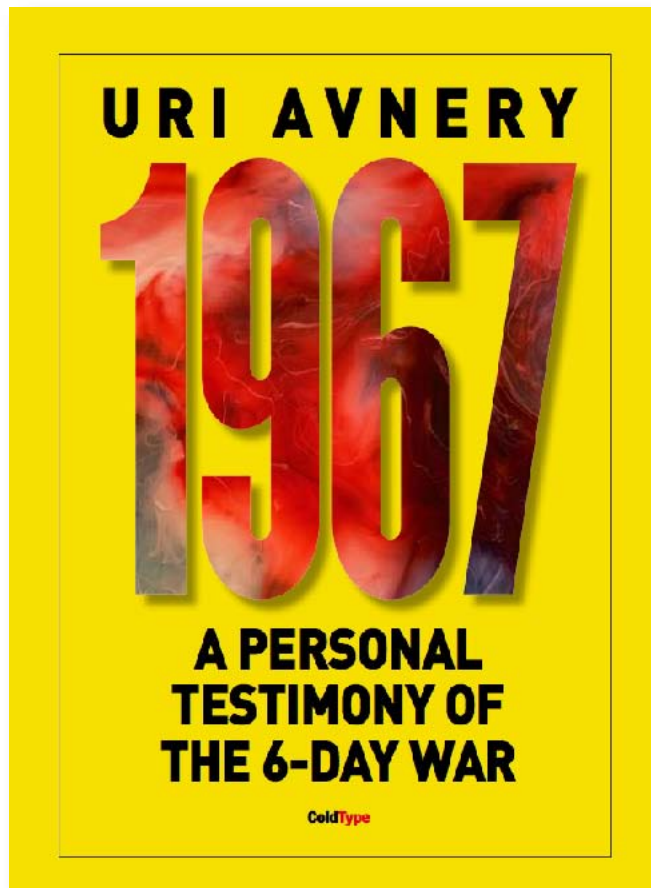


URI AVNERY

1967

**A PERSONAL
TESTIMONY OF
THE 6-DAY WAR**

ColdType



URI AVNERI is a former member of the Irgun underground in Israel. He joined Ha'aretz newspaper in 1949, quitting a year later to edit the magazine Haolam Hazeh, which proved to be a thorn in the flesh to a number of Israeli governments. Avneri was ambushed and both his hands broken in 1953 and escaped an assassination bid in 1975. He became a member of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, in 1969 at the head of a party that took its name from his magazine

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ON

May 25, 1967, twelve days before the Six-day war, I published in Haolam Hazeh, the news magazine of which I was the editor, an article entitled "Nasser Has Fallen Into a Trap". That sounded crazy, because, at the time, all Israel was in the grip of mortal fear.

A few months earlier, I was invited to give a lecture in a kibbutz in the North. After the lecture I was invited to coffee with a few members. There, my host told me in confidence that the Chief of the Northern Command, General David ("Dado") Elazar, had been there only a week before. In the same room, Dado had confided in the same few trusted members: "Every night, before going to sleep, I pray that Nasser concentrates his troops in the Sinai desert. There we shall annihilate them."

When Nasser concentrated his troops in Sinai in the middle of May 1967, it seemed like an answer to this prayer. So, while everybody around me was numb with fright, I was not worried.

That fear was real. There was much talk about an imminent Second Holocaust. From the beginning of the crisis up to the start of the war, for three full weeks, the fear that had gripped Israel intensified from day to day. The "Voice of Thunder", the Cairo radio station that broadcast in broken Hebrew – until then considered rather ridiculous – was issuing blood-curdling threats. Gamal Abd-al-Nasser himself – who in reality was deadly afraid of an Israeli attack and did not dream of attacking – thought that by threatening to throw Israel into the sea he would frighten us into abandoning any idea of war. It had, of course, the opposite effect.

The chain of events that made the war inevitable resembled in some respects the lead-up to World War I, "the war that nobody wanted".

Syria sponsored the Palestinian guerilla war started by Yasser Arafat on its border. Israel responded with dire threats. The chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, publicly threatened to occupy Damascus and overthrow the regime. The Syrians got frightened and called on Egypt for assistance.

Just before the start of the crisis, the Soviet ambassador, Chubakhin, asked me to come and visit him at his embassy in Ramat Gan. He told me that Israel was planning to

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attack Syria and was already massing troops on the border. He saw this as a part of a broader US scheme to install pro-American regimes all over the area, starting with the recent coup d'etat of the colonels in Greece (April 1967) and American machinations in Iran. The ambassador wanted me to use my position as Member of the Knesset and Editor-in-Chief of a popular news magazine to alert the Israeli public.

