



Halakhic Morality and the Halakhic Personality: a Review of “By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God”

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Reviewed Book: Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*. Edited by Rabbi Reuven Ziegler (Maggid Books, 2016)

On the morning of April 20, 2015, upon hearing the news that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein had passed away, I began sobbing uncontrollably for a solid few minutes. This involuntary reaction caught me by complete surprise—I had spoken to Rav Lichtenstein only once, heard only a handful of lectures in person, and had no relationship with him of which to speak. Certainly, the loss of any human life is a sad occasion, and all the more so when such a person is a shining example of the great potential in human life, but I am not so sensitive that such an occasion would move me to tears. My only real point of contact with this great leader was through his writings, which would remain unaffected on my bookshelf.

As surprising as it was, however, it did not take long to explain to myself why his passing felt like such a personal loss. In a very real sense, the force of Rav Lichtenstein’s writings is not only due to his breadth of erudition, his eloquence, or expository brilliance, but also because of the power of his own personality that illuminates all of his works. Needless to say, both honesty and humility precluded Rav Lichtenstein from ever appealing to his own authority,^[1] but the deep sense of responsibility and sensitivity which underlies his writings bespeak an author who truly lived by the values he so carefully articulated.^[2] Passionate without ever sacrificing nuance, thoroughly committed but ever so open-minded, steeped in Talmud and traditional learning while keenly aware of the wider Jewish community’s trends and cultures—Rav Lichtenstein’s writings proved to me that, as long as he was alive, a true giant, a *gadol* [giant] in the most crucial sense, still walked the earth. With his passing, his writings became just another relic of great men passed, belonging now to the bygone worlds of Rambam or the Vilna Gaon, unimaginable and unreachable.

Happily, or at least hopefully, such despair is unwarranted, as Rav Lichtenstein continues “to be a remote polestar, projecting his influence from a distance, as his votaries ponder his every word.”^[3] Speaking of the continued relevance of his own teacher, Rav Soloveitchik as the legitimizing authority of the modern Orthodox community, Rav Lichtenstein wrote in a paper published in 1997, “the Rav *z.l.* remains, even in his death, a bulwark of his spiritual community. Just how long a protective shadow a *gadol* may cast deserves thought... As regards the Rav *z.l.*, in any event, we are not at this juncture at the point of expiration.”^[4] Similarly, it would be hard to argue that socio-cultural landscape has changed so significantly that the influence of Rav Lichtenstein, both in terms of his directives and as a personal example, is irrelevant.

For so many people who are, either by choice or by force, engaged in contemporary culture, those with liberal arts degrees who wish to know how such learning can be incorporated into a life of *avodat Hashem* [service of God] is threatened, Rav Lichtenstein is very much a person of their world, “somehow within reach,” who nevertheless emerged from it as a towering paragon of morality and righteousness. If we take into further consideration not only his personal example, but his skill and eloquence in methodically articulating his positions and clarifying complex issues, we can fully appreciate the great service provided by Reuven Zeigler and Maggid Books in republishing “By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God,” a collection of Rav Lichtenstein’s lectures on topics related to, as the subtitle indicates, character and values. As someone whose upstanding moral character and commitment to values has been a model for so many, this collection serves as a window into his own moral makeup. Towards the end of the first chapter, Rav Lichtenstein tells his audience, “what I don’t practice I certainly am not going to preach.”^[5] The implication is clear: the teachings that these chapters *do* preach bear the implicit stamp of approval that their moral-religious vision represent Rav Lichtenstein’s own vision for how one is to follow in his own footsteps to reach such levels of spiritual grandeur.

The chapters that make up “By His Light” were previously disseminated through Yeshivat Har Etzion’s website, two previous publications, as well as through a Hebrew translation, and although this newest reprinting did little more than add an index, the republishing itself is undoubtedly worthy of celebration. As mentioned, the book is a collection of lectures delivered by Rav Lichtenstein on various occasions which were later written up and adopted by his students, the final editing being done by Reuven Ziegler. Each lecture is related in some way to the question of how to live life as a Jew, both practically and as a matter of values or attitudes. Although many of these topics overlap with those that have been subject to fuller treatments in essays written by Rav Lichtenstein personally, this collection still has much to offer in terms of fleshing out some of those topics, and were delivered in a style that makes them more accessible than the sometimes more difficult works of Rav Lichtenstein’s own essays.

