

Reflections on R' Aharon Lichtenstein from a student of R' Yitz Greenberg

Rabbi Josh Feigelson
Kol Sasson Congregation
Shabbat Tazria-Metzora 5775

As I woke up on Monday morning and scrolled through the Facebook postings of my Israeli friends that had accumulated overnight, I discovered quickly that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein had died. So many of my teachers, friends, and colleagues have been students of Rav Aharon at Yeshivat Har Etzion, Yeshiva University, or both. Where his father-in-law Rav Soloveitchik was known to his students as the Rav, Rav Aharon's students referred to him as "the Rosh Yeshiva." As Alan Brill wrote about him several years ago in the Edah Journal, "Orthodox Jews of all leanings, myself included, have the deepest respect for, even awe of, R. Lichtenstein's piety, learning, and humanity. He is the ideal *rosh yeshivah*—erudite, humble, and moral."

I was not a student of Rav Aharon, so I do not mourn him as a rebbe. But anyone who has studied in the—admittedly small, but nonetheless thick—world of Modern Orthodox yeshivot, has encountered Rav Aharon's writings, and even more so his students, who number in the thousands. And so all throughout Monday, I was filled with a general sense of sadness—the sadness you feel when you know your friends are in pain, the sadness one feels when the world has lost a *Gadol baTorah*.

And yet I also feel I know Rav Lichtenstein in one particular, and perhaps unusual way. And that is as the *bar-plugta*, the interlocutor, with Rabbi Yitz Greenberg in a famous debate that took place in the pages of the YU student newspaper, *The Commentator*, a *yovel* ago in 1966. I wrote a chapter of my dissertation on this debate, the latest in a small—but nonetheless thick!—group of scholars who have examined it. And yet, I'll admit that, try as I did, my view of that debate was ultimately colored by my *rebbe-talmid* relationship with Yitz. That is to say, I'm not sure I gave R' Aharon's arguments their full due. And in the wake of his death, I find myself drawn to try to do a better job. So please indulge me for a few minutes.

First, some background on the Greenberg-Lichtenstein debate. It all started on April 28, 1966, when the *Commentator* published a long article under the headline,

“Dr. Greenberg Discusses Orthodoxy, YU, Viet Nam, & Sex.” Written by freshman student Harold (Hillel) Goldberg, the interview with Prof. Yitz Greenberg spanned 4,000 words spread over four broadsheet pages, during the course of which the YU history professor posed serious challenges to prevailing sensibilities at YU about Jewish theology, Biblical criticism, the idea of Jews as the Chosen People, Jewish pluralism, and the application of *halakha* to contemporary political and social issues, including Vietnam, the war on poverty, consumerism, and sex.

The interview provoked an intense reaction, most notably a lengthy open letter to Greenberg in the same paper a month later by Lichtenstein, who was a prominent contemporary of and fellow rabbi-professor at YU with Greenberg. Both Lichtenstein and Greenberg had similar pedigrees: yeshiva education, rabbinic ordination, Harvard PhDs (Greenberg in history, Lichtenstein in philosophy masquerading as English Literature). Both were hired to the YU faculty in the late 1950s, while still in their twenties, as the university sought to “upgrade” its faculty with professors who were simultaneously deeply immersed in Torah learning and had first-rate American academic credentials. By 1966, Lichtenstein had moved into full-time teaching in the yeshiva part of the university, and by any account he was then, and remained throughout his life, a more significant *talmid chacham* than Greenberg.

In the history of YU and Modern Orthodoxy, the Greenberg-Lichtenstein exchange is still understood as a signal event, a moment when Modern Orthodoxy defined itself—with Greenberg’s vision rejected. To Greenberg and his sympathizers, it marked a key moment in the gradual “move to the right” at YU and in its associated communities that occurred over the 1960s and 70s. To others, it was an important affirmation that YU would see itself primarily as a yeshiva, and would resist efforts to move Orthodoxy “to the left.”

