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CANON AND COMPLEXITY

We accept as teaching what enters us from out of the accumulated knowledge of the centuries in its apparent and, above all, in its real contradictions. Franz Rosenzweig

I initially breathed an atmosphere within which a balance between criticism and rootedness was consistently maintained. Both my parents, each in his own way, habitually raised serious questions about the religious world or about various textual or philosophic aspects of Torah—but always radiated a sense of profoundly engaged commitment.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein brings to discussions of contemporary Orthodox ideology and theology an unparalleled breadth and depth. The subtlety of his thinking stems not only from his vast knowledge—his command of classical Torah sources from halakhah to aggadah, from Shas to mahshava, in addition to bekiut and iyyun in Western literature and general thought—but also from a deliberate attempt to bring to bear complex ideas upon a complex world. “I studied for four years at Harvard, and had you asked me what I had learned there, I would answer: that the world is complicated and that man is complicated.” I wish, in this paper, not to analyze R. Lichtenstein’s worldview or religious ideology. Instead, I want to say something about how he goes about making his arguments and how that reflects his conviction that the world is complicated. I will focus primarily on R. Lichtenstein’s ideological and hashkafic essays rather than his Talmudic analysis and his lomdus, since I feel more comfortable commenting on the former than the latter.

3 Chaim Sabato and Aharon Lichtenstein, Mevakshei Panekha (Tel Aviv: Yedi’ot Aharonot and Sifre Hemed, 2011), 48.
R. Lichtenstein lives in and tries to make sense of a world with many moving parts and which can be understood from multiple perspectives. He understands that the world is a complicated and not-always-transparent place, that arriving at truth can be difficult, that texts can have multiple interpretations, that not all questions have fully satisfactory answers, that several plausible explanations can offer insight into a complex reality, and that clarity requires defining slippery terms. He insists that making religious, intellectual, and moral sense of our complex world requires learning and reading, and that it requires the hard work of carefully thinking and writing.⁴

More, he wants to explain that world to us from the perspective of Torah, a polyphonic textual tradition and canon which includes multiple voices. R. Lichtenstein wants to understand, and wants us to understand, the multiple sides of an issue. He certainly knew how to take a stand, sometimes with great enthusiasm and even harshness – particularly when it came to things he perceived as challenges to the integrity of halakha or to public moral failings on the part of the Torah community.⁵ But even then R. Lichtenstein is careful to couch his arguments with a constant awareness of competing ideas, of possible exceptions, and of reasons to view things differently.

He is, for exactly this reason, sometimes a difficult writer to read, since he regularly stops mid-sentence to qualify a perfectly reasonable generalization, to head off a potential counterargument before it gets started, or to hint that a concept might be broken down into its component parts. The substance and style of his writing might distance readers and students, and there may under some circumstances be pedagogic advantages to simpler prose and simpler ideas. But R. Lichtenstein does not offer us that luxury.

R. Lichtenstein, is, of course, astonishingly well-read, in classical Torah sources primarily and in the world of Western literature secondarily. But erudition alone is certainly no guarantee of intellectual depth. R. Lichtenstein’s complex intellectual vision stems from something else,

⁴ After completing this paper, I saw a similar formulation in Reuven Ziegler, “Preface,” in By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God (Jersey City and Alon Shvut: Ktav and Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2003), vii–xv.

namely the desire to show us the multiple sides of an issue and the diverse Torah sources that address it.

To begin with, R. Lichtenstein is profoundly concerned with the challenge of defining terms. He begins his well-known essay – “Does the Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakhah?” – by rejecting the possibility of a simple “yes-or-no answer…. What kind of Jew responds to salient questions with unequivocal monosyllables?” After all, “every key term [in the question is] an ill-defined boobytrap.” This suggests that defining concepts is central to making sense out of things. R. Lichtenstein refers to “definition” as “the most basic of intellectual chores.” One cannot explain Torah’s attitude toward humanism “without answering a prior question, ‘What Is Humanism?’”

