The Myth of Defeat: The Memory of the Yom Kippur War in Israeli Society

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The Yom Kippur War of October 1973 arouses an uncomfortable feeling among Israeli Jews. Many think of it as a disaster or a calamity. This is evident in references to the War in Israeli literature, or the way in which the War is recalled in the media, on the anniversary of its outbreak.[1] Whereas evidence of the gloom is easy to document, the reasons are more difficult to fathom. The Yom Kippur War can be described as failure or defeat by amassing one set of arguments but it can also be assessed as a great achievement by marshalling other sets of arguments. This article will first show why the arguments that have been offered in arriving at a negative assessment of the War are not conclusive and will demonstrate how the memory of the Yom Kippur War might have been transformed into an event to be recalled with satisfaction and pride.[2] This leads to the critical question: why has this not happened?

The background to the Yom Kippur War, the battles and the outcome of the war, lend themselves to a variety of interpretations.[3] Since these are part of the problem which this article addresses, the author offers only the barest outline of events, avoiding insofar as it is possible, the adoption of one interpretive scheme or another.

In 1973, Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, fell on Saturday, 6 October. On that day the Egyptians in the south and the Syrians in the north attacked Israel. The attack came as a surprise. The question of why Israel was surprised, should it have been surprised, and who was to blame for the surprise is a matter of debate, but it is beyond dispute that war found the Israeli public as well as the army unprepared. In the first few days the Israeli army suffered 'heavy' losses and was forced to retreat along both fronts. On the third day, Israel launched a counter attack on the southern front which failed. However, the tide of the war turned in the early days of the second week. Within two weeks the Israeli army had advanced into enemy territory inflicting heavy casualties on the Egyptians, encircling one of its armies, although it never dislodged the Egyptian army from the Sinai desert, and advancing in the north to within artillery range of Damascus. A cease fire was declared on 22

October 22 at the insistence of both the United States and the Soviet
Union and a separation of forces agreement was eventually signed with
the active intervention of then US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger.

THE YOM KIPPUR WAR A FAILURE: THE RATIONAL ARGUMENT

The mention of the war in the press and in popular books and articles
suggest the following reasons, not necessarily in order of importance, for
recalling it as a calamity.[4]

1. The great number of casualties.
2. The loss of territory which followed the conclusion of the war.
3. The surprise nature of the attack, contrary to the expectations of the
   military and political elite. This, it might be argued has two conse-
   quences. First, it destroyed public confidence in the leadership and
   undermined the public's sense of security. Secondly, it minimized a
   sense of victory that might have followed the conclusion of the war.
   The fear and trepidation that preceded the Six Day War (the June,
   1967 war), enhanced the sense of victory. In the case of the Yom
   Kippur War, the country felt secure before its outbreak so there was
   less cause to be grateful at its successful completion.
4. The inability of Israel to achieve a crushing military victory stemmed
   from the intervention of the superpowers. This demonstrated Israeli
   dependence (impotence) and points to the conclusion that Israel can
   never defeat its enemies decisively; hence it will always be subject to
   security threats.

Analyzed, one by one, the arguments are not overwhelming. However,
each of them has at least a surface credibility. When added together, it
might be argued, they explain why the war is recalled as less than a
victory. But they don't account for the feeling of despair, or disaster that
Israeli society associates with the Yom Kippur War.

   With regard to the casualties argument – whether there were or were
not a *great* number of casualties depends on a number of factors including
expectations with regard to casualties, the period of time in which the
casualties took place, and other, even more subjective judgements. In a
newspaper column written less than a month following the war, an astute
Israeli observer noted that the number of casualties is not sufficient to
account for the prevailing 'atmosphere of dejection'.[5] Less than 3,000
soldiers died in the Yom Kippur War. Slightly over 600 soldiers died in
the Six Day War which Israelis considered the most glorious victory in
their history. Over 6,000 Israelis are presumed to have died in the 1948

War of Independence at a time when the country's population was one-fifth its size during the Yom Kippur War. But that war is widely celebrated in Israeli memory. Furthermore, unlike the War of Independence, there were no civilian casualties in the Yom Kippur War. One might respond that the loss of life is measured against the fruits of victory. The outcome imputed to the War of Independence is the establishment of the State and the outcome of the Six Day War was the occupation (liberation) of the West Bank with its many holy places, especially the eastern part of Jerusalem which contains the Western Wall. No great achievement is imputed to the Yom Kippur War. But, we will argue below, Israeli society could have, retrospectively, credited the War with having brought peace with Egypt. The reluctance of Israeli society to make this connection is part of the question about why the War arouses negative associations, not the answer.

