

Rav Lichtenstein, z"l

Those who follow me will know how much scorn I pour on abuses of religion and religious authority. I despair at the pettiness and outright vindictiveness of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel and its utter refusal to follow the Biblical exhortation to "understand the soul of the stranger". I am alienated by extremism of all kinds, religious and political, including anti-Zionism and lunatic Zionism. I feel revulsion for national religious zealots who think that random revenge killing and physical brutality is a Jewish response to violence directed at us. And I feel profound sadness that sick maniacs (both religious and anti-religious) are let out of detention to murder innocent victims simply because they are different. Just as I despise those who pick on a few examples of inhumanity to claim we are the same as the real evil human beings out there and who pick on one speck when a mountain of real genocide, rape, slavery, stoning, and beheading goes unreacted to.

There is so much wrong with humanity in general and, sadly, in our own minute corner, too, that we need to be reminded, I need to be reminded, of the far greater number of our people who are good human beings and represent the best of us rather than the worst.

So to cheer myself up I am writing this week about a man who represented everything I hold dear and was a wonderful example of a brilliant, gentle, humane, multi-cultured scholar and rabbinic authority, the late lamented head of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, whose memory really IS a blessing.

He was the last of a generation typified by his late father-in-law, the great Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who himself was the greatest exemplar of profound Jewish scholarship combined with mastery of Western thought and literature. He was a powerful supporter of the Jewish state (as well as an honest critic) and an open-minded, caring human being.

Rav Lichtenstein was born into an aristocratic Lithuanian family of outstanding scholars. Educated in the USA, he was a Talmudic scholar of the top rank. He was also a PhD from Harvard University. The range of his scholarship spanned English literature all the way to the most intricate details of Jewish law. But in truth, it was his gentle personality, humility, and humanity that really set him apart from his contemporaries. He was tall, a giant of a man, but he radiated warmth and concern. He was the mentor of several generations of young rabbis and Talmidei Chachamim (religious scholars). Through them, his values and ideals will continue. Thank goodness, for our sake and for the sake of a sane, committed Judaism.

His daughter recorded what kind of parent he was:

"[One of Rav Lichtenstein's daughters described] how her father managed to radiate both a rarefied aura of sanctity and, crucially, a true humanity that extended to such mundane matters as doing most

of the laundry in the house, getting the kids ready in the mornings, helping them with their homework in the evenings, making sure to eat dinner with them almost every night, washing the dishes after Shabbat, attending their performances at school and youth group, teaching them how to ride a bike, playing Scrabble and chess with them, taking an interest in their friends. . .all of them activities that might be undertaken by normal devoted fathers but that I think we usually, rightly or wrongly, do not associate with people of Rav Lichtenstein's intellectual caliber and spiritual stature."

I saw him several times but never actually spoke to him. My late brother Mickey Rosen and he were close and attended some of each other's happy and sad occasions. Rav Lichtenstein wrote a very moving obituary and memorial to my brother on his very premature death a few years ago. I was also aware that Rav Lichtenstein and his wife Tova knew and befriended my mother, who was already in Jerusalem taking care her father when they arrived there. But it was only thanks to the brother-in-law of my late Uncle Hershy in Canada, Jules Samson, that I discovered this anecdote about my grandfather that Rav Lichtenstein appended to a scholarly article he wrote about the religious obligation of raising children. Here he describes the story:

"Let me close with a brief anecdote. On Yom Ha-atzmaut 1973, just prior to Yom Kippur War, there was a big military parade up Keren Ha-yesod Street in Jerusalem. We were new olim, having just come in 1971, and we took our children to see the parade. We went to the home of someone who lived on Keren Ha-yesod, up to their porch, and watched the parade with a number of other people. On this porch we met a Mr. Cohen from Cardiff, Wales. Cardiff is not Bnei Brak, yet all of Mr. Cohen's children were religious, and all of his grandchildren were religious. He himself was not a rav but a simple layman; many Torah giants did not merit what Mr. Cohen did. My wife and I asked him, 'Mr. Cohen, how did you raise such a family?' He responded in Yiddish, 'To raise children properly, you need two things: good judgment, seikhel, and divine assistance, siyata di-shemaya; and to have seikhel, you also need siyata di-shemaya.'"

That was so typical of my grandfather. He loved to say that there were really Eleven Commandments, not Ten. And the eleventh was, "Use your seikhel, your common sense."

Then Rav Lichtenstein adds his own conclusion:

"However, even if you have seikhel and siyata di-shemaya, your heart has to be in the right place. You have to be willing to give, and willing to receive. Family life is all about giving and

receiving reciprocally, to children, to parents, to a spouse, in all areas of life. Superficially regarded, raising children is massive giving. But I tell you that it is massive receiving, but massive! The joy and nachas are beyond words."

I remember the apartment with the balcony overlooking Rechov Keren Hayesod. It was actually where my mother and grandfather lived. Now almost all of that generation has gone. But whenever I despair about the state of Israel or the state of Judaism today, I think of them, their heritage, and their children and grandchildren, and I know there is hope.