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THE RELIGIOUS HUMANISM OF R. AHARON LICHTENSTEIN

In his thought and life, R. Aharon Lichtenstein has developed a unique and original position in the intellectual landscape, not only of Israel, to which he made *aliyyah* in 1971, but of Judaism in Western countries in modern times. This will be made clear, first, by looking at R. Lichtenstein's thought in relation to central currents of Judaism and of religious thought in the modern West, and then by comparing and contrasting his fundamental position with the general ethos and prevailing views of Religious Zionism.

I.

The primary and central orientation of R. Lichtenstein's thought is identification with the central ideals of the *yeshiva* world of Eastern Europe, viz.: absolute faith in the God of Israel,¹ and absolute faith that the central path through which God reveals Himself to his people and to the entire world is the Torah, which is God's Will and Wisdom.² A corollary of this belief is the conclusion that the central means of connecting with God is

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¹ Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself," *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 2004), 363-367.

² Chaim Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha: Conversations with R. Aharon Lichtenstein* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2011) 17-28. See there the interesting reference to R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutei Amarim*.

TRADITION

through Torah study.³ This conclusion is joined by absolute faith in *Hazal* and the conviction that the masters of the Torah, the great religious scholars of Israel in each generation, constitute the supreme authority.⁴ R. Lichtenstein emphasizes again and again that the highest values and the most important activities are Torah study and fulfillment of the commandments, and that all other activity must be measured against the question of whether it adds to or detracts from these two pursuits. Moreover, Torah study for R. Lichtenstein means learning Gemara, and particularly halakhic *sugyot* along with the entire gamut of medieval and modern rabbinic commentators.⁵

R. Lichtenstein is aware of course, of different styles of learning Gemara and Halakha – from *pilpul*, to *asukei shema'ata aliba de-hilkbeta*, following the chain of the development of Halakha until the final codification (*pesak*), and others. These approaches are in his eyes entirely legitimate. However, R. Lichtenstein grants pride of place to the approach that he was trained in, what he calls the “conceptual approach to Torah Learning” or the approach of “Brisk.” In R. Lichtenstein’s eyes, this approach is characterized by rational principles, consistency and coherence, and it is possessed of “power, majesty and grandeur” and therefore it is the style of learning that is most worthy to represent the revelation of Torah – God’s Wisdom.⁶ More than this, it would seem that, according to R. Lichtenstein, the *Brisker* approach includes theological and normative aspects. R. Lichtenstein believes that the Torah has a Platonic dimension, that it is an ideal entity which serves as a standard that defines and measures that which transpires in the world. This ideal aspect of the Torah, standing autonomously apart from the ebb and flow of “the world below,” is especially felt, as R. Lichtenstein’s teacher R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik emphasized,⁷ when one studies Torah using the *Brisker* approach. The deployment of the ideal-conceptual method is the guarantee against both the shallow “ho-hum” religious pragmatism, characteristic

³ Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha*, *ibid*.

⁴ See Aharon Lichtenstein, “Legitimization of Modernity: Classical and Contemporary,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 279-309.

⁵ Aharon Lichtenstein, “Why Learn Gemara,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1 (Jersey City, N.J., Ktav, 2003), 1-17.

⁶ Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Conceptual Approach to Torah Learning,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1, 52.

⁷ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Be-Sod ha Yabid ve-ha Yabad: Mivhar Ketavim Ivriyyim*, edited by Pinchas Peli (Jerusalem: Orot, 1976), 189-253.

of the *ba'al ha-bayit*, the religiously mediocre burgher, and against being swept away by every and any new, ostensibly stirring, cultural trend.⁸

At the same time, and alongside the yeshiva-oriented religiosity that he received from such figures as R. Yitzchak Hutner, R. Ahron Soloveichik, and R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, R. Lichtenstein affirms that full religious fulfillment involves many sided engagement with the world, and regularly cites the verse: “He did not create it to be empty but formed it to be inhabited [developed]” (Is. 45:18). By his lights, the full religious life does not demand withdrawal or rejection of the world, but rather “sanctification of the world.”⁹ Therefore it is a mitsva to serve in the IDF, to contribute to society, and to be a useful citizen and productive member of society. In other words, R. Lichtenstein sees affirmative religious value in involvement with general, non-religious, and non-Jewish society, to be sure with some reservations and under the condition that this engagement not impair religious commitment and Torah study.

It is at this point that the unique character of R. Lichtenstein’s thought comes into view. The central tendency of Jews in the West from the last third of the 18th Century onward was a drive toward their political, economic, social, and cultural integration into the general, surrounding society.¹⁰ In the vast majority of cases this tendency was accompanied by a commitment on the part of the Jews to liberalism as a social and political philosophy; that is, to a view of society and the polity that puts the individual and his/her rights as the point of departure and as the end (the *telos*) of political organization.¹¹ At the very start of this development, Moses Mendelssohn, in his seminal work *Jerusalem*, builds arguments in favor of the separation of religion and state based upon John Locke’s philosophy of toleration (while, in his case at least, maintaining the enduring significance of Jewish religious identity and practice within the liberal state).¹² From that point on, both in Europe and America, Jews prominently fought for liberal principles in the revolutions of 1848,

⁸ Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Future of Centrist Orthodoxy,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 309-329.

