

# Ruin of Israel long been foreseen

**Late Zionist philosopher:** Brutality Zionism's penultimate stage

## PERSPECTIVE

"The national pride and euphoria that followed the Six-Day War are temporary and will bring us from proud, rising nationalism to extreme, messianic, ultranationalism. The third stage will be brutality and the final stage will be the end of Zionism." These are the words of no anti-Zionist, who are multiplying rapidly, but a self-proclaimed Zionist philosopher. However, Yeshayahu Leibowitz did not live long enough to see how far ahead of everyone else in Israel he was and how Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is seemingly taking it upon himself to prove these predictions true.

Described as "the conscience of Israel" by no less an eminence than Sir Isaiah Berlin, he arguably always had the best interests of Jews at heart. But what makes Leibowitz stand out from everyone who fulfills this criterion is that he was also not afraid to speak up to politicians with no foresight and/or sense of humanity that failed to bring Israel back from the path of self-destruction.



Captured Egyptian soldiers (R) bound for a prisoner of war camp pass an Israeli troop convoy in the Sinai desert during the Six-Day War on June 8, 1967. **ROLLS PRESS/POPPERFOTO**

### What self-defense?

"Israel has a right to defend itself." It is a refrain frequently invoked to justify Israeli responses to attacks launched against its citizens by Palestinian fighters. Yet not every Israeli has accepted that truism. Indeed, if there is a single individual who best represents the challenge to such thinking it is the late Yeshayahu Leibowitz.

A fierce embodiment of the Socratic gadfly, Leibowitz (1903-1994) was unafraid to use strong language to criticize Israel's occupation of the Palestinian people and territories, which commenced in 1967. "The corruption characteristic of every colonial regime would also prevail in the

State of Israel," he said in his typically provocative style. For Leibowitz, the occupation meant that Israel forfeited its right to retaliate in self-defense, and he was ever vocal about this position. His outspokenness, eloquence, and polymathy helped establish him as Israel's premier public intellectual.

### A secular brand of Zionism

Yeshayahu Leibowitz was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1903 into a family of religious Jews. They were Zionists, adherents of the pan-national movement founded in Europe whose goal was to establish a sovereign state for the Jewish people in their historical homeland, namely, the land of Israel. A brilliant pupil, Leibowitz studied chemistry and philosophy at the University of Berlin, and then medicine in Koln and Heidelberg, before moving to Basel to finish his medical degree while the Nazis rose to power in Germany. In 1934, he immigrated to Palestine and took an appointment as a professor of biochemistry, and later neurophysiology, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he taught for nearly six decades. In addition to publishing numerous books and articles on everything from the history of science to the philosophy of Maimonides, he was the editor of the *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, and a frequent public speaker on Jewish thought, ethics, and philosophy.

Like his relatives, Leibowitz was a committed lifelong Zionist, yet he grew disillusioned by the use of Judaism as a political tool and as a justification for Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian territories. As an antidote, he developed his own secular brand of Zionism, which was simply "the endeavor to liberate Jews from being ruled by the Gentiles," as he wrote in his 1992 book *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*.

Leibowitz's positions were shaped by his understanding of Judaism as a religion of

praxis, i.e., a normative system of mitzvot, biblical commandments in the Torah observed by practicing Jews, not as a political ideology or a national identity. Contrary to recent interpretations of Zionism inflected with religious and messianic flavors that fail to realize it is "a purely political movement," Leibowitz challenged the notion that the Jewish people have a divine right to the land of Israel. He reminds us that even though there has been ideological yearning for return, "Judaism existed for 18 centuries without statehood and without territory."

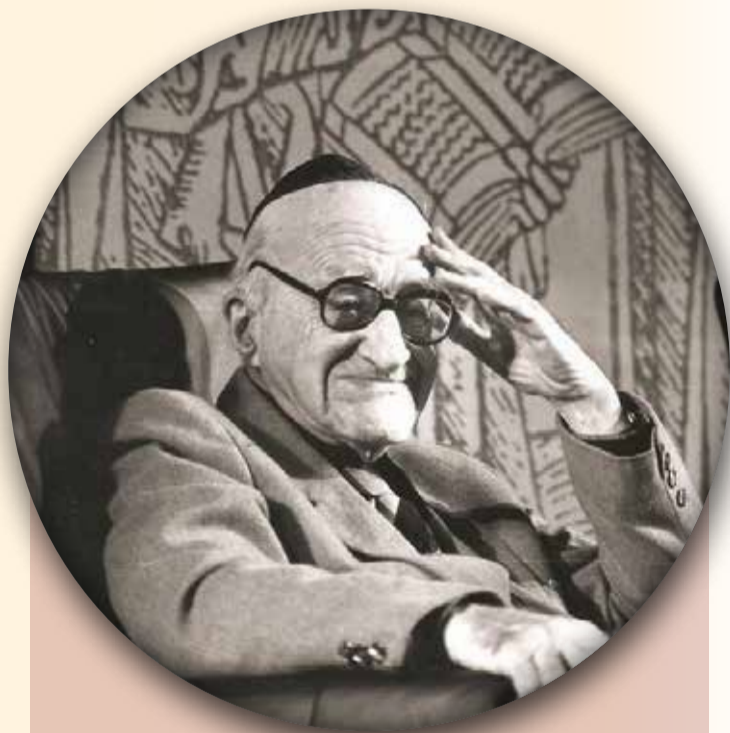
He moreover warned of the dangers of idolizing sovereignty and military power. Divinely sanctioned land claims were, for Leibowitz, tantamount to a form of tyranny, or as he called it, "Judeo-fascism". Unfazed by any backlash, Leibowitz condemned the invocation of messianism and the sanctification of military power. These, he said, amounted to "a modern incarnation of false prophecy" and "a prostitution of the Jewish religion". Since the nineteenth century, he maintained, Jewish people are no longer defined by Judaism, and there's nothing that Israel can do because "the crisis is not a political one" and "the state is not a repository of values". The occupation led to the erroneous belief that military force can be useful for solving political problems, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

After 1967, when Israel captured the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the so-called Six-Day War,

after fighting Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, Leibowitz warned about the heavy moral price Israel would pay for using sacred terminology to describe its victory. Ascribing religious significance to the state and hiding its aggression behind a facade of religious piety constitutes a form of idolatry, he argued, that leads to moral atrocities committed in the name of the state. On the massacre in the village of Qibya in 1953, Leibowitz wrote (translated by Moti Mizrahi from Hebrew):

"We must ask ourselves: where do these young people come from, who have no moral qualms about carrying out such atrocities, and who have the urge to carry out such acts of vengeance? These young people are not the rabble. Rather, they grew up on and were educated in the values of Zionism. They are the product of applying the religious language of the scared to social and national affairs. This practice is common in our education system and in our public advocacy."

In Leibowitz's schema, there can be no religious claim to the land of Israel because any such claim is based on a confusion "between the Jewish people as the bearer of Judaism and the sovereign state instituted by these people as its instrument". Moreover, Leibowitz denied that the Land of Israel was holy and that the Jews had a special right to it, writing that "the idea that a specific country or location has an intrinsic 'holiness' is an indubitably idolatrous idea" and that "talk of rights is pure nonsense. No nation has a right to any land."



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