

An Ideal Rosh Yeshiva: *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God* and *Leaves of Faith* by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein

Reviewed by Alan Brill

Abstract: This review gives a broad overview of the recent volumes of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's thought. Topics covered in the review include his approach to Judaism, an analysis of his intellectual influences, his views of modernity, and his place in contemporary Orthodoxy. The review points out the seminal role of these essays for the formation of Centrist Orthodox thought over the last thirty years.

Biography: Rabbi Dr. Alan Brill teaches Jewish Thought at Yeshiva University, co-Founder and Dean of *Kavvanah*: Center for Jewish Thought. He is the author of *Thinking God: The Mysticism of R. Zadok of Lublin* and has a forthcoming volume on Judaism and Other Religions.



An Ideal Rosh Yeshiva: *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God* and *Leaves of Faith* by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein (KTAV)

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The long-awaited collection of essays by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, makes a memorable contribution to Orthodox thought. Orthodox Jews of all leanings, myself included, have the deepest respect for, even awe of, R. Lichtenstein's piety, learning, and humanity. He is the ideal *rosh yeshiva*—erudite, humble, and moral. His essays, collected for the first time in these volumes, span over forty years of writings and offer up a consistent, ideal vision of life, reflecting the author's dedication to Torah study as an expression of the Divine.

The first volume, *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God* (BHL), which has been superbly edited by Reuven Ziegler, comprises transcriptions and adaptations of important lectures given by R. Lichtenstein in the yeshiva. The second and third volumes have the Whitmanesque title, *Leaves of Faith* (LoF), and consist of articles written by R. Lichtenstein himself. (More volumes are forthcoming.) All three books demonstrate a consistent ideology, rich in ideas, offering great rewards to the ideal reader.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's father, Rabbi Dr. Yehiel Lichtenstein, teacher at Yeshiva University's Central Manhattan High School, provided his son

with a model of a German Orthodox Rabbi with a doctorate. His mother, Bluma, a graduate of the Yavneh School in Telshe was the driving force to insure that her son became a Torah scholar, arranging special teachers and advanced learning opportunities for him. His mother remained connected to the elite of the yeshiva world, creating a household where luminaries such as Rav Bloch and Rav Kaminetsky were guests, and later she arranged for her son's tutelage as a prized student of Rabbi Isaac Hutner.¹ The young Lichtenstein further studied under his future father-in-law, R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik while attaining a doctorate from Harvard in English literature. In turn, he gave a Talmud *shi'ur* at Yeshiva University in the 1960s, and it was his influence that revived the *kolel* at Yeshiva University and encouraged increased devotion to the study of Talmud. Subsequently, he became Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shevut, where he trained two generations of students. In that capacity, R. Lichtenstein maintained close relationships with many *gedolim* of the yeshiva world, especially R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.

When R. Lichtenstein started writing in the 1960s, the canon of Jewish thought featured works by Mordecai Kaplan, Martin Buber, and Eugene

¹ I thank Rav Aharon Lichtenstein who corrected for me the role of his parents in his education by treating me to a lunchtime of stories of his childhood, his mother, summer camp experiences, and earliest teachers. When I mentioned to him that many of his students who I have encountered falsely think that R. Lichtenstein's learning started with his encounter with Rav Soloveitchik, thereby projecting their lives onto his, he responded by delineating the special learning arrangements made for him as a child. For his published eulogies, see for his mother: *Alon Shevut*, volume 116, p. 7; for his father, see *Alon Shevut*, 123, p. 7. I also thank Professors Moshe Gold, Lawrence Kaplan, and William Lee who read earlier versions of this essay and provided useful comments, as did my friend David Landes and my former student Mordy Friedman. This essay was written May 2004 before a former essay of mine was misread as focusing on the thought of R. Lichtenstein.

Borowitz. R. Lichtenstein offered an alternate vision of Judaism far removed from modernist concerns and, in contrast to the American milieu, his essays are immersed in the divine will and wisdom present in the study of Talmud.

R. Lichtenstein's essays reflect the shift from Modern Orthodoxy to Centrist Orthodoxy that has occurred over the last thirty years. This transformation involved the transfer of authority to *roshei yeshivah* from pulpit rabbis, the adoption of a pan-halakhic approach to Judaism, an effacing of a self-conscious need to deal with modernity, an increased emphasis on Torah study, especially in the fashionable conceptual manner, and a shifting of the focus of Judaism to the life of a yeshiva student. As an ideology, Centrist Orthodoxy is a clearly defined separate philosophy from Modern Orthodoxy, with clear lines of demarcation delineating who is in the *mesorah*. These changes from Modern Orthodoxy to Centrist Orthodoxy deserve their own separate study. However I must state categorically at the outset that it is not a question of a change from left to right or from acculturated to sectarian. Each period and group of thinkers develops its own centripetal and centrifugal forces. In many ways, Centrist communities are more acculturated and certainly more educated than prior ones. R. Lichtenstein's essays offer the reader ability to understanding these changes in the form of a definitive and inspiring vision of the Centrist Orthodox ideology.

"Centrist Orthodoxy is a clearly defined separate philosophy from Modern Orthodoxy."

The first part of this review presents R. Lichtenstein's views on Torah, *mitsvot*, work and education (with an occasional contrast to the Neo-Orthodoxy of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch) to explain that although R. Lichtenstein values secular literature, one should not infer his affirmation of the Modern Orthodox worldview in the third quarter of the twentieth century. The remaining sections deal with his influences, his reaction to modernism, and his legacy.

A Philosophy of Centrism

At the start of the nineteenth century, the Lithuanian rabbinic tradition developed the yeshiva ideal of actively studying Talmud throughout one's life. A century later, R. Hayyim of Brisk created an analytic method of Talmud study for the yeshiva world based on abstraction, conceptualization, and pan-halakhicism. Continuing this trend, R. Lichtenstein's approach rests upon his presentation and advocacy of the conceptual approach to learning, broadened into a programmatic method for living a Jewish life. R. Lichtenstein is far from the only figure to make these claims; he is, however, the most articulate and urbane. Much of this essay will explicate the sources and contextualize his thought. My goal as a historian of theology is to offer an understanding of the complexity of his thought for further discussion; and historical contextualization need not reduce him, or any other thinker, to a mere combination of the thought of others.

According to R. Lichtenstein, the Talmud reigns in overarching importance because of its idealistic character (BHL 36); the idealistic quality is so important that he boldly claims that the idealistic method of Brisk constitutes faith in Torah itself because one must not relate to the Talmud as a simple text. (BHL 49) The *Zohar* defends its reading of Torah in light of the doctrine of *sefirot* by contending that the Torah loses its significance if treated in a narrative manner; similarly, R. Lichtenstein creates an existential choice between accepting the conceptual approach or relegating the Torah to pedestrian status, thereby depriving it of passion and mystery. He certainly knows other approaches to Torah study, yet surprisingly he sets up his defense of the conceptual method as a zero-sum game of faith. One must either accept the objectiveness of a methodical approach that offers greater rationality and order, or else one must see the method as foreign to the Talmud.

R. Lichtenstein's reproducible method of Talmud study consists both of learning the abstract legal ideas behind the text and mastering the difficulties

of the textual page.² For R. Lichtenstein, the narrative discourse of the Talmud alone does not pose problematic issues; instead, contradictions leading to a resolution and abstract definitions are the fodder for conceptual understanding.³ Rabbi Lichtenstein describes his approach to the text as anti-realist, (which converges with the anti-realist approach of both the metaphysical approach to poetry and New Criticism). One cannot help but be reminded of Hans Frei's description of conservative religious hermeneutics in the early nineteenth-century, which generalized the text into idealist principles in order to walk the line between rejecting the traditional approach to religious texts based on narrative and affirming the new historicist readings.⁴

"Individual man as an independent source of values represents idolatry."