⁹ Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Future of Centrist Orthodoxy,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 315-316, “The State of Orthodoxy,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 333; Aharon Lichtenstein, “Contemporary Impediments to Yirat Shamayim,” *Varieties of Jewish Experience* (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav 2011), 216-217 and *passim*.

¹⁰ Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation*, (New York: Schocken, 1978).

¹¹ Michael Sandel, ed. *Liberalism and its Critics* (New York: NYU Press, 1984).

¹² Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism*, Alexander Altmann ed. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), Section I: Religious Power.

TRADITION

in the Dreyfus affair and on other occasions.¹³ Until this very day, the organizations that support with utmost consistency separation of church and state in the U.S. are the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League.¹⁴

One does not need to try very hard to understand the reason for this phenomenon. Liberal social ontology, that is, liberalism viewed not only as a set of arrangements but as a categorical orientation towards the nature of the individual, collective existence, time and place, permits Jews to participate in the general society. If, on the other hand, general society thinks of itself as an organic collectivity in which membership is acquired exclusively by descent, or, put a little differently, primordial-ethnic belonging in a non-Jewish ethno-national group such as Poles or Italians, then Jews will not – indeed, under the society’s basic terms cannot – be allowed full entrance and membership. In contrast, if the general society is conceived of as being constituted by a contract that “neutral” individuals establish as individuals, irrespective of their particular primordial-ethnic ties, then there is nothing to prevent Jews from joining fully.

What is unique about R. Lichtenstein’s thought is that, while he affirms participation in, and engagement with, general, non-Jewish society and culture, he absolutely rejects such philosophical liberalism on the grounds that it contradicts fundamental truths of Judaism and erodes faith and religious commitment. When R. Lichtenstein was asked what is the central impediment to faith in our time, among the central challenges he listed “liberalism in the sense used by Cardinal Newman, rampant intellectualist individualism.” That is, not only are liberal social arrangements dangerous, but the essential liberal philosophical conception is dangerous for Orthodox Jews and for a life of faith in general.¹⁵ It is significant that he invokes in this context one of his intellectual heroes, John Henry Cardinal Newman, a central figure in at Oxford in the mid-nineteenth century, who was an impressive and leading conservative religious thinker.¹⁶

¹³ *Zeman Yehudi Hadash: Tarbut Yehudit be-Idan Hilloni – Mabbat Encyclopedi*, Vol. II, (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 2-60.

¹⁴ ADL, Separation of Church and State: A First Amendment Primer, http://archive.adl.org/issue_religious_freedom/separation_cs_primer_schools.html#UwyM9IIUFjq.

¹⁵ Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Condition of Jewish Belief,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 344.

¹⁶ Newman was a major figure in the Oxford Movement of High-Church Anglicans who eventually embraced Catholicism. On Newman see Basil Wiley, *Nineteenth Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (Harmodsworth, England: Pelican Books, 1973), 82-110.

R. Lichtenstein conceives of the Jewish people in absolutely non-liberal terms. He identifies the Jewish people as an organic collective entity which is possessed of a clear identity and vocation to which the individual Jew is connected, not by a voluntary contract but rather by an essential ontological bond.¹⁷ Therefore he opposes the separation of church and state – because both state and society, Jewish and non-Jewish, have to realize their religious-spiritual *telos*.¹⁸ He mocks the inconsistent tolerance of liberals and democrats,¹⁹ and terms John Locke’s conception of tolerance (the very conception which was so important to Mendelssohn) “tepid latitudinarianism.”²⁰

The fact that someone with yeshiva-oriented religiosity such as that of R. Lichtenstein rejects liberalism is not surprising. The Haredi world is full of figures who reject this worldview, from the Lubavitcher Rebbe to the Brisker Rov, R. Lichtenstein’s great-uncle by marriage, in Jerusalem. However, these figures look consistent to us because they also reject involvement in the general culture and society. If they do facilitate or encourage such engagement, it is only on a utilitarian basis such as considerations of livelihood. In this light, it would seem that the Jewish world divides into two: There are liberal Jews who advocate engagement with the general society and culture and there are *yeshivish* and Haredi Jews who are anti-liberal and also reject such engagement.

R. Lichtenstein cuts across these categories. He is a yeshiva-oriented anti-liberal, and yet he supports involvement with the general culture and society, avowedly not on a utilitarian basis but on grounds that are value-laden and even spiritual. How does he accomplish this? What is the matrix of thought on which this combination is based? In order to answer these questions I will offer a reconstruction and synthesis of the thought of R. Lichtenstein.

To my mind, R. Lichtenstein has, alongside a Platonic conception of Torah, what we may call an Aristotelian conception of human beings in the sense that human beings have an end, a *telos*. The *telos*, the purpose of man – of every man – is spiritual and religious: the acknowledgement and worship of God.²¹ Through performance of the mitzvot and Torah study,

¹⁷ Aharon Lichtenstein, “Brother Daniel and the Jewish Fraternity,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 73; “The Parameters of Tolerance,” *ibid.*, 101.

