

The Six Day War: Then and Now
9 June 2007
Birmingham Progressive

One aspect of the process of growing older is a recognition of the ever-increasing number of people on the opposite side of a dividing line of memory. Born in 1944, I have of course no memories of World War II, as some in this congregation do. But events of the 1960s—the Cuban Missile Crisis, the assassination of John F Kennedy, the March on Washington and the assassination of Martin Luther King—are vividly etched in my memory, as I recognize the large number of my acquaintances, including all my students, for whom these events are not fundamentally different from the Magna Carta and the First Crusade.

Included in this category is the Six Day War. Our congregation today is divided into two categories: those for whom it was a living experience, and those—a minority, who will eventually become a majority—who may have heard about it and read about it extensively, but who feel no sense of participation in it. This morning I would like to try and articulate from my personal perspective the feelings of the generation that lived through these six harrowing and exalting days for those too young to have direct memories; and then to reflect on how it all seems in the retrospect of four decades.

Though obviously I am an American, I was in England during the war. When I finished my undergraduate studies, I received a Fellowship for a year of graduate study at either Oxford or Cambridge; someone told me that Cambridge was prettier, and I entered Pembroke College there. But my parents were in Jerusalem. My father was a rabbi, who served in one congregation throughout his professional career, from his student days in autumn 1933 until his retirement in 1980 (with the exception of 2 years in the American Army as a chaplain during the war). In January 1967, after 34 years with the synagogue, he received his first sabbatical leave, and after some initial travelling, they came to Jerusalem at the beginning of March. They were living at the Hebrew Union College building on King David Street, at that time bordering No-Man's Land between Jewish west Jerusalem and the Jordanian held Old City. There was a clear view of the Jaffa Gate and the Tower of David from their window. I visited them during the one-month spring break.

As the tension rose the last days of May and the first days of June, I knew that my parents were not going to leave Israel, despite the urging of the American embassy for its citizens to do so. They volunteered for posi-

tions left empty by those who had been called up for military service – virtually the entire male population between 20 and 55. All internal tensions were pushed aside; high school students delivered the mail, volunteers taught in classes, served food in hospitals, swept the streets.

Many of you will recall the poisonous rhetoric spewing forth from Arab leaders, especially Gamal Abdul Nasser – promises that the Arab armies would sweep the Jews into the sea. Despite the hyperbole, because the memories of the Holocaust were still fresh, we took those threats seriously. *All* Jews, and much of the non-Jewish world as well, felt a connectedness with the population of Israel, but especially those who had loved ones living there. Needless to say, there was no e-mail at the time, and you could not pick up the telephone and direct dial for an immediate conversation – the telephone lines were so swamped that you had to make an appointment 10 days in advance to speak to someone in Jerusalem.

But we wrote letters, and I still have some of those letters, including one that ended, “Roses are red, Violets are blue, Please don’t get dead, ‘Cause I love you.” I have a vivid memory of watching on television the mobilization of a line of Israeli tanks in the Negev, facing Egyptian tanks across the border; this was followed by footage of an American Air Force operation against targets in Vietnam, and I thought: I feel so much more connected with those Israeli tanks than with those American jet planes. That was a time when the young Americans my age would try anything to avoid getting drafted into the army, while young and older Israelis waited eagerly for their call-up notice to active duty, in order to defend their country.

On June 5, we heard the news in the morning that war had broken out in the Middle East. And then there was a news blackout for the rest of the day. It’s hard for us to imagine this now, but there was no information on the media at all until the late afternoon. There was no choice but to go ahead with our normal schedules, despite the agonizing uncertainty. With the renewal of news coverage there were many contradictory reports, including Egyptian boasts of great victories and massive destruction of Israeli forces.

There were reports of Jordanian bombardment of west Jerusalem, including an announcement that the Chagall stained glass windows at Hadassah hospital had been heavily damaged by Arab shelling, and that Chagall had said, “Let Israel win the war, and I will make you new windows.” One BBC correspondent – I don’t know his name—called it correctly: “According to my sources, the Israeli Air Force destroyed most of the

Egyptian Air Force on the ground, and Israeli forces are advancing deep into the Sinai peninsula.” That turned out to be true—but there was no way of knowing it at the time.