With his concern for definition, R. Lichtenstein understands that key terms do not lend themselves to a single definition. Part of definition involves breaking down a concept into its multiple component aspects. Any reader of R. Lichtenstein is familiar with the recurring pattern: he begins an article by defining terms and breaking the discussion down into its various analytical parts, be they objective, subjective, historical, ethical, social, Halakhic, **aggadic**, etc. Any attempt to make sense of the human and social factor in halakha, “needs to relate, perhaps both substantively and historically, to several planes,” explains R. Lichtenstein before dividing the question into the discussion of the “primal halakhic core” and the “halakhic process.” Ethics can be viewed from a “formalist” or “contextualist” perspective. Humanism “revolves around two foci. The first is the nature of man….The second… concerns the destiny of man.” And Torah study involves Halakhic aspects, axiological aspects, and cosmological or mystical ones.

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One central characteristic of complex thinking is the ability to consider several responses or answers to a problem or question. R. Lichtenstein is constantly aware that various interpretations are plausible, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. One may ultimately choose a particular path or idea, but the complex person understands that other paths or ideas also have what to recommend them. On the one hand, halakhic Jews are attracted to “the prospect of total Halakhah” that would regulate every aspect of individual and communal life, due to Judaism’s “overwhelming espousal of the normative.” On the other hand, “we respond to the prospect of total Halakhah with reservation, if not recoil,” due to an appreciation of the uniqueness of the individual and the fact that Jewish law includes vast areas of “devar ha-reshut.”

In consequence, R. Lichtenstein generally presents ideas and positions with which he disagrees respectfully and positively, with rare but important exceptions, such as addressing those rabbis who celebrated the actions of Baruch Goldstein. While R. Lichtenstein does not adopt, for example, the Haredi notion of da’as Torah, he describes it in positive terms. “Where could one receive better definitive counsel than from those of whom it is written Sod Hashem Lireiav U’Brito Lehodiam.” In this case, R. Lichtenstein not only presents the position positively, but grounds it in canonical sources. “Advocates of modernity generally recognize – and to my mind should recognize – the validity of a haredi orientation.”

Thus far, I have described nothing more, I think, than a universal (or perhaps Western) notion of good thinking, nothing more advanced than what should (though perhaps often is not) taught in a good graduate seminar in the humanities or social sciences. Many possess these qualities.

I think, however, that something more is going on in R. Lichtenstein’s ideological writings, and that this is closely related to the richness of R. Lichtenstein’s lomdus. Ultimately, he is keeping alive an important tradition in Rabbinic Judaism. R. Lichtenstein works within a complex

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16 Ibid., 7.
and internally contradictory canon, and his relationship with the canon adds a layer to his intellectual complexity.

The Jewish canon contains within it a seeming tension. On the one hand, it is an authoritative and binding tradition for Jews. On the other hand, it is internally inconsistent and is full of disputes, contradictions, and differing worldviews. How can a body of literature be both canonical and internally contradictory? A canon involves a collection of texts that have some kind of authority for the community that canonizes it. One must follow these texts. Yet, the canon contains mutually exclusive notions. Not all of those canonized texts can in fact determine practice or belief.

In one lecture, R. Lichtenstein explains that this “dimension of pluralism” in Torah stems from what he calls “Torat Hesed,” the human attempt to interpret and articulate what is implicit in the divine Torah. In this sense, “several different and even conflicting views could be simultaneously entertained, even by the same person, as objective Torah.”17 But what is a religious person to do in the face of these mutually exclusive but binding religious texts?

At some level, lamdanim like R. Lichtenstein solve this problem by not taking a stand. Their task is not to determine which interpretation is correct, but to offer as compelling an accounting of each opinion as possible, followed by an analysis of what they have in common and where they differ. Halakhists can also solve this problem by adopting broadly defined kelalei ha-pesak or with the unwritten rules and guidelines that offer a road map to the posek. All texts are canonical – they are all holy – but some authoritative texts are more authoritative than others. We follow Beit Hillel over Beit Shammai, generally follow the Shulhan Arukh/Rama over alternatives, halakha ke-batrai, etc. These rules allow the decisor to issue a ruling without rejecting the legitimacy of alternative opinions. In more philosophical terms, Jews call this elu va-elu (Eiruvin 13b), the notion that all opinions – both those that we follow in practice and those that we do not – are words of the Living God.