¹⁸ Aharon Lichtenstein, “Religion and State: The Case for Interaction,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 1-37, “The Parameters of Tolerance,” 102.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 85-116

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

²¹ Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Condition of Jewish Belief,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 342-343.

TRADITION

Jews have an end and a goal of sanctity and closeness to God far above that of non-Jews. But insofar as the Jew is a human being, he also shares in the universal human search for the transcendent and the divine. In fact, particularistic Jewish spiritual ends and achievements rest upon universalistic spiritual, cultural, and religious achievements: morality, rationality, perfection of character, respect and manners, human sensitivity and understanding, aesthetic sensibility, and the ability to express oneself with elegance and precision. To the extent that the Jew is more moral, more rational, and more sensitive to, and understanding of, universal human issues, to that extent, his piety and fear of heaven, his Torah study, his performance of the ethical commandments and his prayer will be richer, deeper, and bring him closer to God.²² Here lies R. Lichtenstein's interest and affinity to Shakespeare, Milton, Matthew Arnold, Robert Frost, and others. Insofar as these authors' works deepen our human sensitivity and understanding, our moral and aesthetic sensibilities, they broaden the foundation upon which we can build a second story of Torah and piety.²³

R. Lichtenstein is thus deeply connected to the world of English letters and thought, but this connection is not neutral or egalitarian. His deepest affinity is with those figures who recognize "the basic religious nature of human existence."²⁴ Within this framework, it seems that his deepest ties are to figures from those two centuries whose moral and spiritual situation and problems most closely resembled those of the twentieth century, namely the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Those centuries experienced a wave of secularizing rationalist thought, and it seems that R. Lichtenstein felt closest to those religious figures who stood in the breach: Milton and the Cambridge Platonists in the Seventeenth Century,²⁵ and in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, S.T. Coleridge, Cardinal Newman and T.S. Eliot.²⁶

²² Ibid. especially 92-95 and 105-118; Aharon Lichtenstein, "Tova Hokhma im Nahala," in *Mamlekhet Kohanim ve-Goy Kadosh* (Jerusalem, 1989), 25-43, accessible at <http://www.herzog.ac.il/vtc/0084284.doc>; Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha*, 73-96.

²³ On R. Lichtenstein's approach to general studies see also Shalom Carmy, "Music of the Left Hand: Personal Notes on the Place of Liberal Arts Education in the Teachings of R. Aharon Lichtenstein," 223-239 in this volume.

²⁴ Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Condition of Jewish Belief," *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 343.

²⁵ Aharon Lichtenstein, *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1962).

²⁶ On Coleridge, see Wiley, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 9-58. On Newman see Wiley, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 82-110; T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber, 1939).

One of R. Lichtenstein's culture heroes who is something of an exception here is Matthew Arnold, who does not hold a religious position in quite the same way as the others.²⁷ It would seem that Arnold is important to R. Lichtenstein because of other factors, two in particular: First, Arnold as the herald or, if you will, prophet of the idea of "culture" in the sense of standards or criteria of excellence. R. Lichtenstein often quotes Arnold's famous definition of culture: "the best which has been thought and said."²⁸ In other words, R. Lichtenstein supports involvement in general culture, but as Arnold defined it – "the best which has been thought and said."²⁹ This – and only this – is the culture which can uplift our service of God by refining our moral sensibility, perfecting our reasoning and sharpening our sensitivity. Secondly, there is an interesting parallel between Arnold's characterization of culture as "turning a stream of fresh and free thought on received and stale ideas"³⁰ and R. Lichtenstein's approach to analytical Torah study (*Lomdus*) which he characterizes as "subtle, supple and luxuriant" and "sinuous, efflorescent and developmental."³¹

When one reads R. Lichtenstein's essays, particularly those in English, one cannot but receive the impression that these literary figures and the more religious-humanistic stream of English letters of which they are a part make up an important element of his inner world, and that he feels towards them a sort of closeness and spiritual fraternity. Indeed, in one place he raises the possibility that he is closer to them than to a secular or non-observant Jew, though he dismisses it immediately.³² Even though he rejects this possibility – as we know from *Lomdus* – even an intellectual or hypothetical possibility (*hava amina*) has meaning. In other words, the general human category of "the religious" is important to him. The category of "the religious" includes *all* human beings who wish to come close to and worship God.³³ R. Lichtenstein feels that he participates in this category and feels closeness and affinity with these religiously oriented human beings, despite his awareness that this position is

²⁷ On Arnold, see Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955) and Wiley, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 261-294.

²⁸ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 6.

²⁹ Aharon Lichtenstein, "A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View," *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1, 94, "The End of Learning," 113.

³⁰ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 6.

³¹ Aharon Lichtenstein, "Torat Hesed and Torat Emet," *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1, 63, 73.

³² Aharon Lichtenstein, "Patterns of Contemporary Jewish Self-Identification," *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 216-217.

