

# Whoso Confesseth and Forsaketh

Uri Avnery

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**I**N THE TUMULT of the last few days, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “unification” of Jerusalem, one of the articles stated that “even peace-activist Uri Avnery” voted in the Knesset for the unification of the city.

That is true. I have tried to set out the circumstances in my autobiography, “Optimistic”. But not everyone has read the book and it has so far appeared only in Hebrew.

Therefore I shall try to explain again that curious vote. Explain, not justify.

ON TUESDAY, June 27, 1967, two weeks after the 6-day war, I did not get up. I had the flu, and Rachel, my wife, had given me a lot of medicines. Suddenly they called me from the Knesset and told me that the chamber had just started a debate on the unification of Jerusalem, which had not appeared on the agenda.

I jumped out of bed and drove like hell from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, some 65 kilometers. Upon arriving I was told that the list of speakers had already been closed. But the Speaker, Kadish Luz, famous for his fairness, added me to the list.

I had just a few minutes to think. My parliamentary assistant, Amnon Zichroni, advised me to vote against, or at least to abstain. There was no time to consult with the leading members of my party, “Haolam Hazeh—New Force”. I made the decision on the spot, and the decision was to vote in favor.

That was mainly an instinctive reaction. It came from the bottom of my soul. After the amazing triumph, which had come after three weeks of gathering anxiety, the huge victory in just six days looked like a miracle. The Jewish population, in all its parts, was in ecstasy. This mood crossed all dividing lines.

East Jerusalem was the center of the mass ecstasy. It was like a Tsunami. Masses flowed to the Western Wall, which had been unapproachable for 19 years. Both the pious and non-believers were intoxicated.

I felt that a political movement, which intends to win the masses for a new outlook, cannot in such a moment stand outside the people. Faced with such a storm, it cannot stay aloof.

I myself was not unaffected by the emotional storm. I loved Jerusalem. Before the partition of the country during the 1948 war, in which Jerusalem was divided, I had often wandered through the alleys of the Arab parts of the town. After that war, I longed for the Old City in an almost physical way. When the Knesset was in session, I often used to reside in the King David hotel that overlooks the Old City, and I remember many nights when I stood at the open window and listened to far-away dogs breaking the silence beyond the wall—and longing.

But besides the emotion, there was also a logical consideration.

Already in 1949, on the morrow of the war during which Israel was founded, I started to campaign for the “Two State Solution”—the setting up of an independent State of Palestine

side by side with the State of Israel, as two equal states in the framework of a federation.

In 1957, after the Sinai War, I published—together with Natan Yellin-Mor, the former leader of the Lehi underground (a.k.a. the Stern Group), the writer Boaz Evron and others—a document called “the Hebrew Manifesto”, of which I am proud even today. At the time, East Jerusalem and the West Bank were part of the kingdom of Jordan. Inter alia the document said:

21. All of Eretz Israel (Palestine) is the homeland of its two nations—the Hebrew one, which has attained its independence in the framework of the State of Israel, and the Arab-Palestinian one, which has not yet achieved independence. The State of Israel will offer political and material assistance to the liberation movement of the Palestinian nation. . . which strives to establish a free Palestinian state, which will be a partner of the State of Israel. . .

22. (There will be set up) a federation of the parts of Eretz-Israel (Palestine), which will safeguard the independence of all the states which are parts of it.

According to this plan, Jerusalem should have become a united city, the capital of Israel, the capital of Palestine and the capital of the federation.

At the time, that looked like a remote vision. But after the 1967 war the vision suddenly became real. The Jordanian regime was vanquished. Nobody seriously believed that the world would allow Israel to keep the territories it had just conquered. It seemed clear that we would be compelled to give them back, as we did after the war before that, the Sinai War of 1956.

I was convinced that this situation would give us the historic opportunity to realize our vision. For that to happen, we had first to prevent the return of the territories to Jordan. The unification of the two parts of Jerusalem looked to me like the logical first step. The more so since in the proposed law, the words “annexation” or “unification” did not appear. It said only that Israeli law would apply there.

All this passed through my mind in the few minutes I had. I approached the rostrum and said: “It is not a secret that I and my colleagues strive for the unification of the country in a federation of the State of Israel and a Palestinian state that will come into being in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, a federation whose capital will be united Jerusalem as a part of the State of Israel.”

The last words were, of course, an error. I should have said: “as a part of the State of Israel and the State of Palestine”.

THE REASONS for this vote were logical, at least in part, but the entire vote looked to me, in retrospect, like a very serious

mistake. After a short time, I apologized for it in public. I have repeated this apology many times.

Within a short time it became quite clear that the State of Israel did not dream of allowing the Palestinians to establish a state of their own, and even less to divide sovereignty over Jerusalem. Today it is clear that from the first day—still under the Labor Party, led by Levy Eshkol—there was the intention of keeping these territories forever, or as long as possible.

