

High holiday sermon on the 6 day war - 50 years later

Rabbi Stephen Wise

About halfway through our our synagogue's trip to Israel, we left Jerusalem and headed to the north. As our bus slowly ascended up the mountains in the Golan heights, out of our windows we could see far across the fields and mountain ranges in the distance. At first glance, the view appeared beautiful: farms and ponds, small villages, gorgeous birds and tranquil skies. The bus pulled to a stop at the top of Mount Bental. We disembarked and squinted in the blinding sun. We followed the dusty trail and come upon the skeleton of a concrete bunker with tunnels burrowed into the ground, and lookout points at each corner. Once we we'd all gathered at the top, where we could see in every direction, our guide began the story.

This is the spot where Israel's destiny changed, he began. Look down the valley. Those are all Jewish farms. Up until 1967, we were down there, too. Syrians stood here, on the mountain. And they did not want us living here. They aimed and shot at farmers. They sent missiles down

into our homes, they terrorized us for decades. It got worse. In June 1967, the Syrian, Egyptian, and Jordanian armies massed on the borders ready to attack. Many thought this would be another Holocaust, only this time would mark the final chapter in the history of our people. How could a tiny country survive being attacked by 4 countries on all sides? The Arab leaders threatened to destroy Israel and throw the Jews in the sea. And so, in the blink of an eye, the war began. It started in the south. Israeli planes attacked the Egyptian air force at sunrise. Before the Egyptians could even get their planes off the ground, Israel destroyed all their aircraft and the runways. Next, Israel ground troops and tanks moved in, took over the Sinai desert, and restored the port to the Red Sea.

2 days later, the attacks shifted to the middle of the country. Jordan had controlled the west bank and Jerusalem for 19 years, since the 1948 war of independence, but now finally Israeli forces broke through. They captured town after town and pushed the Jordanians back to and over the Jordan River. We recaptured and unified Jerusalem. Finally, after 2 millennia, our Jewish capital was back in our hands, and Israelis were

free to pray once again at the kotel, the western wall. The shofar was blown and people came to the wall crying with joy. The war was turning in our favor.

By day 4, time came for Israel to turn her attention to the north. Right here where we are standing, our guide explained. How could Israel attack up the mountain? It would be suicide. But we had a few tricks up our sleeves. First, there was our man in Damascus, the super spy Eli Cohen. Embedded in Syrian society, disguised as a wealthy Arab businessman, Eli met with top officials of the Syrian army who invited him for a tour of their military outposts along the border with Israel. Eli realized these posts are attacking Israel and made a suggestion. He said,

'your soldiers are here in bunkers, subject to attack and the heat of the sun. see below the Israeli villages plant trees to protect them from our snipers. Lets do the same thing, plant trees around each bunker, to protect them from snipers and give the solders shade'.

The Syrians agreed. Eli sent a note to Jerusalem, when you attack the Golan Heights, aim at every cluster of trees.

Then we had another lucky break. As the war shifted dramatically in Israel's favour, the UN called for an immediate ceasefire. But this was

Israel's only chance to take the Golan. Doing so would protect the Israeli farms and stabilize the region. Israeli Ambassador Abba Eban addressed the UN. While he was speaking, there could be no vote on a ceasefire. He talked and talked, and talked and talked, for over 12 hours, while Israeli forces fought hill by hill. When he finally stopped talking, it was nighttime, so the UN moved the vote to the following day. There was much confusion. Over the radio, an announcer said that all Syrian forces were pulling out to end the war. All the Syrian soldiers in the bunkers heard this inaccurate message and thought they'd been left behind. They left their posts and fled back to Damascus. Over 6 miraculous days, instead of utter destruction, Israel had doubled in size and secured all her borders.

And so, our guide said, we stand at this lookout and see the battle scars on the land – the minefields, burned out tanks and abandoned bunkers. It's different to learn about history from a book than it is standing where events took place. Our guide pointed to hills in the distance and told us they were in Lebanon. He turned and pointed in the opposite direction.

