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# THE SIX-DAY WAR AND JEWISH POWER

On the 20th anniversary of the Six-Day War, the focus will be on the tangible consequences that are its legacy. Indeed, for 20 years the discussion has been about Jerusalem, the territories, peace and space and rights. But the war had a more subtle, sometimes overlooked, effect on the idea of the Jew. The war transformed it utterly, and perhaps irrevocably.

Three of the most important events in the last 1,900 years of Jewish history have occurred within the last 50 years. Each has had a profound effect on the world's consciousness of the Jew and on Jewish self-perception. The Holocaust became the ultimate symbol of Jewish victimhood and vulnerability. The establishment of the State of Israel transformed the Jewish people for the first time in almost two millennia from historical object into historical actor. And the Six-Day War meant the restoration of Jewish power to the stage of world history.

The shock has yet to wear off. Jews had, of course, won earlier victories. In the War of Independence, the Jewish settler was celebrated in Western literature and film as hardy, resourceful, courageous. But not, by any means, as powerful. In the Sinai campaign of 1956, Israel did win a swift victory over Egypt. However, this was seen not as a triumph of Israeli power but as the result of a stealthy gang-up by two major Western countries (Britain and France) with Israel as the junior partner. In some ways the Sinai campaign echoed the classic Diaspora idea of Jewish power, derivative and dependent on foreign patrons. Moreover, whatever gains Israel acquired as a result of Suez were very quickly reversed when both the United States and the Soviet Union forced Ben-Gurion to return the Sinai in exchange for guarantees that would later prove worthless.

The impact of the Six-Day War on the idea of Jewish power has been so dramatic that it is hard to remember now Israel's situation in May 1967. It was quite simply at the brink of extinction. Nasser expelled the U.N. "peace-

keeping" troops in the Sinai, blockaded the Gulf of Aqaba, sent 85,000 troops into the Sinai (he marched them openly, and even had them detoured so as to pass under the window of the American Embassy), concluded military alliances with Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, and prepared for the final liquidation of the Jewish state. Israel was isolated and abandoned. After having forced the return of the Sinai in 1957, President Eisenhower had given Israel a memorandum guaranteeing free passage through the Straits of Tiran. During the desperate days of May 1967, the U.S. government was not sure how far its commitment to Israel extended, and was even reduced to calling Eisenhower (who had been out of office for seven years) to ask. Lyndon Johnson did try to organize an international flotilla to reopen the straits. Every country except Australia and the Netherlands said no, and the idea was dropped. By the beginning of June it was obvious that the Jews were alone. The only arbiter of their fate would be the Jewish army. Within six days that army had given an accounting of itself, and the image of the Jews was forever changed.

The geopolitical results were immediate and astonishing. Overnight Israel had been transformed from a weak and vulnerable minstate into the region's undisputed superpower, with dominion over all of its neighbors, and with a military reach that would take it within two decades to Uganda, Tunisia, and Iraq with seemingly little effort. Three things made this transformation difficult to accept: the extent of this new Jewish power, the astonishing speed with which it announced itself, and its contrast to almost 2,000 years of Jewish powerlessness culminating in the Holocaust.

This transformation elicited several reactions. First, that it was impossible. Initially both the Arabs and the Soviets contended that Israel had not done what it did. Nasser contended that the first Israeli air strike, which wiped out the Egyptian air force, had in fact been carried out by American planes. That fiction could not be main-

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tained long.

Hence the second reaction: if Jewish power was not impossible, it was intolerable. Thus the first great wave of postwar anti-Semitism came shortly after the Six-Day War. It was both exemplified and legitimized by de Gaulle, who was miffed that Israel had rejected his warning not to go to war. He ordered an arms embargo on Israel, ended two decades of very warm relations, and declared the Jews to be "an elite people, sure of itself and dominating." In the Eastern world, 1968 saw one of the more remarkable episodes in the long career of anti-Semitism. Poland was swept by a wave of anti-Jewish propaganda and persecution. There being so few Polish Jews left alive after the war, a new chapter in the history of anti-Semitism was being

written: anti-Semitism without Jews. The anti-Semitic wave spread throughout the Soviet bloc and is still very much evident in the vicious propaganda featured in the Soviet press. And, with Soviet and Arab backing, anti-Semitism spread to places, such as Africa, that had never even known Jews. When the U.N. declared that Zionism is racism—i.e., that Jewish nationalism, alone among all the world's nationalisms, embodies the most radical of this century's evils—anti-Semitism had finally become universal.

