

**Zeitschrift:** Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums  
**Herausgeber:** Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog  
**Band:** 74 (2018)  
  
**Artikel:** Yeshayahu Leibowitz : the Holocaust as a sign of warning against nationalism  
**Autor:** Ben-Pazi, Hanoch  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-960598>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 05.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Yeshayahu Leibowitz: The Holocaust as a Sign of Warning against Nationalism

By Hanoch Ben-Pazi\*

## *Abstract*

*In 1993, the Israel Prize committee announced its decision to award the prize to Yeshayahu Leibowitz, despite, among other things, public criticism regarding his extremist pronouncements. His words comparing the IDF to Nazis were perhaps the most significant act to arouse such antagonism. Some portray this comparison as an element of Leibowitz's provocative side, expressing disapproval of it but at the same time praising him with words of respect and admiration for his personality and other aspects of his thinking. In this article, however, I consider this provocative, controversial statement in a different light – as central to Leibowitz's life and thinking. Indeed, his refusal to retract it was reflective of a deep inner truth that transcends its initial appearance and indicates that, far from being a provocateur in Israeli public life in this context, Leibowitz was actually articulating a sensible political-ethical doctrine shaped in the shadow of the Holocaust.*

*This article explores the direct linkage between Leibowitz's consciousness of the Holocaust and his ideological view of nationalism in general and Jewish nationalism in particular. My assertion of this linkage appears to run counter to Leibowitz's known position: that the Holocaust was meaningless from the perspective of the Jewish world. However, as I will show, it is actually this perspective that helps us better understand Leibowitz's approach to nationalism, and perhaps also his radical view of the phenomenon. The reading proposed here is an attempt to explore the deeper political-philosophical position that constituted the foundation for Leibowitz's public pronouncements.*

*Michael Shasher:* Aren't you exaggerating when you use the term "Judeo-Nazi?" Do you truly believe that we are liable to decline to the level of the Nazis?

*Yeshayahu Leibowitz:* When the nation (or in Nazi terminology, the race) and the power of its state become supreme values, human action is no longer inhibited. This mentality is also widespread among us. In the territories under our occupation in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Lebanon, we are already behaving as the Nazis behaved in the territories under their occupation in Czechoslovakia and the west. We did not set up extermination camps as they

---

\* Prof. Hanoch Ben Pazi, Dept. of Jewish Philosophy, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. – I would like to extend my thanks to Avriel Bar-Levav, Shneur Einam, and Roni Katznelson.



did in the East. However, it is appalling that we are compelled to point out this fact in order to distinguish us from the Nazis!<sup>1</sup>

Such extreme pronouncements aroused substantial Israeli public anger against Professor. Yeshayahu Leibowitz.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, his words comparing the IDF – the Israeli army, which most Jewish Israelis regarded as “our army” – to the Nazis was perhaps the most significant act sparking public criticism of the intention to award him an Israel Prize for lifetime achievement. The same pronouncement, it is interesting to note, is also what compelled him to decline the award.<sup>3</sup> Some portray this comparison as an element of Leibowitz’s provocative side, expressing disapproval of it but at the same time praising him with words of respect and admiration for other aspects of his personality and thinking. In this article, however, I consider this provocative, controversial statement from a different perspective – as central

- 
- 1 YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything: Talks with Michael Shashar* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1987), p. 78 [in Hebrew]. Due to the biographical dimension of the following discussion and my attempt here to reveal important aspects of Leibowitz’s philosophy, this article incorporates numerous excerpts from Leibowitz’s conversations with Michael Shashar.
  - 2 It is difficult to estimate the number of articles in the Israeli press that were devoted to varying levels of criticism against Leibowitz. This phenomenon reached a high point with the publication of an entire book dedicated especially to this purpose. See H. BEN YERUHAM and H. A. KOLITZ, *Negation for Negation’s Sake: Versus Yeshayahu Leibowitz - Essays and Comments* (Jerusalem: El Hashore-shim, 1983) [in Hebrew]; MORDECHAI SHALEV, “The Gospel according to Leibowitz,” in: *Siman Kria* 19 (1986), pp. 216-236 [in Hebrew]; MORDECHAI SHALEV, “Yeshayahu Leibowitz: the Prophetic Dimension,” in: *Ha’uma* 118 (Winter 1994-95), pp. 205-216 [in Hebrew]; EPHRAIM EVEN, “Yeshayahu Leibowitz: A World of Desolation and Contradictions,” in: *Ha’uma* 26 (1989), pp. 421-428 [in Hebrew]; the response of EPHRAIM SHOHAM, “The Hatred Ruins the Line,” in: *Ha’uma* 27 (1989), pp. 218-219 [in Hebrew]; MOSHE GILBOA, *Y. Leibowitz: Ideas and Contradictions* (Sede Boker: The Ben Gurion Research Center, 1994) [in Hebrew].
  - 3 Leibowitz’s decision to decline the award was announced on January 25, 1993. The Knesset Committee discussed awarding the prize to Leibowitz during the 55th session of the 13<sup>th</sup> Knesset, on Monday January 25, 1993, agenda items: 861, 870, 875, 876, 883, 885, and 886. A portion of this mini-drama was broadcast on Israeli television, from the Israeli state television studios, with the announcement of the official statement regarding the intention to award Prof. Leibowitz an Israel Prize for lifetime achievement. This broadcast was incorporated into the film *He Will Overcome* [*yitgaber*] directed by Eyal Sivan (France, 1993, Pt. 2, 5:00-10:30). See also ASA KASHER, “Yeshayahu Leibowitz” in: *Theory and Criticism* 12-13 (1998), pp. 259-268 [in Hebrew].

to Leibowitz's life and thinking. Leibowitz's refusal to retract this comparison is reflective of a deep inner truth that transcends its initial appearance and indicates that, far from being a provocateur in Israeli public life, Leibowitz was actually articulating a sensible political-ethical doctrine shaped in the shadow of the Holocaust.

This article explores the direct linkage between Leibowitz's consciousness of the Holocaust and his ideological view of nationalism in general and Jewish nationalism in particular. My assertion of this linkage appears to run counter to Leibowitz's known position: that the Holocaust was meaningless from the perspective of the Jewish world. However, as I will show, it is this position that helps us better understand his approach to nationalism, and perhaps also his radical view of it.<sup>4</sup> The reading proposed here is an attempt to examine the deeper political-philosophical position that constituted the foundation for Leibowitz's public pronouncements.

### *Germany in the Biography of Yeshayahu Leibowitz*

Leibowitz's conversations with Michael Shasher regarding his time in Germany reveal that they constituted his life's most important chapter both on a personal level and from the perspective of his intellectual and academic development. Leibowitz, who first arrived in Germany as a young student, describes his initial encounter with the German state and culture as a positive experience both intellectually and culturally. As far as he was concerned, Germany was the place of refuge to which he fled as a Russian Jewish refugee. Leibowitz spent approximately ten years in Berlin, and he recounts his days as a student there as pleasant and with an air of respect: "I had the opportunity and the privilege to be part of the world of the great figures of science...I remember that we would sometimes be seated in a colloquium at the university, and seated in the front row were five or six Nobel Prize recipients."<sup>5</sup> With a sense of wonder, Leibowitz describes his interest in the world of theatre and literature in Germany and his involvement in creative work in Germany and Europe as a whole.

