

Shabbat Lessons from a Giant

He was considered to be one of the greatest rabbis of this generation. His complete mastery of the entire gamut of Torah and Talmud reflected a level of proficiency that is possessed by only a few in this generation. His PhD from Harvard in English literature was a testament to his poetic soul and his grand vision of the world.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l was a unique rabbinic figure in his mastery of both traditional texts and secular wisdom. He courageously confronted complex contemporary questions and honestly grappled with the Jewish perspective regarding the pressing issues of the day. His answers were nuanced, honest, and he was determined to weigh and consider multiple perspectives.

Rabbi Lichtenstein’s passing this past month leaves a great void in the Jewish community.

I was fortunate to be a student of Rabbi Lichtenstein for two years during my rabbinical school studies in Israel. By no means was I a part of the inner circle of students; rather, I was simply one of the thousands of students who had the merit to sit at his feet and be in the presence of a Torah master.

We, his students, felt intimidated and in awe of the man who we knew carried the ‘Mesorah’, the great rabbinic Tradition on his shoulders. We were well aware that Rabbi Lichtenstein was one of the select few in this generation who valiantly accepted the task of safekeeping the thousands of years of Torah wisdom, as well as its dissemination to the next generation.

Sometimes It’s The Simple Things That Stand Out

Tens of thousands across the Jewish world listened to words of eulogy describing the life of this great human being. Hearing the loving words spoken by his children we learned something of his inner, more private religious life: the way he prayed, the way he gave charity, and the way he celebrated the festivals and the Shabbat. The following four vignettes speak of seemingly simple practices that profoundly impacted his observance of Shabbat, and can serve as examples for enriching our own Shabbat experience.

Declining The Soup

A close student of Rabbi Lichtenstein attended a banquet on a weeknight together with him. During dinner the student noticed that the Rabbi ate all the various dishes that were served except for one, the soup. He found it odd and asked him why. Rabbi Lichtenstein answered: “In today’s world we often have fancy meals during the week. I decided that I don’t have soup during the week. I only have it on Shabbat so that the Shabbat meal has a unique feel. How else are we going to ensure that Shabbat always feels special?”

Lesson: Make preparations during the week so that the Shabbat experience is memorable.

Washing The Dishes

After Shabbat dinner Rabbi Lichtenstein washed the dishes. At the end of an exhausting week, overseeing his Yeshiva and offering numerous classes and lectures, he could have easily excused himself from washing the dishes.

The reason he did not excuse himself, as explained by his son, is well worth remembering. He followed this practice so that no one in the family should ever equate Shabbat with doing chores, or with something unpleasant. Shabbat should be a day of joy, a day that his children and his wife would always equate with pleasure.

Lesson: Make Shabbat a day filled with joy and ensure that those around you experience it as a delight.

Studying with His Children

Rabbi Lichtenstein did not nap on Shabbat afternoon. Although it is a day when it is not uncommon for people take it easy, Rabbi Lichtenstein saw the day as a golden opportunity to study and spend time with each of his children.

He chose to study with each of his six children individually rather than a few at a time. This requires great patience and dedication. Each child has his/her own interests and ability. Each child has his/her own skill level; each son and each daughter deserved their individual and special time with their father. (This was in addition to meeting them after school and learning with them during the week).

Lesson: Find time each week – and Shabbat is such a beautiful time to do it – to study Torah with your children.

Blessing His Children Friday Night

On Friday night, prior to Kiddush, many homes have the custom to give the traditional blessing to their children. Rabbi Lichtenstein also followed the custom of blessing his children but not before the meal.

His custom, which is unique, was to bless his children at the *end* of the night before his children would go to bed. Why he adopted this unique way of giving his blessing each week is not, to my knowledge, publicly known.

We do not know what Rabbi Lichtenstein's motivation was, but I would suggest that we can learn from his example how to offer a child's blessings in a personal way. Our Shabbat blessing should not be given in a mechanical way or merely as another required Friday night ritual. Rather, the blessing should be given with special care, with intimacy, and in a way that we express our deep love and affection.

Lesson: Shabbat is a time to extend to your children your heartfelt and deepest blessings.

Postscript:

On the last Friday night of his life his son Mayer was with him. His father was weak and there was a sense that this was possibly his last Shabbat. As on so many Friday nights growing up, Mayer approached his father to receive his blessing. His father responded, "Not yet, let's first learn Torah together".

Rabbi Lichtenstein, in his 81st year, with his health deteriorating, had very little strength left. He was hoping to use his last strength to learn with his son. He fell asleep before he was able to learn with his son and before Mayer was able to receive his last Friday night blessing. Rav Aharon, as his thousands of his students and admirers affectionately knew him, passed away two days later.

Learning From A Great Light

The Talmud (Ketubot 103b) reports that at the funeral of Rabbi Judah HaNasi (the great leader) a heavenly voice was heard saying, 'all who attended the funeral merit a place in the world to come.' Rabbi Judah HaNasi was the greatest rabbi of his generation. Surely people would have

attended this momentous occasion. Why were all who were present at his funeral given such a great reward?

An answer: Simply being present at the funeral of a giant spurred each person to improve their own lives. The aspiration now to live a more meaningful and lofty existence was the reason that each person merited receiving an eternal reward.

May the memory of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l be an inspiration and a blessing, and may we ennoble our lives by learning from his magnificent life.