

“The Voice is the Voice of Jacob” — A Tribute to Abba Eban
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I’d like to talk to you about that far-off, if not far-out, long-lost era known as “The Sixties.” Actually, that’s a bit misleading. I’m going to focus not on the general experience of living through the Beatles, Woodstock, or Vietnam War protests, but on the experience of American Jews during that era, specifically on or around June 1967, when the Six Day War broke out. The occasion is the death this past week at the age of 87 of Abba Eban, the illustrious Israeli diplomat whose electric oratory encouraged and inspired American Jews during that time.

It occurred to me the other day that most members of our congregation—probably most of us present today—do not remember the Six Day War. It took place, after all, thirty five years ago, so even if one was alive then, if one is under, say, forty or even forty-five—and most people, after all, whatever their age, claim to be that young—it was unlikely to have had that strong an impact.

And thus, many of the lessons of that war are lost to us, and that’s unfortunate, for to a great extent Israel’s troubles today cannot be understood unless one reflects on what led up to that war, how it proceeded, and what followed it. Michael Oren, an Israeli scholar, has just published a book entitled *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford, 2002). I read it this summer and I recommend it to you. It’s a sobering reminder of how vulnerable Israel was just prior to the outbreak of war, and how vulnerable she may be even today.

I remember those days well because in May of 1967, I was preparing for my Bar Mitzvah. I can recall distinctly one particularly ominous moment. We were gathered in the synagogue on a Friday night, and the rabbi was asking everyone to send telegrams to President Johnson urging him to support Israel in its struggle with Egypt. (When is the last time someone you know sent a telegram?) The Egyptians had just closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships and had ordered the United Nations troops that had been stationed along the Egyptian-Israeli border since the end of the 1956 war to evacuate. General Gamal Abdul Nasser, president



of Egypt, issued one bellicose pronouncement after another. “We shall drive the Jews into the sea!” was one heard most often.

As American Jews, we weren’t able to pick up guns to defend Israel, but we could urge our government to help.

I remember the feeling in the room that night: it was fearful. There was a palpable sense of dread. It was not unthinkable to the folks gathered there that Israel might lose, and that the price of a loss might be not only the destruction of the Jewish State, but also the wholesale massacre of all its Jewish inhabitants.

Those days at the end of May and the beginning of June were very tense. The UN forces were withdrawn and the Egyptian army moved to the front. Israel began mobilizing its reserves. I remember the maps published in the papers as the crisis heated up: Israel, surrounded by five Arab nations, poised to destroy her. The Jordanians and the Egyptians, the Lebanese, the Syrians and the Iraqis were all ready to attack.

The thought that Israel might be wiped out was not far-fetched. After all—and this is a fact not often appreciated—1967 was closer to World War II and to Hitler’s almost successful attempt to wipe out all the Jews of Europe, than we are now to 1967. It had only been nineteen years since Israel had been created. That’s hardly long enough to feel safe and secure.

And then, on June 5th, war broke out. At the time, we didn’t know that it was a pre-emptive attack, and so at first we were even more fearful to learn that the armies were clashing. Then came the news that Israel had virtually wiped out the entire Egyptian air force while all of the planes were sitting on their runways. That was exhilarating.

But then came word that the UN Security Council would meet in emergency session and attempt to stop Israel from defending herself by fully prosecuting the war that had been thrust on her. It was a very tense time. The Soviet Union was firmly supporting its client states in the region, including Egypt, and was threatening to come to their aid, with military forces if necessary. It began to look as though Israel was going to be at war not only with the Arab states but with the Soviet Union as well. Fears of a nuclear confrontation escalated.

We focused our attention on the United Nations. In those days—and I know that this will surprise every young person in the room—most televisions carried only three or four stations. Some TVs carried UHF stations, but those tended to

broadcast local programming. I believe that all three major networks carried the debate in the UN Security Council live.

It's hard to convey what American Jews at the time felt. In addition to their concern about Israel, there was a selfish concern as well: how well would Israel present itself? Would American Jews be embarrassed by the Israeli presentation? Would American Jews suffer greater anti-Semitism as a result of the conflict in the Middle East?

American Jews did not feel very confident in those days. It wasn't as easy, as comfortable to be an identified Jew in those days. It might interfere with one's ability to go to college, to advance in one's profession. Certainly, as a kid, unless one went to an all-Jewish school, being Jewish did not contribute to one's popularity.

And then came the moment when Israel's representative was asked to speak. His name was unusual: Abba Eban. It was Jewish, but it didn't sound Jewish in the way that names like Marvin or Myron or Irving or Stanley might to American gentile and American Jewish ears. (It was later that I learned that his given name had been Aubrey; Abba was his Hebrew name.) What would he sound like? Would he speak with a Yiddish accent? Would he be inarticulate and bore his listeners? Would he lose the war for public opinion even as the war on the battlefield was proceeding so well?