This distinctly Leibowitzian sobriety with which many associated him during his life in Israel can already be observed in the ostensibly rosy picture

---

4 See NAFTALI ROTHENBERG, "People, Nation, or Nationality: Yeshayahu Leibowitz's Criticism of Secular Nationalism and Its Impact on Post-Nationalism," in: NAFTALI ROTHENBERG and ELIEZER SCHWEID, *Studies on Jewish People, Identity and Nationality* (Jerusalem and Bnei-Brak: Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2008), pp. 70-106 [in Hebrew].

5 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 174.

he paints of the atmosphere that pervaded all layers of German society: an atmosphere replete with anti-Semitism, on the one hand, and proper institutions that placed no limitations on Jews and laws that continued to protect Jews, on the other. The political and ethical riddle here lies in the fact that Jewish life in Germany was not threatened by the establishment, as the law provided the Jews with complete protection: “From the perspective of the philosophy of history, all the theories that regard Nazism as an extension of German history are utter lies.”<sup>6</sup> In response to Shasher’s question – whether when he left Germany in 1934 he had been able to foresee what the future would bring – Leibowitz insists that the Holocaust could not have been foreseen, let alone dreamed of:

It did not have the appearance of pogroms – not at all. Don’t forget, the *Jüdische Rundschau* [the newspaper of the Zionist Federation in Germany] was published until 1938, and Robert Weltsch was able to publish his well-known article [“Wear it With Pride, the Yellow Badge”], which is one of the most important documents of Jewish history. And the Nazi censors allowed it to be published! [...] No one imagined what would happen, although it was a heavy blow to be removed from the world which the Jews regarded as their own.<sup>7</sup>

Leibowitz observed the same complex state of Jewish life in Germany when he examined with the perspective of time. He was unwilling to even consider the possibility that this was an illusion, as proposed, for example, by Gershom Scholem.<sup>8</sup> From where he stood, the complexity stemmed from the fact that Jews were significantly involved in German culture and the German People. “The atmosphere was replete with anti-Semitism, but this did not prevent me, as a Russian Jewish refugee, from studying and advancing. Had it not been for Hitler, I could have been appointed as a professor in Weimar Germany.”<sup>9</sup>

---

6 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 76.

7 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 75.

8 See GERSHOM SCHOLEM, “Jews and Germans,” in: *Explication and Implications [Devarim Bego]: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976), pp. 96-114 [in Hebrew]; GERSHOM SCHOLEM, “Against the Myth of Jewish-German Dialogue,” in: GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Explication and Implications*, pp. 114-117 [in Hebrew].

9 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 72. - Careful attention to Leibowitz’s words in his conversations with Shasher, and in a number of other accounts, offers additional insight into the internal tensions among the Jews of Germany. As an “outsider” and an “Ostjude,” Leibowitz was aware of these tensions.

## *The Holocaust is Meaningless for the Jewish World*

A biographical account of Leibowitz's early life appears to be sufficient to teach us something about the significance of the Holocaust in Leibowitz's life and thinking both on a personal level and a national level. Yet, in his recurring public pronouncements, he repeatedly asserted that Jews, as Jews, had nothing to gain from engaging in the Holocaust. In this spirit, for example, he responded to Claude Lanzman's documentary film *Shoah*. "*Shoah* is an immense document from a human perspective," he said, "but it says nothing to us Jews. The film presents what was done to us. We did nothing."<sup>10</sup> However, a more attentive consideration of Leibowitz's words reveals the context in which Leibowitz himself does identify the importance of the Holocaust; the Holocaust, he maintains, is the concern of those who perpetrated it and those who may perpetrate it in the future.

Elsewhere, I have reflected on the importance of the Holocaust, and the crisis of faith it sparked, in shaping Leibowitz's theological doctrine.<sup>11</sup> In this article, I take this line of thinking one step further by asserting that the Holocaust holds major significance for Leibowitz's ethical, or, to be more precise, political-ethical doctrine. His theological argument views the Holocaust as a rupture in the traditional conception of faith in a protective, good God, which necessitates Leibowitz's new theology – Theocentrism: a religious orientation that calls for the performance of commandments with absolutely no hopes or expectations of anything in return on God's part.<sup>12</sup> However, this radical theological position also holds additional significance, as it obligates people to be responsible in a world for which they cannot be responsible. As the mode of human existence can be neither based on nor ensured by faith in God or any other external force, human beings must determine their mode of existence on their own. Leibowitz's religious conclusion, therefore, has ethical implications, as it charges humankind

---

10 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 77.

11 See HANOCH BEN-PAZI, "Yeshayahu Leibowitz's Religious Doctrine as 'Radical Theology' following the Holocaust," in: *Iyun* 57 (2007), pp. 193-202 [in Hebrew].

12 On the nature of the religious position of no expectations, see AVIEZER RAVITZKY, "Religious and Values in the Philosophy of Yeshayahu Leibowitz," in: AVI SAGI (ed.), *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: His World and Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), pp. 16-25 [in Hebrew]; AVI SAGI, "Religion without Metaphysics?! Between Leibowitz and Wittgenstein," in: *Makhshevet* (ThinkIL) 67 (1995), pp. 5-17 [in Hebrew]; DANIEL STATMAN, "Performing Commandments in a World that has been Emptied of Religious Meaning," in: *Da'at* 41 (1997-98), pp. 31-45 [in Hebrew].

with full responsibility for “correcting the world” (*tiqqun ‘olam*). The absence of a divine guarantee means that full ethical responsibility rests on human beings and the societies they establish. In the absence of hope and the divine control of history, humans must adhere to a cautious and responsible approach in their political and human conduct. The focus of the true question regarding the Holocaust, therefore, is not the victim – the Jews, but rather the political-ethical conduct of the Nazis.

Leibowitz’s theological determination, then, obligates a rethinking of political existence without divine guarantee. The Holocaust has a major presence in each of Leibowitz’s human-ethical discussions and his anti-nationalist political positions. From his perspective, Nazism revealed itself as the most severe threat to human existence in the modern era. As a result, it is incumbent upon us, as graduates of the twentieth century, to carefully examine the techniques and forces that facilitated the Nazis’ rise to power and to view them as a sign of warning for human existence, Jewish existence included. That is to say, the question of how Germany became Nazi Germany, or how the horrific Nazi regime was born of civilized Germany, is the most important question we need to be asking ourselves. That being the case, we must relate to each and every manifestation of Nazism as an ethical sign of warning. Leibowitz’s religious conclusion facilitates ethical thinking in human terms and, at the same time, allows us to assert that the ethical and political position is derived from human thinking and culture.<sup>13</sup> Leibowitz’s