I'm afraid that my answer was rather cynical: If you are afraid of this, why don't you instruct your ambassador in Damascus to ask your Syrian friends to stop the guerilla attacks on Israel, at least for some time? Why give our government a pretext for war?

Chubakhin's reply amazed me. "Do you think that anyone in Damascus listens to our ambassador?"

The story about Israel "massing troops on the border" was, of course, ridiculous. A Soviet general may believe that before starting an offensive, troops must be massed on the frontier. But in the tiny territory of Israel, "massing" troops was both impossible and superfluous.

Anyhow, faced with Syria's request for help and the Soviet stories about the massing of Israeli troops, Nasser saw an opportunity to assert his leadership of the Arab world. He sent his troops into Sinai. If he had really intended to start a war, he would have done this as secretly as possible. But his troops passed Cairo in broad daylight, proof that the aim was to show off.

As it so happened, I met Ezer Weitzman, who until recently had been the commander of the Israeli air force, at a party. He told me that he was astonished. The Israeli army intelligence service had been completely taken by surprise by the appearance of Egyptian troops in Sinai. They had been convinced that the entire Egyptian army was tied down in far-away Yemen, where Nasser was intervening in a civil war. Indeed, the ability of the Egyptian air force to supply their troops there elicited grudging admiration from Weitzman.

On May 23, Nasser announced (falsely) that he had mined the sea approaches to Eilat. That was for Israel a casus belli. Eilat was Israel's gateway to the eastern world, free passage there had an emotional importance far beyond its actual value. I remember coming back from the Knesset that day, and telling my colleagues on the New Force Party's executive board: "War is now inevitable." I added: "This war will change everything."

To dramatize these steps, Nasser asked the UN Secretary General, U Thant, to withdraw UN forces – but only from a certain sector. (These forces had been stationed on the border since the 1956 Sinai war).

Misreading the situation completely, U Thant withdrew all his troops. Faced now with the possibility of an Israeli preventive attack, and believing his own propaganda that

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Israel was but an American puppet, Nasser sent his deputy to the US to get the Americans to stop Israel. Israelis, in the meantime, saw only the gathering menace and believed that they could be attacked at any minute.

I can attest to the mood in the highest circles. A few days before the war, Menachem Begin drew me aside in the Knesset. "Uri," he said with great agitation, "we have different opinions, but in this existential crisis we all have the same aim: to save Israel. You and your magazine have a great influence on young people. Please, use it to stiffen their morale!"

In my last speech to the Knesset before the war, I said: "Just at such an hour of wavering on the brink of war, a great Israeli statesman could take a revolutionary initiative for starting a direct dialogue, perhaps secret, perhaps public and dramatic, which could lead to a basic change in our position in the area."

Adding to the general despair was the personality of Levy Eshkol, David Ben-Gurion's successor as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. He was seen – quite wrongly – as a bumbling, indecisive and incompetent leader. In a crucial radio speech, he stumbled over a word that had been inserted at the last minute by one of his advisors, and seemed to be stuttering.

In the course of these "Days of Anxiety", as they became known since, Eshkol was under intense pressure. Prominent generals (among them Matti Peled, who later became my friend and a peace activist) went to Eshkol and delivered what amounted to an ultimatum, demanding an immediate attack. With almost the whole male population mobilized and waiting on the borders, normal life had come to a virtual standstill. The whole country was holding its breath.

I received almost daily reports on what was going on in the cabinet. My source was Yigal Allon.

Allon, former commander of the Palmach (Haganah shock troops) and the commander of the southern front in 1948, was now Minister of Labor. We had become friends after the 1948 war. When the 1967 crisis started, I decided to publish a temporary daily paper, called Daf ("page"). However, there was no printing press ready and able to print it, except the one that belonged to Allon's kibbutz movement.

Throughout the crisis, I met with Allon almost daily to negotiate the deal, and on these occasions he poured his heart out. His junior job in the government was frustrating to the hero of the soldiers of 1948. He pined for the Ministry of Defense, and the deepening crisis offered the opportunity.

Daily, almost perceptibly, the demand grew that Eshkol surrender his job as Prime Minister, or at least relinquish the Defense portfolio. At the beginning, the names of sev-

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eral candidates for Minister of Defense were bandied about. Allon was high on the list. Other credible candidates were the "Old Man" – David Ben-Gurion, the 1948 acting Chief of Staff – General Yigael Yadin, a former Deputy Minister of Defense – Shimon Peres and a former Chief of Staff – Moshe Dayan.