Adapting Eastern European halakhic theories that used Kabbalah to approach the text as infinite, while removing the Kabbalah from his sources, R. Lichtenstein distinguishes between the pristine Torah of truth (*emet*) and the dynamic Torah of mercy (*hesed*), which is the centripetal thrust of Torah study shown in the diverse and creative interpretations of the text by rabbinic scholars. He limits creativity in Torah, however, to validating only those ideas accepted by the consensual judgment of the wise of Israel (*hokhmei Yisra'el*). The Torah of mercy manifests itself as the diverse interpretations of *gedolei Yisra'el*. (BHL170) He explicitly advocates a closed hermeneutic circle of meaning, significance, and authority, all in the hands of *roshei yeshivah*.

What does such an approach offer the ordinary Jew? R. Lichtenstein holds as a principle that the average Jew should not study Torah as recitation or devotion and certainly not as entertainment. In fact, ordinary Jews should not learn *beqi'ut*, *mishnayot*, or practical laws, but should follow the conceptual method the student learns in yeshiva. He asks, "Is it trying to square a circle? Is it apex over reality? Can ordinary wage earners and parents be treated the same as yeshiva students?" Even though he acknowledges that many disagree with his position, Rabbi Lichtenstein wholeheartedly answers the latter two questions in the affirmative (BHL247).⁵

R. Lichtenstein starts the first essay in *By His Light*, a lecture given to students in his yeshiva, with a phrase that displays the gist of his Orthodoxy: "When seeking to shape our personalities according to Torah values . . ." In this short opening, much of his worldview is already apparent. By Torah values, he means the conceptual approach to Talmud, and therefore, in his own words, his starting point affirms the absolute acceptance of *halakhab* as norms and as axiology that must necessarily shape our personalities. (BHL 243) The values gained through Talmud study—not those of the outside world—shape our personalities.

Besides emphasizing the study of Torah, R. Lichtenstein offers the following approach to social questions. The biblical mandate to Adam "to serve and to work" offers a rubric to answer life's questions. "To serve" teaches conservative social values; one should know that one is born into

² On his method of learning, see Elyakim Krumbein, "Dina de-Garmi," *Alon Shevut* 158 (Nisan 5761), adapted and translated as "On Rav Lichtenstein's Methodology of Learning," *Alei Eitzion* 12 (Tevet 5764); "Peritsat Derekh bi-tehumei Qodashim ve-Toharot," *Ma'alim ba-Qodesh* (of Kolel Beit ha-Behirah). 1 (Karmeit Tzur: Sivan 5759); "From R. Hayyim to the Rav to R. Aharon Lichtenstein," *Netu'im* 9, (Elul 5762); Avraham Walfish, "Ha-Shittah ha-Briska'it ve-ha-Qeri'ah ha-Tsemudah: Teguvah la-Rav Elyakim Krumbein, Al Gilguleha shel Masoret Limmud," *Netu'im* 11 (5764).

³ For contemporary examples of concern with the narrative of the Talmudic text, see the writings of R. Brandes in each issue of *Akedmot* or the various approaches of various *ramim* in Israel, including R. Meir Lichtenstein, R. David Bigman, and R. Yaakov Nagan among others.

⁴ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁵ Cf. Richard Daniel Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modern Reader of Victorian Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), p. 267: "True, neither the elite nor the midbrow clerisy functioned as Coleridge and Arnold hoped they would, as culture-bearers to the multitude. They received and treasured knowledge, but they did not spread it except among themselves." In the sociological terms of Mary Douglas, his approach places greater emphasis on hierarchical identity to the grid than horizontal boundaries of group.

society and therefore has obligations right from the start. Individual man as an independent source of values represents idolatry; one needs to reject the individualism of modernity and the irreligiosity of secular culture. This rejection does not function as ideology alone; rather, R. Lichtenstein explicitly censures the seeking of pleasure or self-fulfillment and romantic individualism. Hence, he states that we are axiologically against abortion because the rights of the individual do not take precedence over one's obligations to society.⁶

The biblical mandate "to work" points to our need to develop, create, and contribute to the improvement of the world. R. Lichtenstein seems to advocate a serious work ethic, writing that one needs to work for one's own mental health, to fulfill social obligations, and to imitate God. He rejects hedonism and considers idle hands to be the devil's tools. Thus if one is not studying Torah full time, one needs to reaffirm a commitment to work. His rejection of hedonism and his Puritan work ethic also lead R. Lichtenstein to write that reading the food column in the newspaper should be considered disgusting to the Torah personality.

In the texts cited to prove his social views, we gain a window into R. Lichtenstein's approach. He avoids the texts of Jewish thought of the last millennium except for those of the Eastern European *beit midrash*; he does not cite liturgists, *midrash*, medieval philosophers or kabbalists. Instead, he bases his corporate view of life on the legal texts that discuss the laws of sacrifice, property responsibility, and the four watchmen. His proof text on the need to work is a citation from Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Gezeilah* 6:11) that a dice player cannot be a witness because his vice places him outside of society. This case is paradigmatic of the way in which R. Lichtenstein takes a particular *halakhah* and globalizes it into a general idea about society. When R. Lichtenstein gazes upon the rabbinic ethos, he does not see discussions of accepting the yoke of heaven or serving God through *mitsvot*; rather, he sees a social philosophy based on a responsible society. This

generalizing approach is a unique form of analogous thinking—taking a discussion of the four watchmen and deriving a ground norm (*grundnorm*) about responsibility from it, making it an idealistic allegory.

"Alas, there are not usually any comparisons with alternate middle positions."

When R. Lichtenstein explains texts by staying close to their surface meaning, one is reminded of R. Abuhav's *Menorat ha-Me'or*, where social values are generated directly through citation of the Talmud's social ethos. The essays add to the Talmud text selections from the humanism of the R. Me'ir Simḥah of Dvinsk's *Meshekh Hokhmah*, the work of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, and the halakhic approach of Eastern European thinkers. English literature is overlaid as a means of amplifying and considering alternatives to the pan-halakhic thought, usually through comparing the *halakhah* to extreme positions and leaving halakhah comfortably in the middle. Alas, there are not usually any comparisons with alternate middle positions. Discussions of the Talmudic social ethos are arranged with Puritans on one side and romantics on the other, where both come up for extensive discussion, and then censure, while the positions of Maimonides, Albo, and Rabbi S. R. Hirsch can be dismissed in restrictive clauses.

Whereas Modern Orthodox thinkers focused on *mitsvot* as the defining axiological element of the Jewish life, R. Lichtenstein writes that we do *mitsvot* because we are commanded, and not for functionality, spirituality, or redemption. We need to have a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric world, urges R. Lichtenstein, and we need to identify with divine will known through Torah study. In his own consideration of his severe doctrine of divine will, R. Lichtenstein states that we are not robots or Eastern Orthodox monastics in our obedience, yet does not elaborate on those distinctions by offering any practical differences in the essay.

⁶ For a feminist analysis of R. Lichtenstein's position, see Ronit Ir-Shai, "Tefisat Magdiriot be-Piskei Halakhah: Sugyat ha-Hajlot ke-Mikreh Mivhan," (forthcoming). The article is based on her unpublished Bar-Ilan Ph.D dissertation (1994) of the same title.

R. Lichtenstein uses an army metaphor to convey the role of submission to divine command in the performance of *mitsvot*; the same metaphor was used by Herman Wouk and R. Eliezer Berkovits to teach that the goal of the command is training, not obedience for its own sake. Of course, Rabbi Lichtenstein critiques Martin Buber, who rejects heteronomous commands, but he also distances himself from the utilitarianism of Maimonides' *Guide*, the symbolism of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, or the sacramental ritualism of Kabbalah; *mitsvot* are not our ideal source of connection to God.⁷

Yet, R. Lichtenstein's broader vision for ethics and secular studies exhibits his uniqueness among *roshei yeshivah*. His moral vision is one of his distinctive exemplary traits, striking anyone who has ever had the privilege of having dealings with him. His moral sincerity, consistency, and strength are, without exaggeration, one of the defining qualities of his vision and, unfortunately and painfully, a rare commodity in our leaders. R. Lichtenstein's ethical philosophy deserves a separate paper and will only receive brief mention in this overview.

