

Sh'ma

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The war: first thoughts

Here, written just before or just after *Sukkot* ended, are the initial thoughts of some of our Contributing Editors on the war.

J. david bleich

The somber call to war reminded us of what is perhaps the single, stark fact that Jews can accept as a reality in all of history: We have only the Almighty and each other. In victory or in gruelling conflict, with a chill, we are forced to recognize that we are "*am levadad yishkon u-va-zoyim lo yitchashayv*" (a people that dwells alone and is not reckoned among the nations).

Much could be written about the crucial stake we all have in Israel and about the imperative of its survival for world Jewry — no less than for its own citizens. Much could be written about our anguish at the terrible bloodshed inflicted upon us by yet another needless war. Much could be written about the heroism and endurance of the stalwart and uncomplaining Israelis. Much could, and indeed *must*, be said, written *and done* to assure our active involvement and assistance on behalf of our brethren at the time of their great need.

But there are two principles which we are apt to forget, yet of which we must not lose sight. Even while we realize that the very existence of the State of Israel depends upon military prowess, and while we are filled with thankfulness to its courageous defenders, we must recognize that "my strength and the might of my hand" never was, and dare not ever become, a Jewish stance or value. This point was, of course, valid before the fighting began; but now, in a more chastened atmosphere, it will perhaps meet with greater receptiveness.

It is even more important to underscore the fact that we must remember that no external factor dare alter our basic thinking about ourselves, about Israel or about our identity as Jews. The *blitz* victory of 1967 did much to change the way Jews think of themselves. It had the happy effect of strengthening the allegiance of many marginal Jews and infused all of us with a new measure of spiritual strength. Yet, for many, the Six-Day War created a commitment that was entirely a reaction to the events of the hour; and hence was, in and of itself, a cause for concern. Cataclysmic occurrences such as the Holocaust devastate us and shake us fundamentally; victories and successes nurture our faith, elate and encourage us. Drawn-out conflicts, whether political or military, tax our forbearance to the extreme and provoke doubt and cynicism; sustained periods of economic ease and social ascendancy foster spiritual softness, complacency and smugness. This is only natural. But it is essential that we be aware that Jewish perspectives are eternal and are not subject to modification by historical events no matter how great their magnitude.

Maintaining a proper self-image

Judaism transcends history. There is one factor which has priority even over our allegiance to Israel, from which our commitment to Israel derives and from which flows the promise and assurance that we *will* prevail. As Jews on the eve of *Simchat Torah*, even as we are filled with deep pain and heartache at the tragic toll of this war and with infinite faith in our ultimate victory, we must remind ourselves that "*Ayn lanu shi'ur ela ha-Torah ha-zot*" — it is the Torah alone which assures our existence.

Irving greenberg

For two thousand years, Jewish moral imperatives, and most Christian systems too, operated out of ideal norms and spiritual universes. Such moral systems are present when the people involved have little or no power over the facts of their fate. Judgments then are made by ideological criteria which need not or cannot reckon with the more complicated and morally more compromised, less easily arranged facts of actual life. Such moral universes are characterized by hostility and suspicion toward force and a tendency to call for renunciation and spiritual daring in pursuing moral perfection and peace. Failure or evil is often seen as a result of failure to live up to the individual or community's moral maxims (e.g., "if you repent, redemption will come!") rather than due to the recalcitrance of the

able earlier. However, it is critical that the correct moral assessments now be made. If they are not made, it will distort the negotiations, encouraging the Arabs to choose the most evil options available and weakening American support for Israel's legitimate security needs. (God knows that there are enough oil and other pressures that may weaken it anyhow.)

The real world makes its demands on us

The question of direct negotiation, direct recognition, allowing time and trust to justify the return of lands are not marginal questions, they are central. No morally responsible Israeli government operating in a real world of Jewish existence can waive these needs. (I can envisage a peace plan under which Israel returns the lands in stages of decades, as prolonged peace and open relations confirm that they are not necessary.) Israel will not be able to hold out for these necessary steps unless its sympathizers — starting with other Jews — see the true situation.

What I have written is not a call to Israeli bellicosity or to morally underwrite every decision or step taken or to be taken by the State. But reality judgments must be used from now on. The fragility of Israel's defense against non-existence is all too bitterly clear from this war. Whether any prospects of successful peace negotiations are alive is not clear. To have the nerve, nevertheless, to hold out for real security; to have the moral fiber to exercise partial judgments in an imperfect and guilt-causing reality; not to lose hope — this combination is the psychological heroism we now need. This is what the *halachic* system at its best is about. Unfortunately even Orthodox Jews continue to indulge in abstract and pietistic judgments on Israel both in its foreign policy and (more often) in its religious performance, which often endanger it. The time is now for a solemn confession of guilt for our self-flattering moralism and righteous abstractions of the past decade and a correction and reforming of our moral perspectives on Israel.

Benjamin halpern

The Yom Kippur War may change the political parameters of our concern with Israel, should diplomacy, especially Arab diplomacy, finally recognize the reality and real strength of the Jewish State. Even that is uncertain in spite of the likelihoods of another major Israeli victory. But in any case, what is and remains basic is the essential fact that none but Jews take the existence of Jews and of a Jewish state as among their primary ethical postulates. Our true way — and I mean both Jews

and Israelis — runs not from *de jure* to *de facto* but, if we persist, from *de facto* to *de jure* recognition. And I advisedly say “recognition,” which is a legal category, not “legitimation,” which is as much moral as political. Under the circumstances we need, as always, strength and resolution before all else.

Norman lamm

The war prompts me to a confession. During the past several years I wavered on the issue of Israel sitting in the occupied territories. True, I was suspicious of the doctrinaire quality of the dove's line, but I was even more irritated at the stridency of the hawks. I could not quite be convinced of the cogency of the annexationists' argument that the defense of the Israeli heartland proper required extended borders. They sounded too nationalistic. Their jingoist rhetoric irked me.

