

Concept and Contempt

IN THE main thoroughfare, beneath my window, there was absolute silence. Not a single vehicle was moving.

We were sunk in conversation with a friend of ours, when something unbelievable happened.

The air-raid sirens started to wail.

Within minutes, cars started to race down the street at a crazy speed, men were leaving their houses in haste, wearing their reserve uniforms, bearing backpacks.

The radio, which had been silent, as usual on this day, woke to sudden life.

A war had broken out. The Egyptians and the Syrians had launched an attack on Israel.

Yom Kippur, by far the holiest day of Judaism, 37 years ago today (according to the Hebrew calendar).

SINCE THEN, on every Yom Kippur we remember that fateful day. Impossible not to. It was a watershed in our life and in the history of Israel, a formative event for the entire Semitic region.

Today, as on every Yom Kippur since, the quiet, the silence in the streets, encourages us to think. As a witness, I have the urge to testify.

What was the impact of that war on us?

The first thing to be said: It was a superfluous war.

That is not, of course, something extraordinary. But for a few exceptions, such as World War II (and perhaps our 1948 war), every war was "superfluous". World War I, that orgy of death and destruction, was completely superfluous. Until today, historians try to find a logical reason for its outbreak. The motives of all parties were dwarfed by the consequences.

Well before the Yom Kippur war, the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, was ready to make peace with Israel. Reliable mediators did convey this to the Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir. She ignored the information with contempt.

Before the sudden death of Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, Sadat's predecessor, credible information reached Israel about Egypt's readiness to make peace in return for the Egyptian territories that were conquered in the 1967 war. I myself brought such a message to Pinhas Sapir, after Nasser had revealed his thoughts to my friend, the French journalist Eric Rouleau, in an off-the-record conversation. Rouleau permitted me to transmit the information in secret to the Israeli government. Sapir, at the time the most important minister and the real boss of the Labor Party, treated the information with complete lack of interest. My legal advisor, Amnon Zichroni, who was accompanying me to the meeting, was as stunned as I. I assume that I was not the only one who conveyed messages.

Some months before the war, I met with some Egyptians close to their country's leadership.

Following these conversations, I made a speech in the Knesset warning that, unless we immediately started a peace initiative that would return the Suez canal and Sinai to the Egyptians, they would attack, even without any chance of winning. The Knesset did not listen.

After the war I accused Golda Meir publicly of the murder of 2700 young Israelis and an untold number of young Egyptians and Syrians. Golda, a person with frighteningly narrow horizons, shrugged it off and lived to the end of her days with a clear conscience.

IN THE first hours of the war, the Egyptians astounded the world when they succeeded in crossing the Suez Canal – a formidable water obstacle – and breaking the Bar Lev line, the pride of the Israeli army.

It was one of the great surprise victories in the annals of war. In spite of the difference in dimensions, some compare it to the start of Operation Barbarossa (the German attack on the Soviet Union) and the bombing of Pearl Harbor (the Japanese attack on the US).

How was such a surprise possible? After all, the Egyptian army had to concentrate its forces and arrive at the starting positions without being detected. The area between Cairo and the canal is completely bare.

After the war, Dado invited me to his home and let me have a look at the files. Dado – Chief of Staff General David Elazar – was forced out of the army on the morrow of the war because of his responsibility for the "Omission" (the decision not to mobilize the reserves and move the tanks on the eve of the war). I was a friendly magazine editor, and Dado wanted to convince me of his innocence. The files showed that Army Intelligence had all the necessary information – and far more – about the Egyptian preparations for the attack.

For example, an intercepted order by a mufti (Muslim chaplain) of a brigade to break the Ramadan fast, one of the most important Muslim commandments, and start eating at a certain hour.

An intercepted communication by an Egyptian wireless operator to his brother, a wireless operator in another unit, which included the Muslim prayer before facing death.

An intercepted message of a shore station to the submarines at sea to break off all radio communications at a certain time.

And so forth, a wealth of intelligence. According to Dado, nothing of this reached him, the Chief of Staff. The chief of the army Intelligence department, Eli Zeira, suppressed it all.

Why? Zeira, a person endowed with a lot of self-confidence, was the prisoner of a "concept": that the Egyptians would never attack without air superiority. But this does not really explain the magnitude of the

Omission. Nor do the sophisticated Egyptian attempts at deception. The reason is much more profound: contempt for the Arabs.

