

Dr. Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, ‘*Yashar*’, A Critical Religious Voice on the War in Gaza

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Introduction

Thank you all for joining us for the second and final meeting of this week’s *Eyes on Gaza* series. Yesterday we learned that Shai Glick harassed Professor Moshe Lavee, our colleague from the University of Haifa, who was about to lecture at a conference on the *Mishnah* and the recognition of the suffering of the other. The close connection between religion, nationalism, and racism seems almost inevitable in Israel—and that is certainly how Shai Glick sees it. Yet it is precisely this connection that women and men from the religious left seek to challenge. For that reason, we are especially glad today to host Dr. Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, Senior Lecturer in Hebrew Literature at Ben-Gurion University and one of the founders of the journal *Yashar*, which seeks to amplify a religious, critical, leftist, liberal, and humanistic voice concerning the ongoing destruction in Gaza. Itay, thank you very much for joining us today—we look forward to hearing your remarks.

Paper

Hello, good afternoon, and thank you very much Lior and Ayelet for the invitation. I know the format is quite short, so I’ll try to stay as focused as possible. Before presenting *Yashar* and the very modest role it has taken upon itself in the context of the war in Gaza, I want to quote a prayer that I deeply love from the High Holy Days liturgy. At the beginning of the prayer, the cantor stands and says: “*Here am I, poor in deeds, trembling and frightened,*” because he has nothing of his own to bring—he comes as an empty vessel. And I feel that I too come to this meeting as an empty vessel. My contribution to this important project is quite minimal, since, unfortunately, no human life will be saved because of anything published in our journal. I do hope, however, that perhaps in the long run the words might have some impact. But I do want to say from the start that what we are engaged in here is, I would almost say, a kind of privileged activity—people who, instead of going out and taking direct action, deal mainly with intellectual matters and channel their political energies there. Perhaps this is the refuge of the weak, or of the scoundrels—I don’t know—but in any case, that’s where we currently stand.

I’d like to introduce to you a project I founded about two years ago together with two close friends. The project is called *Yashar*. *Yashar* is the name of an online journal we launched: <https://www.yashar-magazine.co.il/english>. I’ll take two minutes to introduce *Yashar*, and then I’ll talk about what *Yashar* has done since the beginning of the war in Gaza. First of all, we’re talking about an online journal for religious discourse. I’ll add in parentheses: Orthodox, humanistic, liberal. Why Orthodox? Not by deliberate design, but simply because it reflects the biography of the three founders, whom I’ll introduce in a moment, as well as our desire to offer an alternative to the existing Orthodox discourse.

Yashar went online on Rosh Chodesh Nisan, 5783—March 23, 2023—in the midst of the judicial overhaul. The judicial coup was, in fact, the central concern before our eyes at the time. We felt that the general religious discourse was profoundly racist and anti-democratic—this is well known—and we sought to offer some kind of alternative to that discourse. Before this, I and others had occasionally published in more mainstream religious outlets such as *Makor Rishon*, *Srugim*, *Kipa*, and similar platforms. But gradually, since the formation of the current government, we were given less and less space in those outlets, and eventually were blocked altogether. So our idea was: “Let’s create our own platform, where we can publish original material aligned with our worldview.”

The journal’s name is an important point: the term *Yashar* (meaning “just”, “upright”)—recently also used by Gadi Eisenkot for his new political party. For Eisenkot, *Yashar* seems to mean “neither right nor left.” That is not our meaning. For us, *Yashar* clearly and unequivocally means *left*. The

term comes from the verse in *Deuteronomy* (6:18): “And you shall do what is right and good.” In rabbinic literature, this phrase refers to obligations that go beyond the formal commandments: the duty to act rightly, to be a decent and upright person. Our motto is also telling: “Torah with *derech eretz*” [which means combining the study of the Torah with decent behavior] —the 19th-century German Orthodox motto, which in many ways we see ourselves as continuing, in the sense that it accepted a commitment to universal moral and cultural values. It is important for me to stress that this is a private, volunteer initiative by myself and my two dear friends, Yoel Kretzmer-Raziel and Tafat Hacohen-Bick. There is no organization behind us, no one funds or supports us. We are three private individuals—coincidentally all academics—who decided to act.

