

Rabbi Jeffrey Saks, an Associate Editor of *Tradition*, is the Founding Director of ATID in Jerusalem.

THE BEST THAT HAS BEEN THOUGHT AND SAID BY R. LICHTENSTEIN ABOUT THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

RAharon Lichtenstein has long and heroically championed the primacy of place and purpose of Talmud Torah as normative *mitsva*, ennobled lifestyle, and device to forge the Divine encounter – “our life and longevity.” At the same time, for over fifty years, he has also been our community’s most articulate spokesman and role model for the value of the humanities in general, and literature in particular, to achieve and advance a variety of goals advantageous to the religious personality. In this brief bibliographic essay we will survey R. Lichtenstein’s writings on this topic and map out his ongoing articulation of the potential benefits to religious life by engaging with the “best that has been thought and said” (to quote R. Lichtenstein quoting Matthew Arnold).

The major thrust of his thought on the value of literature is that it “provides a spiritual complement” to our lives as commanded worshippers of God [1997: 225].

R. Lichtenstein’s earliest published treatment of the topic was in 1961 (a year before completing his Harvard doctorate on Henry More, exploring “The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist”).¹ In the essay, “A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View,” the reader can already identify most of the major themes he will strike again and again when exploring this topic. First, he posits that the encounter with the humanities “generally help[s] to develop our spiritual personality. Time and again, they intensify our insight into basic problems of moral and religious thought... The humanities deepen our understanding of

¹ Published in book form as Aharon Lichtenstein, *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). For a more detailed analysis of the Ph.D. dissertation see Shalom Carmy’s contribution elsewhere in this volume.

man: his nature, functions, and duties” [1961: 93].² This theme – that “[T]he value [of humanities education] is not only instrumentally pragmatic but, rather, when culture is properly taught and interpreted, inherently and substantively, spiritual, as well” [2004: 33] – is revisited over the years in a number of ways.

Citing Onkelos to Genesis 2:7, which identifies human uniqueness with “*ruah memallela*” (a speaking spirit), R. Lichtenstein states that “language... defines creative human existence... [the study of which] provides invaluable insight into the human character” [1986: 112]. In this regard, the essence of our divine image becomes man as a “creator of symbols – verbal, cognitive, imaginative.... The study of great literature focuses upon a manifestation, albeit indirect, of His wondrous creation at its apex.... [Human artifacts] reveal the spiritual potential which God’s creative will had implanted in man” [1997: 245]. So, for example, “In Hamlet you can witness the greatness of man on one hand, and on the other to see the greatest of Western writers as a living expression of what mankind can achieve; to the height that *ruah memallela* can ascend” [1986: 15].

The power of literature to demonstrate this is sharpened when we consider that among “those who have at least attained and revealed some measure of knowledge, great writers are preeminent. In reading them, we can confront the human spirit doubly, as creation and as creator.... As regards enriching our understanding of *ruah memallela*, imaginative artists have been more illuminating than theoreticians – not only because they have described more powerfully but because they have also probed more deeply.... [The artist] melds precision and sensitivity, intuition and acuity, to perceive and portray concrete personal and social reality” [1997: 248].

Literary exposure leads to experiences which create this type of enriched understanding. Among them is “a broad range of social, historical, and personal experience [which] helps us transcend the insular bounds of our own niche in time and space – to disengage the local and accidental from the permanent and universal, to understand intellectually and empathetically, situations we had not otherwise confronted or even possibly envisioned. All the more so, when that experience has been communicated through culture at its finest, by great souls capable of feeling deeply and expressing feeling powerfully” [1997: 255].

² To be clear, in many of the essays surveyed here, R. Lichtenstein is discussing the larger aims of a liberal arts education. However, in almost every case what he says is applicable specifically to the realm of literature, and his examples are overwhelmingly drawn from that discipline.

