



## **TORAH OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN: HOW DID RAV LICHTENSTEIN IMPACT RELIGIOUS ZIONISM?**

*Compiled by the editorial staff based on a shiur given by Rabbi Taragin, May 2022*

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein had a major impact on the Religious Zionist community and Israel. How did an American-raised rabbi, who was a student of Rav Soloveitchik and not of Rav Kook, have such an impact? Before dealing with that question, it is important to assess a different question: How did he process the concept of the modern State of Israel? In this article, we will explore several issues and how Rav Lichtenstein related to them.

### **Navigating Unprecedented Times**

We all believe we are living through a unique period of Jewish history. We now have sovereignty over Eretz

Yisrael. We can return to our ancient homeland. We can observe mitzvos that, historically, Jews have been unable to observe for centuries — shemitah, terumos, ma'asros etc. What sources do we draw from in order to navigate these issues?

Our natural response might be to look in Tanach which contains prophecies that discuss the ultimate redemption, and also presents challenges and obstacles that arise while living in Eretz Yisrael. Many people in Eretz Yisrael employ Tanach as a template for interpreting and navigating current events.

Rav Lichtenstein didn't take this approach. In his *sichos*, he emphasized the dangers of creating expectations based on prophetic visions. Chazal already warned us against calculating

the timing of the final redemption (*Sanhedrin* 97b). Furthermore, Chazal tell us that Yaakov wanted to reveal to his children how the final redemption would unfold, and this vision was taken from him (*Pesachim* 56a).

Rav Lichtenstein often spoke about the delicate balance between *ahavas Hashem* (love of G-d) and *yiras Hashem* (reverence of G-d), and that overconfidence in our relationship with Hashem can disrupt that balance. He referenced this idea in a *sicha* for *Parashas Shelach* in discussing the *ma'apilim*, who attempted to go to Eretz Kna'an immediately after Hashem decreed that the Jewish people spend forty years in the desert. This type of overconfidence — that Hashem loves us and we can and should live our lives confidently using prophetic visions

as our guide — undermines our *yiras Hashem* and the realization that the King of the Universe is ultimately determining history in a manner that is mysterious.

Rather than looking to Tanach to navigate the challenges of our time, Rav Lichtenstein would turn to the Talmud, to halachic constructs. Here are three examples.

First, in January 1997, as part of the Oslo Accords, Israel withdrew from most of Chevron. This occurred around the time of Chanukah and it put a damper on the yeshiva's Chanuka *mesibah* (party). Rav Lichtenstein delivered a *sicha* before the *mesibah* started. This would have been the perfect opportunity to quote verses from Tanach citing promises that the land will remain in our hands and that Chevron has a special connection to our Avos. Instead, for over an hour, he discussed the two halachic mechanisms available for disputing parties to settle their differences: *vitur* (unilateral relinquishment) and *peshara* (compromise). Rav Lichtenstein provided a thorough legal analysis of these approaches using classical commentaries on the Talmud and then assured his students that our withdrawal should not be viewed as one of *vitur*, giving up the land without any concern for it, but one of *peshara*, a compromise, which some thought at the time would have potential for peace. He noted that sometimes compromise might be painful, and we should be pained by the prospect of giving over land.

Second, Rav Lichtenstein delivered a *sicha* on the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel. Again, the *sicha* didn't focus on prophetic visions, but rather deconstructed and analyzed the various components of *yovel* (the jubilee year) such as *shichrur avadim* and *hachzaras karka* (freeing of servants and returning of land) and

how they can be applied to the socio-economic challenges in Modern Israel.

A third example occurred in the late 80's, when Rav Lichtenstein spoke to the students in the chutz la'aretz program of Yeshiva Har Etzion about issues relating to Aliyah. One of the students asked him what he experienced in 1948 as a teenager. Rav Lichtenstein said this his feelings were best reflected in Tehillim ch. 22. The theme of this chapter in Tehillim is crying out for help in a time of crisis and danger. While it is true that the War of Independence was a time of crisis and danger, even forty years later, it was this chapter of Tehillim, rather than the chapters of Tehillim that we recite when we say Hallel, that framed his memory of 1948.

## Two Conversations

Rav Lichtenstein's outlook can be observed in his own words by comparing two conversations that took place 50 years apart, one in 1962 and one in 2012. In 1962, Rav Lichtenstein made his first trip to Eretz Yisrael. He records a conversation that he had with his rebbe, Rav Yitzchak Hutner:

*One day, I went to see mori ve-rabbi Rav Hutner zt"l, who used to spend summers in Eretz Yisrael. He had an attachment to Eretz Yisrael—he had studied in Yeshivat Chevron when it was still in Chevron. He began to ask me what are my impressions, what do I see here, what do I feel. I discussed with him the vitality of Jewish life and the sense of total community, as opposed to the Diaspora, where one's life is more fragmented. He felt that you could have felt that wholeness and vitality in Eastern Europe as well. Then I said that I think there is a broader range of application of Halakha in Israel. In America, rabbinical courts handled only ritual law, and here they dealt with dinei mammonot (commercial and*

*financial cases) as well, so here you feel the resonance of Halakha in more areas of life. He said that you could have seen that in Eastern Europe or in North Africa also. I tried to get him to elaborate, and finally he exclaimed, "Why don't you mention the uniqueness of being in Eretz Yisrael? Chazal (Ketubot 112a) speak of Eretz Yisrael as a country that Moshe and Aharon didn't merit to enter, and we are there!" It was stunning to him to meet a ben Torah on an airplane flying to Israel, whose attitude was the same as if he were going to California. I walked out of there like a beaten dog.*

