

Shabbat Sermon
Jerusalem Day 2017
The Six Day War Fifty Years Later
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This coming week the Jewish world will commemorate what I believe is our newest Jewish holiday. Most of our holidays go back 2,000-plus years. This one is only fifty years old, almost to the day. It is called Yom Yerushalayim or Jerusalem Day.

Exactly fifty years ago on the Jewish calendar, about two weeks later on the general calendar, Israel defeated the massed armies of five Arab nations mobilized on its borders in only six days in what shortly afterward came to be called the Six Day War (Milchemet Sheshet Yamim in Hebrew). It began on Monday morning, June 5, 1967 and was over Saturday, June 10th.

Before the war, the city of Jerusalem had been divided into two for nineteen years as a result of Israel's War of Independence; into a Jewish sector under Israeli sovereignty and an Arab sector ruled by the Kingdom of Jordan. Included in Arab-ruled East Jerusalem were the Western Wall of the Second Temple and the Jewish quarter of what had long been a multi-cultured and multi-religion Old City. A barrier erected by the Jordanians kept Israelis and Jews from visiting or praying at the holiest sites of Judaism. But then on the second and third day of the war, the Israeli army defeated the Jordanians, who had shelled Jewish Jerusalem on Day One, they re-entered the Old City for the first time in nineteen years and made Jerusalem one city again, with the holy sites of three religions now open to all. In order to defeat the Jordanian army, Israel then occupied not only all of Jerusalem but all of the area west of the Jordan River (called the West Bank for short) that also corresponded to the historic territories of Judea and Samaria in ancient Israel.

In this morning's sermon, we'll relive the Six Day War, six days that drastically altered the geography and psychology of the Middle East; some would say for the better, others would say for the worse. Since 1967, different people have drawn different lessons from that war, often dramatically different and contradictory. Since then, the city of Jerusalem has been expanded and annexed by Israel. Since then, many of us have been privileged to visit the Western Wall, often multiple times. The West Bank remains in Israeli hands and has been a source of dispute and conflict ever since.

So today I'd like to guide you on a quick look back at the events of mid-May through early June 1967, resulting in among other things, the reunification of Jerusalem.

So much for the facts, for a very basic overview of what happened fifty years ago this week. The Jewish print media, be it the Forward or The Jerusalem Post or Moment magazine are filled this week with numerous retrospectives on the Six Day War and with many different views and takes on what we should learn from it today. I'm no more equipped than anyone else to talk about all that. So for the most part I won't, at least not today.

What I can do, which I hope will be a little different, is take you on a journey into the mind and heart of a twenty-year-old American Jew living through that historic and emotion-filled period.

That twenty-year-old American Jewish young adult of course (with emphasis on the young), was me, and I ask you to go back with me as I relive those formative days of fifty years ago.

For most people alive today, the Six Day War is at best ancient history. The millennials we hear so much about have no conception at all of Israel pre-1967. Even the 50-somethings who constitute the leadership of the Jewish community today either weren't born then or were babies. For them, those nineteen years between 1948 and 1967 when Jews were prohibited from going to the Kotel and the Old City are nothing more than a blip on the radar of the Israeli experience. But I lived through those days – I lived through the apprehension, the fear, the shock, the exhilaration of the stunning Israeli victory and through those first attempts to make sense of what happened. Had I been living in Israel then, I would have been one of the boys called up to fight and defend the homeland. But even for those of us who lived in safety here in America, those were traumatic and formative times.

It was finals week on American college campuses. Those were the days when college semesters ended in late May, not in early May as is the common practice today. For most American college kids, life was totally consumed with studying, putting in all-nighters, getting through exams and looking ahead to summer.

But not for me, not that year.

While most of my college dorm-mates were alternatively partying or studying, I couldn't keep my mind on either. I was totally pre-occupied with events going on halfway around the world, how I could find out about them and what to make of them.

In mid-May, Egyptian strongman Gamal Abdul Nasser had closed the Suez Canal to Israeli ships. His navy blockaded the Straits of Tiran, blocking off Israeli shipping from the southern port of Eilat, Israel's only gateway to points east. Closing off the canal and the straits effectively closed off all of Israeli shipping, in itself an act of war. On top of that, Nasser ordered the U.N. buffer force that had separated the Israeli and Egyptian armies since 1957, out of Egypt leaving the two armies right adjacent to each other. If that weren't belligerent enough, he got the governments of Syria, Jordan and Iraq, all at or near Israel's borders, to put their armies under Egyptian command and mobilized them at Israel's doorstep. Nasser proclaimed loudly and in the name of all Arab countries that the time had come to recover Arab honor, to restore justice for the Palestinian Arabs (then called the Arab refugees) and once and for all to get rid of what they called "the Zionist entity" in their midst. Mobs paraded through the streets of Cairo shouting "death to the Jews." The leader of the Palestinian Arab organization, the predecessor to the PLO, Ahmed Shukairy, broadcast for all to hear that the time had arrived to "drive the Jews into the sea."