The lectures that were chosen for this volume deal with what may be called “Jewish values” as interpreted from Judaism’s mainly halakhic, but also *aggadic* [that is, non-halakhic] sources. As discussed particularly in the first and sixth chapters, however, some of these values are meant to be universal values and not expected purely of Jews. Rav Lichtenstein not only insists that morality be seen as a universal demand, but that human moral intuition can itself be a source for values, which remains in full normative force even for Jewish people after the giving of the Torah.^[6] Although he has expressed this thesis more thoroughly in other writings,^[7] the presentation here is focused on the practical implications of such a view, such as the positive attitude one should have towards non-religious morality, and that ideally one should see interpersonal *mitzvot* as being rooted in one’s own sense of justice and goodness.^[8] This example typifies many of the essays in this particular volume, which take a more practical view of the issue at hand than might a theoretical treatment. Of course, sometimes exact instruction is impossible, as in the question of *bittachon* vs. *hishtadlut*, trusting God vs. putting in one’s own efforts, but even there Rav Lichtenstein at least shows how one is to approach the problem.^[9]

Beyond the emphasis on the practical, there are certainly many additional positions or teachings that one would find in this work which do not appear elsewhere. If one is interested in Rav Lichtenstein’s specific views on either contemporary or timeless questions of Jewish practice, I still believe that one would be better served by reading “*Mivakshei Panecha*,”^[10] but there is still much to be learned from this present volume regarding Rav Lichtenstein’s personal views on pressing matters. To refer again to the example of universal morality, it is only in the current selection where Rav Lichtenstein discusses the view of his teacher, Rav Yitzhak Hutner, which stands in opposition to his own.^[11] In reading “By His Light,” one finds, for example, that Rav Lichtenstein supports efforts of environmentalism,^[12] believes that there is no manner of ‘*pesak*’ [definitive ruling] regarding matters of *hashkafah* as there is in halakha,^[13] and that the ‘scholarly jealousy’ which is permitted by the Talmud as a valid means to propel one to greater study

should still be avoided as a negative character trait.^[14] This final example relates strongly to the general thrust of the book, which is that well beyond the requirements of the Halakha, one is required to be a *mensch*. Beyond the manner in which one “must relate to every jot and tittle of formal Halakha,”^[15] it is equally true that “we need to see the total picture,” in which halakha in its fuller sense encompasses “thought, action and emotion.”^[16]

The importance of extracting values out of the halakhic system and identifying their facets and characteristic is not merely academic. First of all, there are several instances in which these values really do have an impact upon one’s behavior, sometimes in ways that are much more far-reaching than any specific halakha. The value of work as an ethical-religious obligation has both obvious and non-obvious implications towards what profession one chooses for him or herself, as does the greater value of Talmud Torah;^[17] one is expected to choose a profession out of a sense of duty instead of out of a desire for feeling fulfilled^[18] and more broadly realize the Torah’s values beyond the “range of obligations and prohibitions.”^[19] Besides for its practical ramifications, however, Rav Lichtenstein also insists upon the importance of maintaining certain attitudes and personality traits. “In building a personality, we focus not only on one’s literal obedience to the *Shulchan Arukh*, but, in the broader sense, on the extent to which he forms himself in line with what *tzelem Elokim* [the image of God] should be. That may entail many factors which are of great significance to the religious life, but not necessarily classified, narrowly speaking, in particular halakhic categories.”^[20] Even beyond specific character traits, these attitudes are also relevant in the sense of one’s personal self-identification as an *eved Hashem* and member of *Klal Yisrael*