With regard to the surrender of territory argument – the Yom Kippur War, it is true, resulted in the surrender of the Sinai desert captured in the Six Day War. But the surrender of Sinai was part of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, a treaty which the overwhelming majority of Israelis acclaimed. Furthermore, the 1956 war in Sinai ended with Israel, under pressure from the United States, ceding all the territory it had captured. Yet that war is not overlaid with a sense of tragedy or despair.

With respect to the surprise argument, the importance of the surprise factor in weakening public confidence in the state's elite is undermined by data on Israeli public opinion prior to and in the aftermath of the War. Public confidence in the government, though not the military, had been steadily deteriorating following the Six Day War[6] whereas even after the Yom Kippur War a majority of the public did 'not believe that the "myth of Israel's military invincibility" had been shattered'.[7] In other words, the Yom Kippur War did lower public confidence in the political elite but that confidence had been declining anyway. On the other hand, it had little impact on the public's confidence in the military. While it is true that unlike the Six Day War, the public did not anticipate the outbreak of the war and, therefore, had no trepidations about its consequences before 6 October, the same was true of the Sinai War in 1956. Furthermore, although Israelis only learned later how close the enemy had come to overrunning the country, there was a public perception during the first few days that the War was not going well. This should have resulted in a general sense of relief as Israel's army reversed the tide of battle. Nevertheless, the mood of the Israelis continued to decline from the end of the first week and reached its nadir on 7 November, the national day of mourning for those who died in the war, two weeks after a cease fire had been declared.[8]

Finally, with respect to the argument that the War demonstrated Israeli impotence, this was not the first war whose outcome suggested that Israel could never inflict a blow of such magnitude on its enemies that they could no longer threaten its security. It was no secret that even in the Six Day War the army's northern command was alloted a minimal amount of time to capture the Golan Heights before the Security Council imposed a cease-fire on Israel. Furthermore, the Six Day War remained the exception to all Israeli wars. That victory alone generated a belief that Israel had achieved some permanent security. The Sinai War was surely a prime example of how the results of a brilliant military victory could be erased through superpower pressure.

Other reasons might be offered to explain the sense of gloom associated with the Yom Kippur War. It has been suggested that the problem is not the outcome of the War, but the great failure of the protest movement following the war. Yaacov Hasdai has written that the humiliating failure of the protest movement, its inability to formulate a positive program or to produce a leadership was more troubling than other aspects of the war.[9] Eva Etzioni-Halevy has described this protest movement which arose as soon as large numbers of soldiers had been released from active service following the conclusion of the Yom Kippur War.[10] The protest movement, she observes, was related to general grievances, but it was precipitated:

> by the alleged failures of the government in handling the war ...
> What was especially resented was that no cabinet members or
> senior officials were willing to assume responsibility for the failures
> and to resign their posts.[11]

But there is no evidence that the general Israeli public, outside certain marginal political and academic circles, shared Hasdai's concern about the failure of the protest movements. If so, the outcome of the Yom Kippur War or at least the failure of the protest movements should have left a long-term impact on Israeli morale, but Etzioni-Halevy, relying on public opinion data reports that this is not the case.[12]

It might be argued that the reason why the War is recalled with such unhappiness is a combination of some or all of the factors already suggested. That may be true but the combination, by itself, does not render the arguments any more convincing. The claim of this essay is not that the public does not accept one or more or even all these arguments, or even that, as indicated above, they do not have at least surface credibility. The claim here is that there is no convincing case for any of them. But even if the arguments were persuasive we must still explain

why the Yom Kippur War was not mythologized, as frequently happens in the case of defeats, and thereby transformed into a source of pride for Israelis.

Contemporary Political Myth

The term myth, once used exclusively to refer to a class of stories which originated in the classical period, is used increasingly with reference to contemporary society. Henry Tudor's discussion of myth seems especially useful.[13] Myth is a dramatic narrative of critical events, historical or pseudo-historical, which functions to assist the individual or society in ordering their present experience. Myth imposes meaning on events. History and myth are not necessarily incompatible. The historian may create myth in the very process of writing history. On the other hand, the events which the myth recounts may be pseudo-history. But more than likely, in the case of contemporary myth, the narrative – though referring to a series of events which did occur – selects, organizes, and interprets these events in a distinctive manner.