TRADITION

Speaking personally, R. Lichtenstein states that his own reading has “reinforced an awareness of the spiritual significance of ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’ [again, Arnold’s definition of literature]. For what is it that culture offers us? In relation to art – profound expressions of the creative spirit, an awareness of structure and its interaction with substance and, consequently, the ability to organize and present ideas; in relation to life – the ability to understand, appreciate, and confront our personal, communal and cosmic context, sensitivity to the human condition and some assistance in coping with it; in relation to both – a literary consciousness which enables us to transcend our own milieu and place it in a broader perspective. Above all, culture instills in us a sense of the moral, psychological and metaphysical complexity of human life” [1985: 228].

Part of the “significant boon” which is garnered through sharpened literary sensibility is training “to observe perceptively and to respond empathetically.” Clearly this is not a characteristic that develops automatically, nor need it come about exclusively through literary reading, but it is among the array of traits by which an *oved Hashem* is well served. In this regard he reminds us that the most significant potential contribution – the kind of personal development that can be brought about – is literature’s role as a “spiritual complement or, if you will, supplement.” It “can inform and irradiate our spiritual being by rounding out its cardinal Torah component... by expanding our spiritual and intellectual horizons through exposure to other areas of potential religious import.” This is because “great literature often offers us a truer and richer view of the essence – the ‘inscape,’ to use Hopkins’ word – of even physical reality. Literature sharpens our experience and, hence, our understanding of various aspects of reality” [1997: 227; 237; 244]. Insofar as there is improvement to the reader, there is improvement to the world: [The humanities] significantly enhance our ability to cope with the two primary challenges of the moral and spiritual life: *tikkun* of the self within this antechamber to the world to-come; and *tikkun* of the antechamber proper” [1986: 115].

Another major theme in R. Lichtenstein’s writings on this subject, evident in the quotes above, is the centrality of creativity as a value in religious life. (As is well known, and as explicated in some of his other essays, this was a matter of specific focus for R. Soloveitchik³; the application

³ See, e.g., Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1 (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2003), 192-196 and 217-225; and Walter S. Wurzbarger, “The Centrality of Creativity in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Tradition* 30:4 (Summer 1996), 219-228.

to literature is a special focus of R. Lichtenstein.) Interestingly, R. Lichtenstein is far more focused on our roles as consumers of the creative product, than on our roles as producers. In the recently published conversations between Rabbis Lichtenstein and Chaim Sabato (himself a Rosh Yeshiva and published novelist), the former admitted to a certain ambivalence toward a type of literature that might emanate from within the Beit Midrash. He candidly admits that he was never tempted to produce such on his own [2011: 158]. Presumably he feels literature is better served by first-rate writers who write from a place of religious sensibility rather than by prodding bishops or rabbis into writing literature; perhaps it's merely a critical sense that the atmosphere of the Beit Midrash – the very spiritual air we breathe – is not likely to produce very good writing.

Among the reasons for this ambivalence is a need for “care and a clear demarcations” in the face of the creative impulse necessary to be a producer of literary art. The need to walk that tightrope would likely “incur costs – both to the *beit midrash* as well as the artistic output itself.” As for *talmidei hakhamim* engaging in the type of imaginative delving requisite to generating a literary embodiment of the world of Torah: “Holy things profane holy things” [*Zevahim* 3b]. This fear requires vigilance so as not to transform, God forbid, the holy experiences of our inner religious realm into something profane when pouring it into the mold of contemporary literature. On the other hand, it's precisely that type of creative reticence that the artistic impulse cannot endure [2011: 158-159].

Another contribution literary sensibility offers is an aid to understanding – both man's understanding of the world and the understanding of man (or humanity). Again, speaking personally, R. Lichtenstein testifies that “my general education has contributed much to my personal development. I know my understanding of Tanakh would be far shallower in every respect without it. I know that it has greatly enhanced my perception of life in Erets Yisrael. I know that it has enriched my religious experience. I know that when my father was stricken blind, Milton's profoundly religious sonnet ‘On His Blindness’ and its magnificent conclusion, ‘They also serve who only stand and wait,’ stood me in excellent stead” [1985: 230].