In 1962, Rav Lichtenstein viewed Eretz Yisrael through strict halachic structures. Let's fast forward to 2012. Rav Chaim Sabato interviewed Rav Lichtenstein on many areas of Jewish thought and they were collected in a sefer called *Mevakshei Panecha*, which was translated into English under the title *Seeking His Presence*. In one particular exchange, Rav Sabato asked Rav Lichtenstein why he prefers to view the establishment of the State of Israel from a more practical perspective as opposed to Rav Kook's followers who see it as a fulfillment of prophecy. Rav Sabato then added that Rav Lichtenstein's own rebbe, Rav Soloveitchik, wrote about the "six Heavenly knocks" in his essay "Kol Dodi Dofek," which follows a similar approach to that of the students of Rav Kook. Rav Lichtenstein responded:

*I don't know to what degree the essay "Kol Dodi Dofek" reflects the Rav's approach throughout his life. I would assume that Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook z"l would wake up in the morning, take in the sounds of the State of Israel, and feel, experience, the State of Israel. The Rav z"l did not wake up in the morning with this deep feeling. "Kol Dodi Dofek" was a very successful work, but it reflects a certain spirit, things that were said on Israel's Independence Day at a time when the State was beginning to strike roots,*

*but had not yet burst into full flower. It was at such a moment that the Rav said what he said. Those who claimed that he was against Zionist policy or an anti-Zionist were mistaken. He identified with Zionism. What is correct is that the theological component associated with the establishment of the State was not at the forefront of his thought. For me, since we made aliya, I have been more existentially connected to the State than the Rav was. Yet, I still would not approach it with the celebratory tones of Hegelian, historical knocking.*

These two quotes succinctly capture Rav Lichtenstein's approach to Zionism and Eretz Yisrael.

## **Rav Lichtenstein's Impact**

Rav Lichtenstein's approach was passed on to multiple generations of students, not only in Yeshiva Har Etzion, but in other yeshivos that were started by his students. Beyond the broader issues discussed above, there are other areas where Rav Lichtenstein made his mark on the hesder movement.

First, Rav Lichtenstein introduced the Lithuanian-style yeshiva to the hesder movement. To Rav Lichtenstein, Yeshivat Har Etzion and Volozhin were basically the same, with a few minor differences. He would even throw in Yiddish lines from time to time during his *shiurim* (which he then translated into Hebrew), because he saw in the yeshiva a connection to the yeshivos of pre-war Eastern Europe.

Second, in the Religious Zionist community, there is a tendency to focus more on national identity rather than individual identity. Rav Lichtenstein emphasized the importance of the individual in the State of Israel. He would often use the terms *Knesses Yisrael* and *Reb Yisrael*, where *Knesses Yisrael* refers to the entire Jewish people and *Reb Yisrael*, to the individual.

For example, regarding political discussions about peace for land, Rav Lichtenstein introduced the concept of *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life) into the discussion. If questions of war and peace were simply a national issue, there would be no room for discussion about *pikuach nefesh* since the *pikuach nefesh* considerations don't apply during wartime because war, by definition, entails risking one's life (see *Minchas Chinuch* 425). Rav Lichtenstein's emphasis on *pikuach nefesh* indicated that the issues also need to be analyzed from the perspective of an individual Jew and not only from a nationalistic approach.

He also stressed that the political agenda of the Religious Zionists shouldn't be wholly focused on land. There are other pressing issues that relate to the individuals in the State of Israel, such as social causes that need to be part of our agenda, as they too reflect Torah values.

A third issue is that Rav Lichtenstein had a sense of optimism for mankind. He often stressed the concept of *tzelem Elokim*, that man was created in G-d's image. This was often seen in the way that Rav Lichtenstein presented "outside" sources. As opposed to Rav Soloveitchik, who would quote other sources as a means of comparing Judaism to other philosophies, Rav Lichtenstein would quote other sources when they provided an insight into how we can better serve Hashem.

Rav Lichtenstein did not tolerate the xenophobic sentiments that some in the Religious Zionist communities express. He was very outspoken when Arabs were mistreated. When Libyan Airlines Flight 114 was shot down by Israeli fighter jets in 1973, Rav Lichtenstein and Rav Amital demanded a government inquiry even though many dismissed the "accident" as a necessary causality of a tense pre-

war environment. Every *erev Rosh Hashanah*, Rav Lichtenstein would personally wish a *shanah tova* to every single Palestinian worker in the yeshiva.

Fourth, Rav Lichtenstein was a consummate institutionalist. He believed in institutions and working together with other institutions, even when they had a different agenda. He never marginalized an institution because of their views and sought ways to work with these institutions, especially government institutions like the police or the IDF.

Let's conclude with a conversation between Rav Lichtenstein and Shimon Peres:

*In 1978, Shimon Peres visited the Yeshiva. He asked me what the political credo of the Yeshiva was. I told him the Yeshiva has no political credo, but we teach three things:*

- 1. Even when sitting in the bet midrash, you have a responsibility to the community;*
  - 2. When addressing these problems, you have to think deeply and not simplistically;*
  - 3. Even when doing what is right, you have to know how to respect other opinions and the people who hold them.*
- This has to be our educational goal. The question is not just what are the particular values we hold, but through which spectacles we view values, through which eyes. A man, said Blake, doesn't see with his eyes but rather through his eyes. What sees is the mind.*