

# Reluctant Prophet

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*On Monday, I was honored to receive the Leibowitz Prize for "life's work", the prize established by the Yesh Gvul soldiers' peace organization. I was unable to prepare a speech, so I spoke off the cuff and have to reconstruct my remarks from memory. (The laudation speech by the Nobel Prize laureate, Prof Ada Yonat, was far too laudatory for me to distribute.)*

First, I wish to thank Yesh Gvul for establishing this prize. Then I would like to thank the distinguished jury, who were so gracious as to award the prize to me and to Hagit Ofran, the granddaughter of Prof. Leibowitz, whose work in monitoring the settlements I have admired for years. And then I want to thank all of you for coming to this ceremony.

Yet at this moment I think of the one who is not here, and whose absence is so unjust: my wife, Rachel. She was a full partner in all I did during the last 58 years, and should have been awarded half the prize – at the very least. She would have been delighted to be here.

When I entered this building, I was greeted by a stormy right-wing demonstration. I was grievously offended to be told that it was not directed against me, but against my friend Muhammad Bakri, the Arab actor who so angered the fascists with his film "Jenin, Jenin". At this moment he is playing in Frederico Garcia Lorca's "The House of Bernarda Alba" next door. Probably he deserves this demonstration, but nevertheless I still feel deeply insulted.

I ADMIRE and loved Yeshayahu Leibowitz.

I admired him for his penetrating logic. Whenever he applied it to any problem, it was a beauty to behold. Nothing could withstand it. Often, listening to his words, I asked myself enviously: "Now, why didn't I think of that?"

I loved him, because of his unshakably moral attitude. For him, the moral obligation of the individual human being was above everything else.

Immediately after the 1967 war and the beginning of the occupation, he prophesied that we would become a nation of work gang supervisors and secret service agents.

Indeed, I always thought of him as Yeshayahu II, the heir of the Biblical Yeshayahu.<sup>1</sup> When I told him this, he got angry. "People don't understand the meaning of the word," he complained, "in European languages, a prophet is a person who can foretell the future. But the Hebrew prophets were people who transmitted the Word of God!" Leibowitz, though orthodox and a kippah wearer, did not think of himself in that way.

Like all great men and women, he was a person with deep contradictions. I struggled to understand how a thinker of total rationality could be religious. He explained to me that a person who strictly fulfils all the 613 commandments of the

Jewish religion can be completely rational – because religion exists on an altogether different level. As a professor of several wildly divergent disciplines (philosophy, chemistry, biochemistry, medicine), he did not let science and religion encroach on one another.

Once, when somebody told him that the Holocaust had stopped him believing in God, he replied: "then you did not believe in God in the first place."

STANDING HERE in this hall, I feel some remorse for my part in the utterly absurd fact that he failed to receive the Israel Prize, the highest distinction the establishment can award. It happened in 1993, when Yitzhak Rabin was prime minister. Fresh winds were blowing (or so it seemed) and the official Jury decided - at long last - to award Leibowitz the respected prize.

As it so happened, I was organizing at the time a public meeting of the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. I called Leibowitz and asked him if he would come and speak.

I must add here that I was always keen to have him at our meetings, for two reasons. First, he was a captivating speaker. Second, when Leibowitz was due to appear, the hall – however big it might be – was always filled to the last seat, the stairs and the windowsills.<sup>2</sup>

When I asked him this time, he readily agreed to speak, under one condition: he would speak only about one subject, the duty of soldiers to refuse to serve in the occupied territories.

"Please speak about anything you want," I replied, "After all, this is a free country – up to a point."

So he came and delivered a speech in which he compared our soldiers to Hamas, who were then (as today) considered the most atrocious terrorists. This led to a terrific public outcry, Rabin threatened to boycott the ceremony, the jury considered whether it was possible to revoke the award, and Leibowitz announced that he would not accept it. So he never was awarded the Israel Prize, in common with some other people I know.

I ALWAYS enjoyed talking with him. He lived in a modest apartment, crammed with books, entered from a courtyard behind a house in Jerusalem's Rehavia quarter. Greta, his wife and the mother of his six children, whom he had met at one of the German universities he had attended, kept order. Rachel and I liked her unassuming ways very much.

Whenever he talked, about any subjects, the little wheels in my brain sprang to life. He would drop little morsels of insight all along the way. (Just as an example: "The Germans and the Jews created all their cultural assets when they did not have a state.")

The relationship between us rested on the fact that we were opposites in many ways. I am as convinced an atheist as he was

<sup>1</sup>Yeshayahu is the Hebrew form of Isaiah.