Then the reality became clear. The Egyptian army in total, humiliating disarray, scurrying back to the Suez Canal, long lines of armoured vehicles trapped and destroyed in the Mitla Pass. The Israeli forces, on the third day of Jordanian shelling, moving into the Old City, raising a flag over the Tower of David, standing before the Western Wall that most of the soldiers were too young to have ever seen. The successful attack on the Golan Heights, from which so frequently Syrian gunners had fired on Israeli civilian farmers down below. By Saturday night it was all over; Israel had survived, our loved ones were safe.

How did we feel at the time? It was a time of euphoria, a sustained, unprecedented high. We felt a sense of awe at the proficiency, bravery and heroism of the Israeli Defence Forces, achieving one of the great victories in world military history. We felt a sense of deep admiration for the citizenry of Israel that had faced up to the danger with dignity and courage and pulled together with such unusual solidarity. We felt a sense of pride for the reaffirmation of humanistic values in time of war and in its immediate aftermath. There was not a single case of rape or pillage reported in the conquered populations. There was no jingoistic, militaristic victory parade. The victory celebration was a concert at the Binyanei ha-Umah hall in Jerusalem, with a new stanza for “Yerushalayim shel Zahav” provided by Naomi Shemer, who had written it.

There were also feelings of gratification and delight about the performance of world Jewry in these days of crisis. The volunteers that streamed into Israel; the massive financial contributions generated; and the feeling even on the part of minimally identified Jews of a kind of mystical bond with the fate of that small country that could not be allowed to fall.

And there was undeniably a religious dimension to our reaction. At first, the very survival of the state of Israel seemed to be at stake. After the destruction of 6 million of our people by the Nazis, with 3 million more compelled to be “Jews of silence” behind the Iron Curtain—was it possible that yet another catastrophe could befall our people within a single generation? Then the stunning victory, beyond the wildest imagination.

We felt then that this was something more than excellent training, discipline, commitment on the part of the armed forces. We felt that we had been witness to something ineffably miraculous. It was reflected in the

eyes of those young paratroopers standing in that iconic photograph before the Western wall. We felt that God was revealing himself once again in history as He had in ancient times; that after a period of excruciating absence and silence since the beginning of the Holocaust, when God's face remained hidden, His presence eclipsed, the events of those days enabled us to feel to the depths of our being the divine presence once again.

So much for our experience in June of 1967. Forty years have passed. How does the legacy of those Six Days seem in retrospect? The simplest thing to say is that it is far more *mixed* than we ever could have imagined when, on Shavu'ot 1967, Jewish civilians were permitted to enter the Old City and stand before the Kotel in a newly constructed plaza. Jerusalem is reunited, we can visit the holy sites, we can view the Temple Mount from Mount Scopus and the Mount of Olives; there is no longer a wall with barbed wire in the heart of the city, no longer No Man's Land or divisions.

Israeli Jews streamed into the Old City to renew acquaintances with Arabs they had known 19 years before; to buy from the Arab shops, and eat in the Arab restaurants. United Jerusalem seemed to be an unmitigated blessing that could never be undone. Today, there is a new high barrier wall of separation in parts of Jerusalem, with deep suspicion and tension between population groups. Today Jerusalem seems less a place of love and peace than an all but insurmountable obstacle to a final peace settlement.

In the years following the Six Day War, we saw certain attitudes cultivated and strengthened that now seem both unfortunate and unhealthy.

- That the Arabs and their armies were incompetent and cowardly, viewed with a contempt and disdain that bordered on racist thought.
- That the Israeli Defence Force was invincible, all-powerful, could accomplish anything, could do no wrong.
- That in times of crisis, Israel could count only on itself (perhaps in alliance with world Jewry); that the rest of the world doesn't give a damn, and that Israel can therefore go it alone, without regard to world opinion. All of these attitudes, rooted in the experience of the Six Day War, turned out to be not only misguided but dangerous.