---

13 On the relationship between faith and ethics, and between the religious context and Kantian philosophical thinking, see NAOMI KASHER, “Leibowitz’s View of Judaism Compared to Kant’s View of Ethics,” in: *Iyun* 26 (1975-76), pp. 242-255 [in Hebrew]; JACOB-JOSHUA ROSS, “Anthropocentrism and Theocentrism,” in: ASA KASHER and YAAKOV LEVINGER (eds.), *The Yeshayahu Leibowitz Book* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1977), pp. 56-65 [in Hebrew]; GILAD BARELI, “Faith and Lifestyle: Between Leibowitz and Wittgenstein,” in: *Iyun* 42 (1993-94), pp. 493-507 [in Hebrew]; ELIEZER GOLDMAN, “Religion and Ethics in the Philosophy of Yeshayahu Leibowitz,” in: DANIEL STATMAN and AVI SAGI (eds.), *Between Religion and Ethics* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1996), pp. 107-113 [in Hebrew]; NAOMI KASHER, “Religion, Ethics, and Feelings,” in: *Iyun* 42 (1993-94), pp. 509-516 [in Hebrew]; DANIEL STATMAN, “Leibowitz’s Ethical Doctrine,” in: SAGI (ed.), *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: His World and Philosophy* (note 12), pp. 326-343; YOSSI BEN MOSHE ZIV, “Ignorance as a Condition for Faith: the Paradox of Leibowitz’s Theology,” in: *Devarim* 1 (1999), pp. 69-75 [in Hebrew]; HANNAH KASHER, “Four Measures of Halakha: Between the Rambam and Yeshayahu Leibowitz,” in: AMICHAÏ BERHOLTZ (ed.), *Journey to the Halakha: Interdisciplinary Studies in the World of Jewish Law* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2003), pp. 242-256 [in Hebrew].

approach involves the examination of the Holocaust as part of historical human existence, not as external to it. The Holocaust changes the ethical perspective in that it obligates us to take into account the possibility of total decline within our traditional doctrine itself.<sup>14</sup>

Our discussion will address the following points:

- (1) The obligation to recognize Nazism as a human possibility, taking into account the role of Germany and the rise of Nazism in the intellectual biography of Yeshayahu Leibowitz himself.
- (2) The effort required to recognize Nazism as an ethical option. In other words, we need to ask ourselves how a person who judges himself or herself to be a positive person can, for good and ethical reasons, become a perpetrator of evil; and in a more extreme manner, how, at times, can a person be an ethical “monster” for reasons which he or she regards as ethical in nature?
- (3) The question of recognizing or not recognizing nationalism as a value – that is to say, the ethical view of fascism, and the transformation of nationalist ideology into fascist ideology.

With regard to each of the above points, our discussion enables us to understand Leibowitz’s view of the Holocaust as a warning sign of Nazism, as manifested in Nazi Germany and in its broader nationalist sense – or, to use words that have proven to be less pleasing to Israeli ears, Leibowitz’s concern that *his* state – the state of Israel and Israeli society – had started down the road to extreme nationalism.

### 1. *During the Holocaust, Nazism Revealed Itself as One Human Possibility*

The Holocaust is one of the possibilities available to humankind. Auschwitz was not “another planet”; rather, it revealed the possibilities of human evil – what people may do to other people, to the point of violent atrocities and extermination.<sup>15</sup> The immense emotional difficulty aroused

---

14 For an example of a discussion on the road of ethical decline, see ADI OPHIR’s book *Lashon Lara: Chapters in the Ontology of Morals* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Am Oved and Van Leer Institute, 2000), pp. 267-279, 392-419 [in Hebrew]. In this context, for example, he describes different routes of decline: “Evil unrolls on three slopes, each of which leads to an abyss of its own, in three heterogeneous spaces” (Ibid., p. 392).

15 On the courtroom testimony of Yihiel Dinur during the Eichmann trial, see YIHIEL DINUR, “The Testimony of Yihiel Dinur,” in: *Attorney General v. Adolf Eichmann: Testimonies II* (Jerusalem: State of Israel Information Center, 1963), pp. 1122-1123 [in Hebrew]. On the extent of Dinur’s - or Ka-Tzetnik’s - impact on and representation of Israeli society, see DAN MIRON, “Between Ashes and



by Auschwitz is the fact that it is a human planet that is both attainable and sustainable.<sup>16</sup>

The Holocaust, then, confronts us with a historical riddle: How did people, and in this case the German nation, reach the ethical low point that facilitated Auschwitz? Auschwitz emerged as one choice among the different options available to humans in choosing their paths, and the fact that there is an ethical path leading to this ethical nadir is a troubling prospect to say the least. In his own unique way, based on his younger years in Germany, Leibowitz describes his astonishment at the Nazis' rise to power. However, from his perspective, the significance of these historical events leads us to a search for the human political behaviour that led to the Nazi regime – or, in his words, “to bestiality.” It is important to point out that Ka-Tzetnik himself, who would later coin the expression quoted at the beginning of this section – Auschwitz as “another planet” – subsequently retracted it and wrote explicitly about the ethical cost of the notion that Auschwitz was a “satanical possibility that was not from this world.”<sup>17</sup> Nazism was not a change in the world order, as “the world pursues its regular course”:<sup>18</sup>

Nazism is an entirely new thing on the global scale that cannot be explained based on the development of the cultural, social, and political reality of

---

Books,” in: *Alpayim* 10 (1994), pp. 196-224 [in Hebrew], particularly regarding the term “another planet,” on pp. 201-203; GALIA GLASNER-HELED, “Whom does Ka-Tzetnik represent?,” in: *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 20 (2016), pp. 167-200 [in Hebrew]; RINA DUDAI, “Kitsch and Trauma - A Case Study: The House of Dolls by Ka-Tzetnik,” in: *Mikan* 6 (2015), pp. 125-142 (especially pp. 125-128) [in Hebrew].

16 See MIRIAM SCHECHTER, “‘Not a Different Planet’: Teaching the Holocaust through Literature,” in: *Sefer Bar-Ilan* III (1997-98), pp. 128-134 [in Hebrew]; OPHIR, *Lashon Lara* (note 14), pp. 368-386, chapter titled “The Uniqueness Question” (*Emunat ha-Yikbud*), in which he discusses the degree of evil innovation reflected at Auschwitz. See also ADI OPHIR, “Renewing the Name [*Khidush Hashem*],” in: *Working for the Present: Essays on Israeli Culture at this Time* (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), pp. 12-21 [in Hebrew]; Rabbi YISRAEL MEIR LAU, *Don't Raise Your Hand against the Boy* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2005), pp. 219-231 [in Hebrew]; EPHRAIM MEIR, *Towards an Active Memory: Society, Man and God after Auschwitz*, translated and edited by Miriam Meir (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2006), pp. 83-95 [in Hebrew].

17 See YIHIEL DINUR (Ka-Tzetnik), *The Code: EDMA* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987), p. 113 and after. On the change in Dinur's view of GLASNER-HELED's article “Whom does Ka-Tzetnik represent?,” (note 15), see pp. 194-196.

18 DOV RAPEL, “The World Pursues Its Natural Course,” *Limudim* 1 (2001/2), pp. 103-111 [in Hebrew].

nineteenth-century and the early-twentieth-century Europe. Based on my own impression, from my younger days, I do not regard Hitlerism as something that sprouted organically from history and German culture. It is truly a completely foreign entity, which is also unintelligible from the perspective of general history. Its primary embodiment was Auschwitz. But even if we disregard this fact, the mere structure of the Third Reich is also something that is impossible to comprehend. It is certainly incorrect to say that the phenomenon sprouted organically from the history of the German People. This also explains why the entire world stood helplessly by against the phenomenon. Nazism was simply not understood; the world did not know how to counter it.<sup>19</sup>

This description is not naïve: it reflects the surprise and shock at the Nazi human society but is unwilling to accept it as exceptional or as impossible for the human mind to fathom. Its mere existence becomes something that needs to be taken into account vis-à-vis humanity. That is to say, the question is redirected from the theological realm to the realm of culture and politics: how did Nazism take form in human existence?

