

BOOK REVIEW

Seeking His Presence: Conversations with Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

by HAIM SABATO

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Reviewed by
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CONVERSATIONAL BRIDGES: RABBI AHARON LICHTENSTEIN AND RABBI HAIM SABATO IN DIALOGUE

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein was born in France in 1933. Rabbi Haim Sabato was born in Egypt in 1952. R. Lichtenstein enjoyed a world-class Jewish and general education in the United States, culminating in both rabbinic ordination from his father-in-law, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and a PhD from Harvard University in English literature. He is associated with the very best of the Ashkenazi scholarly tradition. In contrast, R. Sabato was raised in Israel, with a *yeshivat hesder* background, was one of the founders of a hesder yeshiva in Maalei Adumim and has written, in addition to Jewish scholarly works, five stunning novels that spotlight salient aspects of Israeli life. His novels, *Aleppo Tales* and *Dawning of the Day* draw deeply from R. Sabato's rich Sephardic heritage. The difference between them is perhaps incongruously communicated in the photo on the book's back cover; two clean-shaven scholars look into the camera, one shorter, one taller, one looking straight at us, the other from a side view. The picture is not a conventional side-by-side image, neither is the dialogue inside.

R. Sabato gave us the gift, in *Seeking His Presence*, of allowing the reader to be a fly on the wall while these two giants engage in dialogue on issues central to modern Jewish life: spirituality, Zionism, universalism, Jewish law in the State of Israel, the role of study in the formation of Jewish life, feminism, approaches to Bible study and general studies, the Brisker method, to name but a few. This gift is all the more precious because the book came out in English after R. Lichtenstein's death in 2015, allowing his students and followers across the globe to still access his wisdom. The exchange between these two scholars highlights for the reader with full force that R. Sabato's search for God's presence continues despite the immense intellectual and spiritual loss of R. Lichtenstein's presence.

It is with this seeking that R. Sabato begins the book. Instead of a standard introduction, he opens with a transformational moment from his childhood that explains the book's title. In the synagogue of the Beit Mizmil transit camp, R. Sabato, at the tender age of six or seven, watched his tearful grandfather on Yom Kippur recite to the congregation the lines of ibn Ezra: "Towards You, my God, I direct my fervent yearning, my longing and my love." He watched his scholarly grandfather revert to a childlike posture of wonder in the presence of the Almighty. Although he never articulates this sentiment explicitly, it seems as if this early memory of piety set a course for him to meld the intellectual and spiritual aspects of Judaism tightly and, as a writer and student, to seek out others who had what he glimpsed early on in his saintly grandfather.

R. Sabato first heard R. Lichtenstein forty years before he wrote the book, when he gave a guest lecture at Yeshivat HaKotel, where R. Sabato was a student. It made an early impression; he was won over by R. Lichtenstein's "heartwarming demeanor and humility" and desired to know more about this scholar's worldview. Seeking God's presence, he found it in R. Lichtenstein's personal articulation of his relationship with God: "I sense closeness to the Almighty more than anything else. There is nothing of which I am more certain, more convinced, that I experience more deeply, feel more strongly, than my faith..." (14)

Yet, as an educator, R. Lichtenstein was aware that not all of his students shared these feelings. When R. Sabato asked him how the personality of the Torah scholar is formed, for example, R. Lichtenstein challenged students to go beyond the discourses of Abaye and Rava: "Can one really say, if you study halakha you will meet all your spiritual needs, and you will spare yourselves all sorts of troubles, uncertainties and doubts? Can we truly say that they will not be missing out on anything?" Stylistically, throughout the book, R. Lichtenstein often responds to a question with another question, not – it would seem – out of fear of answering it, but out of respect and humility, as if there is not only one way, his way, to view the world.