The territories conquered in the war have been its most important legacy. At first they too appeared to be an unmitigated blessing:

- providing strategic depth so that the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian armies could no longer be mobilized near Israel's population centers;
- rationalizing borders that seemed all but impossible to defend;
- enabling Jews to have access to holy and historic sites in Hebron, Samaria, Jericho;
- giving a breathing space for a claustrophobic society;
- serving as bargaining chips for peace (as indeed the Sinai did with regard to Egypt, after another costly war).

At first it seemed as if the occupation of these territories would enable Israel to improve the material lives of many inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza by providing opportunities to work and earn decent wages—as indeed was the case for a number of years.

But the occupation turned out to be a mixed blessing indeed.

- For several decades, it led to reliance on Arabs to do the hard, manual labour of building roads and houses in the State of Israel itself, thereby undermining the work ethic of Labour Zionism.
- It strengthened the militantly nationalistic and messianic components of the Jewish spectrum, with settlers believing in a mystical attachment to the land and a redemptive mission that makes territorial compromise an inconceivable betrayal for them, and fosters contempt for the Palestinian population that lives on it.
- And it made Israel into an occupying power. For a long period it was a benign occupation, to be sure, but it was still an occupation: a confrontation between a ruling power and an increasingly hostile population, turning increasingly to violence, which in turn has produced an increasingly repressive occupation.

No one believes any longer (as many did in the 1970s) that having settlements on the West Bank was a strategic asset, providing a first line of defence against enemy forces. It has become increasingly clear to most Israelis, and to most Jews committed to Israel, that the settlements near Arab population centers on the West Bank and in the Golan Heights (and certainly the former settlements in Gaza) are a strategic *liability*, a drain on the resources of Tsahal. Most believe today that the occupied territories are an albatross, a threat to the Jewish or democratic character of Is-

rael, and that Israel desperately needs to find a way to rid itself of these territories in a manner consistent with its security.

What can we learn by comparing our memories of June 1967 with our retrospect 40 years later. One lesson that seems obvious to me is that history is far more complex than we imagine it to be. That which seems confusing and obscure as we live through it often seems obvious in retrospect, while the certainties of the moment we are experiencing often turn out to be far less simple than we imagined. With all of the highly intelligent people in Israel, the number of people on June 11, 1967 who had even an inkling of what things would be like 40 years later was extremely small.

To put it in theological terms: we should all be extremely careful and humble about our confidence that we know God's plan. The victory of 1967, and acquisition of a united Jerusalem and territories of historic and strategic value seemed then like a gracious *gift* from God. Now, in retrospect, they seem to me more like a *test*. How would the people of the State of Israel, and world Jewry in solidarity with it, respond to the new opportunities in the wake of the Six Day War?

- Would they respond with respect for the dignity of the native inhabitants of those territories, and pursue a sincere quest for peaceful co-existence with them?
- Or would they foster a self-indulgent chauvinism that arrogantly claims divine sanction for the suppression of their fellow human beings?
-

I say, with a heavy heart, that in many ways, it appears to me as if we have failed this test.

The central theme of both our Torah parashah and our Haftarah this week is the *conquest of the land*. With this in mind, I would like to conclude by quoting a few sentences written by Martin Buber in 1939: "It seems to me that God does not give any one portion of the earth away, so that the owner may say, As God says in the Bible, 'For all the land is mine.' The conquered land is, in my opinion, only lent even to the conqueror who has settled on it—and God waits to see what he will make of it. We have no desire to dispossess [our Arab brothers]; we want to live with them. We do not want to dominate them, we want to serve with them." (An Open Letter to Gandhi, in Hertzberg, *Zionist Reader*, pp. 464–65).

Let us pray that in the retrospect of 50 years, or 100 years, the Six Day War will not be seen as the beginning of the end of the most precious Zionist values. Let it be seen, rather as providing the opportunity for Jews and Arabs to serve together on the land of destiny.