

## Torah & Politics

JUDAISM, HUMAN VALUES, AND THE JEWISH STATE. By YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ. Edited by ELIEZER GOLDMAN. *Harvard University Press*. 291 pp. \$39.95.

Reviewed by ALLAN NADLER

YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ has long been one of the most eccentric figures in Israeli intellectual life. A respected biochemist, maverick Jewish theologian, and outspoken political crank, he has captured the attention and admiration of many Israelis and American Jews with his radical approach to contemporary Judaism and Middle East politics. Though himself a rigorously Orthodox Jew and a Zionist, Leibowitz preaches a paradoxical

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his magnificent memoir of Lincoln, but the greatest by far were those done by Lincoln. He made it possible for the Union to be preserved (and as Charnwood rightly said, "nobody else could have done it"); he also made it possible for us to see that it was worth preserving. He did this with his words, especially those spoken at Gettysburg.

The Gettysburg Address had been long in preparation; as Wills puts it, "all his prior literary, intellectual, and political labors had prepared him for [it]." This, I think, can be made evident by examining the substance, and not merely the structure, of what he said at Gettysburg and in two of the many speeches, or parts of speeches, that prefigure it. All of them focus on the problem of "the capability of a people to govern themselves."

LINCOLN first addressed this problem in a speech to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, delivered when he was not yet twenty-nine years old. Much of that early speech was given over to a discussion of the passions and the role they play in the politics of a self-governing people. During the early years of the Republic, Lincoln said, human passions were a "pillar of our temple of liberty"; specifically, the "deep-rooted principles of hate, and the powerful motive of revenge, instead of being turned against each other, were directed exclusively against the British nation." But that would change, he said, as the memory of the Revolution faded. From then on, the passions would be a problem—unless, somehow, they could be made to supplement and strengthen the people's rational attachment to the Constitution.

At the time of the second speech, Lincoln was taking the presidential oath of office. Much of that First Inaugural was an appeal to the Southern states not to secede from the Union. But Lincoln knew that they would, and that, in fact, seven of them already had. He concluded the speech with these moving words, words that can be appropriately uttered only on a few occasions in the life of a nation:

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature. [Emphasis added.]

In his earlier Lyceum speech Lincoln had said that memories, even memories stretching from the graves of patriots, grow cold as they grow old, unless, by a rhetoric so powerful, they can be made immortal. Such a rhetoric would require a special occasion, and that occasion was more than likely to present itself. When, in 1863, it did, he delivered his noblest speech, in 272 words, on a battlefield. "We are met on a great battlefield of that war," Lincoln said at Gettysburg, and the purpose of the meeting was to dedicate a cemetery filled with the graves of patriots: to dedicate a cemetery, then, and, in the process, to rededicate the nation by creating new "mystic chords of memory" binding the living and the yet unborn to the cause for which those dead had given "the last full measure of devotion."

Lincoln was more than a great rhetorician; he was, and is, this nation's greatest poet. Without giving him that title, Americans somehow know this, and the fact that they know it is not the result of accident. As Harry V. Jaffa writes, in what is still the best study of Lincoln's words,

Many things in [his] life, like the accident of his death, may have been fortuitous—or providential—but the myth that came to life with his passing was neither. It was the finely wrought consummation, of philosophic insight and a poetic gift, of a life devoted to the problem of "the capability of a people to govern themselves."

*Lincoln at Gettysburg* would have been a better book had it said something like this.

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cally transcendent, anti-nationalist Jewish theology while also freely engaging in attacks on the government and political culture of Israel.

As a theologian, Leibowitz denies that God actively intervenes in human affairs, and he thus rejects completely the traditional Jewish religious belief in divine providence and God's miraculous involvement in the world. He nonetheless insists that, though the Creator of man is essentially uninterested in his mundane existence, the Jews are still expected to serve Him in their daily lives by observing the dictates of the Torah.

As will be immediately evident to readers of this first English collection of Leibowitz's essays, the late Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, was on to something when he accused Leibowitz of atheism: "Though you may believe in Torah," Leibowitz quotes Scholem as saying, "you certainly do not believe in God." In fact Leibowitz is no atheist, but the God in Whom he believes in no way resembles the God of classical Jewish theology.