A reservation with respect to this and similar definitions is the use of the term 'dramatic narrative'. The expression suggests a fixed narrative form to the myth. But this need not be the case. Myth refers to some overarching structure of events. A dramatic narrative can be inferred from this structure in one or more forms, but there need not be any canonical version of the myth. Lincoln did not recite the events of the Civil War in his second inaugural address. He mythologized the war by investing it with meaning, by explaining the terrible loss of life as the price which American society had to pay, in accordance with God's will, for the sin of slavery. Following this outline, the American Civil War myth can now be recounted in dramatic form which would begin with the story of Negro enslavement and end with the Emancipation Proclamation and the victory of the North. There may be no narrative version of the myth, in its entirety, but rather different stories connected to the overarching structure. These stories are part of the myth as long as they serve to reinforce the meaning which the myth imposes. The Holocaust myth, at least in its Israeli version, can be deduced from the manner in which Israelis speak about and commemorate the Holocaust.[14] The Holocaust is projected within Israeli society in a variety of forms which point to the meaning of the myth – the destruction of six million Jews and of Jewish life in Eastern Europe while the world did nothing to save them is conclusive demonstration that Jews have no security except as a sovereign nation in their own land. One could recite the myth as a dramatic narrative and it can be found in this form in school texts. The point, however, is not whether the narrative exists in reality, but whether there is a narrative structure to the

Holocaust in the minds of those who speak about the events or act on the basis of their understanding of these events.

In studying myth, therefore, the scholar may have to provide the flesh and bones of the very narrative which he seeks to explore. Such an enterprise is not without its problems but this merits a separate essay.

A political myth is a myth whose referent (subject matter) is political and/or whose consequences are political (it reorders contemporary political experiences). Myth is of special importance in the case of defeat or some other national catastrophe. Victory or success requires little explanation. It affirms a society's belief in itself, it generates self confidence, confidence in the society's leaders and in its norms and values. Those who might have suffered in the achievement of the success are comforted by the fact that their suffering and sacrifice contributed to the achievement. But defeat, tragedy and national catastrophe challenge a society's self-confidence, its belief in itself, its leaders and its values. It threatens everyone with loss of ultimate meaning, especially those who 'sacrificed' the most. It seems to pose one of two alternatives. Either destiny and fortune, if not justice itself, is on the side of the 'other', the 'enemy', the forces that were victorious, or there is no pattern or meaning to events and reality is built on sands of accident and chaos. Both explanations are destructive of social and personal order. Hence, it is no surprise that some of our most important myths and mythological formulations refer to events that appear to be defeats or might be interpreted as defeat but are affirmed, through the myth, as actually being a victory of some sort. Martin Jaffee, in an article that discusses the mythologization of the Holocaust, describes this pattern in more general terms.

> Victimization ... is easily thematized in memory and story as a moment of victory. That is, when transformed by the religious imagination into myth, the experience of victimization can confer a kind of holiness and power upon the victim. In stories constructed around the murder of the innocent victim, for example, each retelling reconstructs the original moment of the victim's destruction and transformation. In such stories the victim is always both victim and victor, always destroyed but always reborn in a form that overcomes the victimizer ... Not incidentally, the chief beneficiary of that empowerment is the community, which views itself as the historical witness to the victim's degradation and transcendence, the historical body that, in its own life, preserves the memory of and relives the moment of degradation and transfiguration. By telling and retelling the story of the victim, the community of victimization not only memorializes the victim and stands in solidarity with the

> victim's fate; it also shares in the victim's triumph and transforma-
> tion, bringing into its history the power of its myth and mapping
> onto its own political and social reality the mythic plot through
> which it comes to self-understanding as a community of suffering.[15]

The central Israeli myth, as already noted, is the Holocaust. The myth
reflects the effort to find meaning in the death of six million Jews and the
destruction of Jewish life in Eastern and Central Europe. But lesser
defeats or tragedies also occasion mythological formulations – among the
most important of these for the Zionist settlers in Palestine were Masada
and Tel-Hai.[16] In both these cases, ostensible defeats and failures have
been reinterpreted as a source of inspiration, as a bestowal of territorial
legitimacy, and most important of all, as purposeful. Those who died did
not die in vain. This is even true of the Holocaust. No effort is made to
deny the enormous tragedy of that event. On the contrary, the memory of
the victims is honored, at least in part, by associating their death with a
tragedy of unparalleled magnitude. But there is more than tragedy that is
involved. The enemy is denied ultimate satisfaction, the fallen are
reported to have never lost their dignity or pride or belief that righteous-
ness would be restored – 'I believe with complete faith that the Messiah
will come even though he tarries', the victims are reported to have sung
on their way to the gas chambers – and most significantly of all, some
great good has emerged from their death – the emergence of the State of
Israel and the vindication of Zionism, that is, the futility of Jewish life
outside the land of Israel. Furthermore, society has learned a lesson in
heroism and in fidelity to the values shared by those who fell as well as
those who live.

