

Leon Roth and Yeshayahu Leibowitz on the Qibyā Raid

The 1953 Qibyā reprisal raid, led by Major Ariel Sharon, was the first military operation for which the new State of Israel was condemned by the UN, major nations, and the world Jewish community. Two leading Israeli philosophers, Professors Leon Roth (1896-1963) and Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994), wrote important responses to the raid which are relevant still today.

1. Leon Roth, *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 December 1953, 'The Moral Issue'. Reprinted in Roth, *Is There A Jewish Philosophy?* (1999), pp. xviii-xx.

Dr [Abraham] Cohen's summing-up is clear. The Israelis...are censurable, but most of the censors should have remained silent... Two of the factors involved (the Israelis on the one hand and the rest of the world on the other) have been satisfactorily dealt with. But there are other factors... There is, for example, the religion, or the system of thought, called Judaism... The problem is whether either Judaism or Jewry can acquiesce in this incident. It is the type of action which we have been accustomed to say that Judaism taught the world to condemn and from which Jewry itself has so often suffered. If we identify ourselves with it now... where will Jewry be the next time it itself is the victim?...

Shall we still be able to say that we demand one law for all and that we do not do to others what we do not wish others to do to us? That the *lex talionis* is not Jewish; that we abhor the spilling of blood, even of animals; that we are commanded in the Pentateuch to care for the non-Jew ('love the stranger'), as was noted by the rabbis of another day, thirty-six times? Shall we still be able to say that institution of properly constituted courts...is one of the fundamental moral requirements of Judaism; that the Torah...insists on due process of law; that fathers should not be killed for the sins of children nor children for the sins of fathers?... Dare we repeat the old commonplace of which we were once so proud that Jewish courts were so careful to avoid the shedding of blood that they disallowed all circumstantial evidence and in practice all but abolished the death penalty?

The real tragedy is...for the Israelis... What manner of men are these who could contrive this action, or what persons could carry it out? And what manner of men are those who, arrogantly dismissing the moral issue, bemuse themselves and us with their *realpolitik*...

Why just against us?... Is it not perhaps a compliment to Jews and Judaism that our friends say to us: We expected better of *you*.

2. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, 'After Qibyā', *Be-terem*, 15 December, 1953; English trans. in Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (1992), pp. 185-190.

[1] Qibyā, its causes, implications, and the action itself are part of the great test [*nissayon*] to which we as a nation are put as a result of national liberation, political independence, and our military power -- for we were bearers of a culture which, for many generations, derived certain spiritual benefits from conditions of exile, foreign rule, and political impotence. Our morality was...conditioned by an insulated existence in which we could cultivate values... which were never tested... We appeared to have gained control over one of the terrible drives to which human nature is subject...the impulse to communal murder... We ignored...that in our historical situation such mass-murder was not a means at our disposal... The Diaspora [*galut*]...was a form of escapism... This is the true religious and moral significance of our regaining political independence... We are now being put to the test...

[2] By the logic of history and of moral evaluation, our War of Independence was a necessary consequence of our 2,000-year exile. Only one prepared to justify...the continuation of our exilic existence could refuse to take on the moral responsibility for using the sword... We do not apologize for the bloodshed in the war itself... The problem concerns the manner of conducting that war, which goes on to this day... Once the 'craft of Esau' [cf. BT *Gittin* 57b] has been granted legitimacy, the distinction between the permissible and the forbidden...is very subtle.

[3] It is indeed possible to justify [*le-hatzdiq*] the action of Qibyā before 'the world'. Its spokesmen...admonish us for having adopted the method of 'reprisal' [*tagmul*] -- cruel mass punishment of innocent people for the crimes of others in order to prevent their recurrence... We could argue that we have not behaved differently than did the Americans... in deploying the atomic bomb: America saw herself in the fourth year of a war she had not initiated, and after the loss of a quarter of a million of her sons, facing the prospect of continued war...for an unforeseeable period of time. This fear led to the atrocity of Hiroshima, where 100,000 civilians, mostly women and children, were killed in one day to bring about the quick termination of this nightmare. We, too, are now in the sixth year of a war that was forced upon us and has become a nightmare...

[4] It is indeed possible to justify [*limtzo' hatzdaqah*] this action [to ourselves], but let us not try to do so... There is an instructive precedent for Qibyā: the story of Shechem and Dinah [Genesis 34]. The sons of Jacob did not act...out of pure wickedness... They had a decisive justification: 'Should one deal with our sister as with a harlot?!' [ibid., v. 31]. The Torah...adds to its description of the atrocity three words [in the Hebrew text] which apparently convey a moral judgment of the deed: 'The sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and spoiled the city, *because they had defiled their sister*' [ibid., v. 27]. Nevertheless, because of this action two tribes in Israel were cursed for generations by their father Jacob, who is Israel [ibid. 49:5-7: 'Simeon and Levi...weapons of violence their kinship... Cursed be their anger... I will scatter them']... There may be an action which is explained, reasoned, and even justified [*mutzdaq*] (!), but nevertheless accursed.

[5] There is a specifically Jewish aspect to the Qibyā incident... From where have these youths come who felt no inhibition...to perform the atrocity?... They were nurtured on the values of a Zionist education... Their conduct is among the consequences of applying the religious category of holiness [*qedushah*] to social, national, and political interests... The concept of holiness -- which is absolute and beyond all categories of human thought and evaluation -- is transferred to the profane. From a religious standpoint only God is holy, and only His imperative is absolute. All human values...are profane... Country, state, and nation... are never holy... They are always subject to criticism... We may find ourselves erecting our Third Commonwealth upon the curse of Jacob our Father.

3. Neḥama Leibowitz (1905-1997), *Gilyonot* 5717 (1956-1957), *Va-Yishlah* and *Va-Yehi*; *Studies in Sefer Bere'shit* (1976), *Va-Yishlah* and *Va-Yehi*.

In Genesis 34, it is told of the murder of an entire city... Is there justification [*hatzdaqah*] for the deed? Might there be justification in the fact that it was 'a reprisal operation' [*pe'ulat tagmul*] for a heinous crime, as the brothers said: 'Should one deal with our sister as with a harlot?!' [ibid., v. 31]. If the deed were justified, why did Jacob become enraged and say, 'You have troubled me' [ibid., v. 30]... [and] 'Cursed be their anger for it was fierce' [ibid., 49:7]... From the fear of the sword that fell upon the nations, we cannot learn anything regarding the righteousness of the act, or that it was good in the sight of God [cf. ibid., 35:5: 'And the terror of God was upon the cities...and they did not pursue after the sons of Jacob']. For [as Martin Buber observed] among the many names of the Holy One, blessed be He... there is not found the name 'Success'.