## *2. Upholding the Law: The Ethical Option that Leads to Nazism*

The second argument we need to address from a Leibowitzian perspective has to do with the human possibility of an ethical life that leads to Nazism. This notion led Leibowitz to one of his more controversial pronouncements, which portrayed Eichmann as an ethical personality – that is to say, a person acting in an ethical manner in accordance with his ethical judgment and, in Eichmann's case, in accordance with political life and the upholding of the law. From Leibowitz's perspective, Eichmann was fulfilling Kantian ethicality, which calls for upholding the established law of the state.<sup>20</sup>

The very idea of this argument is fascinating because it appears to accept Eichmann's self-perception as simply one cog in the system.<sup>21</sup> "He should

---

19 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 81.

20 For a number of reasons, I refrain here from entering into a discussion of Kant himself. Still, I would like to direct readers to the following relevant studies of NAOMI KASHER, "Leibowitz's View of Judaism (note 13); NAOMI KASHER, "Religion, Ethics, and Feelings" (note 13); and STATMAN, "Leibowitz's Ethical Doctrine" (note 13).

21 It is worthwhile to compare this view of Leibowitz with that of HANNAH ARENDT, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963). Also see IDITH ZERTAL's analysis in "From the People's Hall to the Wall of the Temple," in: *The Nation and Death: History, Memory, and Politics* (Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2002), pp. 135-178 [in Hebrew]; JOSE BRUNNER, "A Critique of Pure Banality: On Arendt's Dehumanization of Eichmann," in:



have been provided with the best attorney we have,” Leibowitz maintains, “to explain that this man is not guilty and not responsible for anything”.<sup>22</sup> This assertion has two elements. The first is a broadening of the understanding of guilt to encompass long-standing anti-Semitism and the entire world’s attitude toward the Jewish People. Considered in this context, Eichmann should not be viewed as the sacrifice of atonement for the transgressions of the world as a whole (including the German People).<sup>23</sup>

The assertion’s second and more important element is Leibowitz’s insistence that Eichmann was not responsible because he was only ‘following orders,’ and that despite his senior position within the German hierarchy, Eichmann truly was a “small cog” in the greater system. This argument portrays a deeper difficulty – the fact that Eichmann operated in accordance with the ethical rules that guided him as a trustee of the spirit of the law and of compliance with the law; that is to say, that he was acting with Kantian ethicality by conducting himself in accordance with the laws of the state. Leibowitz goes on to show that Eichmann’s decision to “uphold the law” must serve us as a warning sign today, as people may act in ways they regard as ethical but still may be proceeding down a path toward Nazi bestiality. This leads us to the most important question in this context: what is the route of decline? That is to say, how can we discern that, despite good and ethical intentions, we have started down a path toward bestiality?

This, of course, is an important assertion of the notion of action in accordance with the law as being tantamount to ethical action: that is to say, people agreeing to obey the law of the political unit in which they live.<sup>24</sup> However, herein also lies the great danger, as acting in accordance

---

IDITH ZERTAL and MOSHE ZUCKERMAN (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Half a Century of Controversy* (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2004), pp. 81-106 [in Hebrew].

22 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 79.

23 In this context, Leibowitz raises the question of Christian hatred of the Jewish People and presents the extermination of the Jews as the outcome of two thousand years of Christian history. See LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 79.

24 On the political implication in this context of the refusal to obey the law and rebellion against the law, see CHEMI BEN-NOON, *Civil Disobedience* (Tel Aviv: Yaar, 1992) [in Hebrew]; YOSSE ZIV, “Leibowitz and Civilian Refusal,” in: SAGI (ed.), *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: His World and Philosophy* (note 12), pp. 228-238; YARON KAPLAN, *Civilian Refusal in a Liberal Democracy*, master’s thesis, Ramat Gan, 2001. Also relevant in this context is IDITH ZERTAL’s article “Obedience and Disobedience in ‘Dark Times,’” in: ZERTAL and ZUCKERMAN, *Hannah Arendt: Half a Century of Controversy* (note 21), pp. 143-169.

with the law can sometimes evolve into perpetrating injustice. In other words, that which serves a private individual as an explanation for or justification of his or her actions, based on his or her ethical obligation to the collective through allegiance to the law, may also end up demarcating the route by which a person becomes party to the actions of the wicked.

### 3. *Fascist Ethicality: the Ethical Path to Nazism*

Leibowitz, who was unwilling to accept the assertion that the German nation possessed a unique attribute that facilitated the rise of Nazism, portrays the route leading to Nazism as a process with relevance to all human societies. On this matter (and perhaps also others), Leibowitz's thinking is based on the work of one of the great German-Austrian poets of the nineteenth century – Franz Grillparzer, who was also a sharp cultural critic<sup>25</sup> and whose poetic writing (particularly in his plays) was critical of the nationalism he encountered in turn-of-the-century Europe. "Europe's path," he wrote, "runs from humanism via nationalism to bestiality," which Leibowitz frequently quoted in a general manner, and not just in reference to European culture. "I say this about every human society that sanctifies nationalism and the veneration of the state," he emphasized. "The Nazis, who perpetrated what they perpetrated, were human beings. The Jews are also human beings."<sup>26</sup>

One important clarification that needs to be made before we continue exploring the issue of ethicality in Leibowitzian thought is the fact that

---

25 On Grillparzer as a playwright and on the cultural significance of his work, see B. THOMPSON, "An Ironic Tragedy: An Examination of Grillparzer's 'Die Jüdin von Toledo'," in: *German Life and Letters* 25 (1972), pp. 210-219; KARL EIBL, "Ordnung und Ideologie im Spätwerk Grillparzers: Am Beispiel des 'Argumentum Emblematicum' und der 'Jüdin von Toledo'," in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 53(1) (1979), pp. 74-95; ADOLF GAISBAUER, "Könige, Juden, Menschen [...]: Aus der Deutungsgeschichte von Grillparzers 'Jüdin von Toledo'," in: *Das Jüdische Echo* 40 (1991), pp. 183-199; BARBARA LINDSEY, "The Wasteland Revisited: Death of the Garden in Grillparzer's 'Die Jüdin von Toledo'," in: *Modern Austrian Literature* 28 (1995), pp. 131-145; FRANK KIND, "'Der Bornierte Jüdische Winkelgott' oder die Falsche Alternative: Judentum und Christentum aus der Sicht Franz Grillparzers," in: *Konfrontation und Koexistenz*, (1996), pp. 82-96; EDA SAGARRA, "Grillparzer, the Catholics and the Jews: A Reading of 'Die Jüdin von Toledo' (1851)," in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 46 (2001), pp. 67-79; DIETER BORCHMEYER, "Franz Grillparzers Bild des Judentums in seiner 'Jüdin von Toledo'," in: *Das Judentum im Spiegel seiner kulturellen Umwelten* (2002), pp. 155-179.

26 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 79.

