



The Six-Day War and the Israeli Dream

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Six-Day War was a decisive turning point in the Zionist enterprise. But the project of building Israeli communities on the West Bank and the messianic aspects of Zionism were not born in 1967. They are stages in processes that were initiated by the workers' parties and the Herut movement.

Every year, the anniversary of the Six-Day War runs up against the rocks of a perennial Israeli debate: Who deviated from the Zionist path?

Each side in the debate is convinced that its opponent is the one who deviated. "It all started with the victory in 1967," the charge sheet begins. "Religious Zionism espoused new dreams. Religious people suddenly became messianic, and right-wingers became ultranationalist." The Israeli discourse on the war veers back and forth between, on the one hand, prayers of thanks for the great victory and the desire to extend Israel's control over the patrimony; and on the other, a longing for the "good years" that preceded the war and a hope for an end to the "occupation."

The war was indeed a turning point that ushered in major change. But the endeavor of building Israeli communities on the West Bank and the messianic aspects of the Zionist enterprise were only a continuation, if accelerated, of processes that had been spearheaded by the pioneering workers' parties and the Herut movement.

Naomi Shemer's song "Jerusalem of Gold," as performed by Shuli Natan at Jerusalem's International Convention Center on Independence Day in 1967, less than a month before the Six Day War, gave open expression to a mood of longing among Israelis. The song immediately stirred powerful, unanticipated emotion. When Natan went down to the dressing room, she was summoned

back for a repeat performance by Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek. The words of the song touched chords of deep public feeling that emerged at that moment with surprising force.

Without context, it is difficult to explain the way the war was conducted. Without the surge of yearning for the parts of the ancestral homeland that, at the end of the War of Independence, remained beyond the border, it is hard to account for why, after the Arab air forces had largely been destroyed, and after victory had effectively been achieved on the Sinai front within the first 24 hours, the Israeli offensive continued on the Jordanian and Syrian fronts.

The explanation is not a mystery. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan expressed it very clearly. At the conquest of Jerusalem, he said: "We have returned to our holiest places. We have returned in order never to part from them. To our Arab neighbors we also extend at this hour, all the more so at this hour, a hand of peace."

The transition to a proactive approach

From the beginning, messianism was deeply intertwined with the thinking of those who led the Labor movement; religious Zionism only continued it. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, a clear majority of the founders of the "Complete Land of Israel" movement came from the Labor movement, including the poets Haim Guri and Natan Alterman. Even if it is true that religious Zionism raised the messianic aspects to new heights, religious Zionists were not the first to fall under their sway. Already in the decade preceding the war, David Ben-Gurion repeatedly emphasized, openly and unreservedly, that he acknowledged the centrality of the messianic vision to the Zionist endeavor.

At the end of the 1956 Sinai Campaign, the prime minister said: "This is the messianic vision that has pulsed for thousands of years in the heart of the Jewish People, and it is my deep belief that this is what has brought us this far, and that only if we remain faithful to it all our lives will our historical hope be fully realized."

When, in February 1961, the philosopher Nathan Rotenstreich demanded "an end to the messianic phase that has beset Israel for close to fifteen years," Ben-Gurion replied at a meeting of the Mapai Party Center: "Do not tell us that the 'messianic phase' has passed, because if it has passed we will not be able to live."

Such words may surprise many, since nowadays the prevailing Israeli perception is that Zionism entailed an abandonment of the messianic idea. But this confusion is easily resolved. There is a fundamental difference between messianism as espoused by the ultra-Orthodox and the Zionist messianism of Ben-Gurion and

Rabbi Kook. The ultra-Orthodox notion of messianism is influenced to a great extent by Christianity and involves passively awaiting the messiah, who represents redemption sent from on high. Zionism, by contrast, adopted a proactive approach in which redemption is attained through human striving. This version of the messianic idea accords with the outlook of Isaac Luria and Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (Or ha-Hayyim): human beings are required to bring salvation nearer; they can advance the redemption through their deeds.

Pragmatic concessions as an interim stage

Proponents of withdrawal to the 1967 lines regard Ben-Gurion as an exemplar. It was he who agreed in 1937 to the Peel Commission plan for a partition of the country, and he accepted the November 1947 UN partition resolution establishing a Jewish state in half the territory of the western Land of Israel.

And yet, in those difficult hours when he chose in 1937 to agree to a partition of the western Land of Israel (and found himself in a confrontation with Berl Katznelson and Yitzhak Tabenkin), Ben-Gurion did not turn his back on the vision of Israel's redemption. As he explained that same year, he was guided by the logic of a graduated approach: "In this territory on which the Jewish state is supposed to be established, there is no possibility of solving the Jewish question. However, the offer can serve as a decisive stage on the path to the greater fulfillment of Zionism. It will give Jewish power itself a foothold in the land in the shortest possible time, leading us to the true realization of our historical aspirations."

In simple words: between zero sovereignty in the Land of Israel and immediate sovereignty in only part of the country, Ben-Gurion chose immediate sovereignty. The important thing, as he saw it, was to develop momentum. The concession was the right move at the right time, but it was never intended to be final.

Viewed from this standpoint, the Six-Day War was a milestone on a path that began in the earliest days of the return to Zion and ran through WWI, the Balfour Declaration, and the large-scale effort that came in its wake. The War of Independence, too, ended for many with a sense of incompleteness, of awaiting the next opportunity. True, from 1948 to 1967 there was an effort to achieve stability and normalcy. But the yearning for the lands that remained across the border did not expire for a moment.

The rift on the question of the future of Zionism

The Six-Day War, as a historical moment, significantly affected the development of the Zionist enterprise and the Middle East at large. As part of the Zionist story, however, it marked a stage in a long-term dynamic. Acknowledging this means seeing the war from a different perspective than those who view the 1949 armistice lines that remained in place until the morning of June 5, 1967, as a fixed state of affairs that was supposed to be final.

This, then, is the question of our time: What has changed, and who has changed? This is where the rift regarding the future of the Zionist enterprise began. To understand where Israel is headed, one needs to reconsider the mindset that generated a profound shift – one that now shapes the question of our future in the Land of Israel.

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