Rav Lichtenstein is obviously not the first in determining the underlying values of halakhic precepts,^[21] even when the comparison or generalization requires understanding the Halakha somewhat metaphorically. For example, *Hazal* learn that sinners must be included in the communal fasts from the fact that the frankincense included a foul-smelling ingredient (*Keritut* 6b), and the principle that “whether one increase or whether one decrease, as long as his heart is directed towards heaven” is demonstrated by the fact that all sacrifices, regardless of size or cost, are described as “sweet smelling unto God” (*Menahot* 110a).^[22] Rav Lichtenstein will sometimes present analyses in a similar vein, either in terms of seeing values as underlying certain specific halakhot or by applying certain halakhic categories and details to other areas. As an example of the former, Rav Lichtenstein sees the division of labor among the Kohanim and Levites and further between those Levites designated as singers or gatekeepers, as speaking to a general value of “spiritual specialization.”^{[23]. [24]} Sometimes Rav Lichtenstein will simply apply halakhic standards to new values, such as in applying the concept of “guarding” in the contexts of both legal guardianship and the obligation of Levites to ‘guard’ the Temple to one’s attitude towards to the natural world as a whole.^[25] He likewise uses the concept of *hesech ha-da’at* [the prohibition of distracting one’s attention] while wearing *tefillin* to understand the parameters of having a conscious awareness of God’s presence,^[26] and discussing the dual obligation of ordinances made *zekher le-mikdash* and *zekher le-hurban* [remembering the Temple and remembering the destruction of the temple] as requiring us to make similar remembrances of European Jewry and its destruction in the Holocaust.^[27]

To be clear, Rav Lichtenstein does not turn exclusively to halakhic sources in order to build his worldview; several of these discussions are centered on passages of *Aggadah* or *Tanakh*. The most passionate chapter, urging for a deeper sense of communal responsibility and demanding of his students that they take up arms against the tides of assimilation, is based upon Rav Lichtenstein’s reading of the Book of Esther. The value of ‘commandedness’ centers around the rabbinic statement that *gadol ha-metsueh ve-‘oseh*, “greater is the one who was commanded and performs [than one who performs *mitzvot* without being commanded in them],” (*Bava Kama* 87a),^[28] and the value of work is supported by an *aggadic* Midrash which states that Avraham desired to live in the land of Canaan because he saw the diligence with which its inhabitants worked the land.^{[29]. [30]} Recourse to philosophical works of the *Rishonim* is also not unusual, as

Maimonides' *Shemonah Perakim*,^[31] the *Hovot ha-Levavot* and *Kad ha-Kemah* all make appearances in these essays. However, such citations are not as frequent as one might assume. Despite his treatments of “*le-ovdah u-le-shomrah*” [to work and to guard] and choosing one’s profession in the first three chapters, at no point does Rav Lichtenstein quote Rabbeinu Bachayei’s parallel discussion in *Hovot ha-Levavot*.^[32] When discussing the dual accounting one must make regarding his activities—whether those activities are valuable in themselves, and whether one is engaged in them for the right reasons—instead of referring to the third chapter of *Mesillat Yesharim*, Rav Lichtenstein in one instance reaches for a basketball metaphor,^[33] and in another, a quote from Matthew Arnold.^[34]

In keeping with the theme of applying abstract values to the practical realm of observance in the current century, the final chapter discusses how those values should be practiced on a communal scale, focusing on his own community, which he prefers to call ‘the Centrist Orthodox.’ Responding to those who may think that Centrist (or Modern Orthodoxy, as it is usually called) is a “watered-down” or more easily observable form of Orthodoxy than its counterparts “to the right,” Rav Lichtenstein vehemently disagrees. Instead, Modern Orthodoxy as he sees it calls for more study, further complexity, and deeper spiritual and moral awareness of both God and man. His emphasis on abstract values actually extends their practicality, as once they have been extricated from any specific line in the *Shulhan Arukh*, they become applicable to any and every area of one’s life. “We [modern Orthodox] tend to be more sensitive—and rightly so—to that area in our life within which the ethical is more directly significant, namely, the area of *devar ha-reshut* (where specific commands do not apply). We have a greater awareness of the significance of this area. Defining something as *devar reshut*, of course, does not mean that this is an area that is neutral and therefore it is immaterial what you do. According to many *Rishonim*, whether a person injures himself is defined as *devar reshut*. That hardly means that a person can wantonly and willfully cut off a limb.”^[35] The vision that Rav Lichtenstein lays out in these chapters is thus not for the semi-committed or the faint-hearted, and in several cases he rails against specific spiritual failings, wherever he senses that “there has been a certain debasement of values, in which people have a concern for the minutiae of Halakha (which, of course, one should be concerned about), but with a complete lack of awareness of the extent to which the underlying message is so totally non-halakhic and anti-halakhic.”^[36]

