



Jerusalem's D-Day

When the Hand of Heaven Changed the Course of Human History

There is no rational way to explain the remarkable circumstances that led to the liberation of the Old City of Jerusalem in 1967. It was one of the most unexpected and inexplicable phenomena in the history of human warfare.

To begin with, there was no battle plan for Jerusalem whatsoever. Israeli intelligence never expected the impending confrontation to include Jordan, which had been in control of the Old City since 1948.

Egypt was the issue. In contravention of international law, Egypt had closed the Straits of Tiran and sent 100,000 troops and thousands of tanks into the demilitarized Sinai Peninsula, a clear act of aggression and war intent. Along with that mounting threat from the south, tensions were also building on the Syrian border in the north. Likely battles on two fronts perhaps, but certainly not on the long mountain range border with Jordan in the east.

President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt had other plans. Unbeknown to the Israelis, Jordan had signed an agreement with Egypt, placing the Jordanian Army under the direct command of Nasser's Chief of Staff, General Riad. It was Nasser's plan to unleash a triple-pronged attack – from Egypt, Jordan and Syria, which he believed the young State of Israel could not defend, and he would finally avenge the defeat of 1948.

On the first day of the war, during the fighting with Egypt in Sinai, the Jordanian forces began shelling major

cities across Israel, including heavy bombardment of Jewish West Jerusalem. Not wanting to engage in war with Jordan, Israel repeatedly implored the Jordanians to cease fire and promised they would not react. Once all diplomatic attempts failed, Israel had no choice but to defend itself and enter the unplanned fray in Jerusalem. Israel would have to defend their "Auschwitz Borders" all at once.¹

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, a member of the paratrooper reserve Brigade 55 under the command of Motta Gur, recalls the surprising change in plan. On the first day of the war, he and his fellow soldiers were en route to El Arish in Sinai when they received an urgent command to redirect to Jerusalem. Since it was so spontaneous, the IDF had only a few hours to familiarize themselves with the routes and topography in and around the capital.

With only partial intelligence, a dire lack of East Jerusalem maps, and in complete darkness, the troops charged into battle at 2.00 am early Tuesday morning on the second day of the war. It was then the paratroopers engaged in the fierce battles on Ammunition Hill, the American Colony and Wadi Joz, and suffered the worst day of losses in their unit's history.

Rabbi Bin-Nun lost 100 comrades in these battles. In comparison, the very same brigade fought for two weeks in the Yom Kippur War and lost 52 soldiers, half of those lost on this one blood-drenched day in the outskirts of Old Jerusalem.

However, despite the heavy price,

Brigade 55, together with the Harel and Jerusalem brigades, had almost surrounded the Old City.

Moshe Dayan, the Defense Minister in the Unity Government, had ordered them not to capture the Old City, for two reasons. Firstly, the intention of this defensive war was never to conquer the Old City of Jerusalem and its holy sites, sacred to many religions. Secondly, he was aware of the large Jordanian military presence in the Old City, especially on the Temple Mount, with huge amounts of artillery and ammunition. Having seen the devastating losses on that one day, Dayan anticipated much greater losses in hand-to-hand street combat, especially in defence of the holy sites. This would be a battle Israel would not fight... or so he thought.

What he didn't realize was that "Divine destiny was knocking at the door."² The drama of Jewish destiny was about to unfold.

That same evening, two utterly unexpected and unpredictable things occurred.

The first, in a remarkable display of unity, left-wing Yigal Alon and Menachem Begin from the right came together to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to intercede on behalf of Jerusalem.

Now was the time to liberate the Holy City.

Never in history had a people prayed for and yearned so much for a city.

The emergency Cabinet heavily debated the issue, with many concerned that the world would not tolerate a Jewish conquest of Jerusalem, and that

Israel should not attack. Eventually, Moshe Dayan's decision was overruled and the Cabinet gave the green light.

It was time to return to Jerusalem for the first time in 2,000 years... at any cost.