Leibowitz did not oppose all nationalism – only nationalism that seeks to establish a distinct scale of values.<sup>27</sup> Nationalism is most appropriately addressed in the political context, due to its role in defining social reality and political entities. He distinguishes between these two kinds of impact by means of two different expressions of nationalism, both of which are common fixtures in many languages: nationality, in the sense of political reality, and nationalism, in the sense of national ideology. One expression of nationalism can be described from an existential perspective: the human division to which a person is close, consciously or subconsciously, and from which he draws a marked part of his existential substance in a practical and intellectual sense.<sup>28</sup> This existential description, however, is not an ethical one and is not decisive from an ethical perspective. The ethical problem, as far as Leibowitz is concerned, emerges when nationalism becomes an ethical program for human life. It is this type of nationalism that he describes in terms that approaches fascism. The problem begins when a person establishes a national scale of values that runs parallel to the religious and the humanistic scales of values. The two latter systems are scales that are characteristic of human consciousness in their reflection of human culture (or, as Leibowitz refers to it, “human consciousness that has emerged from all savagery”).<sup>29</sup> The common attribute of these two value scales – the humanistic and the religious – is that neither features the state as a value but rather frames it as a tool or a means:

These two value scales are the opposite of one another, and there is no possibility of their compromise or synthesis. However, there is one point at which they converge: with relation to the institution known as the state. From the

---

27 On nationalism in Levinasian thought, see, among other sources, AMI TAMIR, “Yeshayahu Leibowitz’s Conception of Nationalism,” in: *International Problems* 32 (1-2) (1993), pp. 40-54 [in Hebrew]. For a close reading of the different expressions of nationalism in Leibowitz’s thinking, see ROTHENBERG, “People, Nation, or Nationality” (note 4), pp. 82-89.

28 See ROTHENBERG, “People, Nation, or Nationality” (note 4), pp. 79-81.

29 “I know of two major value scales, which are the opposite of one another, that occupy a place in human consciousness that has emerged from all savagery [...]: (1) The scale of religious values [...]. From the perspective of the scale of man’s standing before God, [and] (2) the humanistic or atheistic scale of values...from the perspective of the criterion of man’s standing before man, or according to the collective that is known as humanity. Different programs of life are derived from these value scales, each with obligations and prohibitions that do not exist in the other” (YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ, “Via Nationalism to Bestiality,” in: *Haaretz*, October 5, 1984) [in Hebrew].

perspective of both the religious value scale and the humanistic value scale, the state possesses no ethical significance. From the perspective of both, it is only a tool, an implement, or a means that is necessary for certain things which, they themselves, are the things that hold value.<sup>30</sup>

The national path (in the sense of “nationalism”) is what establishes a different scale of values, a different value system, in which the state features not only as a framework or a means but as a value in and of itself. According to Leibowitz, this value scale reflects foolishness and evil.<sup>31</sup> The value of the state as a state, he explains, belongs to the conceptual world of fascists and leads the way to Nazi totalitarianism.

According to Leibowitz’s interpretation, positioning the national and the state as a value leads to this value overriding others. Choosing the national value scale means inverting the proper guideline of human behaviour in that the values of the state take precedence over other ethical human values, instead of vice-versa. And for Leibowitz, this is the essence of the fascist idea: individuals determining their actions for the sake of the state as opposed to viewing the state as a vehicle for the individual or for human society. As far as Leibowitz is concerned, choosing the national value scale, not as a means but as a value, is what turns the institution into a program and the state establishment into an ethical aim, and this, in turn, facilitates a decline into bestiality.<sup>32</sup> “The idea of the state as a framework for ‘national unity’,” Leibowitz maintains, “is a distinctively fascist idea: *ein Volk, ein Fuhrer, ein Reich* – the essence of totalitarianism.”<sup>33</sup> The connection among the notions of the state as a value, fascism, and speech in support of national unity is what paved the road to Nazism:

---

30 LEIBOWITZ, “Via Nationalism to Bestiality” (note 38).

31 The position that Leibowitz is attacking here was the declared position of the circle associated with Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. See DOV SCHWARTZ’s study *Challenge and Crisis in the Circle of Rabbi Kook* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001) [in Hebrew].

32 This issue - the path of decline, or the “slippery slope” - guides Leibowitz in a number of ethical discussions, such as his discussion on the question of euthanasia. See YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ, *Faith, History, and Values: Essays and Lectures* (Jerusalem: Academion, 1982), pp. 247-248 [in Hebrew]. Also see STATMAN’s article “Leibowitz’s Ethical Doctrine” (note 13), pp. 337-339, and OPHIR’s discussion in *Lashon Lara* (note 14).

33 LEIBOWITZ, “Via Nationalism to Bestiality” (note 38). On this issue as well, I draw the reader’s attention to Arendt’s work on the subject of totalitarianism: HANNAH ARENDT, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); HANNAH ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1958).

This is what a man named Franz Grillparzer meant when he spoke about the path from humanity to nationalism – that is to say, nationalism that becomes a program – to bestiality [...]. Here, we have a program. With regard to this program, a nineteenth century philosopher said that there is a path that leads from humanity, via nationalism, to bestiality.<sup>34</sup>

A major philosophical criticism of the fascist position, or of the view of the state as a value, is found in the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche. Leibowitz addresses this criticism on a number of occasions, perhaps most prominently in conversation with his friend and rival Israel Eldad,<sup>35</sup> who was well known throughout the Israeli public as a nationalist ideologue and as the Hebrew translator of all of Nietzsche's writings:

Nietzsche was an extremely complex figure. What the Nazis made of his philosophy is a complete fabrication. In no way can he be understood as a pioneer of Nazism. There is not a trace of truth in that. His attitude toward Judaism is complicated and suffers from complexes. We also need to consider the fact that that he ultimately lost his sanity [...]. But the greatest draw of Nietzsche is the fact that he regarded nationalism as the lowest and most contemptible human drive.<sup>36</sup>

Was this a quest for critical voices against nationalism within German society prior to the war? Was Leibowitz searching for exemplary figures in the struggle against the national scale of values in German-European thinking, of all places? Perhaps he was. What is clear, however, is the fact that Leibowitz's discourse with Israeli nationalism rests almost entirely on German intellectuals' discourse with pre-World War II German nationalism. This may also be why he repeatedly quotes Grillparzer, who advanced the program for ethical decline.

### *The Significance of Nazism in the Israeli Context*

Observing Israeli society from the perspective suggested by the history of German society and the Nazi regime's rise to power presents us with ethical

---

34 From Eyal Sivan's film *Izkor: Slaves of Memory* (France, 1990) (at 1:07).

35 The relationship between Eldad and Leibowitz has been discussed elsewhere, but not enough has been written on the subject. See, for example, PNINA LEONOV's article on "Yeshayahu A. Yeshayahu B (Leibowitz), and Eldad (Scheib)," in: *Zehut* 3(1982/3), pp. 23-36 [in Hebrew], and Eldad's response on the same subject: ISRAEL ELAD, "Disagreement for the Sake of the Heavens and the Earth (a response to Pnina Leonov's article), in: *Zehut* 3(1982/3), pp. 39-41 [Hebrew]. On Eldad and his nationalist view, see AVRAHAM EL-OR, "The Genius of a Fighting Educator: the Doctrine of Israel Eldad," in: *Ha'uma* 63 (1980/1), pp. 127-129 [in Hebrew].