Appropriate to the *Yom Kippur* War, I and many others like me will have to say *Al Chet*, and confess our errors. No longer may we judge vital positions by subjective reactions to style or taste. The hawks may sound reactionary, militaristic, and strident, but (without subscribing to their entire line) I now appreciate the simple point they have been trying to make all along. Not jingoism, not historical motives, not *halachic* pronouncements, but the simple doctrine of *pikuach nefesh* — survival — demands the margin of safety which, *had we not had it on Yom Kippur 1973, Tisha B'av 1974 would have come much, much earlier*.

A second confession that I urge upon those whose guilt is now exposed: *Al Chet* — for the sin of premature Messianism. This presumptuousness is common to two disparate groups — those whose Messianism is primarily nationalistic, and those to whom it is completely internationalist. In 1967 a large number of Israelis, and some Americans, were convinced that the Six Day War proved we were in a definite pre-redemptive Messianic era, and some even said so in the prayers we recite for Israel — *at'chalta di'geulah* (“the beginning of redemption”).

The secularized version of this theological hubris was a cockiness about Israel's power. After *Yom Kippur* 1973, I am more skeptical than ever. A Messianic war would have been on the Six-Day style. Let us talk no more of tagging current history with labels that are symptoms of nothing more than our superficiality and superciliousness. Messiah will come, and may be we can help him come faster. But let us have no more talk of his imminent arrival, and its concomitant: the invin-

cibility of Israel's army. Like every other premature Messianism, it leaves only bitterness and frustration in its wake.

Two "friends"

A much greater *Al Chet*, of course, is owed us by the liberal-humanist-universalist romantics who used to prate about the UN being the "Family of Nations." An Israeli diplomat shortly after the war began, referred to the "lynch mob" atmosphere in the Security Council. "Family of Nations," may be; but a Mafia Family of Nations!

I wish to make one other point. In an article prepared for the previous issue of *Sh'ma* (3/60), I argue against President Nixon on the Tapes problem. But I do not want this to be construed as a blanket condemnation of the man. I deplore Watergate, but I applaud Nixon's support of Israel. I shudder to think of the condition we would be in if George McGovern were President and, possibly, Senator Fulbright his Secretary of State. We have got to get away, once and for all, from this simplistic, almost Manichean, tendency to see people as all good or all bad. Bill Buckley was right when he recently complained about the habit of "anthropomorphizing our ideas." Remember another confession we all had to make: *Al Chet* – for the sin of so adoring the New Deal that we apotheosized FDR and thought he could do no wrong. He did wonderful things and he did terrible things.

So, I am unhappy with Nixon's Watergate record and I think him tragically wrong in his position on the tapes. But I am grateful to him for his decision to supply arms to Israel (although I am still waiting to see just how generous he will turn out to be), and I do not care what his motives are. I won't forget it, and I hope none of us will, in trying to form a balanced judgment.

Richard n. levy

Those who davened in a minyan during *Sukkot* know that the most powerful commentary on the *Yom Kippur* War was provided not by the media but by the *haftarot* for the *chagim* and *Shabbatot*. These Scriptural readings punctuated the two weeks of hostilities with such unnerving accuracy as almost to turn the holidays themselves into ritual observances of the progress of the war. Consider:

First day of *Sukkot*. Fortunes of Israel obscure. *Haftarah* (*Zechariah* 14): "I shall gather all the nations against Jerusalem for war . . ."

Shabbat Col Ha-Moed Sukkot. Israel marching into Syria on northern front. *Haftarah* (*Ezekiel* 39): "I will bring you (Gog) up from the uttermost parts of the north . . . and upon the mountains of Israel you shall fall, and all the peoples who are with you . . ."

Simchat Torah. Israel, marching through Syria and Egypt, destroying their armies' capacity to war against her. *Haftarah* (*Joshua* 1): "From the wilderness and this Lebanon and as far as the Euphrates . . . shall be your border, that no man might stand against you . . ."

The day after *Simchat Torah*, *Shabbat Bereshit*. Having crossed the Suez, Israel is marching undaunted toward Cairo. *Haftarah* (*Isaiah* 42-43): "When you cross the waters I am with you . . . if you walk through fire, you shall not be quenched . . . For I am bringing you victory, I have given Egypt as you ransom."

The day after *Shabbat Bereshit*. The Security Council approves a ceasefire in place.

There is a tendency when confronting such texts to believe that attacks by Israel's enemy neighbors are inevitable, (and inevitably leveled against her very existence), that wars will occur whatever Israel does, and that Israel's actions are a reflection of the will of God. For those American Jews who take this theological view of the Mideast situation, it might have been more appropriate to call this the *Sukkot* War rather than the *Yom Kippur* War.

Acknowledging israel's failures

But the *haftarah* for *Shabbat Bereshit* presents another theological perspective, suggesting that the latter name may still be appropriate:

Who gave Jacob for a spoil to the robbers?
Was it not Adonay, against whom we have sinned? . . .
Therefore He poured upon him the heat of his anger
and the strength of war,
And it set him on fire round about, but he did not know,
It consumed him, but he did not take it to heart . . .

To understand the war through such a text is to suggest that even given the fact of the Arab invasion, Israel is not without fault in the causes of this conflict, and that the consuming of so many lives has to teach a lesson that must be taken to heart.

Many of us know Israelis who were killed in this war. It has taken a heavy price, not the least of which must be our knowledge that a nation which has been involved in five wars in twenty-five years must have some flaws in its foreign policy. It takes two parties, after all, to bring a diplomatic situation to the point of warfare. Israel has insisted that the Arabs respect only force,