Something similar is at work when it comes to questions of ideology or hashkafa. One must live in one community but not another, send one’s children to this school but not that one, focus one’s spiritual energies on some pursuits at the expense of others. This, like pesak from among several alternative sources, involves choosing not the right as opposed to the

wrong, but the path that one will follow in practice from among several legitimate options.

But questions of ideology and hashkafa differ. First, one must ultimately identify with one’s chosen worldview in a way that one need not when it comes to pesak. I need not agree that the Shulhan Arukh offers the best interpretation of the relevant Talmudic passages to follow its opinion in practice about a ritual matter. But I do need to identify with the Torah worldview according to which I try to live my life, even as I am aware that it is not the only possible Torah-grounded ideology. In the process, one is, at least implicitly, taking a stand or staking out some territory on important ideological and theological debates.

Furthermore, the kelalei ha-pesak that help determine halakhic decision-making in a given case do not have an ideological parallel. There are no rules to guide one in determining whether to follow a Hasidic or Mitnagdic approach, to put more or less value in secular studies, to ground one’s faith in rationalism or fideism, to focus spare time on Tanakh or Gemara, to learn Gemara with a halakha le-ma’aseh or lomdus approach, or to feel closer or further from the secular State of Israel. At the end of the day, adopting a particular ideology or worldview means accepting one possible Torah position and in a significant way rejecting the other, something that need not be the case in pesak halakha.

**R. LICHTENSTEIN AND THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL CANON**

In addressing these issues, R. Lichtenstein states clearly that there are genuine disputes about Jewish ideas, and that one cannot simply identify the Torah position on a given question. “In dealing with… almost every major problem of religious philosophy, a number of answers are clearly possible. These are not matters of simple dogma, to be settled by reference to catechetical formulations; and, in actual fact, Jewish thought has certainly advanced a significant variety of attitudes and emphases concerning them.”18 Even Tanakh itself contains differences of opinion between different verses, and even entire books.19

R. Lichtenstein has much to say, most of it implicit, about what it means to take an ideological stand from within the Torah canon. Still, all things being equal, he makes significant effort to minimize the challenge.

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18 Lichtenstein, “Mah Enosh,” 5.
Within the canon, R. Lichtenstein generally prefers harmony to internal contradictions or incoherence. The lamdan prefers “harmonious coherence” as the derekh ba-melekh of interpretation.\(^{20}\)

Often R. Lichtenstein’s preference for harmony is manifest when he draws ideological and hashkafic conclusions by finding common denominators within rabbinic disputes. R. Lichtenstein asks, for example, what the legal category of lifnim mi-shurat ha-din can teach us about the relationship between natural ethics and revealed law. He cites three opinions in the Rishonim. The Semak suggests that following lifnim mi-shurat ha-din is paradoxically itself one of the tarya”g mitsvot. Ramban considers it binding though not an independent mitsva, while Rambam in at least one source suggests that it is the realm of supererogatory practice. The difference between these opinions notwithstanding, they share a commonality that lifnim mi-shurat ha-din makes demands on the observant Jew. Accepting Rambam’s more lenient approach would “merely shift it, to use Leon Fuller’s distinction, from a ‘morality of duty’ to a ‘morality of aspiration.’ But a Jew is also commanded to aspire.”\(^{21}\)

This preference for reading the Jewish tradition with an eye toward consensus does not mean papering over or denying the existence of real disputes. Precisely because Torah contains plural and mutually exclusive attitudes and opinions, in formulating a religious worldview one must make choices from among alternatives. R. Lichtenstein, for example, advocates a position he describes as religious humanism,\(^{22}\) but he is well aware that formulating that position requires “selection from sources. Not every Midrash can be tilted in this direction.”\(^{23}\) R. Lichtenstein understands that advocating general education means not following Rama, Maharshal, or the tradition of Volozhin.\(^{24}\)

