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Review Essay

LETTERS ON RELIGION WITHOUT THEOLOGY

I Wanted to Ask You, Prof. Leibowitz: Letters To and From Yeshayahu Leibowitz (Hebrew), edited by MIRA OFRAN, AVI KATZMAN, ET AL., (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1999), 533 pp.

The recent publication of collected Hebrew letters to and from Yeshayahu Leibowitz is a rich opportunity to gain insight into the often paradoxical, so-called “conscience of Israel”—a philosopher, controversial social critic, and sharp-tongued Socratic gadfly.¹ After his death, his family uncovered thousands of letters which he had received over the years, and copies of his responses. The current volume, *I Wanted to Ask You, Prof. Leibowitz*, has been edited by family members and the Israeli journalist (and Leibowitz disciple), Avi Katzman.

The collection (over 300 selections) is made up largely of his correspondences, but also of occasional selections from his published writings, or letters which had been printed in newspapers and periodicals over the years. The reader is treated to almost seventy years of Leibowitz—the earliest letters, dated 1928, are the only in the volume addressed to his sister, Nechama (pp. 515-7),² while the most recent letter was written just three days prior to his death in August 1994.

The volume is arranged topically, not chronologically, and divided into almost fifty sub-categories—each an area of religion, philosophy, politics, or culture which Leibowitz commented on. He received queries from a pantheon of Israeli public figures (e.g., Ben-Gurion and Yitshak Navon, pp. 430-7). However, the letters also come from high

school students and housewives, who write asking for advice or insight, and sometimes for clarifications or elaborations of what Leibowitz had just said on the radio or TV about Maimonides or some other topic of Jewish thought.³

Leibowitz, born in 1903 in Riga, was educated in Germany prior to settling in Jerusalem in 1934, where he taught chemistry, physiology, and the philosophy of science at the Hebrew University. He was an author and editor of the *Encyclopedia ha-Ivrit*, and taught, lectured, and wrote on a wide range of issues throughout his long life.

Beyond his political thought, Leibowitz is perhaps best known (and critiqued) for his radical conceptions of Judaism.⁴ In brief, his position focused on the centrality—indeed, exclusivity—of *mitsvot* as the constitutive factor in Judaism (e.g., pp. 291-9). Observing the commandments (i.e. fulfilling the divine will) is an end in itself, and not a means to achieve personal, spiritual, or communal benefit. The significance of a religious act, argues Leibowitz, is in its performance *qua* worshipping God. To seek any meaning beyond that is, in his opinion, idolatry.⁵

Critics took Leibowitz's position as atheistic—and indeed, he effectively removes God from the human experience of religion: God as the transcendent being is unimportant to Leibowitz, only the *service* of God holds any meaning. The relationship between man and God can only exist in the arena of the normative practice of halakha. Gershom Scholem (p. 483) once said to Leibowitz: "You believe in Torah, but not in God." Leibowitz responded: "You neither believe in Torah nor in God, but in something bizarre, hidden in the Jewish people—and I do not share in this belief."

Since religion is purely normative, argues Leibowitz, the Torah has no historical or literary significance, but is exclusively a legal code. To look to the Bible as a work of art or as a source of divine inspiration is an error, since, he states (pp. 116-7), it is at best "second-rate literature—unable to compete with Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, or Pushkin. The *meaning* of scripture is in its articulation of the religious imperative to man: Serve the Lord." Since performance of the *mitsvot* themselves is the inherent and ultimate good, Leibowitz saw messianic aspirations as religiously insignificant (a whole section of the book, pp. 268-79, is dedicated to this).

Leibowitz, although personally religious and zionistic, was no Religious Zionist. Over the years, he grew disillusioned with the interplay between statehood and religion. Given that the State was function-

ing outside of halakhic norms, he argued for the severing of religion and state. For example, in 1960, Profs. E.E. Urbach and Ernst Simon, of the Hebrew University, circulated a petition to various public figures, calling upon Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik⁶ to run for the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.⁷ Leibowitz refused to sign, saying (p. 364):

I completely reject your efforts regarding the Chief Rabbinate and your appeal to R. Soloveitchik. I view the very institution of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel—religious leadership established by an atheistic government for reasons of political gain, religious leadership functioning with the authority of such government and entwined in its bureaucracy—as a prostitution of religion, destruction of the Torah, and desecration of God. Regarding R. Soloveitchik: [by inviting him] you are, in my opinion, violating “place not a stumbling block before the blind” [*Lev.* 19:14]. I wish to further point out that I’ve heard from friends in the United States that R. Soloveitchik himself has privately expressed his complete agreement with what I have written . . . regarding separation of religion and state.⁸

Indeed, the Rav does seem to agree with Leibowitz on this point (albeit in a gentler tongue), when he told the *Boston Jewish Advocate* in 1964:

One of the reasons why I did not accept the post of Chief Rabbi of Israel—and the offer was made to me several times—was that I was afraid to be an officer of the State. A rabbinate linked up with the state cannot be completely free. . . . [T]he mere fact that from time to time halakhic problems are discussed as political issues at cabinet meetings is an infringement on the sovereignty of the rabbinate.⁹

Leibowitz feared (and in this many feel he was prescient) that the continued entanglement of religion and state would ultimately lead to a corruption of religion. He felt that the inability or unwillingness of rabbinic authorities in the early years of the State to forge innovative halakhic approaches to unprecedented situations (engendered by the return of Jewish sovereignty in the modern era) would turn religious Jews into parasites (pp. 340-9).