That is Syria, he said. See the car driving along that road, that's a Syrian car. See this sliver down the middle and the highest peak, where we are? This is Israel. Its tiny. We control this spot, but we have enemies at each border, which means we must be vigilant at all times.

The 6 day war victory was reminiscent of the miracle of David vanquishing Goliath, a complete transformation of the powerless, homeless Jews of the Holocaust into the strong, sovereign Israeli who would never again be at the mercy of another country's hatred and violence. Still, we can never let our guard down, like we did once, in 1973. We thought we were secure, but the enemy attacked again on Yom Kippur. We almost lost it all. Rooted in our turbulent story, the continued threat to Israel's existence by neighboring Arab countries, violence from Palestinians, and the persistence of anti-Semitism in the world has made the concern for safety and survival, paramount, an on-going basis during these last fifty years.

Of course, there is another side to consider. While the Golan heights and the Sinai desert were mainly devoid of people, the land in the middle of the country, is highly populated. Suddenly, we had strong borders, but we also controlled land that included our enemies.

Israel's victory was the beginning of fifty years of military occupation of 4.75 million Palestinians who lack citizenship and basic rights such as freedom of movement. They are regularly subjected to detentions and searches, curfews, punitive and administrative house demolitions, confiscation of farmland, and are under constant, demoralizing surveillance. This scenario underscores the morally untenable and discriminatory policies that distinguish between Jews and Palestinians living over the Green Line. It views the Jewish settlements and their supporting infrastructure, such as bypass roads, checkpoints, military presence, and unequal water allocation, as destroying the possibility of a viable, contiguous Palestinian state. In this framing, the last fifty years of prolonged military occupation is viewed as an assault on the Palestinians' humanity and dignity, undermining the moral and

democratic fabric of Israel, and seems to be a failure, on our part, to live up to Judaism's essential moral imperatives.

Israeli historian Gershon Gorenberg calls it 'the accidental empire'.

During the war, we took land without thinking about what we'd do with it and the people who lived there. We never thought we would be left with such a dilemma. This is now an existential question facing Israel.

This year, the 50th anniversary of the 6 day war - we are sadly no closer to finding a solution than the day the war ended.

We cannot deny that the modern state of Israel is the most transformational event for Judaism since the destruction of the temple. In the words of SY Agnon, it is the first flowering of our redemption – *resheit smichat geulateinu*. But as our redemption emerged, a catastrophe began for the Muslim inhabitants of the land, now known as Palestinians. Not that they are totally immune from blame. Their leaders rejected the first partition agreement in 1947, which would have created a Palestinian state right beside Israel. And they fought against

Israel year after year. They supported Jordan, Syria and Egypt through each war. But at the same time their goals were similar to ours. They wanted a country to call their own, in a land where many had lived for generations. We could argue, historically, that Jews were there first, but there is no denying that people were living in this land called Palestine for generations. So they call it the nakva – the disaster - and we have been in limbo every since – each side claiming they are right.

We can't even agree upon language to describe the land that was conquered in 1967. Is it the West Bank of the Jordan River or the occupied territories. It could be called the disputed or administered territories. The land could be called by their biblical names – Judea and Samaria, *Yehudah v'shomron*. Whatever you call this land, it is ground zero in the middle east debate and raises never ending questions: Does Israel cede it in some sort of two state solution and how much? Does Israel remove its ½ million settlers as it did from the Sinai in 1982 and Gaza in 2005. Does she pay reparations to Palestinians whose land was seized? Will Israelis be reimbursed who were forced from Arab lands?

Are Palestinians permitted to return to their homes that were seized?

What do we do about Jerusalem? Is it Israel's undivided capital, or should it be a shared capital of two states? Should the status quo be prolonged?