Having said that, he makes other statements with ease and certainty. "We must develop an approach to Bible study that is both humanistic and religious," he states when asked about contemporary approaches to studying Bible in the Orthodox world and believes that an approach which is too humanizing distorts the extraordinariness of biblical heroes. But he also claims that dehumanization is dangerous. The one person he would like to speak with in the next world is Ramban, a towering personal inspiration. While he describes himself as "less authoritative, less assertive"

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than his father-in-law, the Rav, he writes, “I think that a rabbi has the right to stand firm in his opinion.” When asked what he learned at four years in Harvard he responded: “I learned that the world is complex and that man is complex.”

In a lengthy response to the question, “Can truth be found anywhere or only within the Torah?” R. Lichtenstein shares an observation about the world which puzzled him: “Many people today, including yeshiva students, have a problem. They lack the confidence to dive into deep waters. They live in fear, afraid of everything. This fear permeates a large part of the yeshiva world.” He wrote this specifically in response to the reality that not all contemporary and complex questions have been dealt with in traditional sources. “At times, we are faced with questions that did arise in the past, and which do not appear in the sources.” The obverse is also true. Many ethical/halakhic dilemmas confronted by *Hazal* lack application today. To illustrate, he cites a passage from *Bava Batra* (7b) that tackles how one divides up the economic burden of a city under siege. One opinion suggests that this may depend on the distance a family lives to the city’s walls. “Some of the criteria,” R. Lichtenstein states, “are not relevant nowadays. In a world where intercontinental missiles can be launched across hundreds of miles, should one really take into account which family lives closer to the city wall?”

This tension between authenticity and relevancy surfaces in the arena of women’s Torah study and roles. R. Sabato asked R. Lichtenstein his view on contemporary developments and asked if there should be any limit on women’s learning. R. Lichtenstein responds that there is cause for concern about a feminist agenda broadly but also appreciates the power of learning regardless of gender: “I know many women whose learning gives them a bond to the service of God, to the Torah, at a depth that I doubt they can attain in any other way.” He also encouraged men to “think about how this issue appears from a woman’s perspective” with the caveat that this is hard to achieve. While he is not entirely supportive of all new developments, he also shared a struggle with the judgments often bandied about this area of Jewish life:

I don’t feel comfortable telling women that I know them better than they know themselves, as certain as people assert. Such people insist that while these women speak idealistically about love of God, they are really thinking about their own power and position. I don’t know. Are there no power struggles among rabbis? From these accusations one would think that the rabbinic world was free of such things. (220)

R. Lichtenstein's own mother wrote articles of Jewish thought in the 1920's in the same journal in which Rav Hutner published but wrote under a pseudonym. No such pseudonym would be necessary today.

Some of R. Lichtenstein's most moving comments involve his belief in religious Zionism – what he regards as seizing the staff of history - and the State of Israel. R. Sabato often frames his questions with the inspiring scholarship of others or his own perspective. On Israel and its existence as a fulfillment of a great prophetic vision, both are committed but slightly cautious. R. Lichtenstein writes of being existentially connected to the state yet would still “not approach it with the celebratory tones of Hegelian, historical knocking.” And yet despite the nuance, R. Lichtenstein is unambiguous in articulating the centrality of Israel for world Jewry:

We would be seized with horror if we were to ask ourselves what the Jewish world would be like today were it not for the State...without a feeling of pride in the existence of the State, without those symbols with which one can identify. What a vacuum this would leave. If the State had not been founded, every individual or family that does not fully identify with Judaism religiously would assimilate. There would be isolated strongholds, but nothing more than that. In one sense, the State was established in 5708 (1948), but in another sense it is re-established daily. Every single day God's handiwork is revealed anew. (Included and excerpted from “*Ki simmachtani Hashem...*” *Alon Shvut Bogrim* 9, 5756 and included in the collection *Al Lev Aharon*)

God's handiwork is also revealed in those who represent Him on earth. Perhaps R. Lichtenstein has been granted his wish and is now speaking with Ramban in the next world. But we sorely need his wisdom, his balanced worldview, his sensitivity, and his depth of faith in this world down below. So we thank R. Sabato for offering us this fine sliver of him through their conversations, discussions which we must now continue.