“Reading English literature helps an Orthodox Jew cultivate the moral imagination needed for a sensitive application of the halakhab.”

Forcefully, R. Lichtenstein holds that the universal, by which he means ethics, should be part of the ideology of the *ben torah*, yet the universal cannot be given its own voice; the moral sense needs to be

translated into halakhic categories.⁸ He writes, however, that we feel close to universal human values but we are closer in those elements that remain outside of the halakhic system (*reshut*) because those moral directives do not have conflicting halakhic statements. Reading English literature helps an Orthodox Jew cultivate the moral imagination needed for a sensitive application of the *halakhab*. The cultivation of the ethic occurs through exposure to the universal dimensions of experience, but the concretizations of the ethic can usually occur only within the halakhic system.⁹

Rabbi Lichtenstein states that Jewish ethical theory focuses on the good and not the functional, and that one knows the good as a result of the heteronomous divine command theory; nevertheless, the good is also known naturally. (BHL, 6) As above in his discussions of *mitsvot*, he does not entertain the autonomous and functional ethics of the medieval authorities such as Maimonides.¹⁰ Using as his test case Abraham's appeal to God to act morally at Sodom, he cites the Cambridge Platonists as proof of a moral sense prior to the divine command, as a form of natural morality. Alternately, he cites C. S. Lewis's position that, in addition to the Divine command, certain things are right and do not need reasons.

For R. Lichtenstein, *frumkeit* in its totality includes goodness,¹¹ leading to the natural question: Is there a conflict between religion and morality? On this dilemma, he does acknowledge that the

⁷ An example of an alternate approach would be the magisterial work written by R. Lichtenstein's brother-in-law, Isadore Twersky, to describe the teleological approach of Maimonides. Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980). The differences between R. Lichtenstein's views on *mitsvot* and those of Nahmanides and Rabbis Hayyim of Volozhin, Hirsch, Heschel, Berkovits, Kook are obvious.

⁸ For an explicit critique of his ethic, see Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). For implicit comments, see Shubert Spero, *Morality, Halakhab, and the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Ktav, 1975); For background on the topic, see Louis Newman "Ethics as Law, Law as Religion: Reflections on the Problem of Law and Ethics in Judaism," *Shofar* 9,1 (Fall 1990), pp. 13-31.

⁹ Cf. the ethical thought of R. Walter Wurzberger, whose Orthodoxy had room for "covenantal imperatives," immediate intuitive understandings of the ethical that are co-extensive with the *halakhab*. In these imperatives, God addresses us with calls to needs of the hour, which cannot be a suspension of the ethical. See his *Ethics of Responsibility* (Philadelphia: Jewish Pub. Soc., 1994).

¹⁰ In addition to Twersky's teleological approach, see Avi Sagi, *Yabadut: Bein Dat le-Musar* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1998) where he offers many alternatives to a Divine command theory.

¹¹ In contrast, Rav Yehuda Amital does not consider '*frumkeit*' the same as natural morality and '*menschlichkeit*', nor does he think that natural morality always finds its expression in *halakhab*. See, Rabbi Yehudah Amital, *Jewish Values in a Changing World* (Yeshivat Har Etzion: Alon Shevut-Ktav: Jersey City, 2005).

commandment to destroy Amalek creates problems for our natural moral sense, but acknowledges that in some cases, we must affirm, like Soren Kierkegaard, that there is a teleological suspension of the ethical.

Besides his ethical sensitivity, R. Lichtenstein is renowned for his firm advocacy of secular studies. A fresh reading of his famous article advocating secular studies, written in 1961, early in his career, lets the reader see that his full ideology is presented in the opening pages of the essay. R. Lichtenstein sounds the clarion call for an axiological commitment to fear of heaven (*yir'at shamayim*) and complete dependence on Torah study. (LoF 1, chapter 4 p. 91) He follows this call with a mandate to be present to the revealed will of the Creator, known through a form of general revelation through nature (see the discussion of Gilson below) and needed to cultivate a spiritual personality (see the discussion of Green below). Superficial readers do not usually quote the beginning presentation of fear of heaven, Torah, revelation, and character development, nor do they address that only after fear of heaven and Torah have been attained can one cultivate ancillary secular studies. Among his many arguments for the study of knowledge beyond Torah, R. Lichtenstein cites the need to be fully engaged in the world, the continuous relevance of the humanistic ideal, the need to attain a full manifestation of human spirituality, as well as the wisdom to be found among the gentiles. He concludes that essay by reminding his readers that Torah remains first in sequence both in chronology and in purpose.

Here is a Centrist Orthodox ideal in a nutshell. As R. Lichtenstein presents it, a student attends high school and college in order to become a *talmid hakham*, to engage in the study of Talmud, and along the way to pursue secular studies in the broadest sense—to serve as an ancillary activity to create the breadth to be effective in the world. For R. Lichtenstein, both in his actions and his ideology, opening *kolelim* always took precedence over advocating secular studies.

In general, R. Aharon Lichtenstein advocates the Renaissance ideal of a well-rounded education. Like Matthew Arnold, he believes that such an education gives one a broader vision, a sense of balance, and a greater understanding of the human condition. He cites as a practical example the important lessons of the British tradition, where civil servants and generals who have only narrow or functional educations are not capable of making decisions in the same way that Eton and Oxford trained leaders, who follow the Renaissance model, can make decisions. He also cites Newman's *Idea of a University* for its advocacy of an ideal of studying a wide range of disciplines, and then and only then, attaining specialization or following personal interests. His focus throughout the educational discussion remains on great men and their ability to lead.¹²

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Time and again in his later writings, R. Lichtenstein defines Centrism as secular studies—not any specific quantified level at the high school or college level, but a general axiological thrust for the best: Centrist Orthodoxy as axiology. “I am not talking about going to college per se. . . . Much of what now passes in many places for collegiate education is little more than sophisticated plumbing. . . . I am talking about the spiritual value of education.” (BHL 228)¹³

R. Lichtenstein perceived his major difference with the yeshiva world to consist of the need to pursue secular studies because “an uncultured approach often tends to be superficial and simplistic.” (BHL 232) In contrast, “Centrism at its best encourages a sense of complexity and integration.” He notes that many think secular studies are a waste of time that could be dedicated to Torah and even constitute a dangerous influence; he also notes the current loss of confidence in culture. Nevertheless, he holds that secular studies provide the depth to

¹² For example, see the lecture of his student R. Michael Rosensweig, *Parshat Be-ha'alotekha*, “Ingredients of Rabbinic Leadership” http://torahweb.org/torah/2004/parsha/rros_behalos.html.

¹³ Cf. Douglas Bush, who writes that “the value of a college education depends entirely on how much a student brings to it: a degree does not nowadays guarantee anything, and education is a continuing process throughout life.”

see that the leadership of Moses differs vastly from that of the Hazon Ish. Unfortunately, the right wing yeshiva world is portrayed solely in monochromatic terms as lacking the ability to make distinctions, leaving Centrist Orthodoxy as a triumphalistic black and white choice for knowledge (engaged and educated Agudah Orthodoxy disappears). We can take from secular studies facts, analysis, and articulation, but not values. Also notice that he equates secular studies with the human element of leadership and character motivation, not the academic concerns of philosophy, history, sociology, science, or psychology.¹⁴

“Much of what now passes in many places for collegiate education is little more than sophisticated plumbing.”

