

On Israel's Historic Moments and Milestones

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778

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There's a narrative in Israeli society that in the three weeks leading up to the Six-Day-War, regular people were digging graves, morbidly expecting they or their family members would soon occupy them. It's not true. Here's the truth: In the days before the war, just two decades after the liberation of Auschwitz, municipalities were digging mass graves. Regular Israelis were digging shelters.

This summer we marked 50 years since *Milchemet Sheshet Yamim*, the Six-Day-War. But this Rosh Hashanah is further fraught with historical touch points, because this secular year we also mark 100 years since the Balfour Declaration in which it was written, "His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." And 5778 will mark both 70 years since the fateful November 29th UN vote for partition and the May 14th declaration of the State of Israel and the beginning of the War of Independence.

I want to begin our Rosh Hashanah together with a shameless plug. I'm very excited to share with you, beginning this January, a brand new curriculum created by the Shalom Hartman Institute. It's called "Israel's Milestones and their Meanings," and we at Beth Am have access to it because of my ongoing fellowship at *Mechon Hartman*. This summer, we were introduced to the framework of the curriculum and, with your permission, I want to take some time this evening to make the case for why the Six-Day-War, in particular, was such a pivotal moment, not only in Israeli history but in Jewish history as well. I'll share a few salient points to whet your appetite, but the bulk of the learning will come Thursday evenings beginning early 2018.

It's hard to grasp, especially for those of us born since '67, the profound anxiety radiating throughout the Jewish world in the days and weeks leading up to June 5th. And it's impossible to convey the sense of elation and relief when, in only six days, the fledgling Jewish state more than tripled its size, secured its borders and returned, after 2,000 years, to cities and sites chanted in *haftarot* on Shabbat. Perhaps it's understandable, then, why so few voices that summer had anything remotely critical to say about the fact that millions of Arabs were now going to be living under Israeli occupation.

Dr. Tal Becker, legal adviser for the Israeli Foreign Ministry and a senior member of the Israeli peace negotiation team, lays out the conundrum in this way, "Few words trigger as much emotion and division across the Jewish world as the word occupation.... For some... 1967 is seen as the beginning of our redemption, for others the cause of our moral downfall." I bet some of you here tonight started to squirm at the very mention of "occupation" – while others were probably fuming that I managed to get through four paragraphs of an Israel sermon without mentioning the word "Palestinian." You see the dilemma?

To give us just a flavor of what it was like in those heady days following the victory of June 10th, here's a sampling of just portions of Israeli poems written in the aftermath of the War. This from Naomi Shemer's "*Al Kanfei Hakesef, On Silver Wings*" about the victorious Air Force. Notice the biblical imagery:

He passes like the blade of a sickle
He is like an arrow sent out, whistling by
He writes a letter of fire
From Golan to the Red Sea

They ride on silver wings
Heroes of the wind, in the clouds
The strong and the good
Like birds, soaring high.

Or Yossi Gamzo, the secular *left-wing* poet, in his "The Western Wall":

The paratrooper stood next to the *kotel*
Just him of the entire platoon
He told me that death does not have a shape.
Just a caliber – 9 millimeters – that's all
He told me: "A tear I will not shed"
And silently cast down his eyes

"But grandfather, so help me God, is buried
over there on Olive Mount."

The *kotel* of moss and sadness (2X)
Some people have a heart like a stone
Some stones have the heart of man

It was the rare poet who wrote a lament in those days. An outlier was Hanoach Levin in his play *You and I and the War to Come*:

Where did my child go, my little good child?
Black pawn captures a white pawn.
My father won't return, never will he come.
White pawn captures a black pawn.
Tears in all the rooms, and silence in the gardens,
The king is playing with the queen.

The play was a flop. No one wanted to hear what Levin had to say. The course I'll be teaching includes some of these artistic reactions to Israeli milestones, but the bulk of it is scholarship and foundational texts of the State of Israel. This evening I want to share just one scholar's thinking on the significance of 1967. Here's Dr. Micah Goodman's take, based on his current bestseller, the cleverly titled *Milkud Shishim v'Sheva* or *Catch-67*.