Allon was confident that he would get the job, since he was already a member of the government and had been a very successful general in war. From day to day he became more radiant. On the street the list became shorter and shorter, till in the end the public demand was centered on Dayan. A group of women (immediately nicknamed "the Merry Wives of Windsor") demonstrated on his behalf in front of the Labor Party's head office.

At the end of May, when I next saw Allon, he was shattered. He had just heard that Eshkol had given in and appointed Dayan. Allon despised the famous general. Like most of the 1948 commanders, he considered Dayan a bad soldier, incapable of orderly staff work and thoroughly irresponsible. (Indeed, I once heard Dayan boasting of his "irresponsibility").

Dayan had little influence on the planning of the war, but he had an immense impact on the morale of the troops – charismatic, glamorous and with a reputation as a daring, aggressive commander. The reserves who had been mobilized, only to wait, and wait and wait some more, greeted his appointment with enthusiasm. They understood that the long wait was almost over.

When our army attacked, it was like the release of a powerful spring.

On the first day of the war, after an emergency parliamentary session, I was in the Knesset bomb shelter sitting out shelling by Jordanian artillery in East Jerusalem, when a friend whispered in my ear: "We have already won the war. The Air Force has destroyed the Egyptian airplanes on the ground".

This information was withheld from the public. All reports of the incredible victories of our army were suppressed by the censor, because the government was afraid that if they became public, the UN would impose a cease-fire – which now just seemed obstructive. So the public was exposed to the ludicrous hyperbole of the Voice of Thunder, according to which Tel-Aviv was burning.

Many of the territories were conquered almost by accident. There was a military plan for the destruction of the Egyptian forces in the South, but there were no plans for a comprehensive war. Dayan was not only against the occupation of the Gaza Strip, but even against the occupation of East Jerusalem. The West Bank was occupied in an improvised operation, after King Hussein had unexpectedly opened fire in order to demonstrate his solidarity with Egypt. In the beginning, Dayan also objected to the operation against Syria, for fear of Soviet intervention. Because of this, there was no plan for the future of the large population in the occupied territories.

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On the fifth day of the war, just after our army had conquered the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, I wrote an open letter to Levy Eshkol, proposing that he seize the historic opportunity and offer the Palestinian people the chance to establish a state of their own. I had advocated this idea since 1949, but I was convinced that this moment, with the whole region in a state of shock, was the right time to make peace with the Palestinians by making them an historic offer.

Right after the war, Eshkol invited me to a private talk. He listened patiently while I explained this idea. "Uri, what kind of a trader are you?" he said with a benign smile, "In negotiations, one starts by offering the minimum and demanding the maximum. Then, gradually, one raises the offer until a compromise is achieved somewhere in the middle. What you propose is to offer everything even before negotiations have started."

"That is true when one sells a horse," I answered, "not when one wants to achieve a historic peace."

Contrary to his image, Eshkol was really a very tough guy. This was disguised by a friendly disposition, a Yiddish sense of humor and a syntax that drove the Knesset stenographers up the wall. He had devoted all his life to the setting up of Jewish settlements, and now all he could see was a vast expanse that could be used for new settlements.

In the following months and years, I made dozens of speeches in the Knesset (in addition to my articles in "Haolam Hazeh") advocating the idea of a Palestinian state in the newly occupied territories. In one of my speeches I reported that I had spoken with all the prominent leaders in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including those who were known as "supporters of Jordan", and that all of them had told me that they preferred a Palestinian state to the restoration of Jordanian rule. Both Dayan and Eshkol denied that, but Eshkol sent his advisor for the occupied territories, Moshe Sassoon, to ask me in private about my information. On August 13, 1969, Sassoon wrote a report to the Prime Minister (with a copy to me), in which he confirmed that his own information was identical with mine.

To my pleasant surprise, I found I had quite a number of supporters in the army high command.

Generals, it has been said, always fight the last war. They also have in their minds the last peace. In 1956, President Eisenhower and the leaders of the Soviet Union had compelled Ben-Gurion to give back to Egypt all the territories occupied during the Sinai War. Now everyone expected the same to happen. Faced with this possibility, many generals preferred the idea of a demilitarized Palestinian state next to Israel to the prospect of returning the territories to Jordan, a much bigger state that could serve as a staging area for the armies of Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In public opinion polls, support for

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the idea of a Palestinian state next to Israel reached an astonishing 37%.