Indeed, a practicing Jew can boldly and unapologetically prefer one Torah religious worldview over another. “Had The Guide of the Perplexed been lost, this would be a loss but not a great one; the people of Israel would survive. But if Ramban’s commentary on the Torah would be lost, I feel that this would be a catastrophe.”\(^{25}\) But even here, R. Lichtenstein understands, however cautiously, that he cannot personally

\(^{22}\) Lichtenstein, “Mah Enosh.”
\(^{23}\) Sabato and Lichtenstein, Mevakshet Panekha, 131.
\(^{25}\) Sabato and Lichtenstein, Mevakshet Panekha, 40.
adopt Ramban’s approach in its entirety. “I have no problem in principle accepting [Ramban’s] view” that “in addition to its revealed aspects, Torah is also a string of divine names.” Still, “I know that I am not part of this worldview in terms of my activities and study…. I skip” some Kabbalistic sections of his writings. “Here and there I am involved in Zohar,” says R. Lichtenstein, but it is neither the focus of his worldview nor his learning. R. Lichtenstein has made a choice to adopt a largely non-kabbalistic worldview, and kabbalistic sources play almost no role in his halakhic and ideological writings. This is not a rejection of kabbalah per se, but an awareness that “life is short, and there are many languages. In one sense, one simply must make a choice.”

At a more programmatic level, R. Lichtenstein states explicitly that a measure of spiritual eclecticism is not only possible, but necessary. “I do not believe that, in order to be regarded as a disciple, one must derive his comprehensive philosophic sustenance from a single authority. Certainly, one can draw wisdom and inspiration from varied sources and blend them within his own spiritual orbit,” at least within reasonable limits of internal coherence and spiritual integrity.

Put differently, deciding which Torah sources to weave into one’s own ideology and determining which values to prioritize mean sacrificing other sources or values by giving them less weight or even rejecting them. “The realities of life will not let us have our cake and eat it, too.” One must choose a position, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. One can gain from making a wise choice, but one pays a price for privileging a particular idea, concept, or value over others, since the others have advantages as well. In his important and still timely essay on the ideology of Hesder, R. Lichtenstein explains that “the question of military service” in the context of people genuinely dedicated to ongoing Torah learning becomes “an instance of the difficult, perhaps even agonizing, choice between conflicting values.” This perception encourages R. Lichtenstein to treat disagreements as between legitimate and plausible options. “These are matters on which honest men of Torah can differ seriously out of mutual respect, and I certainly have no desire to denigrate those who

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26 Ibid., 43.
27 Ibid., 46.
do not subscribe to my own positions.”

Despite his conviction that “sanction by a contemporary gadol [is] a condition for the halakhic legitimacy of a movement,” R. Lichtenstein is happy to allow individual laypeople to find a Torah path that speaks to them. He “leaves the decision in the hands of the individual, as it is for him to choose in which field to pitch his tent.”

Yet, by virtue of the way the canon operates, one need not – and perhaps in a very serious way one should not – reject the other options completely. They remain alive and significant in important ways. R. Lichtenstein advocates general education, but those who oppose that include “gedolei Yisroel, not mere obscurantists… The question which gedolei Yisrael could discuss with such fervent interest cannot be lightly dismissed. Even if we feel justified in rejecting the verdict of some – we cannot after all agree with all – the very awareness that so many of our greatest men, before whom the best of us can only stand with bowed heads, steadfastly opposed secular studies, should in itself prove a sobering influence.”

Lomdus, to take another example, involves a particular way of learning, both implicitly and explicitly at the expense of other possible methods. “Conceptualists freely conceded that other modes are dogmatically feasible, yet firmly and fervently champion their own.” More than that, advocates of different approaches toward learning grant each other enormous respect. “For the Rav, Telshe in general and R. Shimon Shkop in particular are the epitome of wrongheaded artifice.” Yet, R. Lichtenstein reports that “if R. Simha Zelig (the dayyan in Brisk and a close associate of Reb Hayyim) came to Telshe, he would be granted the yeshiva, but that if Reb Hayyim came, he would be given the whole town.” One can treat a canonical idea, method, or approach as misguided without losing respect for its adherents, indeed while seeing them as elevated and holy.

