

To Love Unconditionally, Part 2: When It's Hard to Criticize

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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There once lived a man in Eretz Yisrael named Yeshayahu (“Isaiah” in English). He was a prophet. One of the greatest in Jewish history.

Known as “the conscience of Israel,” he was an advisor to rulers—and one of their harshest critics.

People revered—and *reviled*—him for “the unshakable moral and political stand which he took up...in the face of...pressure to be sensible [and] not to give comfort to the enemy...”¹

His country was “the most stable, prosperous, and powerful state in the area”²—but it faced an enemy sworn to destroy it.

“The people ‘looked to weapons’ as the source of security,”³ and this distressed him.

The “arrogance, pride, and insolence”⁴ of their leaders, he feared, would lead to ruin.

I am not speaking about the biblical prophet Yeshayahu.

I am speaking of another prophet—one of our own time.

His name was Yeshayahu Leibowitz and he lived from 1903-1994.

He emigrated from Europe to Eretz Yisrael in 1934 to escape the Nazis.

He was an Orthodox Jew and an ardent Zionist.

He fought in Israel’s War of Independence and advised David Ben-Gurion.

But after the Six-Day War, Leibowitz’s prophetic voice became a clarion call.

It was Israel’s conquest of Judea and Samaria, the West Bank, that unleashed his wrath.⁵

¹ Sir Isaiah Berlin describing Yeshayahu Leibowitz, as quoted by Eliezer Goldman in his Introduction to Y. Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, viii.

² Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 87.

³ Ibid. Here, Heschel quotes Isaiah 22:8.

⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁵ Leibowitz is sometimes referred to as “the prophet of wrath.”

Were Israel to annex the West Bank, he said, it would mean the end of its Jewish majority and “bring about a catastrophe for the Jewish people as a whole...”⁶

Yet to continue ruling over the Arabs living there would be morally untenable.

So, “Out of concern for the Jewish people and its state,” he said, “we have no choice but to withdraw from the territories...”⁷

It sounds so contemporary, but Yeshayahu wrote these words in 1968.

As in ancient times, the rulers did not listen to the prophet.

But he was undeterred.

He warned that the occupation would provoke relentless terrorism against the Israeli people and the expansion of settlements would “add fuel to the flames.”⁸

He said it would only “unite the 400,000 Arab Israeli citizens with their million and a half brethren across the [green] line...thus promoting their fusion into one Palestinian people ruled by the state of Israel.”⁹

He cautioned that an end to American support was “an eventuality that could materialize any day.”¹⁰

But the rulers did not listen to the prophet.

In 1988, *during* the first intifada, Yeshayahu—the Orthodox Zionist Jew—prophesied yet again:

“The state, which was to have been the pride and glory of the Jewish people,” he said tearfully, “is rapidly becoming an embarrassment to it.”¹¹

Leibowitz loved Israel unconditionally and wanted it to flourish—and so do I.

His words are hard to hear. Especially now.

⁶ Y. Leibowitz, “The Territories” (1968), in *Idem*, 225.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁸ Y. Leibowitz, “Occupation and Terror” (1976), in *Idem*, 239-240.

⁹ Y. Leibowitz, “A Jewish State or an Unpartitioned *Eretz-Yisrael*” (1968-1980), in *Idem*, 235.

¹⁰ Y. Leibowitz, “Forty Years After” (1988), in *Idem*, 246.

¹¹ Y. Leibowitz, “A Jewish State or an Unpartitioned *Eretz-Yisrael*,” in *Idem*, 245.

But they *need* to be heard.

Yom Kippur is supposed to make us uncomfortable. And so is prophecy.

Every attempt to make peace has failed.

It is comforting to blame it exclusively on Palestinian intransigence, but Yeshayahu foresaw the problem long ago.

Peace will *never* be achieved, he said, as long as there's occupation—because “honest dialogue is not possible between rulers and ruled: it is possible *only* between equals.”¹²

He believed the Jewish state *must* be accountable to the moral expectations of the Torah.

And only if religion is independent of government influence can it “pass judgment on the ruling power”¹³ and impel *t'shuvah* for its misdeeds.

He made this case to Ben-Gurion himself, but the prime minister insisted that, in Israel, religion must be subjugated to state power.¹⁴

The Hebrew word for “subjugation” is “*kibbush*.”

