

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

Portion of Acharei Mot-Kedoshim

Loss: a void that can never really be filled; a loss which is much more than personal; it is generational. We have lost the greatest of us, and now truly, we are an orphaned generation. With the passing of Harav ha'Gaon HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein z"tzal, one of the great lights of our generation has passed from this world.

It is no accident that the double portion of *Acharei Mot-Kedoshim* (literally 'after the death of the holy ones') was read this past Shabbat in Israel and this coming Shabbat overseas, marking the Shabbat of his passing and then the Shabbat after the traditional seven days of mourning concluded, as his Torah and his teachings deeply impacted our generation both in Israel and abroad; but he had decided long ago, that Israel came first.

I can still remember, quite vividly, my first encounter with Rav Aharon : I was a seventeen year old senior in High school and had applied to study the following year at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Gush Etzion (known affectionately as 'Gush') and was invited to Gush's NY office for an interview w Rav Lichtenstein. I was terrified. I'd been told I would be quizzed on the *Gemara* I was learning, and had prepared a particular piece, but was never asked to let anyone know which folio and topic, or even of which tractate I would like to read until I was actually sitting in front of Rav Lichtenstein, because it did not matter.

As soon as I came into the office and sat down, seeing I was holding a volume of Talmud, he asked me to start reading and began to grill me on the ins and outs of the particular topic I had chosen to read, and very soon our discussion began to wander to various other folios first in that same tractate and gradually in other tractates. And the entire time Rav Lichtenstein did not have a tractate in front of him, he simply quoted from memory.

I remember there was very little small talk; it was all Torah and he was quoting entirely from memory. It was an awe- inspiring experience. By the time the interview was finished, I was drenched in sweat, and left his office in complete awe; it was all Torah, all the time. And the message I got as a young seventeen year old in 1981 was that if accepted , I needed to understand this was a serious decision to embark on a journey of intense Torah study, with no nonsense.

I had been blessed with some Rebbeim (teachers) with whom I was very close, some of whom I am still close with; but on that day I discovered a Rebbe of whom I could be in awe.

Rav Lichtenstein's principles both religiously in general, and with regards to the dedication one must apply to achieve proficiency in Torah study, were unbending, extremely demanding, and even legendary.

His *shiurim* (classes) could sometimes go on for hours and the effort to concentrate and follow his brilliant analyses and intricate organizational structures within the Talmudic exegesis at which he so proficiently excelled, produced a level of excellence in Torah study that remains unparalleled. Notably, he was particularly uncompromising with regards to the exhausting pursuit of a complete understanding of any topic, which often resulted in lengthy lectures.

This was often a challenge for many of the students at his Friday morning classes. Often students would have plans to travel for Shabbat, and would miss the bus to Jerusalem due to the long duration of his

shiurim, causing some to slip out the back of the classroom to catch the bus while Rav Lichtenstein was peering into a commentary in front of him. (Years later, in discussion with him, I discovered Rav Lichtenstein was quite aware of this phenomenon...)

One week, on a winter Friday, word spread that one of the more senior students had bravely asked Rav Lichtenstein if he could perhaps end his lecture in time for students to make the 10:40 am bus (which would allow students traveling further than Jerusalem to catch connecting buses and arrive home with more time to spare before the earlier winter arrival of Shabbat.) Apparently Rav Lichtenstein, upon hearing the request, smiled and nodded, so we were all waiting to see whether the *shiur* would end early; the student who had asked was already a hero!

I can still remember the exact moment, at precisely 10:30 am, when Rav Lichtenstein paused in the midst of his lecture and recalled the request:

“One of the students approached me earlier to ask if we could finish the shiur (class) by 10:30 to allow some of you to make an earlier bus; to be honest I did not understand the question; the shiur will end when we are finished w the sugya (topic)!”

After which Rav Lichtenstein proceeded to give one of the longest *shiurim* I ever heard him give: for hours! **Message received.**

In Rav Lichtenstein’s world view there was absolutely no compromising in Torah; Rav Lichtenstein succeeded in instilling in us, his students, an insatiable and uncompromising desire for excellence in Torah study; a principle he modelled for us in the way he taught, the way he learned, and the way he lived everything he did.

I recall during a *shiur klali* (lecture to the entire yeshiva) in June of 1982 seeing a phenomenal example of this ideal. Every Tuesday afternoon in yeshiva, one of the *Roshei Yeshiva* (alternating between Rav Amital z”l and Rav Lichtenstein z”l) would give a *shiur* to the entire yeshiva after *mincha*.