³³ Aharon Lichtenstein, "Yahadut ve-Yavnut," *Alon Shevut* 12, 43, accessible at <http://www.etzion.org.il/dk/5767/1075mamar.html>.

TRADITION

different from and even opposed to that of most of the Yeshiva-Haredi world, which does not consider the religiosity of non-Jews important or worthy of consideration.

Thus, in summarizing R. Lichtenstein's fundamental views, I am not at all sure that I would designate him, as people so often do, as "Modern Orthodox." It would seem that the mainstream of Modern Orthodoxy is too liberal and less "yeshiva oriented" than he is (at least in the sense of having a more individualist, self-realization-centered world view and not awarding *gedolei Yisrael* the same standing and authority that R. Lichtenstein does). Instead I would characterize R. Lichtenstein as a *religious humanist* of a conservative cast who is committed to high Jewish culture, that is, to intellectual and analytical Torah study, and to high general culture, the latter providing a universal foundation on which the particular Jewish edifice can rise, and rise much, much higher.

II.

The second part of this article is devoted to the relationship between R. Lichtenstein's thought and the thought and culture of Religious Zionism in Israel. Before entering into substantive content, a word must be said about the general cultural background, forms and genres of R. Lichtenstein's writing. As we have seen, the traditions of English literature and thought, or at least certain central parts thereof, are play a pivotal role in R. Lichtenstein's inner world. One important expression of this centrality is the excellent quality of his written English. R. Lichtenstein's superb English style is no mere aesthetic flourish – it is deeply of a piece with the religious humanism at the heart of his thought. Furthermore, R. Lichtenstein's writing in English, in contrast to his Hebrew writing, is more monumental – three volumes of essays and articles and additional important articles – all of which are elegantly constructed and carefully formulated.³⁴ The present writer is not in a position to say whether quantitatively R. Lichtenstein has produced fewer writings in Hebrew, but one can say his non-Talmudic Hebrew

³⁴ Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1, *The World of Jewish Learning* (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 2003); Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, *The World of Jewish Living* (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 2004); Aharon Lichtenstein, *Varieties of Jewish Experience* (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 2011). (I do not here discuss his published Talmudic lectures, which are based on the lecture notes of his students.)

writings are more ephemeral and fragmentary. This part of his oeuvre is found in “talks” and newsletters for yeshiva students, those serving in the army and alumni. Some of these materials were gathered in various collections,³⁵ in the published, and very popular, volume of his interviews with R. Chaim Sabato or they are to be found on the websites of the yeshiva website or the Daat website (a project of the yeshiva’s affiliate, Herzog College).³⁶

R. Lichtenstein is aware that the cultural and intellectual freight which he bears – English literature and letters – is one that, in the Israeli cultural and linguistic context, is very difficult to appreciate and understand.³⁷ However, even if he wanted he could not give it up and replace it with Modern Hebrew Literature, precisely because the main body and tendency of Modern Hebrew literature did not come to express religious aspirations but to *replace* them.³⁸

Turning to the substance of his complex relationship with Religious Zionist thought, we will look first at long-standing definitional issues such as Erets Yisrael, the peace process, and the like, and then at some of the new and contested religious-cultural issues that have arisen in the past fifteen to twenty years, such as the non-traditional method of Bible study known as “Bible at eye-level” (*Tanakh be-Govah Ha-Enayim*), “the turn” to neo-Hasidut and “spirituality,” and the drive to engage in creative writing, poetry, and the arts.

As far as the Land of Israel and the meaning of the Jewish people’s return to Zion are concerned, we may note at the outset a certain degree of tension between R. Lichtenstein’s views and those prevalent in the school associated with R. Kook’s philosophy. One might think that no such tension should obtain between them in that, as we have seen above, R. Lichtenstein is an anti-liberal, who rejects the individualist liberal ontology, and holds, by contrast, that individuals find their meaning, fulfillment, and destiny as part of *Keneset Yisrael* – the organic collectivity of *Ecclesia Israel*. As is well known, this conception is very close to the

³⁵ See, for example, Aviad Hacoen, ed., *Al Lev Aharon: Imrot ve-Hegyonot, Lekutot u-Parperaot mi-Torat ha-Rav Aharon Lichtenstein* (Jerusalem, 2003).

³⁶ <http://www.daat.ac.il/>.

³⁷ Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha*, 94-95. One surmises that this may be all the more so in that the foreign literature popular in Israel tends to the Continental or East European.

³⁸ Aharon Lichtenstein, “Tova Hokhma im Nahala,” *Mamlekhbet Kobanim ve-Goy Kadosh*, quoted in Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha*, 164.