The United Nations called emergency sessions but did nothing. Israel's Foreign Minister Abba Eban gave brilliant speeches, and the governments of the United States, Britain and France promised to pressure Egypt to back off. But rather than back off, Nasser turned up the heat and threatened more. Syrian troops on the Golan Heights fired shells on the kibbutzim below in Israel's north, driving the residents into shelters. Israel was in danger from all sides. Its government had to mobilize its citizen army and reserves, sending all the men to their posts, essentially crippling the Israeli economy. President Johnson was sympathetic but told Israel "my hands are tied, we have all our available military troops in Vietnam. As May turned into June, with the U.S. and its allies doing nothing and Israel's daily life at a standstill, the government of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol had some very tough decisions to make. And note that none of those decisions had anything to do with Jerusalem, divided or united, or occupying more territory. That was the last thing on their minds. The survival of the state was on their minds. It was all about protecting Israel and its citizens against those who vowed to destroy them.

Meanwhile, halfway around the globe, I tried to get any news I could get from Israel. I watched the black and white films from Egypt that showed anti-Israel rallies, the angry Arab marchers spewing hatred that dominated the one 15 minute network TV news shows at 6:30 every night. The reports were chilling. I to have to tell you I was worried sick. Why did news from so far away impact on me so?

I didn't come from a particularly learned or active Zionist family. My parents hadn't been to Israel. In fact, probably the only people we knew who had been to Israel back then were my rabbi and his family.

But I had been to Israel once, four years earlier on a Camp Ramah teen trip. I went almost by default. I wanted to go back to Camp Ramah that summer and work on staff. But the camp director, Rabbi Mogilner said to me "Archie, I don't want you at camp. You must go to Israel. A summer in Israel is more important than all your years in camp and Hebrew school put together."

And so to Israel I went. Not exactly reluctantly but not enthusiastically either. And I was never the same. In seven weeks, Israel went from a place on the map to a place in my heart.

How so? So much happened that summer. Israeli families invited us into their homes. The President of Israel, Zalman Shazar, invited us into his home in Jerusalem for an Oneg Shabbat and a discussion about our experience. That could never happen in America, a president inviting a group of teenagers to his home. Israel's only Nobel Prize Winner in literature, Shai Agnon, dropped over one afternoon to meet us and talk with us. That would never happen in America either, a famous author coming to meet a teen tour group. I came to learn that in Israel, all Jews were family.

We lived in a school building for girls that was unoccupied during the summer. It backed up to the Machaneh Yehuda market and was maybe 2 or 3 blocks from the Old City, which meant that we would walk outside and immediately see those ominous signs that punctuated Jerusalem back then – STOP – BORDER in front of you. We saw the barrier and we knew that just behind the barrier were Jordanian guns.

We went down to the Dead Sea and saw the place where shortly they were about to excavate a 1900 year-old fortress called Masada, where Jews had fled after the Romans burned the Temple. Our guide sat us down one afternoon on a desolate beach about thirty miles from Tel Aviv and said "we're going to build a port here." "Yeah, right," I thought. It was the site of the ancient Philistine port city of Ashdod. But it happened as he said. Twenty-five years later, it became the second largest port in Israel. And I saw it when it was nothing.

On the night of Tisha B'Av, we read the Book of Lamentations on Mt. Zion, the closest place you could get to the Western Wall. When we rode our bus south from Jerusalem we were always accompanied by Israeli young men our age carrying guns. Here, too, we were always near borders and you never know that trouble lurked on there. Four years later, those young men were called up to defend the land from the greatest threat since 1948. Obviously, I could go on and on about that first Israel experience. But for now, what's important was the bond it established between me, the Jewish state and the Jewish people. So when in May of 1967, Israel's very existence was threatened, I was totally consumed by its struggle for life.

Back in the Middle East, by the first weekend in June, with Israel threatened on all sides by armies far larger than it, it did what any nation would do to defend its citizens. On the morning of June 5th, the Israeli air force attacked the Egyptian airfields in the northern Sinai. It caught the Egyptian pilots away from their planes having breakfast. Within a half hour the Egyptian air force was in shambles. The war that the Arab world had called for so confidently was at hand. My friends from camp who were spending their junior year in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University heard the shells fired by the Jordanian army less than a mile away. The Israeli government had called King Hussein of Jordan and said "Our beef is not with you. Don't get into this war. We don't want your land. Don't attack Jerusalem." But by then Egyptian radio was blaring "the oil refineries in Haifa are in flames. Our armies are advancing on Tel Aviv. Victory is at hand!" King Hussein believed the Egyptian and Syrian propaganda. He figured that the Arab party had begun. How could he stay away? And so his army attacked Jewish Jerusalem. In the end it was Hussein of Jordan who paid the greatest price.