36 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 63.

and political questions that precede the security issue when it comes to the future of the state of Israel. Leibowitz regarded the greatest threat to the state of Israel as the state itself – that is, the act of turning the state of Israel into an ideal. In this way, it is not the security question that will guarantee the future existence of the state of Israel but rather the national question. Nationalism, Jewish nationalism included, is the true existential threat to the state of Israel because it is an important marker on the road to Nazism. Leibowitz makes it unequivocally clear that sober historical observation teaches, to our dismay, that the security question is not relevant in the modern world, as the modern world has lost its existential security.<sup>37</sup> The security question is dependent on another more important question regarding human existence:

A generation ago, no one imagined it was possible to destroy a people. But in a Third World War – who knows? Perhaps in another generation in the southern part of Africa, South Africa and the new Rhodesia, they will make a “final solution” of the white problem, the physical destruction of men, women and children, the way that Hitler understood it. And on the other hand, perhaps the white Afrikaners will strike first, while they still have an overwhelming preponderance of strength and destroy the African population [...].<sup>38</sup>

The prism of security is misleading because it can provide only an illusion of security for human life. The bitter truth is that we can no longer speak of a guarantee for personal security in a world containing the possibility of a nuclear bomb or a world that has been exposed to the ideas of the destruction of peoples:

Zionism’s demand for a guarantee of security arises from the nineteenth century outlook which considered security one of the normal characteristics of human life. But in our day we can see – even on the level of science fiction – that the human race feels its life to be hanging by a threat. Hence trends and aspirations today are not measured by the criterion of better or worse security.<sup>39</sup>

In many senses, the choice of Zion appears not only to have not provided a solution for anti-Semitism but also to constitute a danger for the Jewish People, concentrated in one location and contending with permanent

---

37 Leibowitz appears to have advanced this point in the context of his resolute opposition to Israel becoming a nuclear power.

38 These words are attributed to Leibowitz in conversation with Ehud Ben Ezer. See EHUD BEN EZER, “Interview with Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz,” in: *Unease in Zion* (Jewish New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Company, 1965), p. 182.

39 BEN EZER, “Interview with Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz” (note 38).



hatred and violence.<sup>40</sup> The tension between Palestinian nationalism and Israeli nationalism, and the connection of both peoples to the same piece of land, guarantee ongoing violence and war.

Leibowitz's question regarding the Holocaust is not how to protect the Jewish People against Nazism but rather how to prevent the Jewish state from becoming Nazism: the Holocaust was what "was done to us," not something that we did. "The major mistake today is the fact that the Holocaust has become the chief issue for those engaged with the problem of the Jewish People. The only Jewish content found in the Jewishness of many Jewish intellectuals is an engagement with the Holocaust and the fact that 'we are the People that was harmed in this way.' For such Jews, the Holocaust becomes a substitute for their Judaism."<sup>41</sup> When education regarding Jewish identity is based entirely on the Holocaust, it becomes a tool of 'justification' for nationalism and may ultimately turn nationalism into a value in itself. In this context, Leibowitz asked school principals within the Israeli education system who they would be more proud of: a graduate who becomes a good citizen or a graduate who becomes a soldier and an excellent commander in the army? And, with great remorse, he reported that their answer was the latter. On this basis, he argued that the education system was corrupting its students, as it had turned nationalism into a value. This explains Leibowitz's deep concern regarding fascism, the occupation, and the road from humanity, via nationalism, to bestiality.

This account reveals the following deeper significance of the Holocaust in Leibowitz's thinking: the more sober insight it provides into the meaning of nationalism in the aftermath of Nazism, with the most important lesson being that, just as the Nazis were human beings, so are Jews, and that, as humans, we are obligated to our political framework and need to use our best judgement and inner understanding to prevent us from proceeding down the path of decline to human bestiality. The immense difficulty is the fact that the nationalist value scale is an alternative scale to the two others; just like the scale of religious values or atheist-humanistic values, the nationalist value scale can and does establish a complete framework in which individuals build themselves, their personalities, their values, their obligations, and their rights.

---

40 See ADI OPHIR, The Finality of the Final Solution and the Infinity of the Loss," in: *Working for the Present*, pp. 29-50 [Hebrew]; ADI OPHIR, "Post-Zionism," in: *Working for the Present*, pp. 256-280.

41 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 77.

A careful reading of Leibowitz's words suggests concern that the Holocaust could become a justification for the assertion of the state as a value, as some would argue that the destruction of the Diaspora left the Jewish People with no choice but to exist as a state. For example, Eliezer Schweid explains the attitude toward the Holocaust in the Israeli context as follows: Holocaust Memorial Day is intended to remind us that this era [the era created by the Ninth of Av and the destruction of the Temples] has reached a brutal end. Not only was the Temple destroyed, but so was the Diaspora. The Jewish People built a temporary residence, a roadside inn that has been demolished. From now on, everything depends on the desire of the People and its ability to rescue itself and to rebuild itself on its own, in its own Land. For this reason, we can say that the Jewish People lives between the pole of loss, symbolized by the Holocaust, and the pole of independent building, symbolized by the state of Israel.<sup>42</sup>

The emergence of hatred for the Jewish People, this line of thinking continues, can be understood against the background of life in exile, and the technological advancement of the modern era that facilitates tools for mass extermination allowed the Holocaust to occur and means that it is still possible today. Indeed, it is the condition of being a diaspora that facilitates a holocaust, and the directive for the Jewish People at this point in time is to "choose life" – that is, to choose the Zionist option and to prioritize it over other values. "The conclusion is simple and unequivocal," explains Schweid, and provides resolute confirmation of the Zionist perspective. The directive of Zionism is as follows: the Jewish People should be made into a strong people capable of defending itself using its own abilities; that is to say, it should be removed from the Diaspora and given a political territorial framework, like that possessed by every other people.<sup>43</sup>

Leibowitz rejected this idea, if only because of what he regarded as the argument's baselessness from the perspective of security. There was no historical situation, he argued, that could transform the state of Israel into essence. The Zionist justification relates to the state of Israel as the physical rescue of the Jewish People, although "the state of Israel has not saved even one life."

At this moment around the globe, the place where Jews face the greatest physical danger is the state of Israel. The state of Israel is not an effective instrument

---

42 ELIEZER SCHWEID, "Then Choose Life: Coming to Terms with the Holocaust," in: ELIEZER SCHWEID, *From Judaism to Zionism, From Zionism to Judaism: Essays* (Jerusalem: the World Zionist Organization, 1983), pp. 121-137, excerpt from p. 123 [in Hebrew].

43 SCHWEID, "Then Choose Life" (note 42), p. 135.



for saving Jews: its significance and the justification of its existence are found in the extent to which it is required by the Jewish People. Herein emerges the problem of the Jewish People.<sup>44</sup>

### *Israeli Society's Turn onto the Road of Decline*

Leibowitz's conception, which does not place its trust in security but rather fears the internal disintegration of the state of Israel, developed alongside the state of Israel and its wars. Initially, Leibowitz was visibly shocked by the actions and occurrences taking place within the Israeli army and under its auspices. However, his shock soon disappeared and gave way to a position that demanded sober vision and expressed fear of the decline that the state was bringing upon itself.

#### *1. The Qibya Operation: The First Failure in the Ethical Test of the State of Israel*

The first time Leibowitz voiced a public warning against the danger of nationalism and violence posed by the state of Israel appears to have been following the politically and ethically traumatic Qibya operation.<sup>45</sup> The essay in question, which was published in 1953, was a fierce response to operations that had been conducted by the Israeli army under the command of Maj. Ariel Sharon. Readers of the essay would not have identified a fully developed doctrine in it but rather a reaction of genuine shock at what was revealed to be one of the possible significances of the Zionist choice (including that of Leibowitz himself). Here, the assumption of political responsibility by man – by the Zionists – becomes an ethical-political test, and the grave incident at Qibya draws the following scathing Leibowitzian account:

Qibya and all it involves, that which led to the act and the act itself, is part of the major attempt, through which we were established – through national

---

44 YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ, "People, State, Religion" (remarks made at a symposium titled "The Essence of Zionism," 1970), in: YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ, *Judaism, the Jewish People, and the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1975), p. 243 [in Hebrew].