While frequently declaring that literature and the humanities are clearly not the only, exclusive path to attain the types of sensitivities needed in a fully developed religious personality, he documents his “painful discoveries” that “many of these [desired] elements are sadly lacking among the contemners of culture on the right.” By way of example he recalls the *hespedim* delivered at the 1962 funeral for the Lakewood Rosh Yeshiva, R. Aharon Kotler. The only person who gave “insight into the

TRADITION

fire which animated that giant was Irving Bunim, a layman. When one's psychological sensitivity is lacking, the result is that much of Torah – whole *parashiyot* and personalities in Chumash – are simply misread... with a marvelous tradition of *midrashim* often distorted beyond recognition" [1985: 230]. This is the need to enhance the understanding of man – that is, the type of self-reflection we may hope for as men about ourselves and others.

And by way of example of man's understanding of the world around us and the texts which confront us, consider R. Lichtenstein's early essay only recently published after a half-century delay: "In studying *nevi'im* and *ketuvim* particularly, we acknowledge the significance of a range of problems we generally ignore – literary problems; and that we perceive a dimension we ordinarily overlook – a literary dimension." Written in 1962 – long before the types of literary analysis of *Tanakh* we are accustomed to today became developed, acceptable and popular – he proposed that we "discover – or rather, rediscover – *kitvei ha-kodesh* as literature; and second, that in order to deepen our appreciation of them as such, we seek to approach them critically" [1962: 19].

Here R. Lichtenstein enumerates three reasons that literary analysis of *Tanakh* remains a matter of "spiritual import." First, "aesthetic experience per se, properly channeled, is spiritually desired. It serves to sharpen our perception, to expand our horizons, to refine our sensibility and deepen our humanity – to make us richer and more harmonious individuals." Second, the appreciation of the aesthetic component of *Tanakh* is in and of itself significant insofar as "it is beauty as divine revelation, as a reflection of the form in which the *Ribbono shel Olam* chose to manifest His will to man." With regard to cosmic beauty we acknowledge as a matter of course that the "message of divine glory told by the heavens is largely communicated by awe inspiring beauty... Ought we, then, to dismiss with respect to Scripture what we so readily acknowledge with regard to nature?" Finally, literary "power and beauty are not merely frosting on the cake of the *pasuk's* meaning. They are – in the more imaginative and emotional passages, certainly – of the very fabric of that meaning... Readiness to open our sensibilities to the power and beauty of *kitvei ha-kodesh* is the first step in enriching our literary experience of them. In order to maximize our response to them, we should, secondly, learn to read them critically" [1962: 21-23].

In no way to gainsay these various benefits of analyzing *Tanakh* with the tools of literary criticism (the intended meaning of "criticism" in the passage above; not to be confused with "Biblical criticism" in the conventional sense), he nevertheless cautions about the limits of such analysis to

provide insight. Attention to literary phenomena, no matter how potentially profitable, often carries the risk of being spiritually distracting by emphasizing aesthetic form over spiritual message. The reader may find it interesting that the source he cites to make this point is from none other than C.S. Lewis (another keen, religious reader of literary texts), and it is so felicitous that it warrants being quoted at length [1962: 20]:

Some endeavour to isolate it [the profound effect of a Biblical passage] by concentrating on the book's rhythm: but I am not convinced that its rhythms (they are various) are very different from those of any good prose that is written for the most part in short sentences, nor that they would strike us as noticeably fine if divorced from their matter. 'After the cocktail, a soup – but the soup was not very nice – and after the soup a small, cold pie'. It is not a bad sentence: but it is very different from its rhythmical equivalent 'After the earthquake, a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice' (I Kings xix. 12). Is it not possible that critics whose philosophy forbids them to attach much value to the matter of scripture are tempted to attribute to rhythm, and indeed to style in general, more than its due.⁴

And this is merely a limitation of criticism to contribute to our overall understanding. Consider his ever-present note of caution, acknowledging a potential for corruption, and quoting T. S. Eliot's admonition that "explicit ethical and theological standards' must be especially applied to 'works of imagination.' All of us may be influenced by these" [1961: 98 and 1997: 284, e.g.].⁵

Moreover, he continues in a cautionary tone, today "confidence in culture – culture in Arnold's sense, 'the study of perfection' – has been generally shaken... [principally as] high culture... is less cherished than it once was." Indeed, such a notion seems "hopelessly naive" in light of "contemporary vulgarization of culture" [1985: 226].⁶

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 214.