As an extension of the value that Rav Lichtenstein sees in secular morality and goodness, Rav Lichtenstein further calls upon the Orthodox to engage more seriously in secular literature as a means to deepen their own moral sensitivities. In the final chapter, Rav Lichtenstein discusses what he sees as the value of secular learning, which should provide a person with an appreciation of “the complexity of experience,” as well as deepen one’s “literary, psychological, and historical sensitivity.”^[27] In this case, Rav Lichtenstein provides a personal example of how one can go about incorporating secular education into his or her Torah lifestyle, and several instances in this present volume show how he uses his own education. His essays certainly do not want of complexity, and he will often draw upon either his favorite writers (Milton, Coleridge, Newman, Keats, and of course Matthew Arnold) to illustrate a point with added flare, or mention a philosophical text to use as a tool for explicating some distinction or finer point. The Euthyphro has undoubtedly clarified the problem of ethics and religion and given us a framework to respond to it,^[38] and Kant’s conception of duty serves as a useful foil to Rav Lichtenstein’s theory of how one ought to relate to a *mitzvah*.^[39] The “literary sensitivity” provided by Kierkegaard’s reading of the episode of the binding of Isaac is adopted by Rav Lichtenstein approvingly,^[40] and his ability to put certain spiritual movements into historical perspective has allowed him to focus his remarks on what he sees to be the more pressing issues of the day.^[41]

Because “By His Light” is comprised from delivered lectures instead of essays, they retain much of their pedagogical style and flavor. Although they are probably more accessible, this style may also sacrifice some of the thoroughness, meticulousness and nuance that are characteristic Rav Lichtenstein’s other writings. The final chapter on the values of Centrist Orthodoxy deals very

realistically with the reasons why one might oppose secular education or military involvement, and Rav Lichtenstein is very forthcoming regarding theoretical and practical critiques or dangers of the position he stakes out by regarding non-halakhic morality. However, in some cases Rav Lichtenstein simply presents his view and the sources or arguments which support it without giving space to any alternative view, and it would appear as though he is giving many topics less than the full treatment that would be accorded to them had he sat to write out a full discussion of them. Regarding the religious value of work as being divinely sanctioned, there is no mention of, for example, the statement of R. Shimon b. Elazar:

“In my whole lifetime I have not seen a deer engaged in gathering fruits, a lion carrying burdens, or a fox as a shopkeeper, yet they are sustained without trouble, though they were created only to serve me, whereas I was created to serve my Maker. Now, if these, who were created only to serve me are sustained without trouble, how much more so should I be sustained without trouble, I who was created to serve my Maker! But it is because I have acted evilly and destroyed my livelihood, as it is said, your iniquities have turned away these things.” (Kiddushin 82b, Soncino Translation)

Few critiques can be made against Rav Lichtenstein’s conclusions or reasoning that he has not already anticipated in other writings or more fuller discussions, or deserve essays at least as thorough as his own. The strongest complaint one might have against this volume is simply that it is not enough. Despite the strong emphasis on values “in the service of God,” as the subtitle proclaims, there is no essay specifically on the topic of prayer, even though this is one of the most central acts of religious ‘service.’ Additionally, Rav Lichtenstein does not provide a discussion of the flexibility within halakhic observance on adapting *humrot* [stringencies] and religious consistency, nor an essay on the value of *Aliyah* to Israel, nor on Jewish communal leadership or education and the student-teacher relationship. There is no essay on parenting and raising a Jewish family, which to me seems to be the most serious omission for a book meant to represent the values of a man who, when asked after fifty years of communal leadership to identify his proudest accomplishment, responded “our family.”^[42] Of course, one volume could not possibly cover every topic relevant to observing a Torah lifestyle, and so this is not meant as a critique on the editor’s choices, but rather as an encouragement to others to read more of Rav Lichtenstein’s writings and delivered lectures.^[43] One only hopes that his students continue to publish and disseminate his writings and lectures so that so many of those thirsty for Rav Lichtenstein’s Torah still have what to drink, and that this great personal role model of Torah and morality continues to be an inspiration to his followers.

