



Jerusalem Restored: The Six-Day War

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Dateline: Jerusalem, May–June 1967

The date is June 4, 1967. Israel's prime minister, Levi Eshkol, is at an emergency meeting of his cabinet to discuss the looming threat of war. Delivering an assessment of the military situation, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan warns Eshkol and the cabinet that Israel, surrounded and vastly outnumbered by enemy forces sworn to its destruction, faces an uphill battle. But, Dayan insists, if the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are allowed to strike first, the country might be able to weather the coming storm. The ministers debate Dayan's proposal for seven hours before giving him permission to launch a preemptive strike on the Egyptian military.

The next morning, Israeli pilots conduct a daring surprise attack on the Egyptian air force. After three hours of pinpoint raids, the IDF's Chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, receives the following message: "The Egyptian air force has ceased to exist." With their enemies dazed, the Israelis press forward on all fronts, quickly defeating Arab armies in the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights.

In Class 5, we will examine the causes and consequences of the Six-Day War. We will consider how Israel's stunning victory changed its status in the region and explore the war's impact on the Jewish soldiers and leaders who participated in the seemingly miraculous events as they unfolded.



Map of Arab Army movements in the days leading up to the Six-Day War



Defense Minister Moshe Dayan entering Jerusalem

Part B: Historical Spotlights



1949 – 1955: An Uneasy Peace



Israel's victory over its neighbors in the 1948 Arab-Israel war failed to secure a lasting peace. Even after an armistice (a formal cease-fire agreement) was signed in March 1949, the Arab states refused to recognize the Jewish state's right to exist. Beginning in the early 1950s, they launched violent raids into Israeli territory, mostly targeting Jewish civilians. In 1953, Egypt began to organize, arm, and train these "*fedayeen*" terrorist groups, causing the Jewish death count to rise considerably. Between 1951 and 1954, about 400 Israelis were killed and 900 were wounded in *fedayeen* attacks.

1956: Suez Crisis



In 1952, the Arab-nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser led his followers in a revolt against the pro-British king of Egypt. Two years later, Nasser was elected president of Egypt, having promised that he would free the Egyptian people from the control of European imperial powers, modernize the economy, and restore pride to the Arab world. In 1956, he seized the European-owned Suez Canal—a major global shipping lane that connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean—and banned Israeli shipping through it. In response, British, French, and Israeli forces intervened to retake control of the canal. Though pressure by America forced the three countries to withdraw, Israel succeeded in reestablishing its right of passage through the canal.

1956 – 1967: The Rise of Arab Nationalism



For resisting European interference in the Suez Crisis, Gamal Nasser became a hero in the Arab world and a leader in the secular “pan-Arab” movement that sought to unite the Arab peoples of the Middle East into a single polity. His anti-Western rhetoric and socialist economic policies also won him the backing of the Soviet Union. Further cementing his support in the Arab world, he presented himself as the one leader who could “erase the shame of the Palestine War” and reverse the Arabs’ 1948–49 defeat at the hands of “Zionist gangs.” In May 1967, Nasser blockaded Israel’s southern port of Eilat and began to assemble troops along Israel’s border.

June 5 – June 10, 1967: The Six-Day War



By early June, Nasser’s Syrian and Jordanian allies joined him in preparing for war. The Soviet Union’s heavy support of the Arab armies convinced many observers that Israel would be at a major disadvantage in the coming conflict. On June 5, 1967, however, Israel carried out the devastating surprise attack on Egypt’s air force that sowed shock and disarray in that country’s military. With Egypt substantially out of the picture, the armies of Syria and Jordan hesitated to advance on their own, and the Israelis quickly made rapid progress against their would-be conquerors. Within only a few days, all of the Arab partners were calling for a ceasefire.

1967 – 1974: Reunification of Jerusalem and the Settlement Movement



In less than a week, Israel had greatly expanded the territory under its control to include the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, the Golan Heights—and all of its previously divided capital city of Jerusalem. Israel’s victory was so swift that the government had no clear plans for proceeding after the war. Some leaders proposed ceding the captured land in return for peace agreements with the neighboring Arab states. But others worked toward establishing Jewish settlements in the newly conquered territories, especially in the heartland regions of ancient Judea and Samaria; in 1974, religious settlers formed an organization, *Gush Emunim* (“Bloc of the Faithful”), to advance this purpose.