11 years earlier, after the Sinai War, David Ben-Gurion had submitted to the parallel ultimatums of Dwight Eisenhower and Nikolai Bulganin, the heads of state of the USA and the Soviet Union. 105 hours after declaring the "Third Israeli Kingdom:", Ben-Gurion announced in a broken voice on the radio that he would give back all the conquered territories.

It was incredible that the weakling Eshkol would succeed where the great Ben-Gurion had failed, and hold on to the conquered territories. But contrary to all expectations, there was no pressure at all to give back anything. The occupation continues to this very day.

Therefore, the question did not even arise: whether to return the territories to the Kingdom of Jordan or turn them into the State of Palestine.

By the way, in those days, when the glory of our generals reached the skies, there were among them some who supported openly or secretly the idea of establishing a Palestinian state side by side with Israel. The most outspoken of these was General Israel Tal, the renowned tank commander. I tried very hard to convince him to assume the leadership of the peace camp, but he preferred to devote his efforts to building the Merkava tank.

Years later I tried to convince General Ezer Weizman, the former Air Force commander and the real victor of the 1967 war. His nationalist convictions changed and approached those of our group. But he preferred to become the President of Israel.

Even Ariel Sharon toyed for some years with these ideas. He preferred a Palestinian state to giving the territories back to Jordan. He told me that in the 50s, when he was still serving in the army, he had proposed to the General Staff to support the Palestinians against the Jordanian regime. He proposed this in secret, while I was demanding it in public.

But all this theorizing could not stand up to the reality: the occupation deepened from day to day. The readiness to give up all the occupied territories, even in ideal circumstances, dwindled more and more.

And on the other side?

I had many conversations with the admired (by me, too) leader of the Arab population in East Jerusalem, Faissal al-Husseini. The idea of a united Jerusalem, capital of two states, attracted him, too. We drew up together an appeal in this spirit. We talked about this, of course, with Yasser Arafat, and he fully agreed—but was not ready to confirm this in public.

TWO WEEKS after the Knesset vote, I published in my

weekly magazine, Haolam Hazeh, another plan, under the headline "A basic, fair and practical solution". The first paragraph read: "There will be created a federation of Eretz-Israel (Palestine) which will include the State of Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the capital of which will be Greater Jerusalem."

This plan was signed by an amazing 64 well-known Israeli personalities, including writer Dan Ben-Amotz, humorist Uri Zohar, peace-pilot Abie Nathan, publisher Amikan Gurevich, sculptor Yigal Tomarkin, painter Dani Karavan, Nathan Yellin-Mor, captain Nimrod Eshel, film-maker Alex Massis, writer Boaz Evron, journalist Heda Boshes, art-custodian Yona Fisher and the famous educator Ernst Simon, the close friend of the already dead Martin Buber.

This document, like all the former plans, included the aim of creating a regional framework, like the European Union which was then in the making.<sup>1</sup>

IN THE recent publications it was also mentioned that I proposed adopting the song "Jerusalem of Gold" as the national anthem of Israel.

Naomi Shemer wrote this beautiful song for a Jerusalem contest, when nobody yet dreamed about the 1967 Six-day War.

I intensely dislike the present national anthem, "Hatikvah" ("the Hope"). The text is about the life of the Jews in the Diaspora and the melody seems to be taken from a Romanian folk-song. Not to mention the fact that more than 20% of Israeli citizens are Arabs. (Perhaps we should learn from Canada, which long ago changed its British anthem and flag out of respect for its 20% French-speaking citizens.)

I decided to propose Shemer's song to the Knesset as the national anthem. After the 1967 war it had already become the rage of the masses. I submitted a bill accordingly.

That was, of course, a dubious proposal. Shemer did not mention in her song that there were Arabs in Jerusalem. The words have a strong nationalist flavor. But I thought that after the idea of a new anthem was accepted, we could rectify the text.

The Knesset Speaker, Luz, was ready to accept the bill and put it on the agenda only if Naomi Shemer agreed. I made an appointment with her and we had a pleasant talk in a café. She did not agree outright, but allowed me to state that she did not object.

Throughout the conversation I had the feeling that there was an unexplained reluctance on her side. I remembered this years later, when it was disclosed that the rousing melody was not really composed by her, but was a Basque folk song. I felt rather sorry for her.

TO SUM up: the vote of the "peace activist Uri Avnery" for the "unification" of Jerusalem was a huge mistake. I am taking this opportunity to apologize for it again.

I request for the application of the Biblical verse (Proverbs 28.13): "But whoso confesseth and forsaketh shall have mercy".

<sup>1</sup>By the way, lately a new fashion has been spreading in several circles: a new ideal solution to the conflict: the establishment of an Israeli-Palestinian federation and a "regional solution". I assume that many of the new advocates of this solution were not yet born when these documents were published. If so, I have to disappoint them: all these ideas were voiced already a long time ago. This should not discourage them. May they be blessed.