Since the journal’s inception, we have published more than 200 opinion columns written by over 70 writers. The columns are distributed by email lists, WhatsApp, and also through Facebook and Twitter. They reach thousands of readers every month, forming a body of writing that is both topical and stable. In other words, this is not meant to look like a collection of Facebook posts, but rather serious, thoughtful writing that endures—serving as a kind of spiritual, religious, and moral nourishment for the years to come. The content is diverse: from immediate responses to current political events in religious contexts, to broader philosophical reflections on religious-political issues, to *Divrei Torah* and sermons for Sabbaths and holidays. Anyone visiting the site these days will see much focus on *Yamim Noraim*—the Days of Awe, the Ten Days of Repentance, and the question of how one can even pray before God when our hands are full of sins and wrongdoing, and so on. And one special thing we do is occasionally publish texts of particular significance from the past—I’ll give an example in a moment.

In the early days, most of the columns were devoted to the core issues of the judicial overhaul: democracy, majority tyranny, the rule of law, justice, and citizenship—all from a religious and Torah-based perspective. Then came October 7, which upended everything for all of us, and the focus shifted sharply to the war. What areas do we deal with? I tried to classify them for today’s meeting. We can identify four main areas: (1) Halakhic studies of the issue of redeeming captives—a concrete halakhic topic on which we have published many articles from different angles. (2) Questions of war ethics and restraint of power—military power, of course—from a religious perspective. (3) The language of war discourse—a very central topic for us. We hear around us talk of “an age of light,” of redemption, of divine promise; we hear songs like “*The Holy One, Blessed be He, always loves me,*” and other nonsense of that kind. We address this discourse critically, from within a deep commitment to the religious sources themselves. (4) General religious-philosophical reflections on the human condition and humanity’s role in God’s imperfect world—a world full of pain, suffering, horror, violence, and power.

Our editorial policy is somewhat unusual—closer to academic editing, perhaps because all three of us are academics. We challenge our writers. For example, if we receive an article we fully agree with, that aligns perfectly with our left-religious worldview, we return it to the author saying: “your more right-leaning readers will raise strong counterarguments. Please address those arguments before finalizing your piece.” Thanks to this, I think we achieve essays that grapple seriously with the intellectual and religious challenge at hand.

Naturally, the level and sharpness of critique have grown as the war has dragged on. Consider the following examples: “A Time for Redeeming Captives,” by Moti Kaplan, October 2023; “There Is No Light in War: We Need a Different Religious Language,” by Ariel Schwartz, November 2023; “Never Again—But Also No to Transfer,” by Dr. Tafat Hacohen-Bick, also November 2023—note how early that was; “Ascending from the Shores of Jaffa: Returning to the Struggle for the Image of Humanity,” by Rabbi David Bigman, head of the Ma’aleh Gilboa Yeshiva, November 2023; “Jewish War Criminals?” by Dr. Shraga Bick, November 2024; “Returning the Hostages through a Deal: The Moral, Jewish, Zionist, and National Right Thing to Do,” by Yohanan Ben-Yaakov, August 2024; A text by Moshe Lavee, mentioned earlier: “How Ugly Is This Instrument: On Vengeance,” May 2025; “Do Not Muzzle: Preventing Humanitarian Aid Is a Desecration of God’s Name,” by Esther Sperber, June 2025; “No, These Are Not Great Days,” my own piece from last

June; An exceptional text: “What Is Unbearable Is That There Will Be No Soul-Searching at All: Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein’s Letter to Menachem Begin after the Sabra and Shatila Massacre.” I would say that if there’s one text worth reading in all of *Yashar*, it’s perhaps this one—it’s unbelievable that it was written by one of the great yeshiva heads thirty years ago. And these days: “Are We More Guilty than All Nations? On Denial and Repentance,” by Yoel Kretzmer-Raziel.

I want to conclude with the most pressing question that constantly occupies us: How to speak with the mainstream religious Zionist public in the political center and “soft right”? How not to settle for convincing the convinced? How to create a relevant religious language? How to overcome the racist, power-obsessed religious indoctrination pervading the education system and public discourse—in society at large, and particularly in the religious Zionist community? And I’ll end by saying—this may sound dramatic or alarming, but it’s what drives us: How to save the Torah? Our Torah was taken from us on October 7, and we want to rescue it, because we feel that without it, there will be no revival for us. Thank you very much, and I’ll be happy to take questions.