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[1] In responding to those who have criticized his response to the eulogizing of Baruch Goldstein for being hypocritical, Rav Lichtenstein wrote that he “admit[s] without embarrassment that, from both a practical and communal perspective, it would have been better if my reaction had been voiced by *Rashei Yeshiva* who have no trace of the taint that in your opinion clings to me...” Republished in Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith* vol. 2 (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2004) p. 259

[2] Admittedly, such an impression comes not purely from encountering Rav Lichtenstein’s writings, but also through my friendships and repeated contact with his students, for whom his moral character is truly the stuff of legend. To quote those who I do know personally: “His personal integrity, depth of character, humility, indomitable enthusiasm, his attentiveness to the dignity and needs of other human beings... It has been lamented that the intellectual brilliance of R. Lichtenstein may, at times, obscure his moral and human greatness.” (“An Introductory Biographical Sketch of R. Aharon Lichtenstein,” *Tradition* 47:4 p. 14)

[3] Ibid. p. 9

[4] “Legitimization of Modernity: Classical and Contemporary,” published in *Leaves of Faith* vol. 2 (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2004) p. 291

[5] Lichtenstein, Aharon. “By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God.” Edited by Rabbi Reuven Ziegler. Maggid Books, 2016. P. 15.

[6] Ibid, 18-22. Despite the normative demands of universal morality, however, God’s specific commands still take precedence over one’s moral qualms. Ibid, 107-109

[7] Specifically, “Does Judaism Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?” republished in Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith* vol. 2 (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2004) pp. 33-56. However, the crucial analysis of the dual nature of the covenant at Sinai as both supplanting and supplementing the universal covenant between God and man does not appear in that essay, but rather in “The Role of Jewish Communal Service,” *ibid.* p. 226

[8] “By His Light,” pp. 104-106 and 108

[9] Ibid, 122-123

[10] Chaim Sabato and Aharon Lichtenstein, *Mevakshei Panekha* (Jerusalem: Yediot Aharonot, 2011).

[11] Ibid, 18. In fact, one can find this view expressed, though in different terms, in Rav Hutner’s own writings. See *Pahad Yitzhak, Shavu’ot* no. 1.

[12] Ibid, 7

[13] Ibid, 137

[14] Ibid, 180

[15] Ibid ,195.

[16] Ibid, 190.

[17] Ibid, 36.

[18] Ibid, 43.

[19] Ibid, 27.

[20] Ibid, 185.

[21] Such endeavors are specifically encouraged by Ramban. See, for example, his *Commentary to the Torah, Ex. 15:25, Lev.9:1, and Deut. 6:18*

[22] Maimonides also follows in this trend. One example discussed by Rav Lichtenstein is that the invalidity of a dice-thrower as a witness is understood by Maimonides to speak to the Torah’s discouragement of such activity in general.

[23] Lichtenstein, 69.

[24] The approach taken by this chapter is particularly interesting in this regard, as Rav Lichtenstein show that underlying several (but not all, as he presents this as a dispute among the *ba'alei Tosafot*) halakhic discussions of the concept of '*osek be-mitsvah patur min ha-mitsvah*' is the idea that a person designated to perform a particular halakhic task is meant to be dedicated to that one task and no other. One of his halakhic sources is the *Orhos Hayyim* on Laws of Rosh Hashanah (no. 25), although the author of *Orhos Hayyim* himself makes this same point using *aggadic* sources!

[25] Lichtenstein, 6

[26] Ibid, 163.

[27] Ibid, 145.

[28] Ibid, 47.

[29] Ibid, 12.

[30] Interestingly, in his discussion of the Jewish work ethic Rav Lichtenstein does not cite from verses in Ecclesiastes which disparage the lazy rather explicitly

[31] Interestingly, Rav Lichtenstein limits the position of Maimonides that one should desire to perform sins but avoid them due to God's fiat as being truly ideal only when one identifies with the divine command, even regarding *hukim*.

[32] *Sha'ar ha-Bittachon* Ch. 3

[33] Lichtenstein, 38-39.

[34] Ibid, 196.

[35] Ibid, 114.

[36] Ibid, 15.

[37] Ibid, 201.

[38] Cf. Ibid, 93.

[39] Cf. Ibid, 53.

[40] Ibid, 107-108

[41] Cf. Ibid, 46, 133-135

[42] <http://blogs.yu.edu/news/reflecting-on-50-years-of-torah-leadership/>

[43] Lectures on many of these topics can be found on the website of Yeshivat Har Etzion. On prayer, see <http://etzion.org.il/en/efficiency-prayer>, on Aliyah, see <http://etzion.org.il/en/aliya-uniqueness-living-eretz-yisrael> and <http://etzion.org.il/en/mutual-responsibility-jewish-state>, and on family life, see <http://etzion.org.il/en/raising-children>