THIS CONTEMPT is one of the curses of the state, and it accompanies us (Jewish) Israelis until this very day.

It did not exist in the 1948 war, the longest and hardest of Israeli wars. As I well remember, the soldiers at the time respected the enemy. We, the fighters on the Southern Front, had much respect for the Egyptian army (one of whose junior commanders was Gamal Abd-al-Nasser), and the fighters of the Central Front respected the Jordanian "Arab Legion". The Syrian and Iraqi fighters were also rated highly.

The respect evaporated in the 1956 war, and for the wrong reasons. The Egyptian soldiers tried to get away when our army invaded Sinai, and there were some who left their boots behind, but that had a simple reason: they received orders to retreat in haste, since the British and the French were landing in their rear and threatening to turn all of Sinai into a death trap. At that time it was the Egyptians who were surprised by the French-Israeli-British collusion.

But the contempt reached its climax in the 1967 war. After three weeks of mounting existential fear, the Israelis saw their army smashing the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, reinforced by contingents from other Arab countries, within six days. It looked like a miracle. For those who do not believe in divine intervention, there was no miracle: the Israeli military, and especially the Air Force, had meticulously planned the war well in advance, and the plan was executed by the best high command our army ever had.

This victory was a historic disaster. It was too big, too smashing, too stunning. Israel entered a bout of euphoria that lasted for six years. It was clear to everyone that Arabs can't fight, that the Israeli army was the best in the world, that it was invincible. Ariel Sharon declared at the time that the army could reach Libya's capital, Tripoli, within six days.

What happened on Yom Kippur 1973 was a direct consequence of that victory. The abysmal contempt for the Arabs gave birth to the "Kontsepsia"

(as we say "concept" in Hebrew), the *Kontsepsia* gave birth to the *Omission* – two words that became the symbols of the war. The contempt created the belief that the Egyptians would not dare to attack the Bar Lev line, a string of fortified positions that were thinly manned on Yom Kippur by second-grade units. (Two generals objected to the creation of the Bar Lev line to start with: the tank general Israel Tal, who died this week, and the infantry general Ariel Sharon, who lives on in a coma. "Talik" and "Arik" proposed keeping mobile forces well to the rear, ready to

counter any Egyptian breakthrough with a massive counter-attack.)

THE WAR started with outstanding Egyptian (and Syrian) successes and ended with an Israeli military victory. The Israeli army was not yet corrupted by the occupation (another disastrous result of the 1967 victory), and most of its commanders were of a quality that can only be envied today. But politically, the war ended in a draw.

Talik, who took part in the cease-fire talks at Kilometer 101, told me that the Egyptian commander, Abd-al-Ghani al-Gamasy, offered to start direct peace negotiations at once. Talik rushed to Golda Meir, but she forbade him to go on. She had promised Henry Kissinger that all negotiations would go through the US. The peace with Egypt was held up for four more years, until Sadat started his historic initiative behind the backs of the Americans.

The war returned to the Egyptians their self-respect. I visited the Ramadan War Museum (that's how the Egyptians call this war). A great effort was made there to visualize the canal crossing realistically with sound and light effects. The hundreds of Egyptians who packed each performance several times every day were filled with pride.

This pride made it easier for Sadat to go on his historic mission. When I landed in Cairo, several days after his coming to Jerusalem, the city was plastered with posters: "Anwar Sadat, Hero of War, Hero of Peace!"

Immediately after the war, Yasser Arafat started out on his long quest for peace, which led 20 years later to the Oslo agreement. He once told me how he arrived at his decision: when he realized that the big surprise successes of the Arab armies at the start of the war ended in a military defeat, he drew the logical conclusion that there is no way of realizing the Palestinian national aims by war, and that a peaceful settlement was the only solution.

THESE CONCLUSIONS are as right today as ever:

Hubris leads to disaster.

A concept based on contempt for the Arabs will lead to a historical omission.

Every war in this region is superfluous: after every war we shall achieve – in the best case – what we could have got before the war.

There is no military solution, not for the Arabs, not for us.

There are many heroes in war. But the real glory goes to the hero of peace.

As the Jewish sages said almost 1800 years ago: "Who is a hero? He who turns his enemy into his friend."