



20.93x29.32	1/2	48	עמוד	HAMIZRACHI	10/09/2026	99088985-6
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: Rabbi Y ehuda Bibas: The Man Who Lit the Fuse

Rabbi Yehuda Bibas: The Man Who Lit the Fuse

Rabbi Elie Mischel

In the autumn of 1839, two Scottish missionaries arrived in Bucharest on a mission to convert Jews. Andrew Bonar and Robert McCheyne were ministers of the Church of Scotland, sent

across Eastern Europe and the Middle East to assess the spiritual condition of Jewish communities. In Brăila, a port city on the Danube, they heard about a rabbi from Corfu who had passed through recently – and the Jews there were still talking about him. A young Jewish man in Brăila spoke of him with obvious excitement, “especially of this one sentiment, that the Jews must be instructed in science and in arms, that they may wrest the land of Palestine from

the Turks as the Greeks wrested their country.”¹

The two ministers tracked him down. They found Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leon Bibas on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, 5600.

What followed was not the conversation they planned. Bonar later recorded that the moment they sat down, Rabbi Bibas “immediately began to speak of the situation of the Promised Land, asking us to say, Why G-d chose Israel for his peculiar people, and that portion of the earth as their land.” Every time the missionaries tried to redirect the conversation toward their own agenda, Bibas cut them off, “holding us to the point, if we had any pretensions to the character of logical reasoners.”² He had no interest in their mission. He had his own.

When they rose to leave, Bonar recorded Bibas’s parting words: “He said that he was travelling for the sake of his degraded brethren, to see what might be done for them.”³

The two Scots went home to Edinburgh and published their account the following year. They had no idea they were documenting one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the nineteenth century – a man who would help set in motion the chain of events that produced the State of Israel.

Not your average rabbi

Yehuda Aryeh Leon Bibas was born in 1789 in Gibraltar to a Sephardic family whose roots traced back to the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. His ancestors wandered to Morocco and eventually settled in Gibraltar, then under British rule, making Bibas a proud British subject – a fact he mentioned to Bonar with evident satisfaction. His father, a *kabbalist* and Torah scholar, died while Bibas was still young, and he was sent to live with his grandfather in Livorno, Italy. There he acquired extraordinary range: deep mastery of *halacha* and *kabbalah*, fluency in English, Italian, and French, and a doctorate – he signed his name with the title *L.D., Laureato*



Historic Synagogue of Corfu, Greece



19.62x26.89	2/2	49	עמוד	HAMIZRACHI	10/09/2026	99088983-4
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Dottore – from an Italian university. He maintained a large personal library filled with manuscripts, and from it, his contemporaries report, many scholars benefited.⁴

In 1831 he was invited to serve as rabbi of the Italian Jewish community on the island of Corfu, a community of four thousand souls sitting between Italy and Greece. He accepted, and Corfu is where his vision took shape. He watched the Greek revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which ended in Greek independence in 1830, with intense interest. If the Greeks could organize, arm themselves, and take back their ancient land from the Turks, why not the Jews?

He was a demanding rabbi. He prohibited his community from carrying an umbrella on Shabbat. When the *kashrut* of Corfu's *etrogs* came under challenge from Ashkenazic merchants, he produced a formal *halachic* ruling defending them, backed by Rabbi Chaim Palagi of Izmir.⁵ He was no dreamer divorced from practical Jewish life. But alongside the strict observance, he harbored a vision that most of his contemporaries considered dangerous fantasy.

A new reading of teshuva

At the heart of Rabbi Bibas's thinking was a radical reinterpretation of a familiar concept.

The Torah promises: "And it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse... and you return (*veshavta*) to Hashem your G-d and obey His voice... then Hashem your G-d will return your captivity (*veshav Hashem Elohecha et shevutcha*) and have compassion upon you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where Hashem your G-d has scattered you" (*Devarim* 30:1-3).

Every Jew knew this passage. The standard *reading* was clear: repent, pray, fast, do *teshuvah* in the religious sense, and G-d will redeem you. Rabbi Bibas read it differently. The *teshuvah* the Torah demands, he argued, hides its meaning in the word itself – *shuvah*: return to the land.

