



The Conscience of Israel

A Tribute to Yishayahu Leibowitz

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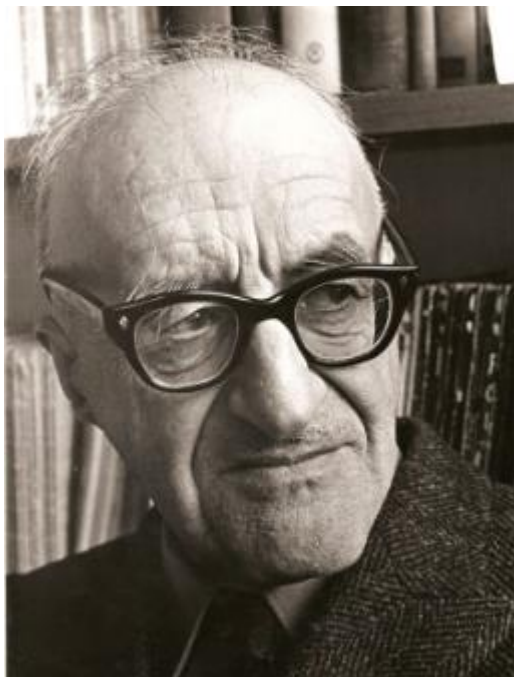
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A Tribute to Yishayahu Leibowitz

Published in a Hebrew translation by Edna Margalit in *Ha'aretz*, 4 March 1983, 18 (omitting the words in square brackets); a 'Response to Isaiah Berlin' by Leibowitz, published on 15 April 1983, takes issue with some aspects of IB's characterisation of IL



Yishayahu Leibowitz (1903–94)

[G'VIROTAI V'RABBOTAI:¹

May I begin by saying how very sorry I am not to be present on this unique occasion,² which was to me a deeply moving prospect. Unfortunately for me, a virus infection has reduced my voice to a muffled sound, which would not have served anyone's purpose.] I am [consequently the more] grateful to the organisers of this

¹ 'Ladies and Gentlemen'.

² IB's remarks were read for him at a symposium – 'On His Eightieth Birthday', dedicated to Leibowitz – of the Israel Colloquium for the History, Philosophy and Sociology of Science, held in Jerusalem on 3 March 1983.

THE CONSCIENCE OF ISRAEL

symposium for offering me this opportunity of writing down, however briefly, something of what I feel and think about the man in whose honour it is being held, something which I have, for many years, longed to say. Since I am totally unqualified to speak of Professor Leibowitz's scientific achievement, it is to his life and personality that I should like to be allowed to pay tribute – not just for what they are, but for what they signify, certainly to myself and I feel sure to many others.

I first learnt of Yishayahu Leibowitz in 1920 – I was then eleven years of age and he seventeen. My parents and I spent some months, before going to England, in my (and his) native city of Riga. Our families were on friendly terms; and since I was known to be in need of Hebrew lessons, they recommended a teacher to whom I was duly sent. He was a small, frail, elderly man of great charm, and a singular sweetness of nature, a gifted teacher, and a man of saintly life. I was a very unsatisfactory, idle and superficial pupil; and although he was too kind to shame me by holding up other pupils as models to me, I somehow divined the existence of standards unattainable by me, reached by two pupils to whom he was totally devoted – a boy and his sister, students of the highest intelligence, most serious and dedicated, steeped in the best traditions of Jewish life and learning, at the same time brilliant students of the arts and sciences of the West – in short, near geniuses, *ilyim* of a modern kind, spoken of with exceptional admiration, indeed with some awe, in the world of my parents and relations.

Their names were Yishayahu and Nechama Leibowitz. In due course I met them and was overawed. I made no effort to get to know them better, for they did not seem to me to be likely to encourage familiarity. I looked up to them, but seldom saw them. Sixty-four years have passed since then – during which they both remained somewhat remote, somewhat awe-inspiring ideal figures in my consciousness. I did, of course, meet them from time to time; I have read some of Professor Yishayahu Leibowitz's non-scientific writings and corresponded with him at very rare intervals. I knew, of course, of the deep respect in which they were and are held in Israel and beyond; I have followed with admiration the views and actions of Yishayahu and of his equally distinguished sister. But it is not so much his intellectual attainments and achievements as a thinker and teacher that have made so profound an impression on me – individuals gifted in the arts and sciences have not been rare

THE CONSCIENCE OF ISRAEL

in our history – as the unshaken moral and political stand which he took up for so many years and in the face of so much pressure from those well-meaning persons who urged him to be sensible, to be realistic, not to let down the side, not to give comfort to the enemy, not to fight against current conventional wisdom. But he did resist these pressures, and did not lower his flag.

Professor Leibowitz had never betrayed the ideals and beliefs which brought him to this country. He was, and is, a Zionist. He holds, so I believe, that it is possible and right to create a free, democratic, tolerant, socially homogenous, sovereign Jewish state, a self-governing and independent community of socially and politically equal citizens enjoying full civil liberties, free from exploitation of one body of men by another, and, above all, free from that kind of political control by the majority over minorities which we have suffered so long and so cruelly, as defenceless strangers in every land. That was the original ideal of the founders of the Zionist movement, even before the unspeakable disaster of our own terrible century.

This ideal, as we know, was common to all the parties represented in the early Zionist Congresses. Since then, some deviation from these goals has occurred. Yishayahu Leibowitz, with total courage, independence and, above all, undeviating honesty and strength of character, stood up: and when others were silent, he raised his voice for what he, and they too, knew to be right, when, for whatever reason, they, for the most part, failed to do so. Of him, I believe, it can be said more truly than of anyone else that he is the conscience of Israel: the clearest and most honourable champion of those principles which justify the creation of a movement and of a sovereign state achieved at so high a human cost both to the Jewish nation and to its neighbours.

What are these principles? Well, to name those which first come to mind, natural justice; basic human decency; avoidance of cruelty, oppression, intimidation. Professor Leibowitz is as well aware as anyone that the enemies of Israel have not recoiled from those practices. Far from it. But, unpopular as this has been, he continues to proclaim, *contra mundum*, that this does not justify those counter-measures – means, often enough, to good ends, which, nevertheless, inevitably demean the men who make use of them and the societies which allow them to be used. Yishayahu Leibowitz is not a natural rebel, not a fanatic, not an anarchist, not an enemy of authority,

THE CONSCIENCE OF ISRAEL

government, establishment as such; he is not a utopian, an unworldly idealist, a man blinded by the categories of natural science to the irregular formations of real life; nor is he a professional gadfly, a man who delights in calling all accepted institutions into question because he is sceptical or oppositional by nature. Respectable persons have at times attributed one or other of these characteristics to him. But he is none of these things. He is a morally sensitive, unusually clear-headed, civilised, deeply patriotic, absolutely honest man, who, like the prophets of old, when he sees political idolatry or moral iniquity round him, suffers agony of spirit and declines to be silent. If his words sometimes seem to cut too deep – some would say, go too far – that is surely better than folding hands in the face of the morally intolerable.

That this most outstanding man, whose example atones for so much, should, despite his years, still be active in the pursuit of truth and justice is surely one of this country's greatest moral assets – something of which Israel, even when it declines to follow him, can be exceedingly proud. I know of no one today in my own British society who works and speaks for those values in so pure-hearted and fearless a fashion. I hope he – and all of you – will forgive me for the fervour of these words: but I can think of no other way of saluting a man who, during the whole of his long life, a life of great intellectual distinction, has been so unswerving a public witness to what most of us, in our own feebler fashion, in fact know to be both right and feasible. Fortunate the society which still has such men to speak to it and for it.

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