

The Six Day War: Forty Years Later

40 years ago, this week, the very existence of the State of Israel was threatened and hung in the balance. Only 19 years after its birth, its neighbors sought to turn back the hand of time and to negate the creation of the Jewish state by attempting to destroy the nascent nation.

For Israelis the days leading up to June, 1967 were unbelievably tense. Arab nations were holding massive rallies to whip their people into a frenzy. "*Itbach Yahud*, Slaughter the Jews!" was the rallying cry and chant of the fervent crowds intoxicated with hatred. A few months earlier Gamal Abdul Nasser, the Egyptian dictator had flown to Damascus, and made a pact with Syria, uniting the two countries in a common goal. Dictators from Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and all 21 Arab nations wanted to join in the effort. None wanted to be left out. They smelled blood, and their intent was clear. Nasser boastfully shouted to the crowds, that the Arabs would unite and "push the Jews into the sea."

It was not until much later that a profound realization dawned on me: 1967 was only 22 years after the end of an all out war against the Jews, of the Nazi attempt to exterminate the entire Jewish people. Imagine the impact the Arab crowds and threats must have had on the Holocaust survivors among the Israeli population.

Tens of thousands of troops were deployed and positioned to be ready for the order to attack. Hundreds of Egyptian tanks massed along the border. Nasser demanded that the United Nations troops, who served as a buffer in the Sinai Desert be removed. I still recall the eloquent words of Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Abba Eban, who asked rhetorically, "What good is it to have an umbrella, when the moment it threatens to rain, it is taken away?"

The assault was imminent. Unbeknownst to the public, preparing for the worst, the government of Israel had secretly ordered tens of thousands of body bags.

As if the bellicosity did not suffice to strike fear and terror in the hearts of the young nation, the port of Eilat was closed, as the Arab nations instituted a blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba, a clear violation of international law, and a justification for going to war.

Israel had not taken any aggressive act to provoke the ire of its neighbors -- unless, of course, its existence could be considered provocative.

There were other subtexts to the conflict. Diversion of much needed water by Syria, Jordan and Lebanon was a source of ongoing tension between Israel and its neighbors. The war also needs to be considered against the backdrop of the Cold War tensions between the United States and Russia. The communist bloc was especially supportive and solicitous of Egypt, Syria, Iraq and sought to make inroads with other countries in the region, while the United States and Western nations saw Israel as their natural ally. And of course, oil was a factor in world politics, even back then, as France which up until this time had been Israel's major ally and supplier shifted its allegiance.

Israel was a nation of less than 3 million, facing over 200 million hostile Arabs from 21 nations. The statistical differences between the armies, the amount of weaponry of the two sides was astounding. Israel had no choice but to survive. Yet nothing seemed further from reality than the possibility of victory against the far better prepared, and significantly better equipped Arab armies.

The Encyclopedia Judaica on the Six Day War states, "Israel was ringed by an Arab force of some 250,000 troops, over 2,000 tanks, and some 700 frontline fighter planes and bombers. The world looked on at what was believed by many to be the impending destruction of Israel, but no action was taken, and every effort was made by the Soviet and Arab delegates to the UN to minimize the seriousness of the situation and to permit developments to take their course."

As a 14 year old ninth grader, I recall the sheer sense of horror and panic that gripped Jews around the world. I remember my parents attending an overflowing rally supporting Israel at the Pikesville Armory on Tuesday June 6th, the second night of the war. Our concerns and anxieties were real, as we worried that our worst fears and greatest nightmare would come true.

The sense of unity and solidarity in the Jewish world was unprecedented. We felt that our fate and destiny were inextricably linked and joined together. Within the first 15 minutes of a UJA emergency appeal luncheon in New York, \$ 15 million was raised. People emptied out bank accounts and took out loans, as we dared not stand by idly and not do something on behalf of our brothers and sisters facing the threat of annihilation.

On Thursday or Friday, I traveled with my father by bus to a mid-day rally in front of the White House. But something unexpected occurred. Word began to reach us that defying all odds, a miracle was taking place. The reports out of the Arab media had spoken of the heavy losses inflicted on the Jews, but by now it was clear that their reports were lies. Our concern and worry was turned into relief, and a sense of joy started to set in, as we began to learn of the extent of the miraculous victory of the Jewish state.