Wandering itself was not a punishment to be endured with patience and prayer; it was a sin requiring repair. "What are we doing, O Israel? In all the lands of the world we wander from city to city to seek our sustenance, and we do not go to the Land of Israel, 'the land that the L-rd your G-d seeks out always' (*Devarim* 11:12)."⁶ And once Jews moved – organized, armed themselves, went up – the Divine response would follow. Not before.

This was the principle the *kabbalists* called "*itaruta d'letata*, the arousal from below" that awakens the Divine response from above. G-d will not act until the people move first. And moving meant preparation: stop collecting the *chaluka*, the charity money sent to support Jews in Jerusalem, and teach them to work. Train Jewish youth in the sciences. Teach them to use weapons. Conquer the Land from the Ottomans the way the Greeks conquered theirs.⁷

The Jewish world was not ready for any of this. When he traveled through Belgrade, Brăila, Bucharest, Vienna, Frankfurt, and London, he was received with honor as a great Torah scholar. His ideas were something else.

Belgrade, 1839

In the summer of 1839, while traveling through Serbia, Rabbi Bibas sat down for a private meeting with a younger rabbi named Yehuda Alkalai, who served in the nearby town of Zemlin. Rabbi Alkalai was already known as a thinker with proto-Zionist inclinations, but nothing he encountered prepared him for what he would hear that day. He recorded the experience in his own words: the ideas Bibas shared were "most awesome, which caused my heart and knees to tremble."⁸

Rabbi Alkalai spent the rest of his life building a complete theological architecture on the foundation Rabbi Bibas laid in that conversation – arguing systematically that human initiative, mass immigration, the revival of Hebrew, the establishment of Jewish national institutions, was not merely permitted but required as the precondition for Divine redemption. The *teshuvah* of *Devarim* 30 was his central proof text, and he learned to read it the way Rabbi Bibas read it. Rabbi Alkalai became Bibas's most important legacy, carrying his ideas forward to the next generation.

For the next several decades, Alkalai served as rabbi in Zemlin. The *shamash* of his synagogue was a man named Shimon Leib Yehuda, Theodor Herzl's grandfather. He sat in that synagogue and heard Alkalai preach. Scholars have traced the line from there: Bibas to Alkalai, Alkalai to the Herzl family, and from that home to the man who convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. What Herzl thought he created from scratch had perhaps been spoken of with longing at his grandparents' table long before he understood what any of it meant.

In January 1852, Bibas left Corfu for the last time. He was past sixty and recently

widowed. He packed his library of manuscripts, took two young students with him, and sailed for the Land of Israel. He settled in Hebron, intending to found a *yeshiva*. Two months after his arrival, he collapsed and died in the middle of a *drasha* – standing before his congregation, in the city of the Patriarchs, exactly where he always said the Jewish people belonged.

After the 1929 massacre, when the Jewish community was expelled from Hebron and the old cemetery desecrated, no one could say any longer which stone was his. Nearly a century later, a 93-year-old man who remembered visiting the grave as a child pointed to the right stone. In 2023, a distant relative who bears his name came to Hebron and placed a nameplate on the stone. It was 173 years overdue.⁹

Rabbi Bibas dedicated his life to planting a vision the world was not yet ready to receive. The world finally caught up.

1. Andrew Alexander Bonar and Robert Murray McCheyne, *A Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews from the Church of Scotland in 1839* (Edinburgh: W. Oliphant, 1842), 380.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Yael Weiler-Israel, "Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Aryeh Leon Bibas, Herald of Zionism," in Ofer Tubol (ed.), *Kol HaTor: Tzionut Mesoratit Sefaradit* (Jerusalem, 2021).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Quoted in Weiler-Israel, *Kol HaTor*.
7. Bonar and McCheyne, *Narrative*, 380.
8. Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, *Darkei Noam*, introduction, 19 Menachem Av 5599.
9. "Mystery Solved: Grave of Yehuda Bibas Identified in Hebron," Hebron Jewish Community, <https://hebron.org.il/en/mystery-solved-grave-of-yehuda-bibas-identified-in-hebron/>



Rabbi Elie Mischel

is the Editor of HaMizrachi magazine and the author of *Countdown: American Jews and God's Plan for Redemption* (2026).