of midrash, an unqualified commitment to Torah, remains in today's world a position that can only be acquired and maintained—with an extraordinary vigilance—and not one, in but every sector of the observant world. That is to say, I do not demur from Rav Lichtenstein's recognition that the hermeneutics of suspicion is, in an academic context, disengage...
other frequencies, whether it be other literary and philosophi-
cal traditions, or more likely, in today’s world, a contempo-
rary culture of entertainment. That is to say, it’s not only the
matter of negotiating a quantity of different influences, but
mastering and maintaining one’s engagement—of receptivity
and openness to the voice of Torah. Internalizing the impor-
tance of the precedent commitment of Torah, embodied by
Klat Yisrael at Har Sinai with the affirmation of na’aseh nisumah,
may be, in the current gener-
ation, an act of disengagement underestima-
ed—difficulty. Torah Umadda may be an ideal, even as Rav
Lichtenstein views it, requiring a balance between different
realms, too difficult for the current generation to sustain. 15
In the 1950s and early 1960s, Torah found itself, in America,
at home in a culture that was hospitable to the ideals of religion
humanism; the problem of synthesis may have been a genuine
anxiety for that generation. The chore of the current genera-
tion—in a very different climate—may require not synthesis,
but rather simply maintaining the forms of attention required to
receive and transmit the Torah, Hochel in the perspective
embodied in the piece I cited at the outset, rejects the words of
Geography and the pagan perspective they entailed, choosing
instead a relation to Torah and “the word of God.” The question
for the current generation is which of the many voices
now broadcasting will come in most clearly? When the younger
generation tunes in—if it does so at all—will it be to Torah? 16

Notes
1. Alain’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism (New
York, 1954), 96.
2. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Torah and General Culture: Confluen-
tence and Conflict” Judaism’s Encounter with Other
Cultures, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (New Jersey, 1997), 220-292
(further references to this article are cited internally). For
further discussions of Torah Umadda, see the sources cited by
Rav Lichtenstein, pp. 221-224, note 8 and in the
same volume: Gerald Blidstein, “Rabbinic Judaism and
General Culture: Normative Discussion and Attributes”, David
Berger, “Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early
Modern Times,” 57-140 and Z. Lerman, “Rabbinic
Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in
Western and Central Europe,” 143-216. See also Yehudah
Levi, Torah Study (Jerusalem, 2002), esp. pp. 237-274, as well
as Rav Lichtenstein’s Torah Chachmah in Tovah Chachmah
Mamelchet Kohenim Vegoy Kadosh (Jerusalem, 1989), 25-42,
and his collection of essays Levesh of Faith (New Jersey, 2003).
3. Given that the arguments here are informed, primarily,
by my own experiences in the university. I limit the discussion here
to madda conceived as the humanities—that is the classical liter-
ary and philosophical texts of the Western tradition. Rav
Lichtenstein himself documents the dispute among poskim about
whether madda itself includes only the sciences or the humanities
as well. It should be mentioned that Rav Lichtenstein provides an
extremely compelling argument for the more inclusive version of
the principle (220 note 1, 238-230). This is to emphasize that my
reluctance to advocate Torah Umadda emerges not out of a
sense of the intrinsic deficiency of madda, but rather out of the
social and educational contexts in which madda is disseminated.
4. Rabbi Nathan Kamenetsky, The Making of a Gdol
(Jerusalem, 2002), I, p. 280.
5. Lichtenstein did not, as some suggest, write his doctoral
thesis on Milton, but on his later contemporary, the philoso-
pher Henry More. Rav Lichtenstein’s classic Henry More, The
Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist (Cambridge, 1962)
remains the authoritative text on the subject.
6. From a letter from Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori dated 10
December 1513 and anthologized in Maynard Mack, ed., The
Northern Renaissance (New York, 1993), 1235.
7. For such a perspective, see Perry Eagleton, The Ideology of
8. See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” The Book
History Reader, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McChery
(London, 2002), 221-224; also in the same volume Michel
Foucault, “What is an Author?”, 225-230.
9. For Rav Lichtenstein’s own views about the study of
madda, and the precautions and prerequisites necessary for such
a course of study, see his, Torah Chachmah, 37-39.
11. Despite the advocacy of madda throughout his essay, there
are qualifications throughout: “Admittedly,” he writes, “it is con-
ceivable that even with the best safeguards, the encounter
with madda may lead some astray. Given mass exposure,” he
continues, “it is likely that not all will be able to sustain the tension
balance between respective realms. This, in turn, raises the obvious ques-
tion as to whether the pursuit of general culture can be justified,
regardless how worthwhile.” “By the same token,” he continues, “if
we are told that madda’s overall enrichment of our culture
spiritual life was conditional upon the apostasy of specific individ-
uals, we would certainly forgo its contribution. We should then
assert with C.S. Lewis that the salvation of a single soul is more
important than the production or preservation of all the epic and
tragery in the world. At the statistical plane, however, even if one
recognizes sadly, that caves notwithstanding, some will probably
lapse, the advocacy of Torah Umadda can very well still be sus-
tained, depending, of course, on the overall balance of gain and
loss” (286). The extent of the qualifications seems, in some sense,
to overwhelm the force of Rav Lichtenstein’s own conclusions.
12. Rav Lichtenstein refers to this phenomenon in Torah
Chachmah as “tiller whatever at hand”—“cold academic clarity” (37).
13. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Kol Dodi Dofek: It is the Voice
of My Beloved that Knocks,” Theological and Halachic
Reflections on the Holocaust, Bernhard H. Rosenberg, ed. (New
Jersey, 1992), 51. For the argument that The Halakhic Mind seeks
to undermine attitudes of disengagement associated with perspec-
tives in both the sciences and humanities, see my “Towards a
Genuine Jewish Philosophy: Halakhic Mind’s New Philosophy of
14. Rav Lichtenstein adds that many of the daughters of
geulah of the previous generation went to university, apparently
with the approval of their fathers; however, he adds, “here’s less
of the moral and religious damages attendant upon exposure to
secular culture”, nevertheless, he writes, “they evidently felt
they could be overcome” (274). One wonders, however, if such
godliness would advocate such a cornerstone given the current configu-
ration of the university.
15. There may be, of course, exceptions to the rule. As
Rav Lichtenstein himself acknowledges (though I think with
unnecessary understatement) Rabbam is a “special case,”
and one can in no way extrapolate success for the ideal on the
basis of Rambam’s own commitments. The problem, in my
view, is not necessarily with individual cases, but with a culture that seems to advocate Torah Umadda as an
ideal. (Indeed in Torah Chachmah, Rav Lichtenstein suggests
that “great souls” are not in need of the “compensation” of
chachmah, but that “most of us” need to avail ourselves of secu-
lar wisdom as a means of fully appreciating Torah [53].)
Further, even the question of tidy wedus may be simpler to
address in theory than in actual practice. Rav Lichtenstein
writes of the necessity of establishing a “functional relation
between the depth of one’s Torah roots and the range of his
cultural branches.” The “linkage between the twin variables
of Torah stature and cultural exposure,” he continues, “is obvious,
the more sensitive and problematic the material.
The greater the caution and selectivity with which it is to be
approached” (282). Yet the pragmatic measure of curricular
material, and the actual exercise of principles of “selectivi-
ity,” from my perspective, may not be so easily conducted
within the framework of the university.
16. I am grateful to the following for their responses to early drafts
of this piece: Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, Yosaf Kamenetsky, Dov
Foster, Mendel Horowitz and Professor Michael Kramer. The perspec-
tive represented here, however, does not necessarily reflect their views.