Examine R. Lichtenstein’s approach to religious ethics. He does not accept Rambam’s ethic of the middle path. Why, after all, should the abstract middle have an a priori ethical advantage? More, over the course of history, the Jewish people has not collectively accepted this approach. R. Lichtenstein, does not, it seems, advocate it for contemporary people,

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31 Ibid.
33 Lichtenstein, “A Consideration of General Studies from a Torah Point of View.”
34 Lichtenstein, “Conceptual Approach,” 34.
36 Ibid., 27. This is part of the reason why in his methodological introduction to lomdus, R. Lichtenstein catalogs a series of methodological criticisms of lomdus both from within the Beit Midrash and from within the academy.
either. Yet, this ethical approach, by virtue of its grounding in the can-
on, remains for R. Lichtenstein a live option. “A person can feel boundy [Rambam’s middle-path approach] due to the authority of Rambam.
Just as Rambam directs our paths when it comes to laws of meat and milk
or other prohibited foods, so too can he be a guide in ethical matters.”

At times, one must take a stand within the canon. An academic need
do little more than describe (richly and contextually) what those positions
are, but she need not take a stand. A Rosh Yeshiva and community leader
has no such luxury. He must make decisions to prefer one position over
the other. In discussing the place of asceticism in Judaism, R. Lichtenstein
acknowledges the ascetic stream in Jewish thinking even as he argues that
it is both a minority position and that it is not one that he shares, either
in principle or as a matter of guidance for today’s community.

According to R. Lichtenstein, Tanakh itself contains several differ-
ent and mutually exclusive attitudes. “Not everything in the Tanakh it-
self is consistent.” Some books adopt a different tone, attitude, or
approach than others do. Proverbs, for example, “has a clear message:
fear of God pays off, and the sinner pays the price.” This differs from
the tone of Job or other books or prophecy, and it is certainly not the
approach of “us – and when I say us, I refer to students of R. Soloveitchik.”
Still, the pragmatic and eudemonic approach of Proverbs remains “an
important message.” It echoes in the human satisfaction that one feels
in a life of observance, even as the spiritually sensitive person prefers
loftier motivations.

At times, R. Lichtenstein simply states that he does not or cannot ac-
cept ideas that appear in canonical sources. Regarding Ramban’s famous
claim (Deuteronomy 11:18) that “the Halakhic regimen in its totality is
gearied to Eretz Israel which constitutes a metaphysical and yet natural
habitat for its realization,” R. Lichtenstein openly admits that “This is…
a bold thesis, and one which, despite my enormous admiration and re-
spect for Ramban, I have great personal difficulty in digesting.”

37 Interestingly, he does not even mention, let alone criticize it, for its roots in
Aristotle rather than in sacred sources.


that Rambam’s educational program was not fully accepted.”42 R. Lichtenstein is careful not to say that these approaches are wrong, but that they are hard for him to digest or that Keneset Yisrael has chosen alternative visions over the course of time.

In one programmatic statement, R. Lichtenstein reflects on the authority and role of sources that one does not fully follow. The Jewish people has built kollels despite “Rambam’s withering critique of much of their underlying rationale. The Torah world simply contends – to my mind, with trenchant cogency – that both the ideological composition of the Jewish community and the pressure of secular vocations have changed to the point that, even if one acknowledges the Rambam’s arguments... the raison d’être of institutions which guard the spiritual hearth as well as train future leaders seems virtually self-evident.” But, the Torah texts that one has rejected in practice remain alive. “This by no means implies that Rishonim’s hashkafic texts are of little moment or they can be circumvented and, at times, even manipulated. Their writings, at the very least, set a tone, point a direction, create a climate, and, to a great extent, determine the parameters of our discourse. They are, very much, the Einei HaEida, our primary philosophical lights, whose concerted and consensual judgment we generally regard as binding. Nevertheless, at the level of specific guidance, particular statements can be parried so that a modernist may feel that he can confront the classical corpus with relative assurance.”43 The meaning of this passage is not entirely transparent, and it may well contain an internal contradiction. Still, R. Lichtenstein argues that Rambam, as an example of a canonical source, remains a guide even as the community rejects aspects of his worldview in practice.