45 On the importance of this event and this article for Leibowitz, see PINCHAS SHIFFMAN, "The Loss of Ethical Inhibitions: The Seeds of Calamity in the Quest for Unity," in: SAGI (ed.), *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: His World and Philosophy* (note 12), pp. 273-283 [in Hebrew]; DENNIS CHARBIT, "Yeshayahu Leibowitz as an Intellectual: 'After Qibya' - the Israeli J'accuse," in: *Adkan: The Open University* 44 (2006), pp. 11-14. Also see Rothenberg's article, "People, Nation, or Nationality," pp. 99-102, which distinguishes between the ethical criticism's significance when directed at secular Zionism and its significance when channeled into religious discourse.

liberation, political independence, and state power – as a nation, a society, and a culture that for generations had enjoyed the intellectual and spiritual benefits of exile, foreign governments, and our own helplessness. From an ethical perspective and the perspective of conscience, we lived for generations in an protected, artificial greenhouse in which we could cultivate and nurture values and substance of consciousness that were not subject to the test of reality. We were regarded, in our own eyes and to a certain extent in the eyes of others, as having mastered one of the most dreadful instincts lying in wait of the human soul, and as loathers of the atrocities that are common in all human societies: the instinct for intercommunal bloodshed.<sup>46</sup>

I further stress this significance based on Leibowitz's remarks during another conversation in a different context, in which he rejects the idea that it was Rav Kook who was responsible for the danger of nationalist ideology. "The danger emerged the moment the state was created," asserts Leibowitz, somewhat surprisingly. "If this was 'the beginning of the germination of our redemption,' then everything is permissible."<sup>47</sup> From Leibowitz's perspective, although the dangers of nationalist ideas existed even prior to the establishment of the state, it was this concrete political context that made them dangerous from an ethical, and apparently also an existential perspective:

This is the true religious and ethical significance of our political revival and the restoration of our option to use force: we are now being tested as to whether we are able not only to suffer for the sake of values we have espoused but to behave according to them. It is easy to endure physical and material suffering, and even to sacrifice our lives, for the sake of values; this requires nothing but physical courage, which exists in human groups to an astounding extent. It is difficult to suffer for the sake of values when the suffering involved means giving up things that are also considered to be values stemming from good inclination – justified collective needs and interests. The ethical problem arises, in all its severity, at the collision between good inclination and good inclination: the destruction of evil inclination by good inclination is difficult but not problematic.<sup>48</sup>

With these words, as I understand them, Leibowitz was not outlining a broad conception of the danger of nationalism as a program but rather primarily articulating his deep shock at the events themselves.

---

46 LEIBOWITZ, "After Qibya," in: LEIBOWITZ, *Judaism, the Jewish People, and the State of Israel* (note 44), p. 229 [in Hebrew] (initially published in the journal in: *Terem*, 1953-54).

47 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 29.

48 LEIBOWITZ, "After Qibya" (note 46), p. 230.

## 2. *The Six-Day War: Starting Down the Road of Decline*

A broader and harsher change in the aim and conception of these ideas was expressed by Leibowitz only after the Six-Day War. At this point, he leaves no room for doubt: a sign had been placed before Israeli society warning that it had started down the road of decline.<sup>49</sup> The radical character of this assertion and the caustic nature of the arguments Leibowitz employs – even the truly extreme ones – can be understood only against the background of his belief that the Jewish People had started down a road of sharp ethical and existential decline. Here, it also appears clear that his words were spoken out of great love, or at least without any hatred. The personal experience, which was translated into a universal political account, was now translated back into the Israeli experience:

In words that were already written shortly after the Six-Day War, the Whole Land of Israel was depicted as a new Rhodesia, to be based on Arab labor and Jewish rule – including all the necessary implications of this arrangement vis-à-vis the social, intellectual, and spiritual reality. This troubling manifestation is already starting to take form before our eyes. It finds expression in the labor market and in the economy, in the increasing corruption within Jewish society, and in the Jewish national consciousness's transformation into aggressive nationalism. It also finds expression in unusual phenomena of a colonial nature in the realm of government in the occupied territories (arrests without trial, the torture of prisoners, the demolition of homes of the families of suspects, the deportation of undesired individuals, etc.): we may even reach the point of the establishment of concentration camps or gallows. Over time, we may need to ask ourselves whether this state is worthy of existence and whether it is worthwhile to give our lives for its existence.<sup>50</sup>

This catastrophic account forecasts the possibility of the state of Israel coming to resemble a totalitarian state, to the point of resembling the Nazi regime. The Six-Day War transformed the state of Israel into an occupying state also in the sense that its national ideology had changed, transforming the state from a means into a value in the eyes of its citizens. The subsequent decline could bring us to a point at which we would need to ask whether the state of Israel “is worthy of existence.” This is not an ethical question

---

49 We have many accounts of Leibowitz's oral responses during the period immediately following the Six-Day War regarding the catastrophe confronting Israeli society. For this insight, and many others, I am grateful to my friend Shneur Einam.

50 YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ, “The Territories, Peace, and Security,” in: *Haaretz*, November 3, 1972 [in Hebrew], also published in LEIBOWITZ, *Judaism, the Jewish People, and the State of Israel* (note 44), p. 427.

regarding what is “worthy.” Rather, in Leibowitz’s eyes, the question has to do with the very existence of the state of Israel. The worst case scenario, as Leibowitz sees it, is that this road would lead to the destruction of the state. It is important to take note of the manner in which Leibowitz’s articulations actually reveal his deep concern for the very existence of the state:

If we continue along the path we are travelling the destruction of the state of Israel is a certainty, over a period of years, not even generations. Internally...with concentration camps for people like me, and externally, it will get entangled in an all-out war with the entire Arab world, from Morocco to Kuwait. This is the perspective for the near future... As long as it believes, in its unfathomable foolishness, that American aid will continue forever, it is not interested in peace. Its end, therefore, will be similar to that of South Vietnam, which also relied on the indefinite continuation of American aid.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding the path of decline described above from humanity via nationalism to bestiality, attributed to Grillparzer, Leibowitz had the following to say regarding the state of Israel: “This is the path which the German People truly followed until the end, and it is the path we started down after the Six-Day War.”<sup>52</sup>

### 3. *The Development of Nationalist State Ideology*

The Qibya operation marks the moment in Leibowitz’s development when he sensed, for the first time, the significance of Nazi violence as a concrete danger lurking on the doorstep of Israeli society. Although the Six-Day War, in his eyes, marked progress along the path of decline, even if only on a messianic-emotional level, the major step in Leibowitz’s thinking occurs only when he identifies the development of national state ideology: “The danger emerged the moment the state was created. If this was ‘the beginning of the germination of our redemption,’ then everything is permissible.”<sup>53</sup> He continues, using even tougher language:

I now unhesitatingly repeat the term ‘Judeo-Nazi’! The policy of occupation is a Nazi policy! Do not forget, the Nazis harmed not only Jews but also Germans, their fellow countrymen. During Hitler’s initial period [in power], which I witnessed with my own eyes, the concentration camps held only a few Jews – Communists. At the same time, the camps were full of pure Aryan Germans who opposed the regime. The same will be possible here in the not so distant future.<sup>54</sup>

---

51 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 24.

