

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE EXALTED FELLOWSHIP OF THE HARNESS: THOUGHTS IN THE ABSENCE OF R. AHARON LICHTENSTEIN

How would you render in English the virtue of *zerizut*? One English translation of *Mesillat Yesharim* offers “zeal.” To be sure, the *zariz* is a passionate individual, but zeal corresponds to Hebrew *kanna’ut*, not *zerizut*; zeal conveys the heat rather than the persistence characteristic of *zerizut*. “Quickness” may be better. Certainly, as the mussar *sefarim* record, the *zariz* does things energetically and doesn’t let the grass grow under his or her feet. But quickness is compatible with haste and when a person discharges their duty rapidly, in order to be finished, that is about as far from *zerizut* as you can get. Noah Gardenswartz says our revered teacher R. Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l* used “alacrity” for *zerizut*. A synonym for eagerness and agility, alacrity, by virtue of its Latinate derivation, carries a slightly elevated tone that gives it moral mass.

Unlike nouns that refer to physical objects, but like many significant moral terms, *zerizut* defies easy translation because it is embedded in a particular culture. Despite attempts to philosophize about the good life in abstract, universal categories, in a kind of a kind of ethical Esperanto, even ideas with universal implications presuppose a thick understanding of their cultural context. Approximate equivalents do not serve well; they produce an indistinct generic substitute for a rich, particular human reality. But abstract words like *zerizut* often originate in concrete nouns: tracing that derivation may be a useful strategy. The root *z-r-z* has a physical application in Rabbinic Hebrew. Mishna Kelim 22:3 mentions the *zerez* of an animal, apparently referring to the saddle belt or harness worn by a domestic animal.

Zerizut seems all spontaneity and fire and lightness. The image of an ox or donkey in harness, ploughing the earth, dutifully bound to the master’s appointed work, suggests the very opposite. If, however, the two

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uses of *z-r-z* are linked, and our *zerizut* comes to us “trailing clouds of etymology,” that image helps bridge the gap between mere quickness, on the one hand, and purposeful obedience, on the other hand. The *zariz* is not the man or woman in a hurry, but in harness, vigorously and undividedly at one with the ordained task.

Sometimes intellectual recognition is unanticipated and comes with the force of an awakening; sometimes it crystallizes what was understood already but not put in words. Discovering the connection between the rare word in the Mishna and the ethical-religious ideal of *zerizut* confirmed and clarified what I had intuited before about *zerizut*, its meaning and beauty and inspiration. That is because I had studied with R. Lichtenstein, and had seen *zerizut* in motion. I thus knew in my heart that the elements of quickness, energy, joy, and total commitment to God mentioned in books that describe *zerizut*, like *Mesillat Yesharim*, are not disparate symptoms of spiritual achievement but part of a unified vision of human striving and fulfillment.

R. Lichtenstein’s gravestone reads *oved haShem* (servant of God). When an individual merits that accolade it is inadequate, nay comical, to praise him as a *zariz*. *Zerizut*, after all, belongs to one of the middle rungs of R. Pinhas ben Yair’s ladder of spiritual progress that provided structure to Ramhal’s treatise and to Maharal’s *Netivot Olam*, among other works, beyond which lie the highest levels of striving and attainment. R. Lichtenstein was more than the *midda* of *zerizut*, yet to me, from the recipient’s side (*mi-tsad ha-mekabbel*), so to speak, the idea of *zerizut* found its essential form in him and continues to lead me towards the ideal life he personified.

II

When I came to Yeshiva University as a teenager, over 45 years ago, I could not have imagined that longevity or passage of time would one day make it my task to tell you what it meant to have been R. Lichtenstein’s student. I appreciated the sterling Talmudic education I was getting at his hands; I couldn’t help appreciating his unassuming but cumulatively overwhelming ethical demeanor. Yet all that was secondary. My urgent preoccupation was how to commit my life. It was not a foregone conclusion that I would arrive at the theological beliefs that have governed my adult years. One of the most pressing questions in my mind was whether traditional Judaism was capacious enough to accommodate all human wisdom. In R. Lichtenstein’s *shiur* I learned the answer to that question. One of my greatest fears was that concentration on intellectual brilliance

and erudition led to narrowness, self-centeredness and smugness. From R. Lichtenstein's *shiur* I learned the truth: There is no more powerful motive for humility, for honesty, and excellence in *middot* than striving for excellence through *Torah lishmah*, while pursuing wisdom wherever it is found, when it is conjoined with and subservient to genuine *yirat Shamayim*. The Mishna says: "He whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom is sustained" (*Avot* 3:9). Day after day I saw this in *shiur*, I saw it in the liberal arts course R. Lichtenstein taught, and I saw it outside the classroom. Eventually it sank in.