Two years ago I had an opportunity to visit Hebron, a city in the disputed territory that might serve as a lynchpin for the whole issue. We arrived by armored bus after going through multiple checkpoints. So many soldiers guarded each and every stop along the way, our best and brightest were forced to consider everyone who arrived at the checkpoint as potential terrorists. We headed into the old city of Hebron, which looks a lot like the old city of Jerusalem. It's a city within a city, and totally surrounded and guarded by the Israeli defense forces. When we got off the bus, it was quiet and peaceful and beautiful. We walked in and visited the gravesite of Abraham and Sarah. In Genesis, we read that Abraham first bought this land as a final resting place for Sarah. But as we find so frequently in Israel, the holiest site is shared. Muslims also revere Abraham as a great prophet, so they have access from the opposite side. There is no mixing of Jews and Muslims today, though

open worshipping existed until 1994, when a Jewish terrorist named Baruch Goldstein came to Hebron and shot 29 Muslims at prayer. Our guide talked about how impressive this site was, how every Jew in the world should have the opportunity to visit Abraham's grave. There are bar mitzvahs and weddings there. You'll find a whole Jewish neighborhood and shuk market with fruits and vegetables. Hebron is one of the greatest sites of Jewish history, far older than Jerusalem itself.

The fear, however, is that if a spot like this were given to the Palestinians when they created a state, the entire site would be looted and destroyed and Jews would no longer be able to visit. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened when Nablus was given to Palestinian control in 2000. the tomb of our patriarch Joseph was looted and burned, and access was prohibited to Jews. Israel recovered it in operation defensive shield in 2002, and it's been refurbished, but now, only Jews can worship there. I came away from that discussion convinced we had to keep Hebron and Nablus under Israeli control. I didn't see a way to allow the Palestinians to have a state and rule these holy sites.

Then we met an ex-soldier from “breaking the silence”. He had served in the IDF here in Hebron. His job was to keep the peace. He hated every minute of it, not serving in the army, but rather, the inhumane treatment of Palestinians daily. He talked about midnight incursions into Palestinian homes to check ID, intimidating families and writing meaningless reports that were ultimately thrown in the garbage. He talked about the market as bustling and full of life with Arabs and Jews side by side before the Intifada. Now, only Jews are allowed. The Palestinians side has been walled off. He talked about destroying Palestinian homes, pointing his gun at children, denying basic freedom of movement in the name of security. And this soldier emphasized the never-ending supply of soldiers, as well as the hundreds of thousands of shekels required every day to keep a few Jewish families and a grave safe in the middle of a city of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Why are we doing this? Soldiers die and are injured, Palestinians die and are injured, day after day, check point after check point, for what reason? I left the discussion in a daze, not sure of anything anymore.

I believe the current situation is untenable, morally problematic, and not in Israel's best interest. I never condone violence. The Palestinian people who started an intifada to protest their occupation in 1987 and again in 2000 – with violence, suicide bombings, murder of civilians and constant terror attacks – are never in the moral right. This is never the way to peace or to force negotiations. But the bitter truth is, we still need to find a solution. The separate fence built between 2004-2007 has given us a decade of relative peace, but it has only separated and hidden the problem that still bubbles under the surface.

Those on the right lay claim to an ongoing Jewish presence in the west bank and refuse to give up any of the land. Perhaps then Israel should finally annex all the territories currently under dispute and call it all Israel and give every person citizenship. This is not a realistic proposal. First of all, millions of Palestinians would be free to go anywhere in Israel. Based on past experience, we can expect more violence, terror and bloodshed. Palestinians have publicly announced the desire to kill all Israelis and replace Israel with a Palestinian state. There is nothing to

suggest they would not follow through with this threat. Moreover, since Israel is a democracy, giving Palestinians citizenship, would mean they could legally elect a Palestinian prime minister. It would be the end of our Jewish state. This will never happen.

The left argues that the continued occupation and settlement is illegal, damages the fabric of Israeli society and demands the immediate withdrawal to pre-1967 borders. But if we simply pull out and allow for the creation of a state of Palestine along the 1967 borders, they could attack Israel anytime and anywhere. What about the 560,000 Israelis who live in the territories, would they live there as citizens, how could we protect them?