In much of the West, however, it was still not permissible to be overtly anti-Jewish or anti-Israel. Resentment of Jewish power found more subtle expression than that of the U.N. or even of de Gaulle. Thus began an astonishing

political phenomenon of the West, the sudden and quite fantastic explosion of interest in Palestinian nationalism. This concern had been dormant for at least 20 years. For 20 years the Arabs had the power to grant what was now suddenly an inalienable right—the right of Palestinians to self-determination—and refused to do so. For 20 years the Palestinians could have had a state, since their Arab brothers controlled the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinian statehood did not seem so urgent an issue then. But now that the establishment of a Palestinian state would come at the expense of Israel, and would in effect reverse the gains of 1967, it became an issue of great moral valence for the West, particularly for Western liberalism. Given the timing of this enthusiasm, it is fair to assume that the new interest in the Palestinian cause was less an expression of sympathy for one of dozens of refugee groups displaced in postwar, postcolonial partitions than a means to deal with the intolerable: the rise of Jewish power.

An even more subtle counterpart of this discovery of the Palestinians was the sudden rediscovery of and nostalgia for Jewish values that tended to negate or even to devalue power: the “prophetic” tradition, Jewish justice, Jewish genius, Jewish universalism. These are, no doubt, important values, but what seemed to attract critics of Israel to them was their close association with Jewish vulnerability. As one interviewer said to Ariel Sharon shortly after the Lebanon war, “You are no more the country of the great dream, the country for which we cried.” After the Six-Day War, to be cried for was no longer an aspiration of the Jewish people.

**F**OR JEWS, the Six-Day War had an extraordinary effect on their self-perception. In the West, particularly in those countries outside of North America where Jews have never been accepted as full citizens, the war gave rise to a palpable Jewish pride. The victory was shared. But nowhere was the effect of the war more profound than in the Soviet Union. The rise of Jewish nationalism, of the movement for emigration, and of the demand for Jewish rights are directly traceable to the outpouring of Jewish identification and pride that followed the Six-Day War.

For some Jews, the war’s effect was at times intoxicating. A prominent Orthodox Jewish rabbi and philosopher, now residing in Israel, remarked shortly after the war that there was no longer any need to observe the fast day of Tisha B’av (the day on the religious calendar on which Jews recite the Book of Lamentations and recall the destruction of the Temple and the other calamities of Jewish history) because, after all, the Jews had returned to Jerusalem. That kind of a religious complacency found its secular expression in the sense of arrogant invulnerability with which Israel faced Egypt and the Arabs throughout the early ’70s. The stunning initial reverses of the Yom Kippur war followed. But neither the disasters of that war nor of the Lebanon war could undo what 1967 had done: restore to Jews a sense of control of their destiny, which in turn derived from a sense of, and the real achievement of, power.

That power is by no means absolute, or even fully independent. Absolute and fully independent power is reserved by history for superpowers. Israel, like any regional power such as Pakistan or Cuba or Vietnam, is dependent economically, militarily, and diplomatically on its superpower patron. There is no doubt that Israel is not a power in the sense of even a European power. But that would be a lot to ask of a country of four million people, with a territory the size of Maryland, with no water and fewer natural resources.

Modernity had taught the Jews the importance of power. And the lesson has been learned. Jews have mastered the gun. For some Jews there is a certain shame in this. For many non-Jews there is anger that a people who had traditionally been masters of science and learning and, most (in)famously, finance should now debase their genius with the pursuit of power. The shame and anger are misplaced. Hitler taught and May 1967 retaught that, in the absence of power, all these other Jewish values can be turned to dust. The restoration of Jewish power is thus a restoration of Jewish normality.

Jewish normality, the great Zionist dream, means not just Jewish garbagemen and Jewish prostitutes in the streets of Tel Aviv. It means that a fractious Israeli democracy may often degenerate into extreme partisanship and incivility. It means that religious fanaticism may, as elsewhere in the Middle East, make inroads in national politics, that chauvinism and even racism may prosper too. It means that power may be incorrectly or unjustly used. But it means, above all, that these sins should no more be held to delegitimize Zionism than they would be held to delegitimize the nationalism of any other people.

**O**F COURSE, power also brings responsibilities, and among the responsibilities of power acquired by Israel in 1967 was the Palestinian problem. As a result of a successful war of self-defense, the Israelis found themselves in control of the lives of well over a million Palestinians, many of whom were awakened, in great measure, by the Six-Day War, to a new nationalism of their own. The craven and cynical exploitation of Palestinian wretchedness by many of their “friends” worldwide does not diminish the need for Israel to find a solution to this problem, which is its problem as well. For reasons of security—and for reasons of justice—Israel must use its new power wisely. Unfortunately, it does not always do so.

In the complex negotiations that have been made possible by Israel’s gains in the Six-Day War and that will ultimately lead to peace in the Middle East, the questions have always been questions of land and rights and boundaries. But ultimately there is the question of power. Wherever the boundary lines are drawn, any settlement whose aim is to return Israel to its vulnerability of May 1967 is unacceptable. The world is far too dangerous and hostile to expect Jews to give up power in return for promises. The lesson of ’67 is that the great abnormality in Jewish life is Jewish powerlessness and that its return should never be permitted again. □