

FIFTY YEARS AGO: ISRAEL'S SIX-DAY WAR

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

"Suddenly, in six days, the Jewish people defended themselves, destroyed their enemies, tripled their land; recaptured control of Jerusalem for the first time in 2,000 years and on the seventh day they rested. That just sounded way too Biblical for evangelicals all over the planet and they rejoiced with the Jewish people."¹

—Joel Rosenberg

When thinking about all of the modern state of Israel's wars, the six-day war certainly stands out as an amazing accomplishment by the then nineteen-year old nation. I consider it nothing less than a major miracle because God was certainly on Israel's side. Everything Israel needed to go right did go right. The results were astounding as Israel tripled her land size. The six-day war took place fifty years ago this June and changed the map in the Middle East in less than a week.

Immediately after the war Israel's popularity and respect as a nation reached its zenith; but it has pretty much been downhill since then. I remember hearing replacement theologian R. C. Sproul admit that he became a premillennialist for a short time after the six-day war. The six-day war stimulated current prophecy teacher Dave Reagan to become a premillennialist and reject the replacement theology he had grown up with. It seemed almost all of American Evangelicalism was excited about the modern state of Israel and thought of the new nation in biblical terms.

BEFORE THE WAR

Israel's six-day war was a defensive war even though Israel struck the enemy in one of the most successful preemptive strikes ever. The war involved Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. For over a month before the war the Egyptians were preparing to strike Israel on the basis of Russian intelligence that later proved false. Egypt moved massive amounts of armor and troops into the Sinai opposite Israel's border, had the United Nations peacekeeping troops removed from the Sinai, took over control of the Suez Canal, and implemented a block-aid in the Gulf of Aqaba that shut down Israeli shipping out of Eilat. (A block-aid such as the Egyptians executed against Israeli shipping was considered an act of war in the international community.) The Arab Street was going crazy-wild in support of Egypt's strongman Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970) throughout the entire Arab world. Syria and Egypt had earlier signed an agreement with each other promising to come to the defense of the other if either were attacked.

When one considers the strength of the Arab armies that were poised to attack Israel, they certainly had overwhelming strength when compared to Israel's military resources. The Arabs had a total of 547,000 troops, 2,504 tanks, and 957 combat aircraft. On the other hand, Israel had 264,000 troops, 800 tanks, and 300 combat aircraft.² "There were just over 2.3 million Jews and a few more than 300,000 Arabs in the country"³ at the time of the war.

Hebrew historian Tom Segev describes the Israeli mindset before the war: "Beginning in 1966, more and more Israelis had started to lose faith in themselves and sink into depression. The doubt was everywhere, and it led to despair. 'What to do,

people, what to do?' lamented songwriter Haim Hefer. 'Nothing goes right and there's not a drop of good luck . . . / Everything is depressing and everybody sad/ Things aren't working out and no one knows why.'"⁴ In addition to low moral "the year saw a dreadful economic recession and a sharp drop in immigration."⁵ Yet three weeks before the war started on June 5th another song made its debut to the Israeli public: "Jerusalem of Gold." As Israel was calling up the IDF reserves many were listening to the new song on their radios. Naomi Shemer wrote the words and the music which said of Jerusalem that said, its Arab half was a deserted wilderness, "apparently unpopulated: 'Where the water wells have gone dry / The market square is empty / And no one visits the Temple Mount / In the Old City.'"⁶ This song was a great moral bust to the Jews of Israel who were destined to reclaim the Old City and ascend the Temple Mount in just a few more days.

THE WAR

Israel could not afford to carry on a three-front war at the same time since they were outnumbered three to one. Yet, Egypt to the south, Syria to the north, and Jordan to the east had all moved their troops, tanks and artillery to little Israel's borders. Also, Israel could not allow the Arabs to exercise air power or they would be able to bomb Tel Aviv and many of Israel's population center that would deal a disastrous blow to the young country. The Israeli high command decided to preemptively strike Egypt first since they were the largest threat, especially their air force. On the morning of June 5 at 7:45 am 90 percent of Israel's air force hit the Egyptian airfields and caught them completely by surprise as they were changing from their night shift to the day shift. Israel first bombed their runways so their planes could not take off and then began destroying the entire Egyptian air force. They flew in under the Egyptian radar and bombed all nineteen airfields. Israel finished the job by returning to their airbases and the ground crews turned the planes around and reloaded them in record setting time. A total of three attacks shutdown the Egyptian air force. At the same time as the air force attacked the ground war began as Israel tanks moved through Gaza and into the Sinai where they routed the Egyptians there as well. Events led to the Egyptians being totally confused and unable to fight effectively against the speedy Israeli tank formations supported by the Israel Air Force. In the fog of war they began retreating and the Israelis had them on the run as the Egyptians headed for the Suez Canal in complete disarray.