From a religious perspective, these discussions exemplify a fascinating stance. One turns to the giants of Torah over the ages, even to one’s own rabbeim, and with a seeming arrogance, rejects their opinions. One simply chooses to behave differently than what these texts call for. Yet, one does not really reject them. One teaches them, analyzes them, presents them to students, reads them with sanctity, considers their implications both in theory and practice, and remains constantly open to the possibility that they might emerge as live possibilities for practice. This is not a mere perfunctory respect for the sake of a peaceful conversation, but rather a serious treatment of a text and idea that one existentially rejects because one simultaneously existentially identifies with it. The rejected positions remain as real spiritual possibilities, certainly for others but

42 Sabato and Lichtenstein, Mevakshi Panekha, 33–34.
perhaps even for oneself should the winds change, as they inevitably do over the course of human lifetime or of history.

This, for R. Lichtenstein, for a great many of my cherished Torah teachers over the years, and for my own self, is precisely the paradoxical intellectual and existential stance which helps make Torah study, and the life lived in the shadow of Torah study, invigorating and spiritually alive. One remains comfortable and confident in one’s Torah-grounded hashkafat olam, and yet simultaneously listens closely to the echoes of those alternatives.

This challenge becomes particularly acute when dealing with canonical sources which run against deeply held contemporary moral sensibilities. As time and history develop, certain of the attitudes of Hazal and the hakhamei ha-mesora can seem problematic. “No one questions the fact that, in some instances, our primary sources and our primal attitudes diverge. Moreover, it is not our baser predatory instincts but our nobler spiritual self which is engaged.” Those contemporary sensibilities cannot merely be written off as deviant. “We encounter elements which we describe, not only euphemistically but genuinely, as difficult; and the art of halakhic living is, at times, not so much discovering the answers as knowing how to live with the questions.” And it is precisely here that “our commitment to Torah and, a fortiori, to its integrative mesorah” must come into play as “an article of faith.”

A particularly extreme example involves a respectful and sanctified attitude toward a halakha which a posek would prefer not even exist. The personality of the pious individual has been formed in part by the moral perspectives of today’s society, and this denies the moral universe that the law represents. Yet, the law remains both binding legally and a sanctified part of the canon. Regarding “kiddushei ketanah on the part of a vindictive father, he [the posek], almost certainly, would not only regard the mekaddesh as a scoundrel but would regret that the institution exists. He would not, has veshalom, sit in judgment upon the license or question its morality…. He would, however, candidly assume that what has been apt and perhaps even necessary in a given socio-historical setting was no longer ideally suited to his own. The assumption would certainly not exempt him from mastering the relevant halakhot nor dim his enthusiasm for analyzing the nuances of devar Hashem.” R. Lichtenstein acknowledges that this stance “raise[s] certain pertinent questions,” though he does not spell out precisely what those questions are or how he would solve them.

Still, while R. Lichtenstein will certainly not do away with the law as

given by God on Sinai, he is also not interested in simply denying the moral intuition to the Jew, either.

The complexity of this stance means that even though one must choose from within the strands in the tradition, R. Lichtenstein does not accept a facile cherry-picking of sources to support some pre-conceived worldview. Despite the fact that “the world of Hazal is very diverse and it is possible to find there many things that go in different directions… there are those who choose what they want from Hazal…. A person can lock into one or two passages and build his worldview around those passages, even when he knows the truth, that most statements of Hazal disagree with what is written in those passages that they like, and they may not acknowledge that. That is not the right way to act.”46 The tradition is too diverse for an individual to agree with it all, but even when one chooses, not only should one generally follow the mainstream or consensus positions, but one should acknowledge when one has chosen one side of a dispute within the canon.