Humanistic culture can be of value in molding spiri-
tual personality and moral identity.

risks—the cost-benefit ratio, if you will—of any projected syn-
thetic; determination of priorities and the appointment of ener-
gies; the psychological and sociological impact of differing rela-
tions to ambient general culture—these are all issues which need to be candidly confronted by the philosophic devotees of
synthetic integration no less than by its detractors. These two aspects are clearly related and yet, they are both

To Sharpen Your Thinking

By Aharon Lichtenstein

Dr. Kolbrenner’s critique of my essay is unquestionably framed within the language and context of what Coventry Patmore denounced “the traditions of civili-
ty.” It is learned, urbane, deferential, cogently argued and suf-
fused with sensitivity, intelligence and commitment. If I must tilt swords with an ideological adversary, may it be with the likes of this
ben Torah enounced in the halls of academia.

But, must we, and do, indeed til? Dr. Kolbrenner appears to have come my essay quite thoroughly, as he quotes chapter and verse from it, frequently and precisely.

For some reason however, its introductory paragraphs appear to have escaped his scrutiny. Inasmuch, however, as I regard their content as essential to an evaluation of Dr.
Kolbrenner’s rejoinder—which, in principle, they anticipat-
ed—I take the liberty of citing them here. The question of this and general culture bears a dual
aspect. Its core is clearly ideological. The relation, respectively, of reason and revelation, the optional and the normative, the tem-
poral and the transcendental, secularity and sacrality, diversity
and uniformity, and, above all, of man and his Creator—these
are obviously the primary components. Philosophy and theology
aside, however, we are confronted by a second, no less impor-
tant, element—practical, and particularly educational, in
nature. How well, if at all, can Torah and secular wisdom meld
within a single personality or institution, the promise and

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conceptually distinct and operationally divisible. One may regard the integration of Torah and wisdom as not only legitimate but optimal, and yet hold that, within the context of an overwhelmingly secular modern culture, it is general-
ity best foregone. However, one may subscribe to the purist ideal of compre-
hsive singleminded devotion to talmud Torah and yet favor an integrated curriculum as an accommodating conces-
sion to the Zeitgeist. What is certain is that Torah educators must ignore either aspect at their—and, more importantly, their stu-
dents’—peril. We must be committed to an awareness of the context to which and within which it is to be applied.

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