R. Lichtenstein does indeed react against social, historical, or modernist analyses of *halakhab*; he does, however, display his ethical sensitivity by portraying an ideal *poseq* as seeking peace and feeling the anguish of his congregants. Hence, the *poseq* should work with divergent precedents to decide in a manner that takes the human situation into account. In order to do this, one needs, according to R. Lichtenstein, the values of a *ben Torah*, not of the *zeitgeist*; this assertion contains an implicit critique of those on his left who speak of the human element in *halakhab*. (LoF 1 179) To prove this point, he surprisingly quotes the famous categorical statement from Newman that it is “better . . . for all the millions to die of starvation in extremest agony as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but commit one venial sin” (LoF 1 169).¹⁵

And he applies Newman to *halakhab*: “Once normative duty has been established, it becomes inviolate” (LoF 1 p. 169).¹⁶ He continues, “No one questions the fact that, in some instances, our primary sources and personal attitudes diverge” (LoF 1 184). Missing from this account are discussions of human frailty, the need for *musar* and techniques to correct human actions, or the process of commitment to the command.

In a striking rhetorical move, R. Lichtenstein calls Newman a liberal, and then identifies with him, in that Newman was considered liberal compared to the ultramontane authoritarians. In the broad scheme of things, however, there is near-unanimous understanding that Newman’s thoughts should be considered as the writings of a conservative protesting against liberal religion. Similarly, R. Lichtenstein’s own defense of humanism and a broader role in society, even through liberal in contrast to the yeshiva sectarian approach, is, in the broad scheme of things, strikingly conservative.

Influences

A reader with even the mildest acquaintance with R. Lichtenstein’s writing knows that he uses quotations from his broad knowledge of English literature to help elucidate his halakhic thought. In this essay, I will single out his use of F.H. Bradley, Etienne Gilson, and Thomas Hill Green because of the explicitness of his use of these thinkers, who are largely unfamiliar to the average reader, and because they form a backbone of his idealism throughout his long career. In a longer essay, the pervasive influence of Newman, Bergson, Burke, Carlyle, and Matthew Arnold, among others, would

¹⁴ Contrast this to the Modern Orthodox approach of Rabbi Dr. Sol Roth who writes of the need to accept the tension of Torah with the values and conclusions of the academic fields of philosophy and science (and the democratic values of America). Synthesis is a personal activity of accepting both perspectives, see Sol Roth, *Science and Religion* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1967); id. *The Jewish Idea of Culture* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ For a similar contemporary appreciation of Newman’s calculus, see George Weigel, *Letters to a Young Catholic* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

¹⁶ For an off the cuff example of this doctrine spoken by a female disciple, see the austere statement by the *yo`etsel halakhab* on needing to submit to the Divine will in the film *Taborah*. In this context it is important to note the book review given to works dealing with the laws of *niddah* by Rabbi Aviad Stollman, “*Taborat ha-mishpaha ba-Datit-ba-Le`umi*” in *Akdamot* 14 (2004), which regarded the work from Yeshivat Har Etzion as more stringent than works from both other *hesder yeshivot* and even from *haredi* sources. Tellingly, the author of the work from Yeshivat Har Etzion responded that he was writing an ideal theoretical work to present the opinions of the medieval authorities and not a practical work. But an idealistic approach nevertheless influences the thought patterns of the community.

need to be explored; however, most of these influences are less transparent, while the influence of Arnold is visible to all. In the case of Newman, R. Lichtenstein's writings are as much a rejection of Newman's historicism as an acceptance of Newman's combination of liberal arts with a fierce Orthodoxy.¹⁷ In contrast, R. Lichtenstein also has citations from authors such as Camus, which generally function as opportunities to reject their opinions.

Aside from his explicit citations, Rabbi Lichtenstein's dissertation research on the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists remains an abiding influence on his thought. In their thought, he found a congenial rejection of materialist perspectives on life, philosophy, and religion. Besides the obvious idealist and Platonic orientations they share, one can note that the Cambridge Platonists allowed R. Lichtenstein to avoid discussing the isolated self of Descartes and, by extension, the isolated self in Kant and Husserl, since the Cambridge Platonists had already shown Descartes' faults. Also, Henry More, the topic of Rabbi Lichtenstein's doctoral dissertation, openly championed the truth of the mind over the truth of sense data, yet rejected medieval thought as antiquated. Following this lead, R. Lichtenstein was free both to avoid Hume and his heirs and to reject Scholastic thought as antiquated. This rejection of Scholasticism echoes in many of R. Lichtenstein's readings of Nahmanides' ascetic and mystical worldview, which tend to remove the medieval elements.¹⁸

These literary influences on R. Lichtenstein are not outside determinates, nor are they foreign accretions and they are certainly not forced responses to modernity. Instead, his use of them

evidences a sincere attempt to work out a rabbinic worldview using the best theory available. The thinkers that R. Lichtenstein chose to help elucidate his thought never appeared on most American college, or even graduate school, reading lists, which at the time were centered on the modernists, including E.E. Cummings, Kafka, Proust, and Joyce. One does not hear in his writings the inner voices of Blake, Rilke, Freud, and Sylvia Plath, the harsh realism of Dos Passos, Steinbeck, and Sinclair Lewis nor the rich symbolism of Ernest Cassirer, Wallace Stevens, Ingmar Bergman, and Mircea Eliade. His description of the human experience from Western sources was carefully and narrowly chosen to match a specific understanding of the world of *halakhab*.¹⁹

"The literary influences on R. Lichtenstein are not outside determinates."

R. Lichtenstein's choice also reflects the influence of Prof. Donald Bush, his doctoral advisor, whom he still publicly calls "*mori ve-rabbi*." In the 1960's, Renaissance studies in the Harvard English department were dominated by the ideas of Christian humanism that considered literature as morally uplifting and esthetically pleasing. Unlike the modernism of other campuses, Prof. Bush championed Renaissance literature and rejected many aspects of new criticism as well as the new modernist canons. Bush's approach is categorized by historians of criticism as a defense of the older conservative scholars. He was known for supporting the official Anglo-Catholic worldview and took the curious position of considering Puritans liberals for their critical and reformist approach toward society, yet he avoided the historical contextualization of poems. Whereas the

¹⁷ When R. Lichtenstein's writings on history are published, given a chance I will likely add at least another 4000 words to this essay.

¹⁸ In his dissertation, R. Lichtenstein actually denied More's own well-established kabbalism and More's detailed study of the Jewish Kabbalah, which were published in Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala Denudata* (1679). More's studies were based on the belief, then current, that kabbalistic writings contained, in symbolic form, original truths of philosophy, as well as of religion. Kabbalism therefore exemplified for More the compatibility of philosophy and faith. See Sarah Hutton, "The Cambridge Platonists," in S. Nadler, ed., *Blackwell Companion to Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); id., ed., *Henry More (1614-1687): Tercentenary Studies* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990).

¹⁹ My colleague Prof. Will Lee suggests the possible influence of, or the similarity to, F. R. Leavis's winnowing of literature to the great tradition, a selection process considered hostile and discomforting to other critics. Leavis's great tradition never claims to incorporate the best of human experience, only a tight canon of literature.

new critical author William Empson, in 1961, declared, "a Renaissance Christian state was a thoroughgoing police terror," Bush continued to focus on the combination of Hebraism and Hellenism which Matthew Arnold had said would save us all. As recently as 2004, R. Lichtenstein used a paraphrase of his teacher's thought to open his speech at the Etzion Foundation dinner in New York.²⁰

"He argues that the self attains full realization by fulfilling its role in society."

The first of the three influences that I will present, F.H. Bradley (1846-1924), was the most famous, original and philosophically influential of the British Idealists. A recent encyclopedia of philosophy positions the Idealists and their most famous spokesman as follows:

These philosophers came to prominence in the closing decades of the nineteenth century . . . and stood out amongst their peers in consciously rejecting the tradition of their earlier compatriots, such as Hume and Mill. . . . Bradley's highly wrought prose and his confidence in the metaphysician's right to adjudicate on the ultimate truth began to seem alien to a later generation of philosophers.²¹

Bradley created an idealism that avoids the Hegelian situation of duties within an organic political state through creating a more individualist discussion of a person's need to act in accordance with his "station and duty." Bradley's political

views were conservative, though not of a narrowly doctrinaire kind.