Words that Changed the Jewish World

Key Texts and Discussion Questions

Source 1: Chapter 6, “The Temple Mount Is in Our Hands” from *Like Dreamers* by Yossi Klein Halevi

Introduction

In Like Dreamers, the journalist Yossi Klein Halevi retells the story of the soldiers who reunited the city of Jerusalem on June 7, 1967. In sharing these soldiers’ experiences, he explores the cost of the war, relives the exhilaration of victory, and analyzes the tremendous psychological and spiritual significance of that victory for the fighters and for their fellow Israelis. In the excerpt below, Klein Halevi recounts the moment when Israeli paratroopers reached the Old City of Jerusalem and when, for the first time in nearly 2,000 years, the Temple Mount and the Western Wall came once again under Jewish control.

The Paratroopers Enter the Old City of Jerusalem

Motta Gur [commander of the 55th Brigade in the battle for Jerusalem] sat on the ground and gazed at the walled city. It was a bright, cool morning, and the sun was on his back. The gold and silver domes of the Temple Mount glowed before him. He closed his eyes, as if in prayer. He was about to enter the Jewish pantheon, along with King David, who’d conquered Jerusalem and turned it into his capital; with Judah the Maccabee, who’d purified the Temple after its desecration by the Hellenists; with Bar Kochba, who’d thrown himself against Rome and lost the Jews’ last desperate battle for Jerusalem. Then came the centuries of enforced separation, landscape transformed into memory. And now landscape was reemerging from dream, shimmering back into tangible reach.

Until this moment, Arik Achmon [the 55th Brigade’s chief intelligence officer] had felt no historical resonance in the battle for Jerusalem. They had come to the city to protect its Jews, nothing more. But now his thoughts, too, drifted into history. The paratroopers were about to become the first soldiers of a sovereign Jewish state in eighteen centuries to enter the capital of the Jewish people. Even for Arik Achmon, that was a disorienting thought.

Arik forced his attention back to practicalities. He aimed his binoculars at the Temple Mount. No sign of movement. Were they walking into an ambush? Motta took the radio and addressed his three battalion commanders. “Fifty-fifth Paratrooper Brigade,” he began, deliberately

violating army regulations against identifying a unit over the radio during combat, recording the moment for history,

we are sitting on the ridge overlooking the Old City, and soon we shall enter it—the Old City of Jerusalem, which generations have dreamed of and longed for. We will be the first to enter. . . . Twenty-eighth and Seventy-first Battalions: move toward the Lions' Gate! Sixty-sixth Battalion: follow them. Move, move toward the gate!

The men of the Twenty-eighth left the Rockefeller [Museum] in two columns and headed toward the Lions' Gate. A shot from the Wall hit a soldier in the neck. Yoel Bin-Nun [a religious-Zionist paratrooper and future leader of the settlement movement] rushed toward him. Meanwhile, a kibbutznik jump-started a parked car. Yoel helped lift the wounded man inside, and the car sped off to the hospital. Rabbi Shlomo Goren [chief rabbi of the IDF] appeared on foot, holding a shofar and a small Torah scroll. Goren seemed oblivious of the sporadic shooting from the wall; he hadn't bothered to put on a helmet. He seemed to Yoel to embody Jewish history, which couldn't wait any longer for this moment.

The Religious Significance of Victory

Yoel Bin-Nun approached the Lions' Gate. Spread before him was the landscape of messianic dream. Terraced into the Mount of Olives were thousands of flat tombstones, of Jews who had chosen to be buried directly across from the Temple Mount, to be resurrected when the messiah arrived. In the Valley of Kidron rose the conical stone monument called the Pillar of Absalom, after the rebellious son of King David, founder of the messianic line. Nearby, embedded in the Old City wall, was the Gate of Mercy, through which, according to tradition, the messiah would enter, and which had been sealed by Muslims to thwart the Redeemer of Israel.