Yet the left-right language doesn’t really get at what was going on in this debate. Both Greenberg and Lichtenstein, for instance, were outspoken in favor of the Civil Rights movement, and later in the decade they would both speak out against the Vietnam War, and even teach during moratoriums held at YU. While they debated the extent to which American Jews should get involved in general social and political issues of the day, both of them were liberal thinkers (with a lower-case l) who sought to bring together western and Jewish thought; both were committed

Zionists who saw profound significance in the state of Israel; and both advocated for the capacity of *halakha* and Jewish tradition to answer the challenges of modernity.

I believe, and have written, that the crux of their debate had to do with their respective understandings of history—how we relate to the past, and how that inflects our relationship with the divine and the world in the present. But that’s an argument I’ve made after much analysis (I’m happy to share a copy of the 35 page chapter if you’re interested). On the surface, the disagreement between Greenberg and Lichtenstein was about both tone and intellectual rigor. And given that this is a short dvar Torah, I’d like to spend my remaining time talking about these issues.

In the initial interview, what proved most controversial, and occupied the bulk of the interview, was Greenberg’s statement that Orthodox rabbis should make “a thorough re-examination of the *Shulchan Arukh*.” “The purpose of *halachah* is to transform the mundane into the holy by the utilization of the *halachah* which applies to any given experience,” he argued. “But today, there are some experiences which *halachah* doesn’t cover adequately, and we are unwilling to apply many *halachot* that deal with contemporary problems. The *Poskim* aren’t meeting their responsibility in updating and fully applying our law codes. This inaction represents a denial of one of the basic tenets of Judaism: that our tradition may be applied to any situation. In short, the *halachah* has broken down.”

In addition to the war in Vietnam and governmental social welfare policy, the chief area that Greenberg highlighted as in need of an *halakhic* update was sex. Here’s one of the key paragraphs: “Today the *Poskim* should recognize that there is nothing wrong with sex per se, and should promulgate a new value system and corresponding new *halachot* about sex. The basis of the new value system should be the concept that experiencing a woman as a *zelem Elokim* is a *mitzvah* just as much as praying in *Shul*. The *Poskim* should teach people that the depth of one’s sexual relationship should reflect the depth of his encounter. Sex has come to be considered as a secular activity only because *Poskim* have abdicated their responsibility in examining its true meaning.”

By his own admission, in this paragraph and the ones surrounding it, Greenberg did a lousy job of clarifying whether he was talking about halakhically approving of

unmarried people having sex. It certainly sounded like he was. And so two weeks later, he wrote a long letter to the editor to clarify that, in fact, he was only talking about sex within marriage, and then going on to defend his position.

Two weeks after this, in the final *Commentator* issue of the year, Lichtenstein wrote his own 5,000-word open letter (“Dear Yitzchak:”). Lichtenstein differed with Greenberg on three key points. First, he did not view Jewish settlement in America with the same enthusiasm as Greenberg. “I do not think that we should immerse ourselves in American society to the extent you seem to advocate,” he wrote. “Our primary goal must be the more selfish—yes, selfish—one of surviving as a viable tradition; and I simply cannot buy your thesis that this can be better done by much greater involvement in American political life.”

Second, Lichtenstein was deeply unsettled by Greenberg’s forceful, even brusque, language of rejection of the past. Lichtenstein defended the *Poskim* whom Greenberg berated. “Were they so obtuse” he asked, “as to overlook the fact that even when conception is impossible, *onah*, periodic marital relations, is obligatory *mid’oraita*?” Lichtenstein proceeded down a lengthy list of laws about the conjugal rights and responsibilities of wives and husbands, underscoring his point that the legal luminaries Greenberg castigated for failing to articulate a positive sex ethic in fact did just that. He reiterated throughout his letter his objection to “the strident tone of much of the critique of contemporary Orthodoxy and some of its *Halachic* leaders.”