In places, however, R. Lichtenstein does deal more directly with sources which seem out of line with our sense of rationality or ethics, and he seems to accept as legitimate at least a limited willingness to self-consciously and deliberately downplay them. Despite his rejection of cherry-picking sources to arrive at a preconceived conclusion – and not necessarily entirely consistent with that position – R. Lichtenstein admits that his own attitude toward women’s Torah study is not determined exclusively or perhaps even primarily by the texts themselves, but rather that one’s reading of the texts can be determined by one’s existential convictions regarding women’s Torah study. “I imagine that a person who existentially wants his daughters or women who he knows to study will find the way.”47 Notice that he indicates an element of deliberate choice in how to read the sources such that they arrive at a preconceived conclusion. He compares this to readings of other canonical texts that seem problematic. “Is somebody today prepared to stand up and say, ‘The best of the doctors to hell?’ (Mishna Kiddushin 4:14), an attitude seemingly out of line with common sense? But a student has options in dealing with this problematic text: “Either you accept these kinds of statements literally, or you say we do not follow them in practice, or you say that the reality changed.”48 And one is welcome to do so.

46 Sabato and Lichtenstein, Mevakshei Panekha, 60.
47 Sabato and Lichtenstein, Mevakshei Panekha, 172.
48 Ibid.
These attitudes and awareness allow R. Lichtenstein to disagree and criticize his own rebbeim, however hesitantly. In addressing the Rav’s Brisker methodology, he points to the fact that sometimes an analysis of a sugya succeeds in explaining every detail, but at other times does not. “The use of detail – to which recourse may be had to buttress a thesis but which can be neutralized, fideistically, as technical and inscrutable when inconsonant with it – opens up the charge of selectivity.” For someone absorbed in this canonical worldview, disagreement and pointing out problems with another person’s ideas need not stem from rude rejection or disrespect, but rather from the respect afforded to others within that canon.

And this is precisely the kind of internal criticism that he offers of his own commitments. In his analytical description of the method involved in “the conceptual approach to Torah learning,” R. Lichtenstein makes it clear that Brisker lomdus represents a choice among legitimate darkei ha-limmud. “It is self-evident that almost no one is, in practice, desirable or capable of addressing all issues equally. And it is the choice of emphasis that, more than anything else, defines a derekh.” There are “alternatives” to lomdus, but the lamdan’s “own predilection is clear… [and] he has a clear preference.” R. Lichtenstein tries to explain how lomdus draws upon certain strands in Torah, while sidelining other strands, leaving them to be addressed by other methods. More, the conceptual approach has weaknesses. The lamdan “freely acknowledges that not all Halakhic cruces lend themselves to this kind of analysis.” Hence, lomdus should not be the only approach adopted toward learning. In fact, there may be some people whose life experience or predilections push them to focus on things other than Gemara in their learning.

**GENEROSITY TOWARD OPPONENTS**

R. Lichtenstein’s respectful attitude toward canonical sources with which he disagrees spills over even to ideas and values that he considers wrong or deviant. All opinions deserve a generous reading, even if ultimately Torah rejects them. R. Lichtenstein, for example, rejects “total

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51 Ibid., 14.
52 Ibid.
egalitarianism” which “constitutes a philosophy and an ethic we categorically abjure.” At the same time, he “urges empathy and humility in perceiving and interpreting how and why deviation from normative conduct has occurred…. We may, in the spirit of the fabled angelic missive of the Kuzari, appreciate motives while decrying results.” R. Lichtenstein categorically rejected many academic and historical approaches to Talmud, but he is careful to describe those positions with some subtlety and nuance. R. Lichtenstein argues for a cautious interaction between religion and state, but “secularists,” who desire the separation of religion from state, “are quite right – indeed, perform a genuine service to religion – in calling attention to” the dangers involved.

A hermeneutic of generosity toward those with whom we disagree stems not only from the pragmatic hope that “sensitivity to those we challenge enhances the prospect that they will heed our message.” It itself is a religious value. “Respecting an interlocutor’s dignity” involves an “appreciation of Zelem E-lohim” which is “itself part of avodat Hashem we are trying to enhance.”