R. Lichtenstein prominently uses Bradley's writings, citing them often, including the famous essay "My Station and Its Duties," in which he argues that the self attains full realization by fulfilling its role in society, which grounds its duties. This concept of man's station allows R. Lichtenstein to advocate responding to situations in a realistic and socially informed manner.²² But R. Lichtenstein remains oddly silent over the fact that Bradley himself acknowledges a major inadequacy of his theory, pointing out, for instance, that any actual society may exhibit moral imperfections requiring reform from the standpoint of an ideal, which remains unexemplified and unavailable in the roles available within that society.²³

A second point of contact with Bradley's thought is Rabbi Lichtenstein's modification of Bradley's essays "Pleasure for Pleasure's Sake," and "Why Should I be Moral," both still-classic critiques of hedonistic utilitarianism. Bradley argues that the good in hedonism cannot be identified independently and therefore cannot be used to structure our lives. In contrast, R. Lichtenstein claims that, unlike hedonism, Torah is intrinsically true and can be recognized independently as the good. (LOF 1, p. 1)

In order to concretize this recognition, R. Lichtenstein turns to Etienne Gilson (1884-1978), French philosopher and historian. He concentrates in particular on Gilson's doctrine of revelation to

²⁰ "A more equal, if threadbare illustration of the antithesis between humanism and the gospel of scientific progress is found, of course, in Montaigne and Bacon.... The sovereignty of man, says Bacon in one of his massive phrases, lieth hid in knowledge. Montaigne would agree, but his terms would have an entirely different meaning. Bacon means that through scientific knowledge man can conquer external nature for his own use and benefit. Montaigne would mean that through study of his own inner strength and weakness man can learn to conquer himself." Douglas Bush, "English Humanism," in *The Renaissance and English Humanism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1939).

²¹ Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/bradley/>

²² It would be instructive to compare the role of autonomy and individualism in the categories of dignity, grandeur and majesty in R. Soloveitchik's thought to R. Lichtenstein's sense of duty and obedience.

²³ I mention this section of Bradley that R. Lichtenstein did not use not because R. Lichtenstein must slavishly follow all the elements of those books that influenced him, nor to imply that Bradley and R. Lichtenstein were answering the same question so that the discussion can be transferred as a whole. I mention these unused sections of Bradley and other thinkers because of their relevance to the discussion at hand of morals and society. R. Lichtenstein also does not mention the implicit tension between, on the one hand, Bradley's metaphysical account of the self as necessarily social, and Green's moral injunction to realize the self in society and, on the other, his own insistence on pure obedience.

provide a definition of the divine good. Gilson's reading of medieval thought disconnected the thought of the theologian Aquinas from the philosopher Aristotle and made religious truth exclusively a revelation of God's will and wisdom. "There is no philosophical writing of Thomas Aquinas to which we could apply for an exposition of the truths concerning God and man which he considered knowable in the natural light of human reason," wrote Gilson.²⁴ Gilson was against religious fideism and attempted to reinvigorate modern philosophical reason "by restoring revelation to its proper content and role" in which man has no other recourse here below than to return to God's revelation by means of philosophic reason. Gilson held that the speculation of Plotinus remained wholly foreign to the Christian revelation, as does any religious illumination or intuition. R. Aharon Lichtenstein offers many a similar comments about reason. In a telling side remark, R. Lichtenstein comments, "I should feel much closer to Gilson than to Weitzman..." (LOF 2 p 217)

In one of his earlier writings, his response to the 1966 *Commentary* symposium on Jewish belief, a regrettably neglected essay, R. Lichtenstein presents a well-thought-out doctrine of revelation similar to Gilson's (LOF 2 p. 338.). He divides revelation into three elements, the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His will, and the encounter gained through rational study of the text:

[First] It was revealed by God, it reveals something *about* Him. . . . This [normative] datum consists of two elements (a) The revelatum, to use a Thomistic term, whose truths inherently lie beyond the range of human reason and which therefore had to be revealed if they were to be known at all"²⁵ (b) The revelabile . . . whose truths could have been discovered by man in any event...

[Second] It presents direct statements about divine attributes: and inasmuch as it is not merely a document delivered (*salve reverentia*) by God but composed by HIM, it constitutes in its normative essence an expression of His will. As such, it affords us an indirect insight into what is otherwise wholly inscrutable. . . . Torah study connects one to God's presence and it is a religious experience.

[Third] Revelation . . . is the occasion, exalting and humbling both, for dialectal encounter with the living God. . . . It is repeated recurrently through genuine response to God's message which ushers us into his presence.

R. Lichtenstein writes openly as a Neo-Thomist, arguing that God is known through revelation and not reason (even though he affirmed there are some limited truths known by natural means). He relies on Gilson to be able to speak of a single eternal revelation, in which the Torah is both God's will and the means of human encounter with God.

"He openly advocates Coleridge's familiar distinction, upon faith rather than belief, upon experiential trust, dependence, and submission more than upon catechetical dogmatics."

R. Lichtenstein echoes Gilson's Neo-Scholastic view of revelation in a few lines in many of his essays without the need for elaboration. When discussing Torah study, he mentions that faith needs to be a genuine conviction, not an assent (LOF 1 p. 8), and elsewhere he mentions that one needs faith in oneself to let divine law instill knowledge and love. In order to answer why we study *gemara*, he says that the Talmud connects the finite human to the revealed will and wisdom of God. Similarly, in the beginning of his

²⁴ Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, p. 367; id. *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: C. Scribner, 1938); id. *God and Philosophy* (London : Oxford University Press, 1941).

²⁵ From other influences, R. Lichtenstein uses the language of a critical idealist, which finds God through knowledge. Yet, according to Gilson, through reason one will never come in contact with being. At other points he seems to use Prof. Gilson's immediate realism, which cannot be mediated and therefore is dogmatic.

aforementioned essay on secular studies, he invokes the Talmud as divine will and wisdom.

R. Lichtenstein's thought on revelation contains elements other than the rationalism of Gilson. In some places, he seems to offer halakhic fideism similar to, but probably not influenced by, Rabbi Isaac Breuer,²⁶ while in other places, he demonstrates an experiential faith, conjuring up realms of romantic religious imagination. He openly advocates "Coleridge's familiar distinction, upon faith rather than belief, upon experiential trust, dependence, and submission more than upon catechetical dogmatics" (LoF 2 p. 367). The question of faith has been a lifelong concern of R. Lichtenstein, and he offers various approaches to it in his essays, not all of them harmonizable.

Gilson's rational revelation allows R. Lichtenstein to describe a single tradition, unlike Cardinal Newman's more historicist sense of tradition. There are, however, mediating positions between Newman's historical reason and Gilson's rational revelation held by those who work with medieval material, such as Henri deLubac, Pope John Paul II, Avery Cardinal Dulles, Rabbi Isadore Twersky, and Rav Kook, among others.²⁷

The last influence that I wish to highlight is Thomas Hill Green (1836-1882), political philosopher and radical, temperance reformer, and a leading member of the British Idealist movement. T. H. Green was an influential force in shifting English thought from the individualism of Mill to an idealist politics, in which the best cultivation of the individual comes from striving for a collective ideal and through community control of individual liberties:²⁸

When following the law then, the individual acknowledges his ability to become that which he is not at present. Secondly, law helps to form the individual in the sense of reinforcing his values, views and the actions of the eternal consciousness as it exists in his world at the time. In this way, the individual is increasingly brought into line with "the law of his being."²⁹

R. Lichtenstein only cited Green's writings twice, but the idealist social philosophy in Green's writings highlight an important strain in R. Lichtenstein's thought, the concept of positive freedom, the freedom to reinforce our best natures through subjecting ourselves to law. As evidenced by his footnotes, he read a variety of conservative political works on positive freedom similar to Green, and he developed these ideas further upon considering the conservative writings of Burke and T. S. Eliot. I am therefore using Green solely as representative of a broad class of British idealists behind R. Lichtenstein's thought.

