



Rabbi Hanoch Teller

THE FORGOTTEN FRONT

of the

SIX - DAY WAR

Memories of the Six-Day War invariably center upon the brilliant military triumph. Forgotten was the overriding concern of the Israeli military and government that the war would be decided more in Washington and in the UN in New York, than on the battlefield. If there was any lesson from the Sinai Campaign in 1956, it was that Israel could win a bloody war and then have it all vitiated.

And just as the Israeli military was blessed with manifest and more subtle miracles at every stage of the war, in the diplomatic arena Israel was also graced with industrial helpings of Divine Providence. To better understand this, some crucial background.

Nasser's closing the Straits of Tiran in May 1967 – which many assume precipitated the war – was actually the *final* chapter of what is often referred to as the “War for the Water.” That war is a more informed *starting point* to the Six-Day War.

In 1964, Israel completed its National Water Carrier, consisting of a north-to-south conduit of tunnels, canals and pipelines some 130 kilometers long transferring Jordan River water to the Negev Desert. To the Arab mind this was an existential threat, for it would increase

the usable land in Israel and consequently result in the influx of more Jews. Accordingly, the Syrians began diverting the Jordan River tributaries emanating from their territory to dry up the carrier.

Tank battles ensued across the border. The Syrians began to move their heavy equipment away from the border and out of the range of Israeli tanks.

There was no question that the diversion of water would constitute a *casus belli* (grounds for war) and there was also no question that the intervention of the Israeli Air Force in the water conflict would be the point of no return for *actual war*. Armor wizard Yisrael Tal made some critical modifications, extending the range of the Israeli tanks so that the Syrian earth-moving equipment was no longer safe wherever it was positioned.

This brought an end to the water diversion, commencing the next diversion. The Syrians began to rain missiles upon the Galilee farms and kibbutzim from the high ground of the Golan Heights. Cautious Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol finally authorized the air force to suppress the Syrian bombardments.

If ever there was a reason to be cautious, this was it, for this act could easily catalyze a regional war involving Soviet intervention. The Israeli air strike made Syrian Mig-21s take to the air and a dog fight

ensued resulting in the loss of six Syrian planes and no Israeli casualties.

Once again, the score on the battlefield did not mirror political realities. In diplomatic circles the world was up in arms, the UN suddenly had no agenda other than censuring Israel, the Soviets lost not only their most advanced fighter jets but also face, and the Arabs threatened the imminent destruction of the Zionist State with renewed vigor.

Egypt, under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, assumed the leadership of the Arab world by expelling the UN Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Sinai Peninsula and immediately afterward flooding it with Egyptian forces. These acts clearly signaled what Nasser was up to, and if any other proof was needed, on May 23, 1967, Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, constituting a *casus belli* for Israel.

Israel was thrust into the nerve-wracking countdown to war, remembered in the chronicles of Israel as the *Hamtana* (the Wait).

As Egypt had stationed 100,000 troops equipped with hundreds of Soviet tanks in the Sinai Peninsula, the most logical action for Israel would have been a preemptive strike. But Israel's (supposed) allies, its arms suppliers, would not hear of it.

France's Charles de Gaulle offered no advice how Israel was to manage with



her seaport choked, but he was unmistakably clear that if Israel fired the first shot, it would forfeit France's friendship and assistance for good. Britain's Harold Wilson was not nearly as strident, but he also had no solution to contain Nasser's war aspirations. President Johnson in America proposed the formation of an "international flotilla" of warships to sail through the Straits of Tiran in the hope it would terminate Nasser's blockade. But such a flotilla would take time to assemble, and in the interim Israel was expected to... *wait*.

Meanwhile in Israel, the pressure for immediate defense in the form of offense was rising to a fury.

Israel's waiting gave the Arabs the sense that the Jews were scared to fight. In Nasser's pep speeches about the destruction of Israel, he appeared to be drunk with an imagined victory as he united the Arab world in a paroxysm of triumph and hate.

Nasser sounded Hitler-esque and the responsive roars and cries of the Cairo mobs were too reminiscent of the Nuremberg rallies. Eshkol's mumblings and inept fumbling evoked memories of the helplessness of European Jewry against the Nazi menace. The contrast of ultra-charismatic Nasser and ultra-phlegmatic Eshkol were making Israelis cringe.