R. Lichtenstein also criticizes others for failing to meet this standard. An American Rosh Yeshiva offered a critique of secular and religious Zionism which R. Lichtenstein saw as lacking a sympathetic and nuanced description of Zionism. “I am, frankly, somewhat confused, and almost wholly astonished. Despite your use of the definite article (“the Zionists”), I don’t know to whom you are referring. Do you envision them as a homogeneous entity? Or, while recognizing that the movement is far from monolithic, are you nevertheless chagrined by everything every adherent to Zionism promotes or espouses?”

As a result of his willingness to see wisdom among those with whom he disagrees, R. Lichtenstein refuses to paint even heterodox Jews in entirely dark terms. “Orthodox Jews recognize that heterodox piety does exist, just as they realize that secularists may lead genuine ethical lives.”

54 Aharon Lichtenstein, “Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age: An Overview,” in Varieties of Jewish Experience (Ktav, 2011), 229–55. Unfortunately, in rancorous Orthodox debates about egalitarianism, such generosity is in short supply, even among great talmidei hakhamim.


59 Aharon Lichtenstein, “Religion and State: The Case for Interaction,” 410. For further discussion of Lichtenstein’s approach to non-observant Jews and for further analysis of these passages, see Adam Feriziger’s contribution to this issue.
“We have many sharp differences with the Conservative and Reform movements, and these should not be sloughed over or blurred. However, we also share many values with them – and this, too, should not be obscured.”

He rejects the position of R. Kook, who maintains that there exists a hidden spirituality among secular Jews, even as he rejects the position of Hazon Ish, that secular Jews should be defined using the category of *tinok she-nishbah*. The former position claims to know people better than they know themselves, and the latter does not acknowledge the genuine value in what secular Jews do. “There are things [among the secular population] which make us bristle, but there are also things which are certainly accomplishments and values, and regarding some matters – if only we reached their level!... Their vision is not my vision, but there are many things which they build and do, and I do not merely refer to statecraft... They truly have significant values.”

One must stand one’s theological, religious, and intellectual ground, if for no other reason than out of fear of a banal relativism. At the same time, one must give one’s interlocutors a positive hearing.

**A PERSONAL CONCLUSION**

I began this essay by suggesting that I wanted to speak about how R. Lichtenstein makes his arguments, rather than speaking about his religious worldview per se. I think, however, that the ways in which R. Lichtenstein makes these arguments – his awareness of complexity, his relationship to a binding but internally contradictory canon, and a respectful conversation even with religious adversaries – are not mere window-dressing. They are an aspect of R. Lichtenstein’s Torah. The substance cannot be separated from the form or style. For R. Lichtenstein, thinking complexly, living with the echoing voice of sacred texts that one has in part rejected, and speaking to and of others respectfully are themselves Torah values.

I am one of the few contributors to this volume who is not and has never had the privilege of being one of R. Lichtenstein’s students. I studied and gained enormously from the other *battei midrash* in which I learned. But over the years I have gained, from books and articles

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primarily, a sense of awe of R. Lichtenstein’s towering intellect and spiritual depth.

Over those same years, partially as a result of professional obligations, I have become a part-time student of contemporary Orthodox discourse. Too often, that discourse is mired in the opposite of what R. Lichtenstein represents: intellectual simplicity rather than complexity, presentation of the Jewish tradition as monolithic and shallow, lack of dedication to definition of terms or intellectual classification, the conviction that “my” and only “my” position is legitimate, insistence that every text actually agrees with me, and a lack of generosity toward intellectual and religious interlocutors.

This, it seems to me, runs quite contrary to the spirit of Hazal and rabbinic literature through the ages. Our tradition has always celebrated that authoritative texts can have multiple legitimate meanings, that God-fearing people need not agree with one another, that terms and words can tolerate many definitions, and that genuine debate requires sensitivity to the strengths of other opinions. As some trends within contemporary Orthodox discourse move away from these genuine Torah values, R. Lichtenstein represents for me a beacon of intellectual and spiritual complexity and sophistication.

To my reading of R. Lichtenstein, some of the flaws in contemporary Orthodox discourse cannot be chalked up to a surface problem that requires a surface solution. They are reflective of a genuine weakness in avodat Hashem, and R. Lichtenstein calls for community-wide teshuva in this regard.