TRADITION

conception held of the school of R. Kook,³⁹ and so in what might the tension inhere?⁴⁰

Yet a tension exists, and I suggest that it is rooted in R. Lichtenstein's refraining, due to his conservative Yeshiva orientation, from deriving and applying any new or special halakhic or theological categories that stem from the new historical reality of the State of Israel. This reservation relates both to the theological-historical issue of redemption and also to the halakhic-moral plane. Despite his deep appreciation of the State of Israel's decisive contributions to the security of the Jews and the strengthening of Jewish identity,⁴¹ and despite his awareness of the historical drama that was involved in its establishment, he refrains from relating to it as a definite vehicle of the messianic redemption or the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies. For example, when asked by R. Chaim Sabato concerning the theological meaning of the State of Israel, and in particular about its redemptive significance as this is understood in circles adhering to R. Kook's philosophy, R. Lichtenstein answered in a fashion that both demonstrated his understanding of the philosophical stakes and cut short the discussion: "That I should come and proclaim, with trumpets and drums, a new stage of history in the Hegelian sense, I don't go so far."⁴² This approach, which refrains from employing new categories finds even stronger expression in R. Lichtenstein's Halakhic and moral discourse. There it would seem that R. Lichtenstein holds, in line with his classical yeshiva (some would say, Galuti) orientation, that the vast majority of the commandments and the Halakhic prohibitions apply to and are directed at the individual Jew. He rejects the idea, in the contemporary stage of Jewish history, that the collectivity of Israel (*Ecclesia Israel*) is a Halakhic subject (a concept which does apply in regard to the Temple and messianic times). And so, when it comes to issues such as the peace process and the status of Eretz Yisrael, R. Lichtenstein takes the position that mitsvot apply to the individual, not to the nation or on the state. Therefore he writes that the mitzva entailed in

³⁹ See for example, Shlomo Fischer, *Self-Expression and Democracy in Radical Religious Zionist Ideology* (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2007).

⁴⁰ It should be stressed that R. Lichtenstein is decidedly non-essentialist, in the sense that he holds (like Rambam and R. Soloveitchik, against Kuzari, Maharal, Tanya, and R. Kook) that there is no difference in essence between a Jew and a non-Jew (my thanks to R. Reuven Ziegler for alerting me to this).

⁴¹ Aharon Lichtenstein, "Zot Torat ha-Hesder," *Tehumin* 7 (1986), 314-329; in English: "The Ideology of Hesder," *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1, 135-158; "*Ki Simmabtani Hashem Befu'olekha, be-Maasei Yadekha Arannen*," *Alon Shevut Bogrim* 9 (1996).

⁴² *Mevakshei Panekha*, 188.

military service (the very basis of the Hesder program!) is self-defense.⁴³ He also holds that if the peace process will in fact prevent bloodshed, then one is obligated, because of the laws regarding saving human lives, to achieve a peace settlement.⁴⁴ The commandment of settling the Land of Israel applies, according to R. Lichtenstein, to the individual, therefore the consideration of saving lives becomes relevant, according to the rule of Maimonides in *Hilkhot Yom ha-Kippurim* (that considerations of saving a human life override all commandments except for murder, idolatry and illicit sexual relations). This position of his contrasts with that of R. Goren, who held that the mitzva does not apply to the individual but rather to the national collective, organized as a state with a military organization that is obligated to conquer the Land of Israel. Because, according to R. Goren, the very act of performing the mitzva involves war, saving human lives (in the instance, for example, of a peace agreement) by definition cannot be a consideration; every war involves losses.⁴⁵ Furthermore, because, according to R. Lichtenstein, the halakhic subject is the individual, moral rules which are commonly applied to the individual such as “what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man” apply even in the national conflicts attending Israeli statehood. Therefore he was outraged by Baruch Goldstein’s massacre and protested Rabbinic acquiescence to it.⁴⁶ In regard to these matters it would seem that R. Lichtenstein’s conservative yeshiva position actually receives reinforcement from Western moral thought, in particular its position centered around the individual’s moral choice and obligations.⁴⁷

In sum, in order fully to account for R. Lichtenstein’s position on these large and defining issues, one can helpfully make an analytical, *lomidische* distinction of the sort taught by the Brisker school between the source of one’s moral and halakhic obligations and the substance of the obligation itself. Thus, while the source of the obligations is that each

⁴³ Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Ideology of Hesder,” 145.

⁴⁴ Aharon Lichtenstein, “A Rabbinic Exchange on Baruch Goldstein’s Funeral,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2, 260.

⁴⁵ Shlomo Goren, *Mishnat ha-Medina: Mehkarim Hilkhatiyim Historiyim be-Nose'im ha-Omedim be-Rumah shel Medinnat Yisrael me-Az Tekumatah*, Yisrael Tamari, ed. (Jerusalem: Ha-Idra Rabba, 1996), 29 ff.

⁴⁶ Aharon Lichtenstein, “A Rabbinic Exchange on Baruch Goldstein’s Funeral,” 255-260.

⁴⁷ I should mention in this connection R. Lichtenstein’s early and active opposition to the Vietnam war on moral grounds.

On R. Lichtenstein’s position on the intersection between war and ethics in the communal sphere, see the article in this issue by R. Yair Kahn and Dr. Kalman Neuman.