Much has been said about R. Lichtenstein's relentless attention to the complexity of human affairs. Like the Rav, he understood that many human challenges, and precisely the most important ones, enact the clash of competing, even conflicting, values, all of which have legitimacy. As a practical matter, we can't avoid giving preference to one ideal over others; we are compelled to choose among people and causes that claim our allegiance. Nevertheless, if you are honest, you cannot deny or dismiss the spiritual reality of the "road not taken." You must continue to keep in mind, and respond to, reality in its full complexity. Undeniably this wholesome honesty had an enormous impact on the development of the intellectual convictions that led me to my present outlook.

At the same time, I also learned from R. Lichtenstein that painstaking analysis need not lead to evasion of decisive commitment. Like the Rav, he had the capacity to reveal the complexity of what seemed simple along with the incisiveness to cut through clouds of complicated reasoning and rationalization and lay bare the fundamental considerations. If you keep the right priorities steadily in mind—holding fast to the primacy of *avodat haShem* and *yirat Shamayim*—then some crucial life decisions become easier rather than harder.

I once confessed to R. Lichtenstein various doubts about my potential as a *mehannekh* (educator). Almost two hours later, after a thorough and fairly frank exploration of my strengths and potential limitations, he had induced me to set aside these hesitations. But then he saw fit to warn me about other obstacles to accomplishing my goals that could not be overcome through effort alone, that were beyond my control. I said: "Rebbi, how can I deal with this?" And he answered, simply and decisively: "Shalom, either you have *bittahon* (trust in God) or you don't!" Stated that way, late in one of the most fateful afternoons of my life, everything became simple, precisely because the decision before me had been placed in the right perspective. Before me was not the choice of a career trajectory but a life: R. Lichtenstein offered me not merely the shrewd professional advice

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one expects from a mentor; he had invited me to follow him, as far as I could or would, into the exalted fellowship of the harness.

A few months later, in the summer of 1970, R. Lichtenstein was exploring his future in Israel. He delivered the opening lecture on conversion at the then prestigious conference on *Torah she-b'al Peh* sponsored by Mosad haRav Kook.¹ It was his opportunity to introduce himself publicly to the Israeli Torah world. Almost anyone else, especially a man planning to make a professional career for himself in that world, ready to give up a secure and respected position and uproot his family, would have played it safe and geared the presentation to the predilections of the audience. R. Lichtenstein did not choose that path. His thesis was not a welcome one. From the beginning, he separated an understanding of conversion rooted in Halakha from one grounded in nationalistic theology, knowing that his audience was not inclined to separate the two. He distinguished between the religious dimension of conversion, which reflects the passion of the individual, the “flight of the alone to the Alone” (a phrase he borrowed from Plotinus), on the one hand, and the national dimension, both of them essential for *gerut*, yet potentially in conflict with each other. He said this to a crowded hall unaccustomed to cultivating phenomenological distinctions in the realm of the spirit, almost constitutionally averse to seeing nationalism and religion as anything but two happy harmonious sides of the same national-religious coin, when the spiritual and practical danger in the facile equation of nationalism and *avodat Hashem* was largely unrecognized. To add scandal to puzzlement, the lecture was loaded with substantial references to Gentile authors. In retrospect R. Lichtenstein’s achievement as a teacher and role model in Israel seems foreordained. At the time, forty-five years ago, one could not have predicted with assurance that he would find his place in Israel. His resoluteness in putting forward the most provocative and potentially alienating aspect of his thinking, one that, in his opinion, was lacking from the Israeli scene, his willingness to plow the furrow his Master had assigned to him, even if that required him, then and often later, to plow uphill, against the current, reflects his straightforward faithfulness to his sacred mission, a faithfulness he sustained throughout his life, in great matters as in small.

¹ See *Torah she'b'al Peh* 13 for the published version of lecture, which contains response to immediate criticism; see the English translation, “On Conversion,” *Tradition* 23:2 (1988), 1-18.

III

Indeed, the test of the life lived in harness is not the dramatic moment of decision but sustaining commitment day after day, year after year. The *zariz* possesses an indomitable sense of responsibility, poised to perform one's duty with alacrity. This is true of our obligations towards family, friends, and other human beings; it is surely true of our infinite duty before the *Ribono shel Olam*. As the Mussar literature notes, the *zariz* exhibits whole-hearted joy in wearing the harness. This joy is a welcome byproduct of commitment and a brake against the chronic frustrations and periodic weariness that beleaguer the day to day conduct of a human life.

It is hard to think of occasions on which R. Lichtenstein approached the performance of his duty with anything less than sober enthusiasm, without shortcuts and without evasion. And what an incomparably intense and varied set of duties he made his! Perhaps there were moments when he would have preferred to take off the harness and defer, for the sake of his convenience, some necessary task; if so, they were not the rule. Over the decades, one could perceive the growth—this man who already bestrode our world like a colossus—the crescent eagerness in his visage, the concentration and penetration of his gaze, as he advanced, persistently and palpably, step by step, from greatness to greatness, bringing his personality into line with his ideals. How can you see such a human being and not be attracted, and not want to share his way?