Yoel ran up the steep road leading to the Lions' Gate, past the still-smoking bus, and through the crowded gate. When he reached the steps leading to the Dome of the Rock, he abruptly stopped: beyond lay the region of the Holy of Holies. He felt lightheaded, as if on a mountain peak. To move from battle to this—he couldn't pray: prayer seemed inadequate. What was left to ask for? He felt *himself* to be an answered prayer to all those who had believed this day would come, that Jewish history would vindicate Jewish faith.

He studied the topography. "This was the women's area of the Temple," he told a friend. "How do you know, Yoel?" his friend asked, surprised. Yoel explained that he happened to be studying the laws of the Temple just before the war, and he could plainly see the Talmud's description of the layout of the Mount. Young men on their way up the stairs

stopped to ask Yoel directions to the Western Wall. Yoel shrugged; the Wall didn't interest him. The Jews had prayed there only because they'd been barred from the Mount. Why descend to the place of lamenting God's absence from the place that celebrated His glory? Yoel thought of his high-school rabbi, who had claimed that Israel's failure to control the Temple Mount was proof that God had rejected Zionism. What was the rabbi thinking now? "So, Yoel, what do you say?" his kibbutz officer asked. "Two-thousand years of exile are over," replied Yoel.

"Just say the Sh'ma"

Exhausted, grieving, exultant, paratroopers crossed the Temple Mount and rushed down to the Western Wall. Hanan Porat [another future leader of the religious-settlement movement], too, was looking for a way to get to the Wall. The Temple Mount may have been the locus of holiness, center of the universe, but Hanan craved the Wall, where Jews had prayed for this moment. As he ran down the steps, he told a friend, "We are writing the next chapter of the Bible." The narrow space before the Wall—barely five meters wide and twenty meters long—filled with soldiers. Rabbi Goren was lifted onto shoulders. He tried to blow the shofar but was too overcome. "Rabbi," said an officer, a kibbutz officer, "give me the shofar. I play the trumpet." Goren complied. The sound that emerged resembled the blast of a bugle. A kibbutz officer asked Hanan Porat to teach him an appropriate prayer. Hanan replied, "Just say the Sh'ma": the basic Jewish prayer that begins, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one," and which any Orthodox child can recite. But the kibbutz officer had never heard of the Sh'ma. "Repeat after me," said Hanan, and they said the prayer together. . . .

Udi Adiv watched Rabbi Goren hoisted above a circle of dancing soldiers and felt repelled. People died so that Goren can prance before his holy stones—despite himself, though, something about this place moved him. He leaned against the row of Arab houses in the narrow lane and, for the first time in his life, confronted antiquity. The kibbutz

Discussion Questions



1. "The paratroopers were about to become the first soldiers of a sovereign Jewish state in eighteen centuries to enter the capital of the Jewish people." Can you imagine what this would be like? How would you feel at that moment?
2. Some Israeli soldiers immediately saw the retaking of Jerusalem as a great event in Jewish history—they were joining the pantheon of "King David," "Judah the Maccabee," and Bar Kochba." Others saw it as simply the latest Israeli battle: "They had come to protect Jews, nothing more." Which reaction makes more sense to you? How did the event itself seem to change the soldiers who experienced it?

celebrated youth, the future, not nostalgia. This stone alley, with its gray light: he felt a longing that disoriented him. He was an Israeli, a new creature; if he thought about his Jewish identity at all, it is the way a human being relates to the fetus he once was, as mere unconscious prelude. In Udi's vocabulary, Jewish was equated with the ills of exile: rootless, parasitic, superstitious. Yet here, in the Western Wall's solitary dignity, was beauty. In this world of stone, he felt softness; in this quarry of memory, peace. Udi looked on as soldiers caressed the Wall and buried their heads in its crevices. He felt no need to unburden himself to these stones, no urge even to touch them. He was grateful to be alive and intact, grateful that the murderous flashes of light [from exploding bombs] had stopped. The confinement of this small space felt soothing. Once, exiled Jews had unburdened themselves to the Wall in defeat; now an Israeli soldier received comfort here in his unwanted victory.

3. When the Israeli soldiers arrived at the Western Wall, Yoel Bin-Nun declared: "Two-thousand years of exile are over." What did he mean? Why was the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 not, in his mind, the end of Jewish exile?