The period of *Hamtana* finally came to an end when America ever-so-subtly hinted that they felt it was not their position to restrain others. Israel had the green light and it acted immediately, effectively, and decidedly. In the air and very swiftly afterward on the land, Israel defeated the Egyptian threat and then focused upon destroying the Jordanian and Syrian air forces.

The clock was ticking.

Israel had not yet liberated Jerusalem nor cleared the Golan Heights and the UN was pressuring for the adoption of a ceasefire. Nothing could have been less in Israel's interest.

America was willing to let Israel win the war, but it was not interested in a clash with the USSR, which demanded immediate condemnation of Israel and withdrawal to the previous lines.

Gambling on the fact that Russian forces were not yet in the region (albeit

steaming in that direction), and the fact that the Arabs and the world did not know the full extent of the Arab defeat (because Cairo Radio issued announcements about Egyptian victories and even informed Jordan that 75% of Israel's air force had been eliminated), the IDF fought on. Israel was so desperate to avoid the imposition of a ceasefire that Jerusalem issued no battle communiques of the truth.

However, when Moscow finally learned the extent of the Egyptian losses, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin sent a strongly-worded message to Washington that it could no longer remain indifferent to "Israel's criminal aggression" and that if Israeli troops did not withdraw, the Soviet armed forces would use appropriate means to end the "Zionist adventure."

From this point on, the most important battlefield for Israel was in the United Nations. Israel dispatched its heaviest hitter, Foreign Minister Abba Eban. He arrived with no time to spare. A ceasefire resolution had already been drawn up that would have paralyzed Israel from achieving its military goals and robbing what had already been obtained. Eban, having shuttled non-stop across Europe, rose to the UN podium and delivered a tour de force.

With drama perfected through his Oxonian presentation, Eban delivered a panoply of metaphors that dazzled the assembled. Referring to the blockade he said, "Israel is breathing with a single lung," and labeled the UNEE, "an umbrella taken away as soon as it begins to rain."

"Look around this table and imagine," Eban reprimanded, "a foreign power forcibly closing New York or Montreal, Boston or Marseilles, Toulon or Copenhagen, Rio or Tokyo or Bombay Harbor. How would *your* government react? What would *you* do? How long would *you* wait?" He stressed that Israel's only aspiration was self-defense and peace and concluded, "Let us discern across the darkness the vision of a brighter and gentler dawn."

Abba Eban was brilliant and hailed worldwide as a genius of oratory. The Chicago Tribune summarized, "One of the great diplomatic speeches of all time." But

even with this gifted asset, Israel could still not fight off the world alone. Enter the white knight of rescue (his head adorned with an abundance of cotton locks like a tobacco shag about to be rolled), the United States' long-forgotten ambassador to the UN, Arthur Goldberg.

In what would appear as a fluke of history, Goldberg resigned from his position as a justice on the Supreme Court to accept Johnson's nomination to be his country's UN ambassador (LBJ believed Goldberg was the most competent member of Kennedy's cabinet). How Israel would profit from this nomination, and the unmistakable Divine intervention in this most unusual of career shifts, was not discernable when it occurred in 1965.

But in 1967, when Israel's future was so precarious, and the risk of being coerced to accept a ceasefire so imminent – which would have cost Israel its victory precisely as had happened 11 years earlier in the Sinai Campaign – there was no one who proved to be a better and more effective ally than Arthur Goldberg.

Goldberg knew how to handle the wily Russian ambassador Nikolai Fedorenko, who, despite his constant anti-American harangues, was fond of his American counterpart and admired his creativity. He referred to Goldberg as "A slick Jew who could fool the devil himself." Goldberg saw to it that the situation did not deteriorate into a situation that the Russians would actually enter the fray, and skillfully delayed matters at the UN to allow Israel the time it needed to achieve its full victory. ■

Rabbi Hanoch Teller's new podcast "Teller from Jerusalem" chronicles the stories of the early struggles of the modern State of Israel. Available wherever you listen to podcasts, or scan:



Rabbi Hanoch Teller, internationally-acclaimed storyteller extraordinaire, is an award-winning author and producer.



A member of the Mizrahi Speakers Bureau
mizrachi.org/speakers