Leibowitz further articulated views on the State, such as positing that the ascription of inherent sanctity to the land is a form of idolatry (pp. 247-54), and that viewing the state as a value in and of itself (rather than as a vehicle for social or national good) is a precursor to

fascism (pp. 372, 391, *inter alia*). He believed that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza after the 1967 war would ultimately corrupt the state in the way in which all colonial regimes become corrupted (e.g., pp. 462-5). Along these lines, he exhibited specific contempt for *Gush Emunim* (e.g., pp. 375, "*Gush Emunim* is not interested in Jews or Judaism, only in the State") and the followers of Rav Kook. All of these elements bear the common thread of his repugnance at the use of religion to justify what he saw as political corruption or oppression.

Leibowitz denied that he possessed a systemic philosophy. Of course, others have disagreed.¹⁰ In truth, he never set out to write a systematic work which puts forth his thinking in total. It does however seem that there are so many central characteristics to his thought, that one can talk about a system—and the current volume reverberates with recurring themes and ideas.

Such a wide range of issues is covered, and the editors have not tried to hide the sharp criticisms which Leibowitz received in his mailbox. Documented in the letters (pp. 409-16) are attacks (and his responses) for his unfortunate 1982 "Judeo-Nazi" remark, referring to the war in Lebanon. The public outcry around that incident was still echoing a decade later when he was forced to decline the 1992 Israel Prize (the nation's highest civilian honor) in the wake of the controversy which that decision aroused (pp. 416-7, 475).

The work is a generally good introduction to Leibowitz (the editors help by crossreferencing the letters to his other published material), but it's a user-friendly Leibowitz.¹¹ It is a sincere attempt to introduce Leibowitz to a generation that didn't know him, but who are compelled by the central issues which he dealt with for many years. One need not agree with his positions (and many did not), but the topics covered are as relevant to the pressing social and moral concerns in Israel today as they were when he wrote on them (e.g., p. 365 on the role of the Supreme Court, or p. 366 on civil marriage and divorce). He remains an original (albeit controversial) voice on every issue within the Israeli social discourse. Indeed, in Israel the book quickly reached the top of the *Ha'aretz* best-seller list and stayed there for over six months—a rare feat for a work of this nature, but testimony to the visceral connection the Israeli public has to Leibowitz and the issues on which he wrote.

However, Leibowitz often remains unknown to American Orthodoxy (to whom the name Leibowitz generally connotes Nechama—in Israel it is usually the opposite). Israelis knew him primarily from his public lec-

tures, radio and television talks, and his political and cultural polemics. For this reason, his was a very strong presence on the Israeli scene. He could hardly be expected to have the same impact on American Jews.

While it is true that the dearth of writing translated into English is no help, this may not be the cause, but the effect. Leibowitz's notion of Judaism is unappealing to many, for whom Judaism is not merely the performance of *mitsvot*—although it is certainly *also* that. Most people find Leibowitz off-putting because they find meaning in other aspects of religion, which he (at best) belittled or (at worst) claimed were idolatrous. Many people who feel comfortable with a broader conception of Judaism feel that he is (at best) irritating or (at worst) un-Jewish.¹² As a friend of mine once told me, "I tried to read Leibowitz once, but after ten pages I was tired of being yelled at, so I put the book down."

To some Leibowitz was an oracle, to others he was a crank—both wrote to him, and he responded to all. As he reminds us (p.18), "it is a good sign [to be troubled by questions], it shows that you think. The important thing is knowing to ask, regardless of your ability to give or obtain an answer. We have no answers to some of the greatest and gravest questions. As you know (from the Haggadah) the antithesis of wisdom is not knowing how to ask." These letters show that he remains a compelling, original voice for those attempting to understand Jewish life, philosophy, and polity in Israel during the better part of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. The best introduction to Leibowitz in English is Eliezer Goldman's prefatory essay to the volume he edited, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992). This volume contains 27 translated essays, most of which come from Leibowitz's Hebrew collection, *Yahadut, Am HaYehudi u-Medinat Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1975). Goldman's recent collection of his own essays, *Mehkarim ve-Iyyunim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996) contains a number of pieces on Leibowitz as well.
2. Brother and sister were very close. In one letter from 1988 (p. 483), he writes to one of her students:

Your problem (like most of your friends in the National Religious camp) is that you do not understand—or try *not* to understand—the

deep crisis among religious Jews today: You don't at all feel the contradiction between your involvement with Nechama's "enterprise" and your obsequious prostrations to the rabbis who distance women from Torah and Torah study and even negate the value of learning from a woman.

