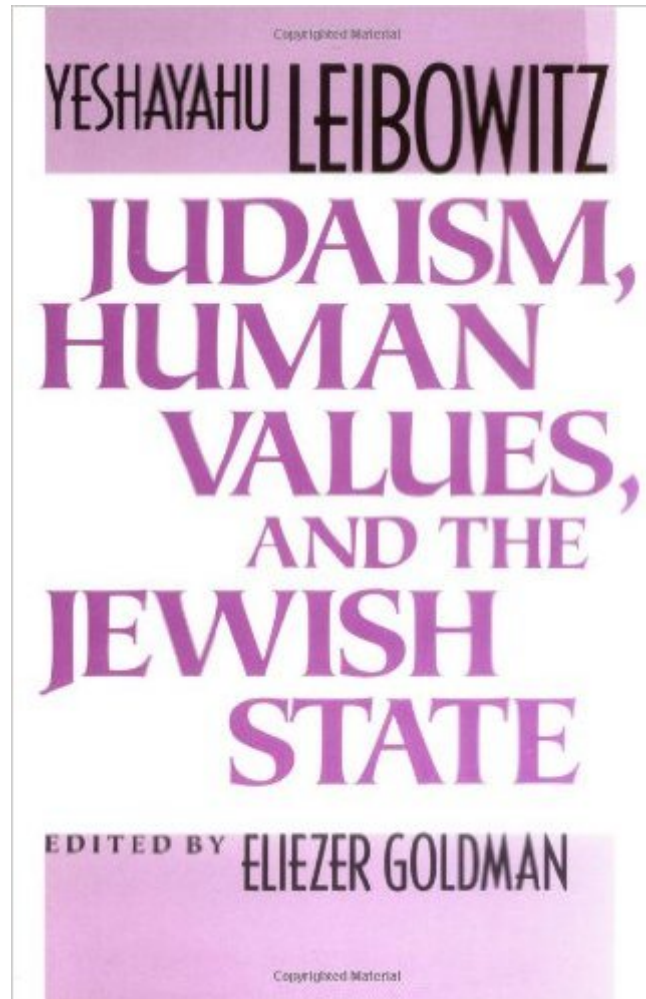


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Judaism, Human Values, And The Jewish State



Synopsis

A biochemist by profession, a polymath by inclination and erudition, Yeshayahu Leibowitz has been, since the early 1940s, one of the most incisive and controversial critics of Israeli culture and politics. His direct involvement, compelling polemics, and trenchant criticism have established his steadfast significance for contemporary Israeli-and Jewish- intellectual life. These hard-hitting essays, his first to be published in English, cover the ground Leibowitz has marked out over time with moral rigor and political insight. He considers the essence and character of historical Judaism, the problems of contemporary Judaism and Jewishness, the relationship of Judaism to Christianity, the questions of statehood, religion, and politics in Israel, and the role of women. Together these essays constitute a comprehensive critique of Israeli society and politics and a probing diagnosis of the malaise that afflicts contemporary Jewish culture. Leibowitz's understanding of Jewish philosophy is acute, and he brings it to bear on current issues. He argues that the Law, Halakhah, is essential to Judaism, and shows how, at present, separation of religion from state would serve the interest of halakhic observance and foster esteem for religion. Leibowitz calls the religious justification of national issues "idolatry" and finds this phenomenon at the root of many of the annexationist moves made by the state of Israel. Long one of the most outspoken critics of Israeli occupation in the conquered territories, he gives eloquent voice to his ongoing concern over the debilitating moral effects of its policies and practices on Israel itself. This translation will bring to an English-speaking audience a much-needed, lucid perspective on the present and future state of Jewish culture.

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Customer Reviews

Perhaps the best introduction to Yeshayahu Leibowitz in English is Eliezer Goldman's prefatory essay to the volume he edited, *Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992). This volume contains 27 translated essays, most of which come from Leibowitz's Hebrew collection, *Yahadut, Am HaYehudi u-Medinat Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1975). Goldman's recent collection of his own essays, *Mehkarim ve-lyyunim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996) contains a number of pieces on Leibowitz as well. Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-93) was the often paradoxical, so-called "conscience of Israel"--a philosopher, controversial social critic, and sharp-tongued Socratic gadfly. He was born in 1903 in Lithuania, and was educated in Germany prior to settling in Jerusalem in 1934, where he taught chemistry, physiology, and the philosophy of science at the Hebrew University. He was an author and editor of the *Encyclopedia Halvrit*, and taught, lectured, and wrote on a wide range of issues throughout his long life. Beyond his political thought, Leibowitz is perhaps best known (and critiqued) for his radical conceptions of Judaism. In brief, his position focused on the centrality--indeed, exclusivity--of mitzvot as the constitutive factor in Judaism. Observing the commandments (i.e. fulfilling the divine will) is an end in itself, and not a means to achieve personal, spiritual, or communal benefit. The significance of a religious act, argues Leibowitz, is in its performance qua worshipping God. To seek any meaning beyond that is, in his opinion, idolatry.

As another review points out, Leibowitz believes that the purpose of Judaism and mitzvot is "the religious perfection of man", and that mitzvot (commandments) should be observed for their own sake rather than for external ends. According to Leibowitz, it follows that religion is completely separate from morality; if serving God is the most important end in life, it takes priority over man's perceptions of morality. Rather than seeing the almost-sacrifice of Isaac as an aberration, Leibowitz sees it as a classic example of how Judaism should function - obedience to the divine command for its own sake. Leibowitz has a point: certainly, God does not exist to serve man. But I wonder if Leibowitz somewhat oversimplifies Judaism; halacha (Jewish law) is based in part on broader perceptions of morality (though on the other hand, that morality comes in part from halachic tradition). Leibowitz follows his logic to a variety of conclusions, including: *rejection of messianism, because hope in a worldly Messiah "undermine[s] the motivation to serve God in the world as it is" and thus leads to defections from Jewish practice when the Messiah fails to come and the "cheerless day-to-day practice of Torah and Mitzvoth" (p. 71) fails to inspire.* Rejection of the idea that Jews are naturally holy. Holiness, according to Leibowitz, comes from following Mitzvoth, and

thus a belief in holiness by birth is merely "racist chauvinism."*Rejection of Christianity because "in Christianity it is not man who serves God but rather God serves man." (p. 98).*Rejection of Kabbalah because Kabbalah interprets mitzvot as "a method for mending disruptions in the world of divinity" (p. 111) and thus falsely elevates man to a divine level.

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