SIX DAYS OF WAR 50 YEARS LATER
TEMPLE SHOLOM, VANCOUVER BC
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
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This Monday will mark the 50th anniversary of the start of the Six Day War, its Hebrew Calendar Anniversary was last week. As Thane Rosenbaum a novelist, essayist and Distinguished Fellow at NYU School of Law wrote in one of the many articles I'll reference tonight. "The Six Day War was brief in duration but infinite in consequence. No other war has ever presented the paradox of a victorious nation, annihilating its enemies so thoroughly that one of them barely got a plane off the ground, [then] almost instantly suing for peace rather than setting the terms for surrender."

In six days Israel tripled its size and fortified its once vulnerable borders. The vanquished Arab nations, quickly assumed the role of the victim in a war whose drumbeat they were drumming. With hubris and chutzpah they offered Israel not an olive branch or an apology but rather the three famous No's at the 1967 Arab League summit in Khartoum: "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it."

A half-century later a battle that was won is six days has turned into a war both internal and external that appears without end.

I am by no means an expert on the History of the Middle East or Geo-politics. But this historic moment demands comment and reflection, and so I will try to share some insights from my studies.

In Jewish tradition, the 50th year is called the Yovel or Jubilee Year and it too is marked by a time of reflection and a return to the natural order of things. The thinking of the rabbis and sages was that after 50 years, commitments, assumptions, agreements and just plain overuse of natural resources will become far removed from their intended shape and form. To keep things from getting too far beyond repair we stop, return and restore the land and our relationships to their intended status.

The 50th anniversary of the Six Day War is a time long overdue for honest reflection and rededication to the founding principles of Zionism from which this *Milchemet B'riut* – War without choice was fought, and the ramifications of Israel's victory were won.

Allow me to share six observations, one for each day of the war. I make no claim that these are of my own scholarship – but rather a survey of the many insightful and important articles that have been written these past two weeks as we reflect on this historic moment in the history of Israel, the Palestinians and Jews around the world.

One: The war was justified. Losing was not an option as it would have clearly held existential ramifications. One has to only ask, "What would the Arab countries have done with Israel had

the outcome been reversed? Had they vanquished all of our armies, air forces and tanks in less than a week?" The infamous Three No's at the 1967 Arab League summit in Khartoum: "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it" would have had a fourth – "No Israel."

The war gave Israel strategic depth and with regard to two of its nation state advisories, it also gave it the geographic bargaining chips to trade land for peace. The territories that Israel captured and eventually returned led to peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. Without the Six Day War, those alliances, and the border security that ensued, may never have been forged.

Two: We call it <u>OUR</u> victory, because the Six Day War gave Jews around the world, not just Israelis, a war story for the ages. Jews everywhere stood taller, prouder, stronger.

With America mired in the quagmire of Vietnam, these tough Jews showed the whole world how to fight a war and win.

The swiftness and decisiveness of the operation forever put the lie to Jewish defenselessness. Israeli fighter pilots left Egyptian planes in ruins; Israeli tank commanders buried the carcasses of Jordanian tanks in the sand.

With victory came the transcendence of a national myth: a colossal triumph of the Jewish State a mere 22 years after Auschwitz, the complete routing of its many enemies, the reclaiming of some land and the conquering of another. The epic dimensions of this war evoked near universal national pride like no other Israeli achievement.

As Rosenbaum observes, "Nothing shaped the national identity of the plucky, nimble Israelis quite like the Six Day War. In fact, the Start-up Nation is a direct descendent of the improvisational spirit of that dynamic campaign. This was one David and Goliath story where a long shot was transformed into a regional superpower with slingshot precision.

Three: There are serious limitations to having power and conquest. You can very rarely fight your way to peace. At what point do we pass the point of no return as an occupying force? At what point do the spoils of war begin to spoil society and become an obstacle to achieving a Jewish and democratic State?

The victory came with huge costs, many of which have only multiplied in the fifty years since.

Suddenly, Israel became the custodians of one million Arabs who proclaimed a Palestinian identity and national aspirations. Again, Rosenbaum points out, these same Arabs existed between 1948 and 1967, but the West Bank and Gaza was then under Jordanian and Egyptian rule, respectively. Throughout those 19 years, however, no one uttered the word "occupation," and the idea that there were Palestinian Arabs separate from Israeli Arabs, much less the concept of Palestinian statehood, was a bewildering thought.