By the end of Day One, with the Egyptian air force in ruins, the bulk of the Israeli army had driven back the larger Egyptian force back into Sinai. At the northern gateway to Jerusalem, in the bloodiest battle of the war, the Israelis defeated the dug-in Jordanians at Ammunition Hill. The battle in the south and around Jerusalem had turned.

But back in the States, I didn't know it. We American Jews didn't know it. Nasser was claiming victory and the Israelis were keeping quiet. And so I sat in my parents' kitchen listening to a console radio hoping to find out what was going on from the hourly news snippets. I listened, I waited, and I prayed; I prayed for the friends in Israel I knew and for all my brethren in Israel that I didn't. The TV news at 11:00 was a little more encouraging. By then, the Israelis were assuring us not to believe the Arab news reports.

Back in Israel, by the second day of the war, to make things short, the battle had already been decided. The Egyptians were on the run back through Sinai toward the Suez Canal. The Israeli army was entering the Old City, the first Jews to go there since 1948. At home, we American Jews were beginning to get the real story. It was almost too good to be true. Now after the 11:00 local news each night, there was a 15 minute extension devoted entirely to the Middle East War with commentary by a general, S.L.A. Marshall. He was already calling for an Israeli victory.

It was on Day Three, June 7th that the Israeli forces broke through to the Western Wall. Soon we were able to see those iconic pictures of Israeli paratroopers in full battle garb putting on tefillin and praying at the Wall, 20-some Israelis pretty much my age, secular Israeli boys dissolved in tears as they entered Judaism's holiest shrine.

In the subsequent days, we realized what was really happening when we watched TV and saw the Arabs at the U.N. ranting and raving. Instead of claiming victory, they were crying foul. They blamed America. They claimed American troops were fighting on Israel's side. After all, there is no way the Jews could defeat their armies without help. Or so they thought.

By Day Four, the Jews had liberated the entire Old City. They had re-entered Hebron, the home of Abraham and the Cave of Mechpelah, the resting place of all our patriarchs and matriarchs save one. The Israeli army reached the Suez Canal and ended the Egyptian threat once and for all. On Days Five and Six with the southern and eastern threats eliminated, Israeli soldiers stormed the Golan Heights, destroyed the Syrian batteries there, and guaranteed peace for the kibbutzim below. The kids could now come out of their shelters. All of that in Six Days. At week's beginning, the existence of Israel was in grave danger. By week's end, Israel was saved

and Jews were again at the Western Wall. Shocking. Amazing. A miracle, we said! American Jews went to shul that Friday night in record numbers. Four years before in 1963, American Jews came en-masse to their synagogues in quiet shock to mourn the death of President Kennedy. Four years later we turned out again. This time in gratitude and in thanks.

There is so much more I could say about those amazing and eventful days. People say that I'm known for my memory, but I'll tell you this: there are not six other days from ten years ago let alone fifty that I can recall in such detail. Except maybe the year the Phillies lost ten in a row at the end of the season to lose the National League Championship.

But those six days were momentous. And the point I want to stress today is this: For me they were special only in part because the city of Jerusalem was whole again. Back then, that was only a by-product. The primary emotion we all felt was not that Jerusalem was united, but that the existence of Israel was saved. A week earlier, we worried that the Zionist dream would go up in smoke a mere nineteen years after it became a reality. What we felt in those days of June, 1967, was first and foremost relief. Relief that Israel survived. Pride and joy that stemmed not from conquering territory, not even the holy sites, but that Am Yisrael Chai, that the people of Israel and the State of Israel had emerged whole from grave danger.

There will be much written this week about Jerusalem, about the politics of Jerusalem, about the future of Jerusalem. No one loves Jerusalem more than I do. The highlight of every one of my many visits to Israel since has been going to Jerusalem. Whether it's the larger expanded Jewish Jerusalem of today or the smaller, Jewish new city enclave of pre-1967, it's all about Jerusalem. And yes, I will be proud to celebrate Yom Yerushalayim this Wednesday.

But for me, the Six Day War was about deliverance, about existence, about Am Yisrael Chai, about how privileged I have been to celebrate the continuing existence of Israel.

I know this has been a long sermon, but I hope you can understand why and the joy that is in my heart as I look back. I thank Rabbi Arnowitz for giving me the privilege to share it.

At another time I can speak about the contradictory lessons of the Six Day War. Those of you who have been with me for almost thirty years have heard me do that on occasion.

But today, I thank you for joining me as I relived those formative and emotional days fifty years ago.

There's really only one way to end a sermon on the Six Day War, and I'm going to ask Cantor Wendi to help me with that.

That is to sing the one song that helped Israelis get through those anxious days – a song that had been written only weeks before – I've spoken about the history of that song before. I'm sure I'll do it again. But now, we'll just sing it together - Yerushalayim Shel Zahav – Jerusalem of Gold.