4. In this passage, the liberation of Jerusalem is described as "the landscape of a messianic dream" and "writing the next chapter of the Bible." Was the return to Jerusalem in 1967 a miraculous event? Was God involved?

5. The passage from *Like Dreamers* ends as follows: "Once, exiled Jews had unburdened themselves to the Wall in defeat; now an Israeli soldier received comfort here in his unwanted victory." What does this suggest about the impact of the Six-Day War on the soldiers involved and on Jewish history itself?

Source 2: Address by Yitzhak Rabin upon receiving an Honorary Ph.D. the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (June 28, 1967)

Introduction

On June 28, the day after the Knesset passed a law formally reunifying the city of Jerusalem, Major-General Yitzhak Rabin, Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Hebrew University. Just weeks after Israel's astonishing victory in the Six-Day War, the tone of the general's speech was far from triumphant. Though he joins his audience in celebrating Israel's military achievement, Rabin focuses on the need to preserve Israel's distinct moral character, even as it becomes a military power.

Your Excellency, President of the State of Israel; Mr. Prime Minister; President of the Hebrew University; governors; teachers; ladies and gentlemen.

I stand in awe before you, leaders of our generation, here in this venerable and magnificent place, overlooking Israel's eternal capital and the birthplace of our people's ancient history. Together with other distinguished people, who are no doubt worthy of this honor, you have chosen to do me great honor by conferring upon me the title of Doctor of Philosophy. Permit me to express to you here what is in my heart: I regard myself at this time as the representative of thousands of commanders and tens of thousands of soldiers who brought the State of Israel its victory in the Six-Day War, as a representative of the entire Israel Defense Forces.

It may be asked why the university saw fit to grant the title of Honorary Doctor of Philosophy to a soldier in recognition of his martial activities. What is there in common between military activity and the academic world, which represents civilization and culture? What is there in common between those whose profession is violence, and spiritual values? I, however, am honored that through me you are expressing such deep appreciation to my comrades-in-arms and to the uniqueness of the Israel Defense Forces, which is essentially an extension of the unique spirit of the entire Jewish people.

The world has recognized the fact that the Israel Defense

Discussion Questions



1. Major-General Rabin says that the Israel Defense Forces are “essentially an extension of the unique spirit of the entire Jewish people.” What does he mean?

2. Rabin is addressing his audience as a military commander in the immediate aftermath of a major victory. Does his tone reflect a sense of triumph and conquest? Why or why not?

Force differs from other armies. Although its first task is the military task of ensuring security, the IDF undertakes numerous tasks of peace, tasks not of destruction but of construction and of the strengthening of the nation's cultural and moral resources. . . .

War is intrinsically harsh and cruel, bloody and tearstained, but this war in particular, which we have just undergone, brought forth rare and magnificent instances of heroism and courage, together with humane expressions of brotherhood, comradeship, and spiritual greatness. Whoever has not seen a tank crew continue their attack with their commander killed and their vehicle badly damaged; whoever has not seen soldiers endangering their lives to extricate wounded comrades from a minefield; whoever has not seen the anxiety and the effort of the entire Air Force devoted to rescuing a pilot who has fallen in enemy territory, cannot know the meaning of devotion among comrades-in-arms.

The entire nation was exalted, and many wept, upon hearing the news of the capture of the Old City of Jerusalem. Our [Israeli-born] youth, and most certainly our soldiers, do not tend toward sentimentality; they shy away from revealing it in public. However, the strain of battle, the anxiety which preceded it, and the sense of salvation and of direct participation of every soldier in the forging of the heart of Jewish history, cracked the shell of hardness and shyness and released wellsprings of deeply felt spiritual emotion. The paratroopers who conquered the Western Wall leaned against its stones and wept. As a symbol, this was a rare occasion, almost unparalleled in human history. Such phrases and clichés are not generally used in the IDF, but this sight on the Temple Mount, beyond the power of words, revealed, as though by a flash of lightning, a deep truth.