52 See Sivan’s film *He Will Overcome* (at 1:07).

53 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just About Everything* (note 1) p. 29.

54 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just About Everything* (note 1) p. 29.

In practice, we note a different focus in the problem Leibowitz identifies in the life of the state of Israel in light of the lesson and the sober view demanded by Nazism and the Holocaust. This focus, which may be a general term for all the other problems, is nationalism. In his extreme statements, then, Leibowitz's position is actually revealed to be a distinctively Zionist one.<sup>55</sup> However, the Zionism in his words is a political act as opposed to a movement representing a political value: Zionism as an effort "to renew a framework for the political independence of the Jewish People."<sup>56</sup> Did Zionism also have cultural values? Leibowitz maintained that Zionism is a political concept and therefore can reflect different cultural content, which also implies the possibility that the national meaning of Zionism could be ethically unworthy and existentially dangerous.

*The Problem: The Jewish People or the Importance of Extreme Pronouncements*

It would be mistaken to interpret Leibowitz's words as if he had become an opponent of the Zionist movement, when he actually sought to maintain Zionism as a pure political framework. In other words, Leibowitz's choice of Zionism was a choice of nationalism in the sense of a political framework as opposed to an ideological program. He completely rejected the conception of the Jewish People as a distinct biological unit and in doing so distanced himself from the racist nationalist position. He also opposed the idea that the Jewish People be defined by the state, and thereby sought to distance himself from the fascist position. His preference was for the Jewish people to remain identified by its commitment to Judaism and the Jewish sources. This complexity led Leibowitz to the following position: on the one hand, he was a Zionist who desired the good of the state of Israel; on

---

55 DAVID OHANA explored Leibowitz's Zionist thinking in "The Zionism of Yeshayahu Leibowitz," in: *Kivunim* 45 (1995), pp. 161-172 [in Hebrew]. See also DOV SCHWARTZ, "Leibowitz's Philosophy in Light of Religious Zionist Theology," in SAGI (ed.), *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: His World and Philosophy* (note 12), pp. 209-218; GILI (MIVATZERI) ZIVAN, "Yeshayahu Leibowitz: The Door to a Different Religious Zionism," in: YOSEF AHITUV and HANNA and DAVID AMIT (eds.), *Devarim: A Collection of Articles Marking the Tenth Year of the Yaakov Herzog Center* (Ein Tzurim: Yaakov Herzog Center, 1998/99), pp. 95-105 [in Hebrew]. It is important to note the change in Leibowitz's attitude toward the religious significance of Zionism. See ELIEZER GOLDMAN, "Zionism as a Religious Challenge in the Philosophy of Yeshayahu Leibowitz," in: SAGI (ed.) *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: His World and Philosophy* (note 12), pp. 179-186 [in Hebrew].

56 MICHAEL SHASHER, *Leibowitz: Heretic or Believer?* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2002), p. 22 [in Hebrew].

the other hand, he was unwilling to recognize the state as a value in itself. He sought to fight for the image of the state of Israel and, in his mind's eye, saw the path of its ethical decline, which led not only to the loss of its right to exist but also to a process that in practice endangered the security of its inhabitants. In this situation, he had no choice but to embark on a struggle over the values that were appropriate for Israeli society: "But ethical words divide people; values have to be fought for, values have to be struggled for: unity cannot be established over values."<sup>57</sup>

What kind of struggle should be conducted for the future of Israeli society? Leibowitz's answer to this question is the outcome of his analysis of the danger posed by nationalism, learned from the experience of Nazi nationalism. The nation must not be maintained as a value in itself, which means there need be no concern regarding the unity of the nation. 'I know why German society declined culturally, humanely, and ethically into Nazism,' Leibowitz appears to be telling his readers and his listeners: 'It declined because people were not willing to endanger the nation and its unity': I do not bow down to the sacred cow of national unity. The nation is no more than an existential human field (as opposed to a territorial field) for people, who sometimes have very different – and even opposing – aspirations, orientations, and values...A national framework that is empty or that contains substance that is illegitimate is of no value. Neither is the unity of a nation if it comes at the cost of abandoning values.<sup>58</sup>

What listeners and readers understood as a danger to the nation due to the threat it posed to national unity in the name of the values for which Leibowitz was struggling, Leibowitz himself regarded as the only chance of changing the tide in society. Accepting the unity of the nation as a value in itself, Leibowitz would argue, means accepting the national scale of values that leads to Nazism: "National unity typically exists only for the common goal of looting and plundering: this is something around which unity can be achieved."<sup>59</sup> Against this background, we can understand why Leibowitz made use of the extreme term – "Judeo-Nazi" – with which he is so uniquely associated and for which he received such scathing criticism across the political spectrum. In Leibowitz's view, the struggle against enshrining the nation as a value must be conducted with a willingness to shock national unity, and with the hope and expectation that it will ultimately protect Jewish society from national ideology, as reflected in the following excerpt from his conversations with Shasher:

---

57 LEIBOWITZ, "After Qibya" (note 46), p. 245.

58 LEIBOWITZ, "After Qibya" (note 46), p. 245.

59 LEIBOWITZ, "After Qibya" (note 46), p. 245.

*Shasher*: Aren't you exaggerating when you use the term "Judeo-Nazi?" Do you truly believe that we are liable to decline to the level of the Nazis?

*Yeshayahu Leibowitz*: When the nation (or in Nazi terminology, the race) and the power of its state become supreme values, human action is no longer inhibited. This mentality is also widespread among us. In the territories under our occupation in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Lebanon, we are already behaving as the Nazis behaved in the territories under their occupation in Czechoslovakia and the west. We did not set up extermination camps as they did in the East. However, it is appalling that we are compelled to point out this fact in order to distinguish us from the Nazis!<sup>60</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In this article, I sought to shed new light on the role of the Holocaust in shaping the political-ethical philosophy of Yeshayahu Leibowitz. Leibowitz's personal memory, like the social analysis of Germany's decline into Nazism, imbued him with an acute concern regarding Jewish nationalism and the state's transformation into a value in itself. This understanding helps us better understand his deep fear of fascism, the occupation, and the road leading from humanity, via nationalism, to bestiality:

A great English historian once said that history was, "the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." Edward Gibbon spoke the truth, but not in its entirety: although history is the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind, it is also the register of mankind's struggle against these crimes, follies, and misfortunes. These crimes, follies, and misfortunes stem from the nature of the world and the nature of man himself. Therefore, the struggle against them requires an immense effort on the part of man – the individual and the collective alike – to overcome this nature. In other words, it is man's struggle against himself.<sup>61</sup>

Based on this analysis, it is clear that Leibowitz was, more than anything else, a lover of Israel in the most profound sense. It is also clear that his deep concern regarding the loss of Israel's ethical path was actually a fear of the destruction of the state itself.

---

60 LEIBOWITZ, *On Just about Everything* (note 1), p. 78 [in Hebrew]. Due to the biographical dimension of the following discussion and my attempt here to reveal important aspects of Leibowitz's philosophy, this article incorporates numerous excerpts from Leibowitz's conversations with Michael Shashar.

61 YESHAYAHU LEIBOWITZ, "On History and Miracles," in: LEIBOWITZ, *Faith, History, and Values* (note 32), p. 165 [in Hebrew], first published in: *Petachim* 3-4 (1978/79), pp. 47-48.