Because we love Israel so much, we must strive to find a solution in the middle. We must start to examine this dilemma with a sense of humility. Perhaps we can, at the very least, acknowledge that the Palestinian people have suffered for the past 50 years while we've been trying to work this out. We must acknowledge that Jews who voluntarily settled into this conflicted area did so with the intention of

building a strong Israel for the future. And we must acknowledge that successive Israeli governments did not know what the future would hold, and based on the continuous state of war our homeland has endured since independence, the delay of a final decision on the disputed territories was not necessarily the wrong decision. Let us remember that Israel is an incredibly strong and vibrant country. The press is free, the supreme court is separate and holds lawmakers accountable, the economy is strong, and the army is stable and prepared. We are not what we were in 1967, nor 1997. Today, we are able to do things we couldn't do at the time of the last Intifada.

I think we can start with the framework that Yitzhak Rabin began with during the Oslo accords in 1993-- determining three types of areas within the west bank. Those under complete Palestinian control, those under shared control and those under Israel control. I think Israel should annex into Israel the largest Jewish settlements that are currently across the green line but very close and have large populations such as Ma'ale Adumim. In exchange, Israel would give up certain equivalent areas on the Israeli side of the Green Line to a future Palestinian state. Israel

must acknowledge the 50 years of occupation and that Palestinians do have claims in land in Israel and reimburse them. I would demand the Palestinians also acknowledge Jewish claims to the land, but I wouldn't wait for it to start the peace process. We should always take the higher ground. Slowly, the areas that are under complete Palestinian control would come together to form a patchwork Palestinian state. Over time they could be woven together, even the Gaza Strip, without encroaching onto Israel. There could be some sort of protected highway, bridge, tunnel or high speed train.

There will be painful sacrifices to be sure, on both sides. Many smaller Israeli settlements would have to be disbanded one by one, and the people resettled in Israel. we would give up part of our ancestral lands. I understand this. We all remember how painful it was with the Gaza Strip, but we accomplished it for the overall good of the country.

What would be the eventual capital of the Palestinian state? Maybe it would be East Jerusalem- with another name. It's essentially a separate city right now anyway, and no one goes there except for the army. It

could be demilitarized and separated. Jerusalem will always be Jerusalem, the one that we visit, the eternal capital of the Jewish people. I don't claim to have thought through every scenario or answered every question, but we started along this road in 1993 and got off track with the assassination of Rabin in 1995. We need another leader with vision, patience and strength, such as Rabin to restart this process. There is no perfect solution, no perfect negotiation or compromise. Everyone has to give up something and many extremists on both sides would be unhappy. But I have to think that it's got to be better than what we are dealing with right now. I know I'm an optimist, but I want to see a world where Israel, and by extension, the Diaspora, would have one fewer reason to be considered scapegoats. No longer would Israel be faced with boycott, divestment and sanction campaigns. Perhaps Jewish students on campus would not be faced with messages of Israeli apartheid and feel shame about our homeland. Maybe other Arab nations would be given the opening they need to establish real diplomatic relations with Israel, to organize a basic framework for regional stability. Imagine taking that bus ride up the Golan Heights on

a trip to Israel and saying, look there at Lebanon, tomorrow we are going to hike through the famous Cedars of Lebanon – as we sing each Shabbat Tzakkik katamar yifrah c'erez balvanon. There see that joint farming venture with Syria, they grow the best produce in the area.

The bible tells us to love our neighbors. We can try to at least accept neighbors and they could tolerate us. Maybe attacks would continue but we would have taken the concrete steps towards peace. We could reclaim the ethical and moral stance that characterized Israel before the 1967 war, when world opinion saw the Israeli state as a champion of human rights, “or lagoyim”, a light to the nations. Even in a world of harsh realities, fear and hatred, Israel could represent what is possible and what is hoped for. Then truly our capitol of Jerusalem would be a city of god, a shining light – Yerushalayim Shel Zahav.