<sup>2</sup>However, I always arranged things in such a way that I would speak after him. For good reason: when he rose, he would cut all the speeches of his predecessors to pieces. Using his formidable powers of analysis, he proved that everything they had said was absolute nonsense.

orthodox – a fact that never disturbed him in the least. I am an optimist by nature (as was my father and my grandfather), he was more of a pessimist. He was 20 years my elder and a multiple doctor and professor, while I never finished elementary school. He came to Germany from his native Riga in his teens, while I was born there.

When, on the morrow of the Six-day War, we both spoke in favor of giving up the occupied territories, we had different reasons. He predicted that the occupation would turn Israel into a fascist state, I was convince that turning the territories over to the Palestinian people and enabling them to set up their own state would put an end to the historic conflict.

COMING FROM opposite directions, we both shared the uncompromising demand for the separation between religion and state. This led me to a parliamentary prank. When the Ministry for Religious Affairs was on the agenda, I asked Leibowitz for some comments on the subject. He dictated a statement to my assistant, and when my turn came to speak, I announced that instead of voicing my own views, which were well known, I would read out the opinion of an orthodox thinker, Prof. Leibowitz.

I then read his words: “Under this clerical-atheist government, Israel is a secular state publicly known as religious in Israel,<sup>3</sup> . . . The Chief Rabbinate is a secular institution appointed by the secular authorities according to secular laws. Therefore it has no religious legitimacy. . . . The Ministry of Religious Affairs is an abomination. . . . It turns religion into the kept concubine of the secular authority. It is the prostitution of religion. . . .”

Here the Knesset exploded. The chairwoman of the session was so agitated that she announced that she was striking the words from the protocol. I later appealed, and the words were restored to the record – enabling me to read them just now from the official protocol.

As a speaker, Leibowitz was deliberately provocative. It was he who coined the term Judeonazi, at a time when comparing anything to the Nazis was strictly taboo. He likened certain units of the Israeli army to the Nazi SS, and youth in the settlements reminded him of the Hitler Youth. He called the holiest of holies, the Western Wall, “a religious discotheque”, or, in short, “discotel” (“kotel” means wall in Hebrew.) He used such provocative language to help him break through the crust of established myths.

THE LAST years before his death in 1994 he devoted all his efforts to encouraging soldiers to refuse to serve. We had several debates about this, since I was not quite convinced.

During my army service, I was witness to situations where one upright soldier at the right moment and the right place could prevent atrocities. One shining example: when Nazareth was occupied in 1948, the commanding officer was a Canadian Jew named Ben Dunkelman. He received an oral order from David Ben-Gurion to drive out all the inhabitants. Dunkelman refused to do so without a written order. As an officer and a gentleman, he had promised the mayor at the capitulation meeting that no inhabitant would come to harm. He was immediately relieved of his command, but by the time his successor took over, it was too late to present things as occurring in the heat of battle. No

written order was ever issued, of course.

Years later, I obtained a description of the episode from Dunkelman, who had returned to Canada, and Haolam Hazeh published it.

Against this argument, Leibowitz maintained that the most important thing was for individual soldiers to stand up and refuse to take any part in the occupation, whatever the consequences for them personally – imprisonment, ostracism, and worse. When enough soldiers did so, he believed, the occupation would collapse (Yesh Gvul was founded with this aim.)

A FEW years before his death I had the honor of appearing side by side with him in a book of interviews by the German writer-photographer Herlinde Koelbl. There he defined his political outlook in the shortest and simplest way. I translate from German:

“There exist only two possibilities. The one is war for life and death, in the full sense of the term, in the course of which Israel will become a fascist state. The other possibility, the one that can help to prevent this war, is the partition of the country. Both peoples would have their independence and their states, but not in the entire country. I believe that partition will come, if not by an agreement between the state of Israel and the PLO, then through an imposed order. Imposed by the Americans and the Soviets.

If neither of these happens, then we are heading toward a catastrophe.

I repeat: there is no third possibility.

Since the Six-day War, Israel has become a power apparatus, a Jewish power apparatus for ruling over another people.

That’s why I say in the clearest terms: this glorious victory was the historic misfortune of the State of Israel. In the year of the “Spring of the Peoples”, 1848, [the Austrian dramatist] Franz Grillparzer warned of the path that leads from humanity, through nationality to bestiality. In the 20th century, the German people indeed followed this path to the end. We entered upon this path after the Six-day War. Our essential task is to put an end to this.”

I AM happy to receive this prize together with his granddaughter. It reminds me of another passage in the same interview. “*For the short time left to me, I shall stay here. Here in Jerusalem are my children and my grandchildren, and all of them will also remain here.*”

That is real patriotism. Dr. Johnson famously labeled patriotism the last refuge of the scoundrel. We see the patriotic scoundrels all around us. But we are the real patriots – patriots like Yeshayahu Leibowitz.

There will not be a second Yeshayahu Leibowitz. “*He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again.*”

<sup>3</sup>“publicly known” is a term denoting living together without marriage.