

## THE QUESTION OF JOSHUA AND THE RESPONSE OF I. LEIBOVITZ

by AVITAL WOHLMAN

The faith of I. Leibovitz is the expression of a conscious choice: conscious of choosing one among many ways in which a person can give meaning and significance to his life. The commandment: “you will not have other gods than I” (Ex. 20:2, Deut. 5:7) guides Leibovitz on a path which represents the practical translation of a negative theology. Torah, in the sense of halakha, becomes an unyielding demand for him, requiring total submission on a person’s part. As such, it opposes any other overriding demands, be they of the state, society, or morality, for these other demands express profane categories, in which a believer can only find empty, pretentious, and false echoes. In Judaism, humanity and the different dimensions of human life cannot be values in themselves. Humankind is only the image of God: “Nothing can be sacred in itself; only what is consecrated to God is sacred, consecrated to God with a specific intention and to a specific use by a cultic action.”<sup>1</sup>

So his faith allows him to discern the relative — the human, the “all-too-human” — in so much that we value, so that they may not become idols. This faith, as he often repeats, consists in fulfilling the commandments for the simple reason that they are commanded. Neither from a conviction regarding their truth, nor from a recognition of their usefulness — moral, educative or whatever — “for I have no

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1. *Judaism, Jewish People and State of Israel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1979).

All numbers in parentheses refer to the pages of this book.

reason to adore the God who is Creator of the world” (342). We are in the presence, then, of a choice whose sole justification lies in the one who makes it. The believer can be likened to a painting which is nothing but a splash of colors until it begins to mean something.

It is the believer who decides that he is the image of God (315), and by that act he becomes free, for what is freedom but the adopting of a rule of life not dictated by nature? “to do the will of God and not my own” (30). Such a life is heroic: “the Torah was given to heroes” (61). So we meet the last idol and the most intractable to combat, for it is a phoenix arising from its own ashes: the person of faith himself. Such a believer has only to respect his own limits, the fact that he is so constructed that only what is difficult commands his respect (35). One must simply bear the burden, however, understanding that not even that action can become a kind of justification: “this decision that I take... does not follow from my own being” (342).

What then is the decision? It is, as I have remarked, a conscious choice expressing one’s grasp of the fact that what makes one human is that one’s life is absurd. For we might well define an absurd situation as one in which there is an immense divide between human intention and reality. Think of a warrior encased in a coat of mail complete with resplendent arms arriving on his horse to the field of combat after the battle is over! Yet even this is only a relative absurdity, all that would be needed to transform it into a dramatic situation behind for him to arrive on time, whereas when we speak of that absurdity inherent in the human situation, we are speaking of a necessary divide. The divide opens between the fact that one cannot live without a goal, without choice or commitment, on the one hand; and the capacity that we have, on the other, of considering ourselves apart, contemplating this freedom of choice, yet knowing full well that things could be otherwise. Otherwise put, a division between the two senses of ‘choice’: the global choice of an orientation of one’s life which would rather be to accept our tendencies, our drives and capacities; and those successive choices of diverse means to accomplish the ends which follow from the original choice. We must understand, however, that this ability to observe ourselves does not offer us an absolute perspective, from which our actual life would appear relative, small and confined. All that such a perspective affords us is the simple truth that any significance our life might have depend solely upon us for whom it is significant. The only worth our choices have is for us who have made them. If we never assumed this perspective on ourselves, we might overlook this capacity, or even forget it. But we can no longer pretend to innocence.

Professor Leibovitz has chosen; he knows that he alone is responsible for his decision. In his time and place he has responded to the question addressed by Joshua to the tribes of Israel, assembled before God: “if you will not serve the

Lord, choose today whom you wish to serve, whether the gods that your ancestors served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amoraites in whose land you are now living.” The people chose, and Joshua recalled to them what they had done: “you are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him” (Joshua 24:15, 23).

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