To Leibowitz, the sole constant of Judaism and its only essential, distinguishing feature is the *halakhah*, or Jewish religious law. But his philosophy of *halakhah* is purely positivistic: in Leibowitz's version of Judaism there is no place for anything beyond a slavish, unselfish, and otherworldly adherence to the Torah's 613 *mitzvot*, or commandments:

If the *mitzvot* are in the service of God, not of man, they may not be directed toward the satisfaction of human wants. Any attempt to ground them in human needs—cognitive, moral, social, and national—deprives them of their religious meaning.

Leibowitz's absolute exclusion of earthly or human concerns from the sphere of religion finds specific expression in his contempt for what he calls "the two great distortions of Jewish faith"—the Kabbalah and Reform Judaism. Leibowitz not only rejects Jewish mysticism's view of God as emanating "into" the world; he also repudiates the late-kabbalistic doctrine

of *tikkun olam*, an interpretation of *halakhic* observance as a vehicle for the reparation of flaws both in the Godhead and in the created universe. He is even less tolerant of Reform Judaism's emphasis on the ethical monotheism of the prophetic tradition at the expense of faithfulness to rabbinic law. He defines all ethically based systems of religion, such as Reform Judaism, as "atheism *par excellence*."

Finally, the requirement to exclude completely all selfish, earthly motives from religious practice pertains not only to the spiritual life of the individual Jew but in equal measure to the people of Israel. So, for example, Leibowitz has little patience with a view of Jewish law as an instrument for the advancement of Jewish nationhood. And he is still less patient with the Conservative movement's appreciation of *halakhah* as the constantly evolving expression of the Jewish people's encounter with history. For

the service of God as crystallized in the *halakhah* is an ahistoric reality. Historical vicissitudes and changes have no bearing on man's posture before God.

FEW scholars would deny that rabbinic law has been, since classical times, the one historic constant of Judaism. For almost two millennia, until the breakdown of traditional European Jewish society in the 19th century, faithfulness to *halakhah* was the *sine qua non* of traditional Jewish faith. But in no school of Judaism did the rule of law rule out the rest of life, or exclude entirely all other manifestations of spirituality, as it does in Leibowitz's system. Indeed, Leibowitz's strict legal positivism is without precedent in Jewish thought, and impossible to reconcile with almost any reasonable interpretation of the canonical sources of Judaism.

To begin with, Leibowitz's system ignores what most authorities consider the defining characteristic of Jewish law, namely, its responsiveness to human needs and to social and historic change. By its nature, *halakhah* is an evolving system of jurisprudence which is constantly challenged to address new

historical, social, scientific, and technological realities.

Then, too, Leibowitz's radical removal of God from history cannot be squared with the actual Scriptural record. In maintaining that Judaism is a completely otherworldly faith, Leibowitz is forced to dismiss the many biblical and rabbinic texts which connect God intimately with the affairs of this world, and which emphasize the Creator's intimate concern for the welfare of His people. Whereas, for example, Leibowitz takes Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac as the great paradigm of the selfless worship of God, in fact one of the overriding principles of normative Jewish law is the preservation and enhancement of life. This is reflected in a number of juridical principles, not least of which is the *halakhic* rule that "*pikuakh nefesh*," or the saving of human life, overrides all but three of the Torah's 613 commandments. In short, Leibowitz's Judaism is a sad caricature of the religion it purports to define.

BY FAR the most troubling aspect of this collection of essays, however, is the overtly political use to which Leibowitz puts his ostensibly anti-political theology. Because he insists that Judaism must never be concerned with earthly life, Leibowitz categorically rejects the attribution of intrinsic sanctity to the Jewish people's return to Zion, and directs his sharpest criticism against religious Zionism's sacerdotal interpretation of modern Jewish history, its conviction that the creation of modern Israel is of messianic significance, and the belief of some of its spokesmen in the holiness of "every inch" of the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria. In the same spirit Leibowitz rails against the corruptions of Israel's domestic religious establishment and insists on the total separation of "synagogue and state."