Jordan was reluctant to enter the war because of the false information coming from the Egyptians that they were routing the Israelis. Israel had planned to remain in a defensive position while they attacked Israel. However, at 10:00 am on June 5, Jordanian artillery began pounding Tel Aviv and later Jerusalem. Israel now had no choice but to extend the war on the Jordanian front. Israel's first step was once again to attack Jordanian air bases with their air force and they eliminated them from the fight. On the afternoon of June 5 Israel launched an invasion to encircle the Old City of Jerusalem. During the night the IDF pounded the Jordanians with artillery and mortar fire in order to soften them up for an invasion the next day. The next day saw extremely heavy fighting often hand-to-hand combat. However, the Israelis steadily advanced toward the Old City from various positions. On June 7 the fierce fighting continued. General Moshe Dayan heard there might be a ceasefire so the Israeli troops make their final push into the Old City and liberated from the nineteen-year rule by the Jordanians. Then the Temple Mount was taken and soldiers began rushing to the Western Wall, many in tears. "After a brief skirmish with Jordanian riflemen, Gur

radioed Narkiss the three words—seven in English—that would resonate for decades afterward. ‘Har ba-Bayit be-Yadenu’—‘The Temple Mount is in our hands.’”⁷

The evening of June 5 the Israel Air Force attacked and greatly disabled the Syrian Air Force. For years leading up to the Six-Day War Syria had often shelled Israel from the Golan Heights and sent raids into Israel. Additionally Syria was attempting to change the course of the Jordan River so that it would not flow into the Sea of Galilee. These were the main reasons Israel bused many of their troops from the south and central parts of Israel to the north in order to launch an attack on the morning of June 9 in order to take the Golan Heights as a buffer-zone for the Jewish people. Beginning with strategic air strikes and followed by an armored brigade the assault was initiated. Four Israeli brigades broke through the Syrian defenses on the first day. On the last day of the war, June 10, Israel overran the Syrian positions as they retreated from the Golan Heights. Just as fast as it began the war ended with Israel in control of the Sinai, Gaza, the Old City, Judea, Samaria, and the Golan Heights.

CONCLUSION

Even though the Six-Day War was a rousing success for Israel, the victory came at a great cost of lives for the small nation. “766 Israeli soldiers were killed during the ‘Six Day War’. The number of Arab dead was never announced.”⁸ However it is estimated the Arab casualty rates were “approximately 25 to 1 in Israel’s favor.”⁹ Oren concluded: “Basic truths persisted: for all its military conquests, Israel was still incapable of imposing the peace it craved.”¹⁰ Indeed, even today there is a lingering pessimism throughout Israeli society that wonders if they will ever find peace in the Promised Land.

The Bible provides the answer to the question of whether Israel will ever find peace. The answer is yes indeed. However, peace will only arrive in Israel after a great time of drama known as the tribulation that will lead to the conversion to Jesus as their Messiah who will return and rescue His Chosen People who will be on the verge of extinction but will finally accept Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah. Thus, the Six-Day War, like the founding of the modern state of Israel, is a step in the process of preparation for the next step within God’s plan for Israel that will unfold during the seven-year tribulation period. In the War of 1967 the Jewish people regained control of the Old City of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. During the tribulation Israel is pictured as having rebuilt its Temple in the Old City on the Temple Mount. However, Israel is still largely in unbelief and many problems persist for the current nation of Israel. Maranatha!

⁷ Joel Rosenberg quoted in Chris Mitchell, “Israel’s 1967 Miracle,” CBN News, June 5, 2007 <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/insideisrael/2007/june/israels-1967-miracle/?mobile=false>.

⁸ Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 7th edition (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), p. 65.

⁹ Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, The War, and The Year That Transformed The Middle East* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), p. 14.

¹⁰ Segev, *1967*, p. 14.

¹¹ Segev, *1967*, p. 14.

¹² Segev, *1967*, p. 222.

¹³ Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford Press, 2002), p. 245. Oren, the former Israeli ambassador to the United States, has contributed this excellent book of the Six-Day War.

¹⁴ Gilbert, *Arab–Israeli Conflict*, p. 68.

¹⁵ Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 305.

¹⁰ Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 327.