What is the paradox at the heart of the Six-Day-War? To understand this, we have to go back in time to the years before Israel was a reality. What is Theodore Herzl's rationale for *Der Judenstat*, a Jewish state? It's about Jewish survival. He sees a Jewish population in Western Europe largely comfortable and assimilated, but precarious. Antisemitism is real and, in Herzl's estimation, the Jews will never be safe until they, like other nations of the world, have a sovereign land to call their own. 1948-49, long after Herzl's death, marks a dream fulfilled and deferred. A state for the Jews is indeed a reality, but the true security Herzl sought, his solution for the problem of Antisemitism, with Jews sitting as equals among the community of nations, those aspirations are laid to waste as the fledgling state ekes its way to the green line's armistice of 1949. A mere

three years after two-thirds of European Jewry are eradicated, the State of Israel's almost demise is a sobering lesson about the place of Jews on the world stage.

If Herzl is the forefather of secular Zionism, religious Zionism can claim as its patriarch Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Kook envisions Jewish return to the land not as a pragmatic matter, nor as a solution to Antisemitism, but as a romantic reengagement with a long lost lover or family member. But Kook's vision is only partially fulfilled in 1949 as well. Two of the four historic holy cities, Hebron and Jerusalem's Old City, remain cut off from the Jewish state. The Jewish side of partition, even the expanded version after the cease-fire, was historically not all that Jewish: The Philistines lived in the coastal lands – cities like Ashkelon or Ashdod. The Negev was, well, the Negev. True, the Galilee was Jewish, but most action in the Biblical narrative takes place in Judea and Samaria, in the hills between the Levant and the Jordan River. Goodman says the feeling in those days among religious Zionists is that we aren't returning to our actual homeland – but sort of “homeland-adjacent.”

Fast-forward now 18 years. What changes in '67, in that surprising, death-defying victory of the Six-Day-War, when the mass graves were denied their fill of Jewish bodies? Herzl's disciples can finally claim to have extra land for secure borders which can also be used as a bargaining chip for peace. The Golda Meirs and Yizhak Rabins say, “We can finally force them to accept us as co-equals in the community of nations.” Simultaneously, Rav Kook's disciples also feel their dream has been fulfilled! “We are no longer like a body of amputated limbs! *Shechem, Beit Lechem, Hevron*, - the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the *Kotel* and Temple Mount – *Har Habayit b'yadeinu!* – We have come home!” And if that's not a sign that *Mashiach* is on his way, the entire thing happened in six days, the exact amount of time it took for God to create the world!

You can see where this is going. *Catch-67* is what happens when, in less than one week, after thousands of years of wandering, insecurity (even genocide), two conflicting, messianic, utopian dreams become reality. Over the next few decades, the dreams of both sides will begin to fade. Two intifadas will take their toll. Oslo's failure will exact its price on the body politic, Israeli peace of mind, victims of terror and, of course, the Palestinian people as well. In Israel today, few talk about peace, not because they don't believe in it or want it, but because they don't believe it's achievable. What will be in Israel's next fifty years, seventy years, one hundred years? What can be done by Israelis, Palestinians, by Americans (if anything) to help move things along?

This is Rosh Hashanah. Perhaps the promise of 5778 will be one of realism. Perhaps here in the churning and tumultuous United States and there in the swirling Middle East we will have to claim small victories, confidence-building measures. When Micah taught us this material over the summer, he joked that standing in front of a congregation any given Saturday right now, on either side of the Atlantic, the entirety of a sermon could be “It's all going to hell. Shabbat Shalom.” Is there hope? Of course there is! Israel's very anthem means “hope.” *Hatikva* isn't a battle hymn. It's not a victory song. It's a plea for a better tomorrow. But perhaps the hope we must feel this New Year is a yearning for granular not grand solutions, modest not messianic steps. The Talmud, Micah points out,

speaks of how learned individuals don't make peace, they lay the groundwork for peace. "*Talmidei chachamim marbim shalom ba'olam*" (Berachot 64a), the sages *increase* peace in the world."

The sources and ideas we'll explore together in the Hartman course will not offer simple answers, but they will help us navigate the tricky terrain of modern Israel and what it means in the Jewish imagination. We'll celebrate, through our learning, this monumental year in our history. By interrogating ancient and modern sources, and our honest confrontation with the complex nature of Jewish sovereignty, I suspect we'll come a little closer to a more authentic engagement with and understanding of the Jewish state – past, present and future.

As the Rabbis say *Ta-Shma*, come and hear, come and learn.

Shana tova!