⁵ Eliot's cautionary words are returned to many times throughout R. Lichtenstein's writings. See especially the 1935 essay "Religion and Literature" in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. F. Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 97-106.

⁶ As to the more general threat of contemporary academic culture, see the response to William Kolbrener [2004]. Regarding the "shaken confidence in culture," R. Lichtenstein frequently cites George Steiner's preface to his book *Language and Silence*: "We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, then play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning" [see, e.g., 1985: 227].

TRADITION

And yet, even in regard to so-called “high culture” there remains danger, as Ramban points out (at Leviticus 26:11 in reference to the *Sefer ha-Refuot*): “The danger of looking at inner creative life disconnected from God leads to the risk of substituting that for *emuna* and *dveikut*. This form of culture is in competition with faith” [1986: 13].

But in the final analysis, if balanced within a larger set of commitments to Torah and *mitsvot*, the reader of Rabbi Lichtenstein’s half-century of writing on this topic must conclude that that there is much to be gained from the exposure to literature and the development of the sensibilities in engenders. On one foot how can we distill it all? “If I were pressed to encapsulate what I learned in graduate school, my answer would be: *the complexity of experience*. ‘The rest is commentary; go and study’” [1985: 229].

In 1956, R. Lichtenstein had an opportunity to meet the legendary American poet Robert Frost. He described this a few years ago then tried to demonstrate the “complexity of experience” by reading and explicating one of Frost’s poems, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” How exquisite, how insightful – and ultimately, how unusual for a Rosh Yeshiva to analyze poetry within the Beit Midrash!

But it is precisely his reading of the poem that justifies its place within the study hall (although to be clear, as an adjunct, a mere *parperet*, to the *havayyot de-Abbaye ve-Rava!*), for he concludes “I know of few poems that express so forcefully the moral idea that binds us to the *beit midrash!*”

The analysis of the Frost poem is of course noteworthy for its rarity. Aside from a period at Stern College when R. Lichtenstein actually taught English Literature, his myriad references to Sophocles, Shakespeare, Arnold, Milton, and the like serve as demonstrations and decorations, illustrations and points of comparison – but almost never as the object of study itself from within the yeshiva.⁷ Furthermore, the marshalling of literary source material in the analysis of *Tanakh* or Jewish thought is largely absent in R. Lichtenstein’s teaching of Talmud, including its *aggadic* passages (which, after all, has been the bulk of his life’s work).

Returning to the Frost poem we see the glorious complexity: “It is easy to devote yourself to Torah [exclusively] if you are convinced that everything else is nonsense. Nonsense is easy to give up. But one who sees the beauty in God’s creation, who comes to love it, must be strong in order to devote himself to learning Torah. One must not divorce the world, but rather bear in mind one’s ‘lover’s quarrel with the world’” [2008: 134].

⁷ On at least one other occasion he read and analyzed two sonnets by Milton (including his beloved and oft quoted “On His Blindness”) at a *sibah* in Yeshivat Har Etzion, but that talk was never published.

This is the upshot of Frost's poem as elucidated through R. Lichtenstein's reading. It is a statement about our engagement with nature (the topic of the poem), but it reads equally true as a statement of our consumption of literary creativity.