But Leibowitz is just as guilty of using religion to advance his own political agenda as are those whom he criticizes. The very sequence of the essays in this volume tells the tale: part one is entitled "Faith"; part two, "Religion, People, State";

and part three, "The Political Scene." Leibowitz's evaluation of the last derives directly from his particular interpretation of the first. Here, then, is a book which combines a theology of total retreat from the affairs of the world with a specific political posture emerging out of that very theology.

Leibowitz has long been celebrated as the most dovish Orthodox Jew in Israel. Indeed, if his theology has found virtually no following even among the religious, his political proclamations are avidly sought out and quoted not only by the Israeli peace movement but by foreign journalists and others. That Leibowitz's strident attacks on Israel's political culture are at least as peculiar for an Orthodox Jew as is his theology only seems to add to the charm. Isaiah Berlin, for example, has praised Leibowitz as "one of Israel's greatest moral assets" and "the conscience of Israel: the clearest and most honorable champion of those principles which justify the creation of a sovereign state."

In this book the "conscience" of Israel repeats his well-known warnings against incipient fascism in the Jewish state and his opinion of religious Zionism as a form of idolatry; the editor, clearly an admirer of Leibowitz, has judiciously chosen *not* to include his outrageous characterization of Israel's leaders during the war in Lebanon as Judeo-Nazis or other similarly extreme statements. There is not even so much as an allusion in this collection of essays to the tragedies of recent Jewish history or to the murderous record of the Arab nations toward the Jews and Israel, let alone to the fact that Israel is and remains a democratic state.

As FOR the Western liberals and intellectuals who are so charmed by the radical politics and anti-ecclesiastical proclamations of this sage in a black yarmulke, they have, in many respects, the wrong man. Many who invoke Leibowitz to advance their own agenda often speak in the name of "*tikkun olam*," but, as we have seen, there is hardly anything in Jewish thought more repugnant to Leibowitz

than the idea that it is the business of religion to "correct" the world. Leibowitz's political followers also resolutely ignore his deep religious intolerance, his rejection of the pluralism of Jewish thought, and his contempt for the pluralism of Jewish life. In Leibowitz's world of Orthodox exclusivism, most of his own greatest admirers are allowed no legitimate place. That this does not deter them from parading him as their authority, or him from courting the publicity they have given his views, is only another confirmation of the old saw about politics making strange bedfellows.

### The System

THE LIFE OF THE PARTIES: A HISTORY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES. By A. JAMES REICHLEY. Free Press. 487 pp. \$27.95.

Reviewed by TERRY EASTLAND

WHEN Ross Perot announced in July that he was ending (temporarily, as it turned out) his independent bid for the presidency, he claimed he was doing so because he could not win the election outright and his candidacy would throw the decision into the House of Representatives. Since the House was made up of Democrats and Republicans, he said, "our group would be unlikely to win."

The press at the time doubted that this was the real reason Perot was withdrawing. But there can be no doubt that the Electoral College, because it lets a House whose members are almost all Democrats and Republicans decide presidential elections when no candidate has an electoral majority, empowers the two major parties at the expense of other-party or independent challengers. This is ironic, since those who designed the Electoral College—the framers of the Constitution—did not intend or foresee the development of political parties. Were the Electoral Col-

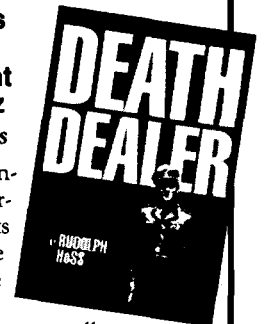
TERRY EASTLAND, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., is the author of *Energy in the Executive: The Case for the Strong Presidency*.

lege to be replaced by another method, such as one embracing proportional representation or one allowing for a second round in the general election, our two-party system would be a thing of the past.

But while the Electoral College is unlikely to be scrapped—it has survived periodic attacks—recent decades have, in fact, witnessed a serious weakening of the two major parties, a development which A. James Reichley of the Brookings Institution views with alarm. As he documents in *The Life of the Parties*, voters increasingly reject party labels and call themselves "independents"; they habitually split tickets; and they seem to like divided government, in which one party controls the presidency and the other the Congress, more than they do unified government, in which the same party controls both branches. Despite organizational strengths at the national level, parties seem weaker than ever at the

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