See also his "The Status of Women: Halakhah and Meta-Halakhah" in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-31.

3. Leibowitz broadcast for many years, first on the radio and later on television, on a wide range of topics in Jewish thought. Some of these talks were later edited and published. Among his English works, *The Faith of Maimonides* (NY: Adama Books, 1987) and *Notes and Remarks on the Weekly Parashah* (Brooklyn: Chemed, 1990), are based on these broadcasts. The Hebrew series *Sihot al . . .* (*Lectures on . . .*) are also products of these broadcasts (as well as the sessions of his study circle, which met for decades). Among the titles in the series are *Lectures on the Guide to the Perplexed*, *Shemoneh Perakim*, *Pirkei Avot*, *Mesillat Yesharim*, and most recently *On the Jewish Holidays* (including a chapter on the meaning of the Holocaust).
4. For a good treatment in English of Leibowitz's philosophy of Judaism and *halakha*, see: Avi Sagi, "Yeshayahu Leibowitz—A Breakthrough in Jewish Philosophy: Religion without Metaphysics," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997), 203-16. Sagi shows how Leibowitz attempts the "removal of theology from Jewish religion."
5. In his insistence on Judaism as a religion of law, Leibowitz maintained a protracted polemic with Christianity—which, after all, is founded on the *rejection* of the law. See the letters on pp. 379-87. His virulent hatred for Jewish apostates, for similar reasons, is documented on pp. 388-91, where (among others) he sharply attacks Heine, Mahler, and Brother Daniel.
6. In a letter to the author of a book of intellectual biographical sketches, Leibowitz (p. 482) states that he knew the Rav "personally and spoke with him a number of times," and chides the author for "not fully understanding the depth of meaning of [the Rav's] philosophy." It is not clear when the two first met, although it is possible that they met in the 1920's at the University of Berlin. Leibowitz once recalled to Eliezer Goldman that he thinks that they must have met at the university, since both attended a certain course of lectures the same year. They certainly met and talked at least twice in the 1970's when Leibowitz visited the United States. R. Soloveitchik had sent Leibowitz some of his books, and Leibowitz described the Rav as one of the giants of modern Jewish philosophy. An interesting comparison of the two can be found in: Avi Sagi, "Contending with Modernity: Scripture in the Thought of Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Joseph Soloveitchik," *The Journal of Religion* 77 (1997), 421-41. Sagi correctly points out (pp. 424-5) that "one of their shared assumptions must be . . . that the religious realm is autonomous and unconditioned by extrareligious factors." See also pp. 98-99 in Zev Harvey, "He'arot al HaRav Soloveitchik ve-ha-Pilosofiah HaRambamit" in *Emunah Bizmanim*

- Mishtanim*, ed. Avi Sagi (Jerusalem: WZO, 1996), 95-107 (in note 16, p. 106, the Rav is quoted as saying in the 1950's that Leibowitz was the "only interesting religious thinker in Israel.")
7. The position had been vacated in 1959 upon the death of R. Yitshak Herzog, and remained vacant until 1964, when it was filled by R. Isser Yehuda Unterman. In the intervening years a bitter conflict took place over the electoral process by which the Chief Rabbi would be selected.
 8. One of the articles to which Leibowitz is referring has been translated, and appears as "A Call for the Separation of Religion and State" in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-84.
 9. Cited in Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1999), I: 56. Of course, on other occasions, the Rav spoke more favorably of religion's involvement with the State, and the contribution of religious parties (specifically *Mizrachi*). See, e.g., *Five Addresses* (Jerusalem: Tal Orot, 1983), pp. 80-9.
 10. See, e.g., Avi Katzman, "Bein Kodesh le-Hol" in *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: Olamo ve-Haguto*, ed. Avi Sagi (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), 312-3, n. 1 (esp. quote from Avi Ravtizky there); and Eliezer Goldman in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, *op. cit.*; and Avi Sagi, "Religion without Metaphysics," *op. cit.*
 11. Eliezer Goldman pointed out to me that the Israeli public is struck by Leibowitz's personality as it emerges in these letters as distinguished from his public image. There is a sharp contrast between the sympathetic, almost fatherly figure of the correspondent prepared to answer the questions of adolescents seeking his counsel (signing off with his address and phone number in letter after letter, inviting his pen pals to continue their discussion in person), versus his reputation as the caustic critic, intolerant of views that appeared to him foolish. The book is a revelation for many Israelis who knew him only from his public appearances.
 12. Indeed, at the recent Yeshiva University sponsored Orthodox Forum in Jerusalem (February 20, 2000) one of the presenters took exception that a fellow panelist had even made reference to Leibowitz's philosophy at "a Torah conference such as this." Another speaker then stated that he once told Leibowitz, "You're very religious, but your religion isn't Judaism."