It was only **after** the Six Day War that the governing of another people began to tarnish the Zionist ideal. And the return of Jews to the West Bank and Gaza as settlers did two things. One it gave credence to those who insisted that such facts on the ground diminished Israel's once moral high ground. Two, it hijacked Israeli foreign & domestic policy, placing it in the hands of a new group with a near oxymoronic name, Religious-Zionists. In another age, on a mountain named Masada in the desert we called them Jewish Zealots.

Four: Terrorism became a global menace after the Six Day War, especially for Israel. The PLO mounted airline hijackings, bombings, and even the assassination of Israel's Olympic team. Israel now had yet another militarized Arab enemy — this one without a country, wearing no uniforms and targeting Israeli civilians.

Of course, the PLO was created before the Six Day War when there were no Jews living beyond the green line. Nation building was always a low Palestinian priority. Terrorism did not arise in response to Jewish settlements. Exchanging land for peace won't end the conflict because the land Palestinians have in mind is not what Israel gained in 1967, but rather what it achieved in 1948.

Five: Ironically, the glory of the Six Day War also created Palestinian Nationalism which would grow 50 years later to become a movement, that not unlike the Zionist dream has appealed to the empathic heart of liberal and political progressives around the world.

Relatedly the war also unmasked the hypocrisy of the Muslim world and those same political progressives, which continued its wars with Israel not on battlefields but in universities, intellectual magazines and at the United Nations. None of these countries or movements cared about Arabs living in the West Bank and Gaza until Israel captured those territories in a defensive war. Only then did the land assume both legal and political significance. The Palestinian cause became the most enduring weapon with which to defeat Israel.

Six: Where the war united Jews around the world – its aftermath and resulting, occupation is dividing us in ways that are eerily similar to our biblical destructions. It is written of the first and second temple periods that is was not the Greek Assyrians or the Romans that destroyed the temple and with it the Jews of Biblical Israel, but rather Jewish infighting and *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred toward each other that sacked the temple and brought about of 2,000 years of exile.

There is a very real question whether Israel and Jewish peoplehood will survive the next 50 years. Our infighting over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has revealed deep divisions amongst Religious & Secular, Diaspora & Israeli, Progressive & Right Wing. Perhaps it is a case of us always thinking that our current generation could be the last – but I think it is more than that at this defining moment.

The demography of the region is against a Jewish Majority in our ancestral lands. The demographics of Jews worldwide shows the two fastest growing groups as the Orthodox and

the non-religious. Jews are assimilating with great success in the western world and Israel. At the same time Israelis are becoming pariahs associated unfairly, but not entirely inaccurately with policies that remind a world that consumes its news in 70 character tweets of South African Apartheid.

Young Jews believe that Israel does not reflect the Jewish values we taught them in preparation for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah and older Jews see a rise of anti-Semitism that evokes memories of Nazism. These forces are tearing us a part – and a resolution, even if there were one, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might only divide us further.

Fifty years later the wall that so symbolized the victory of the IDF, Israel and the whole Jewish world. The wall that united us in song and celebration, for which Naomi Shemer penned Yerushalyim Shel Zahav – and wrote the soaring words:

For your name scorches the lips
Like the kiss of a seraph
If I forget thee, Jerusalem,
Which is all gold...

That city, that wall a symbol won in battle now divides us not from our land but from each other. It's a place of internal conflict and strife.

After the war, Meir Ariel wrote a new version of Shemer's song, a version that for a brief time was as popular as the original. It was a song about a Jerusalem trampled by blood and iron and war, a song sung to the same melody as Shemer's, but with a dark cynicism that comes from knowing there is more at stake in this struggle for our beloved Jerusalem than sentiment.

Jerusalem of iron

In your dark places, Jerusalem,
we found a loving heart
as we came to broaden your borders
and overthrow the enemy.
We had our fill of his mortars,
and dawn broke suddenly –
it had just risen, not yet white
and was already red.

Jerusalem of iron,
and of lead, and of blackness,
have we not declared your walls liberated?

We won the war, but the battle for Israel, for peace with our neighbors and peace with those living concurred lands, the battle for the soul of Judaism; that battle rages on, and on, and on. When will it end and how will it end?