

Yeshayahu Leibowitz

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

My nephew Dov, a philosopher, scholar and rabbi of YAKAR Jerusalem, sent me a brilliant essay he recently published entitled "On Social Distancing and deontology." It looks at the ethical aspects of the current crisis in terms of what moral responsibility we have to avoid causing sickness in others. How do we decide medical equipment allocations and services? The technical terms he uses are *Deontological*, set moral standards, and *Consequentialist*, comparing and weighing up actions and consequences.

Are we bound by formulae like "the greatest good or benefit for the greatest number"? Do we accept fixed systems of morality such as a religious or legal standard? Or do we try to do what we believe is right according to our own conscience?

Judaism's response is to try to reconcile both. We have certain general unquestionable principles. No one person's life is more valuable than another's. In this week's Torah reading we have the declaration "VeChai Bahem," "You should live by them." Which is taken to mean that preserving life overrides most commandments. As a rule, we put human needs before our obligations to God. Each case must be looked at within its specific context and circumstances. And then, if it is not clear, we turn to experts – religious and others.

Even if we are forbidden to put a comparative value on a life, triage (deciding who to treat first when there are competing and conflicting demands) sometimes involves decisions that has this effect. According to the Mishna, a person must do that which is honorable in the eyes of God and human beings (though that, in itself, depends on which humans one is considering). Ethical behavior remains the challenge of philosophy and religion. Often, there are no easy answers -whichever position one takes. And that is why we see so many conflicting responses to the present crisis within the Charedi, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish world.

This is why I asked my nephew what position he thought the late Professor Yeshayahu (Yeshaya) Leibowitz would have taken. Of all modern Jewish philosophers, Leibowitz was the one who tackled moral issues fearlessly and practically. He demolished fanciful theories and solutions mercilessly. My nephew believes he would have combined both *deontology* and *consequentialism*. And I heartily agree. Aristotle, Kant, Mill and Moses all rolled into one.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994) was professor of biochemistry and neurophysiology at the Hebrew University. He was also a controversial speaker and writer on Jewish thought.

His obituary in the English newspaper, "The Independent," said, "he was a prophet in the Jewish tradition: like Elijah, he was 'the troubler of Israel'. He denounced Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and was a determined opponent of the Lebanese war. Although a committed Orthodox Jew, he advocated complete separation of politics and religion. He supported dismantling the established Chief Rabbinate, liberty of secular marriage, and the dissolution of religious political parties. Though he often aroused bitter anger, he was admired throughout Israel for the uncompromising sincerity of his views."

In 1993, Leibowitz was awarded the Israel Prize. Before the award ceremony, he was invited to speak to the Israel Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. It was there where his controversial remarks calling upon Israeli soldiers to refuse orders to harm Palestinian protestors triggered outrage. Yitzchak Rabin threatened to boycott the ceremony. Leibowitz, himself, announced that he would refuse to accept the award because he did not want to create antagonism when receiving the prize.

I first heard him speak at a Student Conference in Holland when I was a philosophy student at Cambridge University. His Germanic appearance was severe and rigid. Not a hint of humor. His lecture was challenging. I was amazed – even shocked – by his assertion that the only thing that matters in Jewish religious life is Halacha (Jewish Law) as an act of complete submission to God. The only way of encountering and serving God, he said, is through Halacha, the Commandments. He had no time for mysticism or happy-clappy Judaism.

Some thought he was rejecting the idea that human beings could communicate with God. Yet he was simply saying, as did Maimonides, that physical humans cannot know a non-physical, non-human God. Obeying it is the ultimate act of submission to God's will.

From a rational point of view, he was right. We cannot know God. We have no proofs. All we have are our holy texts. As with modern literary theory, we may not know the intent of the author. Indeed we cannot be sure who composed all of Shakespeare's plays. But we can experience them, enjoy them and be inspired by them. And we can experience God through them. He did not seem to sympathize with an existential definition of spirituality.

Leibowitz said that “nothing in nature and in history imposes upon a person the decision to be honest and decent. He can just as well be a scoundrel. We cannot even rely on morality of previous generations...it depends on whether you decide to be honest and decent.”

That is why we need the idea of God. A symbol. A motivation to be better human beings. A sense of something better to aspire to. A feeling within us of a spark of God that some of us can actually experience. Anyone who can kill without reason, or ignore the rights of other people, ipso facto cannot have God.

As humans, we all make mistakes. However, we believe we can overcome our tendency to be selfish. That is why the Torah mandated atonement for religious and political leaders as well as ordinary folk. When we experience human or natural evil, as we are at this COVID-19 moment, the challenge is to rise above the primitive reaction of self-preservation and look at humanity with concern and care. This means giving of ourselves – materially, behaviorally, spiritually and morally.

Wherever Leibowitz saw moral failure he spoke his mind and tried to do something about it. He could be harsh, judgmental and unfair. He said of David Ben Gurion that he was “ the biggest catastrophe that ever happened to the Jewish State.” Whatever shortcomings or mistakes Ben Gurion made he was certainly no catastrophe. But then all mavericks who speak their minds and shoot from the hip say things they often regret. Even the biblical prophets had a certain capacity for anger, impatience, even arrogance and were criticized for their harsh judgments.

At a time when most of our religious leaders spout noble and pious platitudes, few are really prepared to take an unpopular stand.

He was a moral giant. As we have just celebrated Israel’s Independence Day against a background of passionate disagreement over Israel’s moral and political values, Leibowitz stands as a beacon to proclaim the obligation to strive for a just and moral society.