TRADITION

individual is an organ of *Ecclesia Israel- Keneset Yisrael*, the obligation itself, applies to the individual as an individual.⁴⁸

This point may be illuminated from a different one of R. Lichtenstein's cultural anchors, namely Matthew Arnold's criticism of English society, and in particular the Puritan revolutionary political-religious current within English culture. Arnold terms the Puritan revolutionary drive to reorganize the English state, society and religion, both in the 17th and the 19th centuries (the Dissenters) "Hebraism." Thus, he identifies the inner purposes of English Puritanism with the Hebrews of the Bible. Arnold very much values this tendency but he is also critical of it. He would want that English society and culture and especially Puritan society should contain more "light," more reason, thought, and culture. He claimed that the Puritans "have not enough added to their care for walking staunchly by the best light they have, a care that that light be not darkness." He further argued "that acting and instituting are of little use, unless we know how and what we ought to act and institute."⁴⁹

In these terms, Israeli culture, and especially the culture of Religious Zionism, with its emphasis on "divine politics," as R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook termed it, is "Hebraistic." The emphasis in this culture has always been on action – on founding another settlement and building another road without paying too much attention to niceties. In contrast to this, and less explicitly than Arnold, R. Lichtenstein posited an alternative of "light" from within his commitment to the high Jewish culture of the analytical/conceptual approach to Talmud – *Lomdus* – and to high general culture. It seems to me that this cultural alternative was internalized by some of R. Lichtenstein's students and that it showed them the possibility of an alternative Torah culture also in regard to the Land of Israel and the peace process – not only "to walk staunchly by the best light we have" but to turn "a fresh stream of thought" in order examine the torch-light itself (by whose light we are supposed to walk),⁵⁰ both in terms of its moral quality and in terms of the definition of worthy objectives and proper means.

This brings me to the last topic, which R. Lichtenstein's encounter with new trends within Religious Zionism, especially those at work among Religious Zionist youth. These trends are best understood in terms of the "expressivist" nature of the culture of radical Religious Zionism, that is, the Religious Zionism that is associated with the school of R. A.I. Kook and

⁴⁸ Cf. Alan Brill, "An Ideal Rosh Yeshiva," *Edah Journal* 5:2 (2005), 1-18.

⁴⁹ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 9, 41.

⁵⁰ Cf. Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha*, 271.

with the settlement project in Judea and Samaria. During the first period of its rise, spread, and flourishing in the Religious Zionist community (circa 1965-1990), radical Religious Zionism placed its emphasis upon the collective self-expression of *Am Yisrael*.⁵¹ Since the mid 1990's, this expressive structure became increasingly applied also to the individual, private, and intimate planes. Religious thinkers, writers, and artists have emerged who seek to realize religious meaning and ideals in individual experience particularly through a new focus on Hasidic teachings, especially those of R. Nachman of Braeslov, the Holy Jew of Przysucha, and R. Mordechai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (author of the *Mei ha-Shiloah*); through exploring the religious meaning of the routines and minutiae of everyday life; by celebrating the body, sexuality, and aggressive drives; through artistic creativity of all sorts – literature, poetry, cinema, and the performing arts; and in the search for individual interpretation and meaning in Bible and Talmud study, most vividly in the trend of “Bible at Eye-level.”⁵²

To make a very long story short, I will just say that this strong tendency towards self-expression is rooted in the theology of R. Abraham Isaac Kook. In the most general way, one can say that according R. Kook, because the material world emanates from God, its most inner will is to return to God and to recognize itself as part of God. In so doing, it – including its human subjects – will overcome its self-alienation and realize its true nature.⁵³ The religious practice that derives from this conception is the practice of authenticity, that is, the practice of recovering from

⁵¹ Shlomo Fischer, *Self-Expression and Democracy in Radical Religious Zionist Ideology*.

⁵² Shlomo Fischer, *Radical Religious Zionism from the Collective to the Individual*, in Boaz Hus (ed.), *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival* (Beer-Sheba: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2011), 286-309.

⁵³ I will explain this idea in greater detail: According to R. Kook's understanding of Lurianic Kabbalah. God created the world in order to add an active dynamic dimension to his perfection; in order to be characterized not only by being perfect but by becoming perfect. God thus enacted his “withdrawal” or “contraction” leaving an “empty space” in God's center with a “residue” (*reshimo*) of divine substance. This residue is the root of all bounded, finite, material and hence deficient existence. God then emanated a vector of light from His unchanging perfection which initiated a dynamic of becoming perfect which characterizes the Creation and History as a whole. As the cosmos, human beings and the Jewish People achieve greater unity with God and divine perfection, they realize their own inner will to return to their source in God and they realize their own true nature (*atsmiyyut*) as being of God. By realizing their own inner will and true nature they overcome their own self-alienation. See Yossi Avivi, “History as a Divine Requirement,” in Moshe Bar-Asher (ed.), *Jubilee Volume for R. Mordechai Brewer: A Collection of Articles in Jewish Studies*, vol. II [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1992), 709-772.