In the opening three hours of the war, the Israeli Air force flying low to avoid radar detection taking preemptive action had destroyed 391 planes on the ground, and another 60 in the air, effectively knocking out the air forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

The impact of the stunning victory on Jews in America and around the world was astounding. I still feel chills when I remember the sense of pride we felt. At the rally, Israeli flags with the Star of David were proudly displayed. Almost instantly, people started to wear a Star of David, or chai around their necks, and it was ok if people saw it. I am not sure, but I think it was the first time, I saw and heard people singing and dancing defiantly, "Am Yisrael Chai, the people of Israel lives. Yet our ancestors still live!" And it was the first time I ever saw people wearing keepot publicly. It too was a sign of honor. The war had a profound impact on how Jews viewed ourselves.

The image of the timid Jew, of the defenseless shtetl Jew, of the ghetto Jew dependent on others for his well-being was repudiated and replaced by the image of the brave and fearless Israeli soldiers, male and female. Jewish pride was awakened, as somehow, David had defeated Goliath.

The war, known as “Israel’s Finest Hour”, gave way to songs, including Naomi Shemer’s memorable, *Yerushalayim shel zahav*. Other memorable songs dreamed of peace and expressed the longing to live in peace and to set aside strife. A Hebrew book “*Du Siah*”, of dialogues and words of Israeli soldiers was translated into English as “*The Seventh Day*.” It was amazing to read the lack of hatred, the humanity, doubts, and decency of the Israeli soldiers, who within a few decades would instead be unfairly and inaccurately portrayed in the harshest of terms.

In the end, Israel had captured territories it had never dreamed of or even desired seizing. The Sinai Desert was captured from Egypt. In the north, the invading Syrian armies wound up losing the Golan Heights, which had been used for decades as a place to shoot at Israeli kibbutzniks below. Jordan lost territory it had held onto since the 1948 War of Independence, areas which in Biblical times had been part of the nation of Israel, and known as Judea and Samaria, or the West Bank. Jerusalem was reunited, and for the first time in 1,900 years, all of it, including the Old City was in Jewish hands.

The speed with which Israel devastated the might of the Arab bloc shocked the world and humiliated the Arabs. The psychological impact was devastating. The shame felt by the Arabs would compel their leaders to prepare for the chance to exact revenge and regain their honor.

We sometimes forget how severe a toll the victory exacted. Altogether, Israel lost twice as many men — 777 dead and 2,586 wounded — in proportion to her total population as the U.S. lost in eight years of fighting in Vietnam. Had Israel waited for the Arabs to strike first, as it did in 1973, the cost clearly would have been much higher and victory would not have been assured.

Following the cease-fire, the Israeli government immediately expressed its desire and willingness to negotiate a comprehensive peace agreement with its neighbors. The response came from Arab leaders meeting in Khartoum who declared the famous “three no’s” – their policy would be “no peace, no recognition and no negotiation with Israel.” So much for the victor dictating terms to the one who was defeated.

So looking back: what was it all about? What has changed and what has remained the same? To this day, the results and outcome of the war are debated. Differences of opinion over what was resolved, and what was not, as to what problems were solved and what were created are part of its lasting impact and legacy.

Sadly, the moment of unity was all too brief and the sense of security was too fleeting and short-lived. The war gave birth to many conflicting responses in Israel, including the

Peace Now movement and the Gush Etzion movement. The sense of euphoria and relief was soon replaced by the assaults of ongoing terrorist acts and international resolutions seeking to undo Israel's victory.

We have all read stories of combatants who meet after 40 years and reconcile. Japanese and Americans, Germans and their enemies, and others – but somehow that is elusive and has not happened in the Middle East. One must ask why that is so. I would contend the reason is that the same purpose which united the disparate Arab forces in 1967 is still operative today: their unresolved desire to act upon their hatred and to wipe Israel off the face of the earth.

Let us recall that one brief shining moment, 40 years ago when the desire to eradicate Israel seemed to have been vanquished

My message is that we should never forget that the threats to Israel's existence from most of its Arab neighbors are real and they have not disappeared. The hatred of the Jewish state emanates not just from the capitols and streets of extremist Arab or Muslim nations and leaders, but also in the form of civilized British professors who boycott Israel and British trade unions refusing to do business with Israel. Anti semitism in the disguise of anti Zionism is found in the form of college students working in a store who refuse to serve students wearing shirts proclaiming their support of Israel. It also includes a former American president whose antipathy is so strong and blatant that he can dare to compare Israel to South Africa. All of these individuals and efforts, knowingly or unknowingly buy into the Jihadist propaganda and program to destroy Israel.

Clearly, our work as lovers and supporters who believe the Jewish people need and are entitled to a homeland is not done. We must continue to advocate on behalf of the state of Israel, which remains a beacon of hope for Jews around the world. May the words of June, 1967 ever ring true: Am Yisrael chai, od aveenu chai! The people of Israel lives! And let us proclaim those words as one, as a united people.

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