"R. Lichtenstein advocates the interaction of religion and the state and the need for religious coercion."

The ultimate goal of individuals as human beings, for Green, is to become totally rational, that is, to perfectly embody the eternal consciousness. Crucially, this realization requires the individual to possess a sense of self-worth and to understand what is of ultimate value within his society. One often hears echoes of this connection of self-worth and the ideal in R. Lichtenstein's work. For example, the correlation reverberates in his connection of the virtue of trust (*bittahon*) with the

²⁶ See Binyamin Brown, "Emunah beTehilah ve Emunah beSof: Emunah be Sheloshab Haredi Hogim be Meah HaEsrin" *Akdamot* 4 (1998).

²⁷ The all or nothing choice of Newman or Gilson is a bit dualistic; see Avery Dulles, "Can Philosophy Be Christian?" *First Things* 102 (April 2000): 24-29.

²⁸ <http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/green/>

²⁹ The passage continues, "This is the ideal. In reality, the currently existing laws (and the underlying social institutions, values and so on) are imperfect in that their presuppositions contradict the logical structure of the eternal consciousness. Recognition of these imperfections awakens an innate drive in the individual to correct them. In fact actualizing the idea of perfection found in reason increasingly becomes the source of self-satisfaction contained in the individual's will." *"Different Senses of 'Freedom' as Applied to Will and the Moral Progress of Man"* in *T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, P. Harris and J. Morrow, eds. (Cambridge: CUP, 1986) p. 22-3.

belief that one can accomplish one's goal, as well as in his connection of the virtue of faith (*emunah*) as the trust in God's providential mission and man's striving for its realization.³⁰

Following Victorian models, R. Lichtenstein sidesteps the individualism of Mill and presents Judaism based on community, of *Keneset Yisra'el*.³¹ For R. Lichtenstein, the modern state leads to mediocrity, rather than the idealist vision of T. H. Green for England or the ideal halakhic community. In both, liberty cannot be achieved through equality; only through the recognition that equality is not a positive virtue can true liberty exist. From these premises, R. Lichtenstein advocates the interaction of religion and the state and the need for religious coercion because we cannot have both freedom and commitment.³² He remains sensitive to the problems of religious coercion both practical and theoretical, yet he firmly maintains that society needs an ideal Platonic norm, albeit not as extreme as those of Plato's *Republic*. As he phrases it, society needs to be at least "some steps down the Platonic road" (LoF 2 21). While liberalism is obviously considered wrong, without the need to argue against it, he does take the time to reject the Calvinist and Puritan versions of separation of Church and state.³³

For R. Lichtenstein's students to cite Green (and other British idealists) at the very end of the

twentieth century without taking into account Green's important and widely read critics, such as Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, leaves one wondering about whether the canon of acceptable theory is closed and about how much depth one is supposed to use in one's reading of secular sources.³⁴ Rarely does one hear any of his students mention R. Lichtenstein's fundamental rejection of Mill, Locke, and Hume, or the need for a response. These intellectual patterns are peculiar if we assume that his students are following his example in seeking secular knowledge, for the overwhelming majority of literature and political science syllabi contain only critiques of British idealists. To present a conservative philosophy, a reader would have to respond and defend Bradley and Green against Berlin and Popper.³⁵ Not to enter in to the vortex of intellectual life but to remain a passive consumer bypasses the strength of R. Lichtenstein's own arguments, leaving them as mere window dressing or, worse, a dogmatic sensibility.

Modern Jewish Identity

R. Lichtenstein has a greater hidden love than generally recognized for certain aspects of the nationalism of Rav Kook, advocating an organic unity of the Jewish people, yet he eschews R. Kook's connection of this unity with the material land itself. Instead, R. Lichtenstein cites his own pantheon of Victorian-era nationalist essayists,

³⁰ R. Lichtenstein pushes off the Hazon Ish's definition of trust that attributes everything to God, but precludes direct Divine intervention; faith is belief in the divine while trust is a separate imperative of seeing God in the everyday. In the end, he leaves greater possibility for miracles than the Hazon Ish, even though we do not rely on them

³¹ This is another point of similarity to Rav Isaac Breuer's rejection of liberalism.

³² One of R. Lichtenstein's interesting formulations is a solution to the problem of the need for inner conviction despite the coercion, where he combines R. Meir Simḥah's *Meshekh Hokehmah* with Burke to formulate a theory of coercion that accommodates inner conviction. (36).

³³ One of my students, Yair Hindin, "R. Lichtenstein's and T. S. Eliot's Views regarding Religion and Modernity" (unpublished paper, Spring 2003) offers several noteworthy insights into R. Lichtenstein's political theory. Hindin notes that R. Lichtenstein and T. S. Eliot start with similar designs for a religious state, yet Eliot seeks to reorder society, while R. Lichtenstein's goal is for the ideals of Judaism to flourish; the former wants to save the masses, the latter to cultivate the leadership. "To succinctly capture the differences...R. Lichtenstein's solution is top down, aligning religion with government and only then having it affect society en-masse. Eliot presents a bottom up solution, a reordering of the entire culture and social structure." Hindin also notes that for R. Lichtenstein, it would be belittling to advocate religion for its remedying powers on society and not for its true purpose of forging a relationship with God's truth.

³⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969); Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, (London, G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd. 1945).

³⁵ One of the aspects not used by R. Lichtenstein is Green's strong affirmation that "Moral rights should be used to criticize legal rights." 'Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation' in *T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, P. Harris and J. Morrow, eds. (Cambridge: CUP, 1986) p. 9.

among them Ernest Renan and Ernest Baker, to define Jewish peoplehood in idealistic terms. Renan asks, "What is a nation?" He answers, "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle." In a similar vein, Baker expresses nationalism as a common general will: "We are members of a timeless and universal body which constitutes an organic whole" (LoF 2 p. 72).

On the question of the advent of modernity, R. Lichtenstein rhetorically quotes thinkers who say that Orthodox Judaism lingeringly remains stable and continues through inertia, in contrast to the dynamic modern varieties of Judaism. To such thinkers, R. Lichtenstein firmly and categorically answers: No! Orthodox Judaism bursts forth as a vibrant and dynamic entity. If one does not see the dynamism of Orthodox Judaism, the fault lies in oneself: one has not placed revelation in one's heart. The tradition seems arid and stale because one lacks the living connection to the Divine and the depth of divine wisdom. And since the Torah is permanent and, as a corollary, the survival of the Torah is assured, there is no special problem of the American Jew or the vanishing Jew. Judaism is as eternal as the Torah. R. Lichtenstein's categories for Jewish self-definitions are thus entirely halakhic and based on the eternity of Torah (LoF F 2 chapters 8, 9).

"Since revelation relegates modern reason to the side, history and sociology are irrelevant for analyzing contemporary issues."

Since revelation relegates modern reason to the side, history and sociology are irrelevant for analyzing contemporary issues. In Peter Berger's terms, R. Lichtenstein offers a plausibility structure that opts out of the questions of secularization rather than one that responds. For R. Lichtenstein, any position that proclaims that the Jew is a pariah, or alienated, or assimilating, is untenable; Jewish society is still in continuity with the tradition. Therefore, he willingly accepts Max Weber's account of traditional Judaism, which holds that Jews have a double ethic of treating the

surrounding culture as different from their own; an internal Jewish realm and an external gentile realm (LoF 2 p. 215). Thus, he would implicitly reject Professor Jacob Katz's understanding that Orthodoxy in all its modern varieties has already rejected the exclusivism and dualism of traditional Judaism and has transformed itself into an Orthodoxy existing in the single realm of modernity.