TRADITION

one's conflicted and alienated self, one's own, true inner will.⁵⁴ This drive to self-expression, both in R. Kook's thought and in Religious Zionist culture in general, is connected, it seems, to some of the deeper currents of modern nationalism. According to the conception of modern nationalism, starting with Johann Gottfried Herder, the nation is the sovereign and its will replaces the will of God. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason, Dr. Isaac Breuer wrote, that ultra-Orthodoxy rejects nationalism.⁵⁵ R. Kook's *tour de force*, developed at length and with great subtlety and power is to identify the inner will of the nation and that of finite, created beings in general with the will of God and thus, inter alia, to overcome the contradiction between religion and nationalism.

On the collective level, this new conception led Religious Zionism to the politics of the general will (*volonté générale* in the sense of Rousseau), such that, to take just the most consequential example, the project of settlement of Judea and Samaria, though undertaken by a small and regularly embattled minority, was understood by the participants as expressing the collective will of the ecclesia of Israel, and thus of the cosmos itself.⁵⁶ With the additional shift, for a number of reasons and beginning in the 1990s, of emphasis within the Religious Zionist camp to the individual (alongside the collective and political planes), the larger cultural enterprise shifted its focus, to a large extent, to an effort to find religious meaning in individual experience and on the intimate planes. In these efforts, individualized interpretation of the Bible and the Talmud and artistic expression began to play a large role.⁵⁷

In regard to this issue, as well, it is not immediately obvious that there should be tension between R. Lichtenstein's approach and the tendencies of Religious Zionist youth. After all, R. Lichtenstein places great emphasis on the individual's cultivation of both his aesthetic as well as moral responsibilities, and has written that a positive relation to sexuality is an

⁵⁴ Fischer, *Self-Expression and Democracy*, 75-126, and the references cited there.

⁵⁵ Eliezer Goldman, *Mehkarim ve-Iyyunim: Hagut Yehudit be-Hoveh*, Danny Statman and Avi Sagi, eds., (Jerusalem: Magness Press, 1997), 153; Isaac Breuer, *Morial: Yesodot ha-Hinnukh ha-Leumi, ha-Torati* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1982), Isaac Breuer, *Nahaliel: Hinnukh le-Mitsvot ha-Torah* Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1982); Isaac Breuer, *Weltwende*, (Jerusalem, Ahva Press, 1979).

⁵⁶ Shlomo Fischer, *Self-Expression and Democracy in Radical Religious Zionist Ideology*, 215-269.

⁵⁷ Shlomo Fischer, "Radical Religious Zionism from the Collective to the Individual," in Boaz Hus (ed.), *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2011), 285-309.

essential part of any marital relationship.⁵⁸ In his opinion, understanding the human side of the protagonists in the Bible such as Moses and Abraham is vital.⁵⁹ He has a very positive attitude towards enthusiasm and emotion in prayer,⁶⁰ and of course he affirms the importance of literature and literary culture. So wherein lies the problem?

It would seem that the problem is rooted in the fact that R. Lichtenstein's fundamental approach and discourse is that of religious humanism while the culture of many of the Religious Zionist youth is a discourse of religious expressivism. We can illustrate this by looking at two topics: spirituality and Biblical interpretation. In regard to spirituality, R. Lichtenstein attacks statements by students and rabbis identified with the spiritualist trend that identify one's inner self with God or with Torah and mitsvot themselves. R. Lichtenstein attacks the abolishment of the gap and the barrier between man and God and the erosion of the heteronymous aspect of accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.⁶¹ Whether or not these statements on the part of individualist, expressivist radical Religious Zionist spokesmen are theologically legitimate in the eyes of Kookist expressivism itself (a complex and perhaps contradictory body of doctrines), they form an integral part of Kookist expressivist discourse in contemporary Religious Zionism and express its spirit faithfully. This discourse is saturated with a focus upon recovering one's inner self which is in essence a return to God.⁶²

We find a similar situation in regard to the study of Bible. Despite the importance that he attaches to the human aspect of the Biblical figures and stories, R. Lichtenstein is very critical towards certain manifestations of "Bible at Eye Level." In his conversation with R. Sabato, he said: "What is more problematic is that certain people today are guided by what is called 'Bible at Eye Level.' 'Eye level' would be fine if, if [these people] were of the magnitude of Moshe Rabbeinu, but since most of them are dwarves, we don't need dwarves."⁶³

Again, as the adherents of "Bible at Eye Level" are primarily interested in finding religious meaning in their own feelings and desires, they

⁵⁸ Aharon Lichtenstein, "Of Marriage: Relationship and Relations," *Varieties of Jewish Experience*, 1-37.

⁵⁹ Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha*, 199-200.

⁶⁰ Lichtenstein, *Varieties of Jewish Experience*, 185-186.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 188-190.

⁶² See the 2015 Orthodox Forum on the topic of "Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut," and in particular the treatment of R. Lichtenstein's response to neo-Hasidut.

⁶³ Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha*, 199.

employ the Biblical figures in order to conduct such an exploration. In so doing, they reduce the sublime Biblical figures to their own dwarf-like dimensions. As R. Lichtenstein sees it, human sensitivity in Bible study properly should aid one in understanding Moshe Rabbeinu, while for the adherents of Bible at eye level, Moshe Rabbeinu is to aid me in understanding oneself. In contrast to expressivism, R. Lichtenstein's religious humanism is not directed towards the inner or authentic selves of human beings. It faces outward – towards an enhanced fulfillment of God's heteronymous commands or to improved relations with other human beings, which stand upon a foundation of ethical imperatives.

