

Leibowitz at 110

By Jeffrey Saks

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Yeshayahu Leibowitz died in 1994, but he has by no means been forgotten. His 110th birthday is being commemorated by conferences throughout Israel, several publications, and even a new documentary film. A scientist, a philosopher, and a sharp-tongued public intellectual, Leibowitz was an oracle for some, and to others a crank. But even those who are relieved not to hear his voice any more have to acknowledge his originality and his importance as a Jewish thinker and a force in Israeli life during the better part of the 20th century.

Born in Riga (where for a time he was a schoolmate of the young Isaiah Berlin), Leibowitz was educated in Germany before he settled in Jerusalem in 1934. For decades, he taught chemistry, physiology, and the philosophy of science at the Hebrew University. In addition to being the editor of the *Encyclopedia Halvrit*, he taught, lectured, and wrote on a wide variety of issues.

A religious Zionist and a supporter of Jewish statehood, Leibowitz nevertheless expressed strong suspicion of all forms of government and **warned** that viewing the state as a value in and of itself (rather than a vehicle for social or national good) paves the way to fascism. He denounced as a form of idolatry the attribution of inherent sanctity to land, and is best known, perhaps, for insisting that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza after the Six-Day War would ultimately corrupt the nation. Leibowitz demonstrated nothing but **contempt** for Gush Emunim and the followers of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (whom he characterized as being "not interested in Jews or Judaism, only in the State"). He believed that the entanglement of state and religion would only harm the latter. His position on these and many other matters reflected his deep fear of seeing Judaism become the "concubine" of the state.

As a philosopher of Judaism, Leibowitz focused on the exclusive importance of the performance of the mitzvot. He held that observing the commandments (i.e., fulfilling the Divine will) is an end in itself, and not a means to achieve personal, spiritual, communal, or national benefit. To seek any meaning beyond the mitzvot themselves, he thought, is a form of idolatry.

Leibowitz **rejected** conventional articulations of the Jews' chosenness or uniqueness: "The notion that Jewish man is endowed with characteristics that non-Jews lack (the prophetic faculty described by Judah Halevi, the 'soul of the nation' proposed by Rabbi [A.I.] Kook, and the like) derogates the significance of Judaism." That significance, and the very constitution of Jews as a people or nation, consisted for Leibowitz exclusively of "the realization of a program of living set forth in the Torah and delineated by its mitzvot." Jewish uniqueness "is not a fact; it is an endeavor. The holiness of Israel is not a reality but a task." The Jewish people's "uniqueness rather consists in the demand laid on it. The people may or may not heed this demand, therefore its fate is not guaranteed."

The racial or genetic theories that found expression in Halevi's *Kuzari* and other religious sources were, in Leibowitz's eyes, anti-rational and pseudo-mystic. But he was equally hostile to those who propounded secular definitions of Jewishness. "He who empties the concept of the Jewish people of its religious content (like David Ben-Gurion)," he wrote, "and still describes it as an *Am Segulah* [chosen people] turns this concept into an expression of racist chauvinism."

Critics took Leibowitz's position to be atheistic—and indeed, he effectively removes God from the human experience

of religion. The transcendent Deity was not Leibowitz's concern; only the service of God held any meaning for him. The only possible relationship between man and God was the one embodied in the normative practice of halakhah.

Leibowitz's views aroused a great deal of criticism, which was only intensified by his singularly cantankerous mode of expressing them. Most famously and most egregiously he described Israeli soldiers' conduct during the 1982 Lebanon war as the behavior of "Judeo-Nazis." Anger against him on account of that remark had not subsided a decade later, when a public outcry forced him to decline the Israel Prize for his life's work.

Distaste for his politics has not prevented his posthumous publications (mostly transcripts of the conversations he conducted over many years with a circle of students and disciples) from selling well in Israel and resonating within public discourse. And yet, it is quite likely that contemporary devotees of Leibowitz latch on to his views about the territories or separation of religion and state without paying any attention to the other strains in his philosophy, especially his emphasis on mitzvah observance as the central act in the private life of a Jew.

Leibowitz remains largely unknown to American Jewry (to whom the name Leibowitz generally connotes his sister Nehama, the Bible scholar). There is a collection of essays by Leibowitz translated into English, **Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State**; and perhaps the best English-language introduction to his work is the preface to the book, written by its editor, Eliezer Goldman. Unfortunately, however, very little of Leibowitz's work is available in English. This may have something to do with what many find to be the unpalatable nature of his religious philosophy. The idea that Judaism is merely the performance of mitzvot is unappealing even to many for whom it is also that. As a friend once said, "I tried to read Leibowitz once, but after 10 pages I was tired of being yelled at, so I put the book down."

But whatever one thinks of his philosophy or his politics, Leibowitz's ideas are as relevant today as they were during his lifetime and deserve all of the attention they are receiving on the 110th anniversary of his birth, in Israel if not elsewhere.

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