For R. Lichtenstein, there is fundamentally no modern Jewish narrative. He does acknowledge the effects of the Enlightenment, emancipation, Zionism, and the Holocaust, yet he finds them irrelevant to creating a halakhic identity; in fact, he even faults Zionism for not stopping assimilation, since for many, the state substitutes for Jewishness. His vision of Zionism is entirely halakhic, based on Torah studied in the land of Israel by those with the organic connection in their souls to the land. It is a Zionism without a sense of the call of history or a sense that special answers are needed in our age. The reason for army service is to express our ability to show *hesed*, to accept our responsibility as part of the people of Israel, in support of for which he once again quotes Bradley's essay "My Station and its Duties."

In an essay on modernity, R. Lichtenstein tellingly treats modernity as posing the question of authority. Do we have autonomy, as modernists proclaim, or are we bound to rabbinic authority? He questions the Enlightenment's emphasis on autonomy over authority (in Kant's formulation, autonomy takes precedence not only over authority, but over tradition and revelation as well). R. Lichtenstein portrays *haredim* as accepting authority for religious security and out of the need for personal relationship with great figures. In contrast, R. Lichtenstein states that the Modern Orthodox Jew has ambivalence towards authority; he acknowledges the need for leadership but wants to remain religiously autonomous and rely on personal judgment. R. Lichtenstein's response affirms a continued need for *gedolim*; yet as moderns with autonomy, we show our autonomy by choosing to belong to a certain religious camp

or to affiliate with a particular *rosh yeshivah*.³⁶ In turn, he advocates a kinder, gentler “*da`as torah*.” A Modern Orthodox Jew would be best served by a *gadol*, not unlike himself, who appreciates culture, secular studies, and the human condition, and has a broad understanding of life, rather than a *gadol* who stresses his supernatural authority or who claims that all knowledge derives from Torah. R. Lichtenstein ascends further to a broader axiological claim about modernity that we need a great man as a leader for a vision of greatness, for ideal aspirations: “Orthodoxy is vivified by its *gedolim*.” In choosing community goals, “The quest for vigorous and sensitive spiritual leadership should retain high priority. The current dearth of first-rank *gedolim*” should be troubling to us. (LoF 2 p 350)

“The Modern Orthodox Jew has ambivalence towards authority; he acknowledges the need for leadership but wants to remain religiously autonomous.”

The essay explains to the “more modernist” camp the correctness of *gedolim* (LoF 2 p 292). First, R. Lichtenstein denies authority to ordinary people; they must rely on *gedolim*.

Even if we assume that, on the personal level, a moderate *lamdan* may, and perhaps must, act in accordance with his own informed and conscientious reading of the sources—a dubious proposition in its own right—surely no such course could be championed in the public sphere. (LoF 2 p 290)

And in a brilliant analysis, he distinguishes between relying upon the texts of the early authorities (*rishonim*), whom we approach as a resource for our learning, and using our own judgment in listening to contemporary *gedolim*, whom we need to face and whose judgment we must accept. Modernists rely on the former at the expense of the latter.

Finally, for R. Lichtenstein, modernists need to be concerned about their legitimation; therefore, they have to cultivate an appreciation of *gedolim* to gain legitimation (LoF 2 283).

As a subtext, the essay asks about the use of such Western European modernists as Rabbis Hirsch, Hoffman, and Kook, which R. Lichtenstein tellingly frames as: “What of eclecticism?” Concerning Rav Kook, R. Lichtenstein comments, “One can view nineteenth-century European nationalism as an appropriate matrix for Rav Kook’s thought, and there is no dearth of analogues to Hegel, Bergson, and others in his writings” (LoF 2 p. 202). Yet, and despite the preceding comments, he judges Rav Kook as having a radical Jewish authenticity that was not seeking “socio-cultural validation.” In contrast, he deems R. Samson Raphael Hirsch’s humanism and universalism as accommodations and concessions to modernity, as is R. David Zvi Hoffmann’s acceptance of academic scholarship.

In general, R. Lichtenstein defines the tradition within the purview of the traditional Eastern European *beit midrash*. Hence Western European Orthodoxy in Germany, Italy, or Amsterdam, together with the books that it produced, are outside of the canon or the scrutiny of *gedolim*, and can therefore only be seen as accommodationist—and their embrace of modernity is even more suspect. He warns that while ideological eclecticism is legitimate, one must beware accretions. Or, as R. Lichtenstein privately commented to an academic who specialized in Western European Orthodoxy and early nineteenth-century *halakhah*, “Why do you waste your time on these figures?”³⁷

What are the dangers of the modern age for R. Lichtenstein? In 1966, echoing Cardinal Newman’s attack on rampant intellectualist individualism, he wrote that the enemies are materialism and

³⁶ A similar role of autonomy in Orthodoxy, as limited to the choice to submit to a given rabbi or to Orthodoxy, was empirically documented in Debra Kaufman’s study of newly observant women. She notes that since they freely chose to become observant they retained a sense of autonomy in their complete submission to the system, see Debra Renee Kaufman, *Rachel’s Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*, (Rutgers University Press, 1991).

³⁷ Much of the older Modern Orthodox thought was based on the western European traditionalism of Rabbis Samuel David Luzzatto, Hirsch, Hertz, Jung, Lookstein, Belkin, D.Z. Hoffman, Hildesheimer, and others.

liberalism, accompanied by positivism and historicism (LOF 2 p. 344). These concerns remain throughout his corpus, but twenty-five years later, when dealing with the religious issues of the modern age, he wrote:

The Centrist Orthodox community is one to which the danger of distance from God—the eighteenth-century danger, the danger of a certain spiritual hollowness, of apathy, of pushing God off into the corners—is indigenous and endemic. And rather than the issues of the current decade it is an eternal struggle of religious and secular. The secular world as such is one which, philosophically and ideologically, denies God totally. The secular world very often likes to speak in the name of neutrality . . . An education from which God is excluded is not a neutral education. (*By His Light* 196)

His concern to avoid secularism casts the entire modern intellectual world as a problem that needs to be rejected.³⁸ (There does not seem to be any sense that almost half of America is currently evangelical; one wonders how much of R. Lichtenstein's rhetoric itself is the actual cause for Centrist Jews sensing the outside world as hostile to religion.³⁹)

“Why do you waste your time on these figures?”

As mentioned above, R. Lichtenstein's writing career began at the same time that Eugene Borowitz presented *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*. R. Lichtenstein bypasses these choices, however, and returns instead with a copy of *The Conservative Reader* within which to articulate a reading of R. Zevin's *Ishim ve-Shitot*. He aptly selects what he considers the best of past conservative ideas to formulate the life and thought of great men as well as the ideal Torah personality and his ideology.

Legacy

Rabbi Lichtenstein absorbed much from R. Soloveitchik, his father-in-law, yet it is a mistake to conflate them, as many try to do. For example, R. Soloveitchik intimately connects the conceptual method of Torah study with Kantian personal autonomy. In contrast, R. Lichtenstein writes in several places that he questions the Kantian reading of R. Hayyim of Brisk, who was not theological and not in favor of autonomy (LOF 2 p. 53). In other places, R. Lichtenstein notes that his own theological approach is theocentric and less anthropocentric than that of his teacher. Especially concerning *mitsvot*, R. Soloveitchik repeatedly gave anthropocentric explanations of the commandments.