Our fears dissipated rapidly as we listened to his unbelievable eloquence. He spoke in a beautiful, erudite British accent with mellifluous tones and thoughtful turns of phrase. He presented Israel's case with strength and clarity. American Jews lapped it up. "On the morning of June 5th [he told the UN on June 19th], our country's choice was plain . . . [T]o live or perish; to defend the national existence or to forfeit it for all time. From those dire moments, [we have] emerged in five heroic days from mortal peril to glorious resistance. What should be condemned is not Israel's action, but the attempt to condemn it. Never have freedom, honor, justice, national interest and international morality been so righteously protected." Unfortunately, Abba Eban's erudite eloquence was more popular abroad than at home. Israelis didn't have too much appreciation for this scholarly diplomat, and his attempts to appeal to ordinary people often fell flat. I didn't know it at the time, but at the very moment he was addressing the Security Council at the United Nations, there were calls in Israel for his resignation. He was criticized for leaving the country, for "considering the Security Council meeting important enough to attend and address." (St. John, p.459). Abba Eban's voice was

always more impressive to outsiders than to insiders in Israel, who tended to give more respect to those who had served in the army—which he had not—or to those who talked tough, which again he did not.

Abba Eban had been a brilliant student of Oriental languages in England and was thoroughly comfortable in Arabic.

Once, a few years after the Six Day War, Abba Eban visited an Israeli Arab village and spoke to the village elders in beautiful, literary Arabic. Afterwards, one of the elders was interviewed by Israeli television. “What did you think of the speech?” he was asked. “Well,” he responded, in perfectly colloquial Hebrew, “it was interesting, but . . .” and then he proceeded to rattle off several issues of concern that Eban, despite his lofty message, had not addressed.

Eban was an independent thinker. In his early years, he was one of the most effective voices denouncing the PLO and its leader, Yassir Arafat; it was he who famously and repeatedly quipped that the Palestinians had a tradition of “never having lost a chance to miss an opportunity.” Nonetheless, he later criticized those who would slow or stop negotiations with the Palestinians.

There is no question that, without the training, the commitment to sharpen the sword and the willingness to fight on the battlefield, Israel would have been destroyed in 1967. But it is equally clear that, without the brilliant oratory and equally brilliant diplomatic finesse of Abba Eban, the gains achieved by that war might have been lost within a few weeks.

Abba Eban was not destined to be a popular hero; his destiny lay elsewhere, in helping outsiders view his nation with sympathy and understanding. Would that Israel had someone of his depth, his appeal, his erudition, his persuasive talent, today!

Is there a connection between the life of Abba Eban and today's parashah? At the very beginning of today's parashah, Jacob meets his brother Esau, for the first time in twenty years. It's an emotional meeting. The last time they'd seen each other, Esau had threatened to kill Jacob. Now, they are embracing.

But then comes a critical moment: Esau invites Jacob to accompany him. To continue on together. It's a tense moment. Jacob knows that it would be a terrible mistake to walk on with Esau. Within a short while, they'll be at each other's throats. And yet, to say “no” is also dangerous. It could hurt Esau's feelings and precipitate conflict. What to do?

The answer, of course, is to say the right thing. Jacob responds with tact and eloquence. He praises Esau and thanks him profusely for his offer, yet, at the same time, gently and sympathetically declines it, with six Hebrew words: “*Lamah zeh! Emtzah-hen b’einei adoni*” – “Oh, no, my lord is too kind to me!” As the Book of Proverbs puts it, “A gentle word can turn away wrath.”

Abba Eban was a master of the gentle word and the not-so-gentle word. He knew how to say the right thing. He knew what to say, and when and how to say it, to defend Israel with exquisite flair. His life reminds us that Israel’s security continues to depend not only on its military capability but also its diplomatic and public relations finesse.

Abba Eban could have lived a very comfortable life in England. But instead he chose to give all of his talents to support the nation of Israel. As comfortable as he would have been in England, that's how uncomfortable, in a sense, he was in Israel! And yet, where would Israel be today had he not made that choice, that commitment, to bind his destiny with that of his adopted country?

I’d like to conclude with the closing words of Abba Eban’s autobiography—words that though written twenty years ago, can and should speak to us and inspire us today: “It is in Israel alone that the Jew can face the world in his [or her] own authentic image, and not as a footnote in the story of other societies. It is only as a nation in its own soil, its own tongue and its own faith that the Jewish people can hear what it has to hear, say what it has to say—do what it has to do.”

Let us take those words to heart.