This particular Tuesday was a couple of days after the start of the Lebanon War, and in the middle of the lecture a couple of F-16’s heading north streaked so low over the yeshiva that the building shook. I remember it seemed they were going to land on us, and it was so loud and so unexpected that I recall seeing Rav Lichtenstein instinctively stoop down and reach up to hold his *kippah* on his head as if the planes might hit us, **but he did not even pause what he was saying; the lecture continued unabated** without even so much as a pause or an acknowledgement; nothing could be allowed to interrupt Torah study. **Message received.**

And then there was Rav Lichtenstein’s commitment to the respect of different points of view. In the aftermath of the Lebanon War (in the early eighties) Rav Lichtenstein, along with Rav Amital, were both worried about the implications of a growing cacophony of voices in the national religious camp calling for expanding Israel’s borders to include portions of Lebanon historically considered part of Biblical Israel (and now captured by the IDF) without regard for the potential loss of life and sacrifice such decisions might entail militarily alongside the potential divisiveness of such a process.

As such, they called for the community to desist from such calls and were involved in the founding of a political group advocating for peace with the Arabs, even at the expense of giving up Israeli territory.

A good number of students in the yeshiva were quite upset with this approach and were quite vocal about their opposition to this idea, even posting a petition on the bulletin board expressing their struggle.

This of course resulted in other students becoming quite vocal as well in their opposition to students daring to oppose the opinion of the *Roshei Yeshiva*.

Rav Lichtenstein, in response, gave a lengthy *shiur* on the merits of learning Torah in an environment that promoted public discourse and encouraged a healthy dialogue and even disagreement on such issues, even and especially allowing for students to express a viewpoint different from their *Roshei Yeshivas*, as long as all the opinions existed within the framework of Torah and a commitment to Jewish tradition. How refreshing; a Rosh Yeshiva who actually encouraged his students to disagree with him, and who actually valued their opinion and considered what they had to say! **Message received.**

In 1984, after completing the initial period of my *Hesder* army service, I was invited to the Officer's course and went to the Lichtenstein home one evening to get his permission and blessing for an endeavor that would necessitate leaving yeshiva and Torah study for a significant period of time (years).

Rav Lichtenstein had told me to come by his home at 10pm. Arriving a few minutes early, Mrs. (Dr. Tova) Lichtenstein answered the door and told me the Rav would be with me in a moment. Standing in the hallway waiting, I heard Rav Lichtenstein's distinctive voice coming out of the partially opened door of his study. Clearly he was in the midst of a *sugya* (passage of *Gemara*) with a *chavrusa* (study partner) and discussing a debate between some of the medieval commentators. Trying to follow the flow of the discussion I could not resist peering through the partially opened door to see who was sharp enough and merited a *chavrusa* with Rav Lichtenstein in his home at 10PM. It was his son Shai, who at the time could not have been more than 11 or 12 years old! To this day, when balancing the priorities of students, work, and family, that image remains foremost in my mind. **Message received.**

There is so much more to share regarding our Rosh Yeshiva, but words will never suffice to convey the tremendous sense of gratitude we owe, and I owe personally to our Rebbe and Rosh Yeshiva who nurtured us on the mother's milk of Torah and Talmudic excellence and whose life was a living model of what Torah living was meant to produce. It is impossible to comprehend that he is gone, and that I will never have the privilege of hearing a *shiur* from him in person again. (I will forever remain indebted to Rav Yitzchak Blau who, a couple of months ago, shared with me that Rav Lichtenstein was still giving a Shabbat afternoon *shiur* in his home enabling me to walk over from Efrat and hear one last *shiur* from our Rosh Yeshiva.)

And yet, the awe of Torah and pure *Yirat Shamayim* he modeled will live on, in the hearts, actions, and especially the Torah study of his thousands of students, forever.

Indeed, one of the great lights of our generation has passed from this world, but it is not extinguished. If anything, it is a light which will continue to burn brightly and even ever brighter, having illuminated the path for an entire generation of Torah scholarship, and Jewish leadership. Truly, we have lost the greatest of us; and we are now an orphaned generation, but we are and will forever remain the richer for having been blessed to bask in the glory of his Torah and his life.

Yehi nishmato tzrura be'tzror ha'chaim; May his soul be ever-entwined with the soul of life and all of us, through whom, *be'ezrat Hashem*, his words will continue to impact and ensure a better world....

Yehi zichro baruch.

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