Rashi uses it to say: do not *kibbush*—do not subjugate or force—your eyes closed and pretend not to see people suffering around you.¹⁵

It is telling, then, that the word Israelis use for the military rule of the West Bank is also...

Kibbush: “The Subjugation.”

We are now in the 60th year of this Subjugation, and the dynamics Leibowitz warned about have hardened into an inescapable paradox.

Haviv Rettig Gur—the most thoughtful commentator on Israel, in my view—puts it this way:

¹² Y. Leibowitz, “Occupation and Terror” (1976), in *Idem*, 239-240.

¹³ Leibowitz stated this on many occasions, but this quote is taken from an interview with Leibowitz included in the 1991 documentary “A Philosopher for All Seasons,” available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QICchSHhVjI>.

¹⁴ In the documentary, Leibowitz says that he advocated directly to Ben-Gurion in the 1950s for separation of religion and state in Israel, and that Ben-Gurion responded, “I will never consent to a separation of religion and state. I want the state to maintain power over religion.”

¹⁵ See Rashi to Deut. 22:3.

“Unilateral withdrawal is impossible because [it] just hands the place to Hamas.”¹⁶ ... “And they will *actually*...try to murder my kids.”¹⁷

“Annexation is really dangerous if you don’t want never-ending insurgency, mass ethnic cleansing, or a binational state.”

“If anyone tells you they’ve figured it out more than that,” he said, “they’re lying to you.”¹⁸

Leibowitz did not live to see the massacre of October 7.

But 50 years earlier, he predicted that “control over the territories and over the Arab people inhabiting them will end in a war to the bitter end...and in that war the entire world will support the Arab side.”¹⁹

Sadly, he was right.

Today, when American Jews are being violently attacked by antisemites who accuse us of complicity simply because we are Jews, we would, understandably, rather focus on things about Israel that make us proud.

After all, as Americans who cannot vote in Israel’s elections, we are *not* responsible for the policies of its government.

But as Jews, we don’t have the choice to avert our eyes from the plight of the human beings in the territories.

Al chet shechatanu l’fanekha—For the sin we have committed against You by pretending not to see it, forgive us, pardon us, lead us to atonement.

In its Declaration of Independence, Israel promised to be “based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel.”²⁰

So much about modern Israel reflects the compassion and strength of the Jewish spirit—and we should celebrate that.

¹⁶ Haviv Rettig Gur, “Ask Haviv Anything,” <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/l-kmLE1ZZ4Y>.

¹⁷ HRG, “Ask Haviv Anything,” episode 146, <https://youtu.be/6liCokBlxjE?si=VWkZ3phM5wxg1OKR>.

¹⁸ HRG, “Ask Haviv Anything,” <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/l-kmLE1ZZ4Y>.

¹⁹ Y. Leibowitz, “A Jewish State or an Unpartitioned *Eretz-Yisrael*,” in *Idem*, 235.

²⁰ Israel’s Declaration of Independence, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/israel.asp.

But no one has found a way to uphold Jewish sovereignty, democracy, *and* Arab human dignity at the same time. So, the *Kibbush* continues indefinitely.

And yet we act like it's not happening.

And not without consequence: Our silence is undermining our arguments in defense of Israel.

How can we credibly tout it as a democracy without even *mentioning* the dilemma of ruling over 1.5 million people who are “deprived of civil and political rights”?²¹

To be a Zionist is to love Israel unconditionally, *despite* its failings—but Zionism does *not* demand that we condone immorality by the state.

If we are to *truly* love Israel with *integrity*, we *have to* talk about the *Kibbush*.

I averted my eyes from it for too long.

I justified it to myself and others out of tribal loyalty.

Maybe you have, too.

But it's not right.

To ignore it is not only dishonest, declared the prophet.

It is “a desecration of the religious faith.”²²

חזון ישעיהו בן אריה²³ אשר חזה על מדינת ישראל.²⁴

These are the prophecies of Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the “conscience of Israel,” concerning the Jewish state.

We would do well, finally, to listen.

²¹ Y. Leibowitz, “Forty Years After,” in *Idem*, 243.

²² Y. Leibowitz, “A Jewish State or an Unpartitioned *Eretz-Yisrael*,” 236.

²³ “Leibowitz” is a Slavic name meaning “son of the lion,” which is rendered in Hebrew as “*ben aryeh*.”

²⁴ Adaptation of Isaiah 1:1.