That phase passed quickly. The US, which, on the eve of the war, had secretly informed our government that it would not object to an Israeli attack, now did nothing to compel Israel to withdraw. Gradually, the Israeli leadership became aware of a total absence of international pressure to return anything. Moreover, the "three No's" adopted in September 1967 by the summit meeting of humiliated Arab leaders in Khartoum ("No peace, No recognition, No negotiations") played into the hands of Israeli annexationists.

Teams of people from the Kibbutz movement were already swarming over the West Bank looking for favorable locations. They found them in the Jordan valley – flat, suitable for tractors and watered by the river. Immediately after the war, huge numbers of refugees from the 1948 war had been driven out of the Jericho refugee camps near the river. The settlement drive, which was to change the map completely, was on its way.

Almost automatically, actions of ethnic cleansing were carried out. It was never ascertained who had given the orders. Clearly, they were transmitted orally. Over all of them hovered the spirit of Moshe Dayan.

Immediately after the fighting, the writer Amos Kenan came to me. He was in a state of shock, and told that me he had just witnessed the expulsion of thousands of inhabitants from three villages in the Latrun area. I asked him to sit down and write a report of what he had seen. It was a revolting document. I immediately drove to the village Imwass (perhaps the Biblical Emmaeus) and saw bulldozers leveling house after house. When I tried to take pictures, soldiers drove me away.

From there I hastened to the Knesset and distributed copies of the report to several ministers, including Begin and the Mapam ministers, as well as to the assistants of the Prime Minister. It did not help. The work was finished before anybody could intervene. Today, the "Canada Park" covers the site.

At that time, everybody still believed that Israel would be pressured to return the territories it had conquered. The Latrun villages were a kind of bulge in the Green Line, dominating the main road between Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem. For that reason, somebody decided to create a fait accompli that would remove the pressure to return this area..

Almost at the same time, it was reported to me that the army had started to destroy the town of Qalqilia. From the vicinity of that town, Jordanian artillery had tried to shell Tel-Aviv, some 25 km away. I hastened there and saw that one neighborhood was already almost completely demolished. Again I went to the Knesset, in order to induce the Prime Minister and the other ministers to interfere. And indeed, the demolition was stopped and the houses already demolished were rebuilt. I don't know what role exactly my intervention played in this, but since then, every time I pass the place, I have a feeling of satisfaction. (Though Qalqilia is now cut off by the monstrous wall.)

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Soon after, a soldier came to my office in an obvious state of nervous breakdown. He told me that every night refugees were trying to cross the Jordan in order to return home, and the order was to kill them on the spot, women and children included. I wrote a long letter to the Chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, and received an answer from his office chief, Shmuel Gat, dated October 29, 1967, saying that the army had investigated the matter and "drawn the conclusion that could be drawn". As far as I know, the systematic massacre was stopped.

(Some days ago I met this soldier again. He was playing the flute on the street.)

On THE first day of the fighting, it was a defensive war. Dayan declared that we had no intention of conquest. Almost all Israelis thought so, too. A day after the fighting was over, it had become a war of expansion and annexation. Completely intoxicated by the Biblical landscapes, the flood of "victory albums", the new patriotic songs and the messianic slogans, the public took the lead. The Eshkol government, which had first officially decided to negotiate the return of the Territories, forgot about this when it realized that there was no need to.

In an article soon after, I told a story about how to capture monkeys. One attaches a bottle to the branch of a tree and puts a fruit into it. The monkey puts his hand into the bottle, takes hold of the fruit and tries to pull it out, but his fist enclosing the fruit is much too big. Thus he is captured. He could, of course, get free any moment by letting go of the fruit, but, craving for the fruit, is unable to do so. In the same way, holding on to the occupied territories, we were hostages of our own greed.

After the war, Professor Yeshayahu (Isaiah) Leibowitz, an orthodox Jew, foresaw that the occupation would corrupt us and turn us into a people of "secret service agents and managers of foreign labor". (I called him "prophet Isaiah the third", which made him furious. He said that a prophet voices the words of God, while he was speaking the language of logic.)

In retrospect, it looked as if the whole scenario was the work of a talented director – the anxiety, the crescendo of fear, the miraculous victory. This helps to explain what happened later on. In the Faust legend, Mephistopheles pays for the soul of the learned doctor with every imaginable kind of pleasure. Something like that happened to us in June, 1967. The chain of events directed by a superior being, a temptation deliberately put in front of us in order to test us. What looked like a gift from God was actually a temptation from Satan, an attempt to buy our soul.

Did he succeed? Did Israel lose its soul

I hope not. I hope that the intoxication is now finally wearing off. Many things said and written this week seem to indicate this.

Forty years after the event, the question is still open.



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