And more than this, the joy of triumph seized the entire nation. Nevertheless, we find, increasingly, a strange phenomenon among our fighters. Their joy is not total, and more than a little sorrow, and shock, permeates their celebration. There are those who do not celebrate at all. The warriors in the front lines witnessed not only the

3. How do the Israel Defense Forces “strengthen... the nation’s cultural and moral resources”?

4. While recognizing that war is “harsh and cruel, bloody and tearstained,” Rabin suggests that Israeli soldiers also demonstrate the highest possibilities of human character: “heroism and courage, together with humane expressions of brotherhood, comradeship, and spiritual greatness.” Does this make sense?

5. What is the “deep truth” about Jewish history that Rabin thinks was revealed by the soldiers weeping at the Temple Mount?

6. How does Rabin’s description of Israeli soldiers during the war compare to Klein Halevi’s account in *Like Dreamers*? Does Rabin—a commander at the highest level—seem to understand the real experience of his troops?

glory of victory but also its price—their comrades who fell beside them, bleeding. And I know that the terrible price paid by our enemies also touched the hearts of many of our men deeply. It may be that the Jewish people never learned, never accustomed themselves to experience the thrill of conquest and victory, and so we receive it with mixed feelings. . . .

We speak a great deal about the few against the many. In this war, perhaps for the first time since the Arab invasions of the spring of 1948, . . . units of the Israel Defense Forces stood on all fronts, the few against the many. What this means is that relatively small units of our soldiers often entered seemingly endless networks of deeply dug fortifications, surrounded by hundreds and thousands of enemy troops, and faced the task of forcing their way, hour after hour, in this jungle of dangers, even after the momentum and excitement of the first assault had waned and all that remained was the need to have faith in our strength, in the lack of any alternative, in the goal for which we fight, and in the importance of summoning up every spiritual resource in order to continue fighting to the very end. . . .

It all starts and ends with the spirit. Our soldiers prevailed not by their weapons but by their awareness of their supreme mission, by their awareness of the righteousness of their cause, by their deep love for their homeland and by their recognition of the difficult task laid upon them—to ensure the existence of our people in our homeland, to defend, even at the price of their own lives, the right of the Jewish people to live in their own state, free, independent, and in peace.

This army, which I had the privilege of commanding during this war, came from the people and returns to the people—to the people who rise in their hour of crisis and overcome all enemies by virtue of their moral stature and spiritual readiness in the hour of need.

As the representative of the Israel Defense Forces, and in the name of every one of its soldiers, I am proud to accept this honor.

7. Rabin describes the war as “the few against the many.” Why is this theme so important to the Israeli story?

8. Rabin declares: “It all starts and ends with the spirit. Our soldiers prevailed not by their weapons but by the awareness of their supreme mission, by their awareness of the righteousness of their cause . . . to defend, even at the price of their own lives, the right of the Jewish people to live in their own state, free, independent, and in peace.” Why was the Israeli spirit so central to Israeli victory?

Final Thoughts

The Six-Day War—and with it the restoration of Jerusalem as Israel’s eternal capital—was the most significant event in Zionist history since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. As a *political* event, this remarkable victory transformed Israel from a small, fledgling state into a regional power. As a *spiritual* event, it united the ancient city of King David and the modern nation-state: a restoration that many Jews could only understand in biblical terms. While many viewed this turn of events as a miracle and a blessing, it also created new forms of opposition and hostility to Israel. It also left the Israeli government with many new questions: What should Israel do with the newly acquired territories—including the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, Judea and Samaria, and the Golan Heights? How should the Jewish state govern the many non-Jews now living under Jewish sovereignty? How would Israel manage ongoing threats to its security while ensuring the ethical use of Jewish power? These large issues remain central to Israeli political life in the current age.



Israeli soldiers at the Western Wall

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- “Six Days of War Change a Country Forever” in *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* by Daniel Gordis (pp. 259–282)
- “The Real Truth About the Temple Mount” by Meir Soloveichik in *Commentary* – <https://www.commentary.org/articles/meir-soloveichik/temple-mount-judaisms-holiest-site/>
- “The Religious Meaning of the Six Day War” by Norman Lamm, Michael Wyschogrod, Pinchas Peli, Shear Yashuv Cohen, and Walter Wurzbarger in *Tradition* – <https://tikvahfund.org/library/the-religious-meaning-of-the-six-day-war/>