At that very same time, another dramatic decision was being made. The commander of the Jordanian troops in the Old City, sensing the inevitable and realizing he was surrounded, requested permission to retreat over the Mount of Olives and back over the Jordan River. General Riad gave his approval and the Jordanians fled that same evening!

When Motta Gur positioned himself on the Mount of Olives the next morning, preparing for the battle of his life, he was astounded. There was barely a Jordanian soldier in sight.

After a few minor skirmishes and mercifully with very little loss of life, Motta Gur proclaimed the iconic words, הר הבית בידינו, "The Temple Mount is in our hands." Israel had accomplished what seemed impossible with all the political predictions and military assessments from just a few days before.

The Jewish people had returned Home.

Motta Gur recounts a breathtaking conversation between himself and Rabbi Shlomo Goren, the IDF's Chief Rabbi at the time, which had taken place the evening before.³ While in the Rockefeller Museum at the north eastern tip of the Old City, awaiting orders, the Rabbi said to him, "Motta! Jewish history obligates you to liberate the Old City!" Motta replied that while he draws great inspiration from Jewish history, he takes his orders from his superiors. "Motta," said Rabbi Goren, "Jewish history will not forgive a Jewish commander who had the opportunity to reclaim Jerusalem and did not do so."

Heaven and Earth

Our Sages describe how Jerusalem is the only city in the world that exists on two planes, in Heaven and on Earth. Jerusalem on High and Jerusalem down below. Nothing happens in Jerusalem on High unless it happens concurrently in Jerusalem below.⁴ One is a reflection of the other. The spiritual destiny of the city is inseparable from its physical reality.

Perhaps, at the very moment the debates between the Rabbi and Commander and within the Cabinet were taking place in the city below, a similar debate was being held in the Heavenly Cabinet – between the קטיגורים, the prosecuting angels, and the סניגורים, the angels of mercy.

Were the Jewish people worthy of returning to *Yerushalayim Ir HaKodesh*?

Was this the moment they'd been waiting for for 2,000 years or would they have to wait 2,000 more?

Would there be more devastating loss of life in a battle on the Mountain of G-d or would there be a more merciful outcome?

As we know, Divine mercy won the day. *Am Yisrael* would not have to wait any longer and little blood would be spilt on that epic day in Jerusalem in June 1967.

This extraordinary turn of events – and the entire Six-Day War – is another powerful reminder of the meaning of Jewish life. Our collective journey on earth cannot be separated from our heavenly odyssey. Individual and national master plans cannot be severed from the Master's plan. The existence of Israel and Jerusalem are a constant testimony to the inextricable bond between human history and Divine Providence; between Jewish destiny and spiritual destination.

Yom Yerushalayim, celebrated on this very day of our return to Jerusalem, 54 years ago on the 28th of Iyar, is a wonderful opportunity to express our appreciation for the miracles of our generation. Together with Shavuot, it is the perfect time to reflect on our unique mission in the world.

Yom Yerushalayim and Chag Shavuot Sameach!

¹ This was an expression used by Abba Eban, Israel's Foreign Minister, who actually said, "... The June map is for us equivalent to insecurity and danger. I do not exaggerate when I say that it has for us something of a memory of Auschwitz. We shudder when we think of what would have awaited us in the circumstances of June, 1967, if we had been defeated; with Syrians on the mountain and we in the valley, with the Jordanian army in sight of the sea, with the Egyptians who hold our throat in their hands in Gaza."

² A reference to Rav Soloveitchik's famous essay, *Kol Dodi Dofek*, in which the Rav uses the metaphoric imagery in *Shir HaShirim*, Song of Songs, to contextualize the establishment of Israel and return to Zion as G-d knocking on the door, so to speak, of Jewish destiny.

³ Rabbi Bin-Nun recounts that Motta Gur mentioned this in a radio interview following Rav Goren's passing in 1994. Another version appears in Rav Goren's autobiography, edited by Avi Rath and translated into English as *With Might and Strength*.

⁴ Ta'anit 5a.

This article is the basis of the script for Mizrachi's special new video for Yom Yerushalayim, see page 17.

Rabbi Doron Perez is Executive Chairman of the Mizrachi World Movement.