Whatever one may think of the contemporary expressivism of Religious Zionist youth, there is no getting away from the fact that it constitutes a continuation of an important stream in Zionism, one that since the 19th century stresses “the material,” “life,” and the “world,” as opposed to the sterile and alienated life of disembodied intellectualism and spirituality which characterizes the exile.⁶⁴ It is possible that this cultural gap between R. Lichtenstein and substantial sectors of Religious Zionist youth, among them presumably students in R. Lichtenstein's yeshiva, is connected to other aspects of a cultural disjunction with youth and students, such as the crisis of Talmud study among contemporary Religious Zionist youth – it is widely reported that substantial sections of Religious Zionist youth do not want to study Talmud and are not interested or proficient at it.⁶⁵ This gap results in a lack of coordination of mutual expectations, as well as disappointment and alienation among a number of the students at Yeshivat Har Etzion.⁶⁶ At the same time, it is quite possible that the enormous success that Bible study has enjoyed in Yeshivat Har Etzion and its affiliate, Herzog College, is the result of the combination, and the dialectical relationship

⁶⁴ Moshe Leib Lilienblum, *Hattat Neurim: Viduy ha-Gadol shel Ehad ha-Soferim ha-Ivriyyim Tslofhad ben Hashim ha-Toheb* (Vienna, 1876), 56-62; Avner Holtzman, *ha-Sefar ve-HaHayyim: Massot al Mikba Yosef Berdyczewski* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2003), 69-82. See also Boaz Neumann, *Land and Desire in Early Zionism*. (Waltham, Ma.: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

⁶⁵ See Shlomo Fischer, “Israeli Modern Orthodoxy: Fundamentalist or Romantic Nationalist,” in Harvey Goldberg, Steven Cohen, and Ezra Kapelowitz, *Dynamic Belonging: Contemporary Jewish Identities* (Oxford and N.Y.: Berghan, 2011), 95, and references cited there. R. Lichtenstein also expressed himself in regard to this crisis. See Aharon Lichtenstein, “Teaching Gemara in Yeshiva High Schools,” [in Hebrew], *Shana be-Shana*, 2001, 315-327. For an opposing view see Shimon Gershon Rosenberg -ShaGaR, *In His Torah One Shall Meditate: Torah Study and the Quest for God* (Alon Shvut: Institute for the Publication of the Works of R. ShaGaR, 2008); Yehudah Brandes, “Discipline and Meaning” [in Hebrew], *HaTzofe*, 6.2.01.

⁶⁶ This conclusion is based on conversations and interviews with former students conducted over several years.

between, R. Lichtenstein's religious humanism, which employs literary tools and emotional insights to understand the Bible and its great protagonists, and the religious expressivism of the "Bible at eye level" movement which is interested in the connection between the Biblical protagonists and the desires and self of the reader.⁶⁷

In summary, R. Lichtenstein is a figure who constantly swims against the current. In the American context he broke the accepted dichotomy between liberal Jews involved in the general society and culture and insular Haredim who segregate themselves from the general non-Jewish environment. In that context R. Lichtenstein presents a model of a non-liberal, yeshiva oriented thinker who grounds meaningful engagement with the general society and culture combined with a rigorous demand for commitment to Torah and religious devotion on an original vision of religious humanism.

In Israel, he presented a strong alternative, both to the hegemonic political discourse and to the dominant cultural climate. I venture to say that R. Lichtenstein's greatest impact on the cultural and public plane is his crucial contribution to the construction of a space for culture, precisely in the sense of "turning a stream of fresh and free thought on received and stale ideas." His commitment to culture in this sense manifested itself both in *Lomdus* and in relation to public issues. In every one of his essays devoted to public, cultural, and religious issues he comprehensively surveys all sides of the subject at hand, avoiding the presentation of a one sided or stereotyped view. One must stress that he undertook this project of promoting thought and culture in a Religious Zionist environment whose watchword is doing and not necessarily thinking. This "fresh stream of thought" touches upon every aspect of our lives: our relationship with non-observant Jews, to war, to non-Jews, and to the Ultra-Orthodox. It inquires: What in fact should be our primary goals and what should be the appropriate means for attaining them? One should emphasize that not always was R. Lichtenstein gratified by the results of this stream of fresh and free thought. From the open intellectual space of Yeshivat Har Etzion students entered upon violent political activism, the Haredi world, and a religious liberalism which tests the boundaries of Orthodoxy. But through this emphasis upon thought – "supple, subtle and luxuriant," both in regard to the "conceptual approach to Talmud study" and in regard to public issues, R. Lichtenstein made a decisive contribution to the enrichment and flowering of religious life in Israel.

⁶⁷ See Yehoshua Reiss (ed.), *Hi Sihati: Al Derekh Limmud ha-Tanakh* (Alon Shvut: Yeshivat Har-Etzion, Herzog College, and Maggid Books, 2013).