Earlier in my time at Yeshiva, groping my way to Orthodoxy, to *yirat Shamayim*, to religious truth, I thought I was opting for a sacrificial path: I had chosen duty over inclination, truth over happiness. R. Lichtenstein was dedicated to truth and he knew that spiritual growth is impossible without *yissurim* (suffering). Nonetheless he thought I drew the contrast between pure religious commitment and having a happy life more starkly than needed. Despite potential conflict, duty and inclination should ordinarily coincide. The predominant mood of *avodat haShem* ought to be an inexhaustible sense of joy and accomplishment. He did his best to convince me of this. Eventually he prevailed, not by power of argument, but through the example of his life.

About twenty years ago, I witnessed a private conversation between R. Lichtenstein and his rebbi, R. Ahron Soloveichik: “Then spoke the fearers of God one to the other... (*Malachi 3:16*).” I cannot describe the beauty, the joy that emanated from these two *gedolim*, one in the full magnificence of his powers, the other fighting inch by inch against the

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diminution of his. I thought of Tennyson's line: "One equal temper of heroic hearts/Made weak by time and fate but strong in will." After a minute or two I looked away: the Mishna says that when two engage in words of Torah the Shekhina is between them (*Avot 3:3*); in any event it seemed improper for me to intrude further upon the intimacy of their glory. The sheer radiance of those moments will accompany me forever.

IV

Rambler 127 is a powerful exposition of the many ways in which the ambition for literary excellence comes to naught. The sad descriptions of human folly and failure, as so often with the great moralists, are faithful to the world as we know it. How does one avoid these pitfalls? Where is the mirror to reality that shows us the alternative?

Johnson concludes:

These errors all arise from an original mistake of the true motives of action. He that never extends his view beyond the praises or rewards of men will be dejected by neglect and envy, or infatuated by honors and applause. But the consideration that life is only deposited in his hands to be employed in obedience to a Master who will regard his endeavors, not his success, would have preserved him from trivial elations and discouragements, and enabled him to proceed with constancy and cheerfulness, neither enervated by commendation, nor intimidated by censure.

Of course this is easier said than done. We are deflected and distracted from unreserved devotion to our duty by the realistic fear that the most exhaustive labors inevitably fall short of attaining even a fraction of our hopes or we congratulate ourselves for trivial or non-existent triumphs. We accept with equanimity one-sided ways of thinking and feeling or we fancy that compromising Orthodox convictions and commitments will gain fleeting relief from our feelings of isolation, perhaps even a moment of applause. More than correct doctrine, as important as that might be, we require the mirror to life, the personal example of the individual for whom Johnson's ideal is a living reality, and we cannot value too highly the mentor who understands what we want in this world and can also tell us what we ought to want.

When asked why he gave *shiurim* on Jewish thought that were over most students' heads, Rav Lichtenstein responded, paraphrasing

R. Yitzchak Hutner: the best teaching aims at where the student will be years later rather than at his present state.² Much of what he taught has been absorbed by me and many of my fellows, as he had hoped. We commemorate his mastery of Torah and his capacity to draw judiciously and elegantly on the Western intellectual tradition to enhance authentic and critical religious thinking. We dwell on his ethical greatness and the magnificence of his piety, how he prayed, how he listened to other human beings, how he attended to his father, how he never wasted a moment. We continue to be driven by the irrefutable charisma of the life rightly lived, the life lived in harness. In his absence, as in his lifetime, we continue to ask ourselves what he would think about the way we contend with our everyday challenges and what he would say about our struggle against torpor and faithlessness.

This man, who made every effort to avoid placing himself on a higher level than others, who showed the example of enjoying the best that a “normal” life can offer with unmitigated zest while pursuing without compromise or abatement the passionate service of his Creator, continues to beckon, from eternity to eternity.

May our fellowship of *talmidim*, with the inspiration of our now absent teacher, “with deliberate steps and slow” make our way through the world and together meet the challenges and opportunities of the future: “One equal temper of heroic hearts/To strive to seek to find and not to yield.”

May his memory be a blessing.³

² See *Pahad Yitzhak: Iggerot* # 155.

³ These remarks overlap, at some points, with my eulogy at Yeshiva University (http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/834779/Rabbi_Shalom_Carmy/Divrei_Hesped_for_Rav_Aharon_Lichtenstein_zt'l) and published eulogies in *First Things* (<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/04/the-mantle-of-elijah>) and *Jewish Action* (Shalom Carmy, “On Complexity and Clarity,” *Jewish Action* (Fall 2015), 38-41), as well as unpublished impromptu comments at Yeshiva University immediately after R. Lichtenstein’s *petira*.