Third, Lichtenstein took issue with Greenberg’s discussion of these issues in public. “There is a basic distinction between discussion and publication,” he wrote. “Horace’s dictum about waiting nine years between writing and publication may be too severe. But the underlying principle is sound. We would do better to do more tentative groping orally before rushing into print.” Lichtenstein argued for exploring ideas in “fluid forms of inquiry and discourse (although even then with caution) before encasing our gropings in the hard cast of print.” Lichtenstein here reflected Greenberg wasn’t engaging in a simple thought experiment; by exploring these issues in the paper, he was engaging in politics.

Beyond these disagreements, Lichtenstein took Greenberg to task strongly for being sloppy with his language, for failing to show sufficient care with his words.

Regarding the specific issue of the passage about sex, Lichtenstein observed, “Anyone reading the original article... would naturally have assumed that the hue and cry about new *halachot* had to involve significant departures in the only area in which departures could make a real difference—the premarital.” Greenberg, Lichtenstein suggested, was being at best careless, and at worst mendacious.

More broadly, he agreed that “basic problems should be discussed. A Torah-*Halachic Weltanschauung* vis-a-vis contemporary problems does need to be formulated and expressed.” In any yeshiva, students must integrate the world as they encounter it into a total Jewish worldview. And at Yeshiva University, with its motto of *Torah u-Madda*, it was especially important. Yet precisely because of YU’s vision of integrating the sacred and the secular, professors at YU “incur a collective debt to [the students] and to ourselves to help them grasp the relation—be it one of complement, irreconcilable conflict, or fruitful tensions—between *Torah* and a given aspect of *Madda*. To place the full burden of integrating two worlds upon the individual student is neither fair to him nor in the best general interest of *Halachic* Judaism.”

Thus, Lichtenstein argued, a professor like Greenberg—much less one as popular and influential as Greenberg was at the time—who engages in public discussion of sensitive issues, “assumes a double obligation: of inquiry and expression. He is morally bound both to come as close as possible to the truth and to be as accurate as possible in communicating that truth... And of course the more serious the problem, the greater the responsibility to be precise—or, if need be, to remain silent.” The souls of students were in their hands, Lichtenstein argued (“we are dealing with human lives and their spiritual destinies”), and thus Greenberg should have been more careful, measured, and deliberate in his choice of words. With his radical rhetoric, Lichtenstein suggested, Greenberg risked shattering the carefully constructed and maintained modern-Orthodox identities of YU’s students. “Where the reality of error is genuinely regarded as a disaster,” Lichtenstein concluded, “its possibility will be neither lightly regarded nor easily dismissed. How much margin of error is allowed on the Gemini flights?” By implication, Greenberg, with his forceful rhetoric and perceived push against the tradition, was bringing about a catastrophe.

In my read of this debate, I have long been drawn more to Yitz's side, as I would imagine many of us here likely are. The issues of applying halakha to new social configurations, particularly ones around sex and gender, are part of the *raison d'être* of this minyan, and of the broader community of Orthodox feminism (of which Yitz, and particularly his wife Blu, are *gedolim*). And yet, particularly in light of the death of Aharon Lichtenstein, it behooves us to listen to this critique, and to acknowledge that it, too, contains truth. Those of us who want to argue that halakha supports our position have the responsibility to study, to learn, to think, and to present our case in a way that conveys not only our moral passion, but our reverence for halakha, for Talmud Torah, and for the *mesora* that has been entrusted to us. Language matters. Tone matters. Style matters. And most of all, intellectual rigor matters.

In the days since R' Aharon's passing, many of his former students have written hespedim, and virtually all of them have said similar things: he was a truly pious man of astonishing intellect. Many have written about how understanding he was when they spoke with him about their spiritual and religious struggles, about how he helped them to live with the questions rather than seek pat answers. But what has particularly stood out in all the recollections is the repeated use of the word humility. Aharon Lichtenstein was a humble man who embodied the virtue of *hatz'nea lechet im elokecha*. I know that he taught Yitz Greenberg a great deal in their debate in 1966. And like R' Yitz, we would do well to learn from him too. *Yehi z'ichro baruch*.