And that creativity – after all, not produced by us the readers – has great merit for us even as mere consumers. In the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold, so often quoted by R. Lichtenstein, considered what our relationship to great creations of the past ought to be. Since great works can only be produced by those immersed in a climate of great ideas, reading carefully and critically (what he called “criticism”) is the necessary prerequisite to further creation and creativity. Arnold's remarks, although not quoted in his essays, summarize something that R. Lichtenstein has been trying to communicate to us these many years:

There is so much inviting us! – what are we to take? what will nourish us in growth towards perfection? That is the question which, with the immense field of life and of literature lying before him, the critic [i.e., reader] has to answer; for himself first, and afterwards for others...

I conclude with what I said at the beginning: to have the sense of creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge. Then it may have, in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and conscience will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary, inadequate creation. And at some epochs no other creation is possible.

Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature we must never forget that. But what true man of letters ever can forget it? The epochs of Æschylus and Shakspeare [sic] make us feel their pre-eminence. In an epoch like those is, no doubt, the true life of a literature; there is the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon. That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.⁸

⁸ Matthew Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. V. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), p. 825.

TRADITION

For R. Lichtenstein, and for we his students (at least aspirationally!), whose primary commitments lie elsewhere, whose spiritual “promised land” is a different realm altogether, there is still profit in “saluting from afar” the true life of literature which can be of immense “value in molding spiritual personality and moral identity” [2004: 33].

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography covers R. Lichtenstein’s major written statements on the role of literature in religious life, which is of course a central topic in his thought, and receives passing treatment in many other essays as well; see the full bibliography maintained by R. Dov Karroll at etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/Bibliography-web.htm for his writings on the larger issue of Judaism’s interaction with general culture. Additionally, in his many essays on a wide variety of halakhic and philosophical topics, R. Lichtenstein often illustrates points with the type of humanistic insights gained from the world of literature. While not constituting expositions on literature per se, they form demonstrations of his worldview (on this matter) in practice.⁹

Items are listed by year of formulation, not necessarily publication (the date of which is marked in the publication data). Essays written, transcribed, or adapted by others are marked with an asterisk.

1961. “A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View” in *Yeshiva College Commentator* (April 27, 1961), 5-6; *Gesher* 1 (1963), 33-38; and *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1 (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2003), 89-103 [page numbers in my essay above refer to the *Leaves of Faith* edition].
1962. Public lecture at Stern College, published with an updated epilogue as: “Criticism and *Kitvei ha-Kodesh*” in *Rav Shalom Banayikh: Essays Presented to Rabbi Shalom Carmy*, ed. H. Angel and Y. Blau (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2012), 15-32.
- 1985*. “Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting” in *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, adapted by R. Ziegler (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2003), chapter 12, 220-252.

⁹ A good example of such an insight can be found in an essay on the *better mekhira*, which he calls a “halakhic tragedy,” in which to flesh out the full meaning of his thought he makes an aside to compare lyrical and tragic viewpoints; in “Thoughts About Shemittah” in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2 (Jersey City: Ktav, 2004), 179-188.

1986. Torah U-Madda lecture at Yeshiva University, published as “The End of Learning” in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1, 105-117.
1989. “*Tovah Hokhmah im Nahala*” [in Hebrew] in *Mamleket Kohanim ve-Goy Kadosh*, ed. Y. Shaviv (Jerusalem: Family of David Cohen, 1989), 25-42.
1996. “*Ha-Yesodot ha-Hiyyuviyyim ve-haSheliliyyim be-Tarbut Ma’aravit*” [in Hebrew] in *Tokh u-Kelipa be-Tarbut ha-Ma’aravit* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 1996), 11-19.
1997. “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict” in *Judaism’s Encounter With Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, ed. J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1997), 217-292.
2004. “To Sharpen Understanding” (response to William Kolbrener, “*Torah Umadda: A Voice From the Academy*”) in *Jewish Action* (Spring 2004), 32-34.
- 2008*. “‘The Woods Are Lovely, Dark and Deep’: Reading a Poem by Robert Frost,” *Alei Etzion* 16 (Iyar 5769/2009), 129-134.
- 2011*. Chaim Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha: Sihot im ha-Rav Aharon Lichtenstein* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sefarim, 2011), esp. on 157-164.