R. Lichtenstein characterizes his father-in-law as a font of inexhaustible creativity. He also explicitly notes that R. Soloveitchik was self-critical of his failures and of his lack of effect on the community. He recounts how R. Soloveitchik confided in him, “They think that I am an *apikores*.” Thankfully for the reader, Rabbi Lichtenstein's portrayal does not remove Rav Soloveitchik's critical edge (LoF 189-246). Yet, depending on your point of view, either tellingly or ironically, R. Lichtenstein portrays R. Soloveitchik as a literary artist and a poet, rather than an abstract Neo-Kantian, relegating his Neo-Kantianism to the realm of “abstruse abstractions.” This portrait differs from R. Soloveitchik's own concern for seeking depth of understanding through formal philosophic discussion. One also misses a sense of his teacher's existential language of commitment, confrontation, and paradox.⁴⁰

R. Lichtenstein wholeheartedly accepts R. Soloveitchik's humanistic portrayal of Rav Hayyim of Brisk and seeks to hold up that biographic image as an exemplar for Jewish continuity and faith. R. Hayyim of Brisk, who, according to the

³⁸ In contrast, Rav Soloveitchik had an acute sense of needing to respond to early twentieth century thought. Similarly, Rav Kook's *Ma'amar ha-Dor* wanted to address issues of the age. Even his co-*rosh yeshiva*, Rav Yehudah Amital deals in his books with the contemporary issues of the Yom Kipper war, holocaust and modern doubt.

³⁹ Christian Smith, *Christian America? : What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ On the dialectic theology background of these ideas, see Alan Brill, “Triumph Without Battle: The Dialectic Approach to Culture in the Thought of Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik” (forthcoming proceedings from the Van Leer Soloveitchik conference 2003); id., “Elements of Dialectic Theology in Rabbi Soloveitchik's View of Torah Study” (forthcoming proceedings from the Ben Gurion University conference on learning and study 2004).

story, looked every morning to see if there would be foundlings on his doorstep, serves as a model for ethical sensitivity. The moral of the curious story is that if the foundling checker R. Hayyim was able to live with the moral dilemmas of *halakhab*, then so can we. Questioning the ethics of the *halakhab* becomes tantamount to questioning R. Hayyim, the founder of the conceptual method, and thereby Judaism as a whole. Yet supporting an ethical theory based on anecdotes of nineteenth-century Russian rabbis flies in the face of the firsthand accounts of their actual minimal responses to the needs of the laity or to the ethical and social challenges of their time. In these aspects, R. Lichtenstein's portrayal of R. Hayyim bears comparison to the similar characterization of Brisk in *Nefesh HaRav*, R. Hershel Schachter's portrayal of R. Soloveitchik.⁴¹

Despite the towering legacy of his teacher R. Soloveitchik and his efforts to create an educated Orthodoxy, R. Lichtenstein notes the shift to the right of the younger generation. Even noting this shift, however, he comments, "What we share with the rightist community far, far outweighs whatever divides us" (LoF 1, 224). Throughout, he has a deep and abiding connection to the yeshiva world and even the old *yishuv*. His thought shares many of the same concerns of the writings of R. Eliyahu Dessler and the Hazon Ish. One can compose many fine lectures comparing the subtle differences between R. Lichtenstein's thought and right-wing religious writings. On the other hand, R. Lichtenstein's approach stands in sharp contrast, with few points of comparison, to the New Religious Zionist emphasis on autonomy, eclecticism, liberalism, historicism, individualism, and spirituality.⁴²

On approaching the opinions of others with whom one disagrees, R. Lichtenstein astutely points to the fact that "Rav Kook was, philosophically, far more tolerant but, as a public figure, tolerated less; the reverse was true of the Rav" (LoF 2 113). One should chart R. Lichtenstein's own opinion about those with whom he disagreed by his own public statements. I would hope that subsequent volumes of *Leaves of Faith* will show the public side of R. Lichtenstein's thought and publish some of his important public statements, including his 1966 debate with Rabbi Irving Greenberg over modernity, his 1996 letter in the *Forward* against Edah in which he condemns the association of R. Soloveitchik's name with any modernist agenda, and the 2001 *Haaretz* letters reproving Yishi Rosen-Zvi's religious defense of conscientious objection.⁴³

"His thought would be especially problematic to anyone Orthodox whose canon consists of all that is best within the liberal tradition."

Even though he is the rabbi and teacher of the last generation whose thought has become the yardstick for the regnant views of Centrist Orthodoxy, those with modernist agendas would certainly not accept R. Lichtenstein's philosophy. Nor would his thought appeal to those interested in spirituality, a narrative approach to Talmud study, or medieval Jewish thought. More importantly, his thought would be especially problematic to anyone Orthodox whose canon consists of all that is best within the liberal tradition.

A greater problem is that the majority of American Jews, even those affiliated with Orthodoxy, would

⁴¹ Compare Rabbi Walter Wurzbberger's presentation of R. Soloveitchik as the opposite of R. Hayyim of Brisk, see *Ethics of Responsibility*, p. 106.

⁴² On the new religious Zionists and the Orthodox modernist positions, see the journals *De'ot*, *Amudim*, *Akdamos*, *Yisra'ell Aheret*, and *Dimmui*. Their articles offer diverse positions. For a philosophic overview, see Yitzhak Geiger, "Ha-Dati'im HaZioni ha-Hadasim" *Akdamos* 11 (Tishri 2001). For an example of the ideology of one of the leading new *roshei yeshivah*, see Yuval Cherlow, *Ve-Erastikh Li le-Olam : Li-Demuto ha-Datit shel ha-Adam be-Yisra'el be-Et Tehiyah be-Mishnato shel ha-Rav Kuk* (Petah Tikvah : Yeshivat Hesder, 2003); *id.*, *Torat Erets Yisra'el le-Or Mishnat ha-Re'iyah* (Hispin, Ramat ha-Golan, Yeshivat ha-Golan, 1998).

⁴³ Records of the statements of R. Lichtenstein concerning the curriculum, especially the role of critical Talmud, *mishpat ivri*, Biblical studies, and philosophy, at Mekhon Herzog would provide many more examples.

not feel comfortable with a theology that centers on learning Torah using solely a conceptual method. Most Orthodox Jews are *mitsvah* Jews at best. R. Lichtenstein is acutely aware of this issue:

In an age in which more than half of *K'lal Yisra'el* does not even know *Shema Yisra'el*, are we sufficiently assessing the importance of minimal mass commitment as opposed to the need for maintaining a small intensive core? (LoF 2 p 359)

Yet he does not necessarily fancy changing the community's course: "Perhaps in the end, the answers will change little." He would, however, probably entertain the ideas of those who do feel compelled to reach a wider audience. Nevertheless, much of his thought remains in the realm of an ideal necessitating that people change in order to conform or learn to accept culturally constructed institutions and model attitudes toward Judaism, family life, and society, whose expectations may not be experienced privately.

But the real question is: Would this idealist conception of Orthodox philosophy taught by someone not as urbane, moral, and sensitive as R. Lichtenstein still be ideal? Would we be left with a *da'as torah* that is not kinder and gentler, but

instead only conservative and dogmatic? "This is no book, Who touches this touches a man." In this verse from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* the deictic "this" connects the reader to the man.⁴⁴ Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's *Leaves of Faith* connects the reader to his own ethos as a *rosh yeshiva* through an ideal model, but can every reader use this model to touch a living approach?

These books are essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary Orthodoxy. I state without exaggeration that these volumes contain the most original essays in Orthodox thought in our time. Without reading these volumes, one cannot understand the changes to the community over the last thirty years, nor how these changes are not a shift to the right-wing yeshiva world as much as their own unique reformulation of the ideals of the community. These volumes give an exceptional portrait of where Centrist Orthodox ideals differ from the former Modern Orthodox ideals. One can use them to articulate the ideology that our youth imbibe in their year in Israel and the ideals of many contemporary Jewish educators. Or one can use these volumes to formulate alternatives to contemporary ideology. But, axiologically, and rhetorically, their greatest purpose is to offer a superb ideal vision for the Centrist Torah personality.

⁴⁴ I thank Prof. Moshe Gold for this formulation.