The narrative content of each myth and the particular lessons which the
myths relate tells us a great deal about the society in which the myths have
become embedded. But one is hardly surprised at the enterprise of
mythic construction. As Henry Rosenberg notes,[17] it is at least as old as
the biblical story of the death of Saul and Jonathan.[18] It is found in
Herodotus' account of Leonidas and the battle of the Greeks against the
Persians at Thermopylae. Rosenberg provides similar examples from
English, Scandinavian, Welsh, modern Greek, Serbian, French, Scottish
and American literature to help illuminate his case study of General
George Custer's last stand against the Sioux Indians.

There is nothing unusual, then, about the mythologization of Tel-Hai
or Masada or the Holocaust. What is surprising is when a seeming victory
or a series of events which lend themselves to mythologization is recalled
in terms of disaster and calamity. This seems to be the case of the Yom
Kippur War as it is remembered in Israeli society.

THE MYTHOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

There are at least three related paradigms that are available in mytholo-gizing the Yom Kippur War: the Purim paradigm, the bravery paradigm, and the consequences paradigm.

The Purim Paradigm

The holiday of Purim celebrates the salvation of Persian Jews recorded in the biblical book of Esther. The story is of an imminent threat to Jewish life and the nullification of that threat through what might appear to be natural but the believer knows to be miraculous means. The ultimate victory of the Jews, therefore, signals both Jewish power of sorts as well as the help of God who is the source of that power. The paradigm's emphasis on the immediate threat to Jewish existence and miraculous salvation from the threat, sometimes but not always accompanied by the humiliation of the Jews' enemies, recurs throughout the Middle Ages. Collective memory manipulates sacred history, as Lucette Valensi notes, by appropriating 'the great tradition and ground[ing] it in local context'.[19] Local Jewish communities, relived the Purim paradigm in their own experiences and commemorated the anniversary of the event with local variations of the Purim celebration. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* lists 100 such 'special Purims' the earliest of which dates from 1191 in Champagne, France and the latest in 1878 from Vidin, Bulgaria.[20]

The Yom Kippur War contains all of the elements of the Purim paradigm. It might be argued that secular Israeli society's historical memory is so dim and its distance from the tradition so great that it has a limited capacity to formulate contemporary events in classical Jewish molds.[21] But why did the religious public fail to mythologize the War in terms of the Purim paradigm? Interestingly, even the *haredim* (sing: *haredi*), the ultra-Orthodox and ostensibly anti-Zionist community which constitute roughly one-third of the religious public, did do so with respect to the Six Day War.[22] Furthermore, they acknowledged that miracles had taken place in the Yom Kippur War.[23] Yet they refused to portray the Yom Kippur War in accordance with the Purim paradigm – a step which would have turned the event into one with very positive rather than negative associations.

The Bravery Paradigm

This is the most self-evident of the paradigms. Loss of human life, particularly of young people, is deemed unnatural and it begs for inter-pretation. The imposition of meaning upon the loss of many lives,

especially in time of war, becomes a central task of every society's leaders, a task in which the intellectuals who are among the major producers as well as the scribes of society's high culture, play a prominent role. If the loss of life has no meaning, then the bereaved remain without comfort and all members of the society are threatened by conceptual chaos. This is overcome, in part, by the attribution of purpose to death, by what George Mosse has called the 'myth of the war experience'.[24] The death of the fallen soldiers leads to some outcome that would not have otherwise been achieved. In addition, we console ourselves about the deaths of particular soldiers by retelling the event of their death as a saga of heroism and bravery. The bravery of the fallen not only celebrates their achievements, it honors the society which produced them and sanctifies the values of the society for which they were prepared to face death and for which they did their utmost.

The bravery of Israeli soldiers on the battlefields of the Yom Kippur War was already celebrated before the war had ended. Particular episodes of the war are recalled as instances of great courage, fortitude and innovation, but the war in its entirety, unlike, for example, the War of Independence, is not remembered in that light.

The Consequences Paradigm

On 19 November 1977 Egyptian president Anwar Sadat visited Israel. The visit led to the Camp David talks a few months later. A formal peace treaty with Egypt was signed on 26 March 1979. The vast majority of Israelis welcomed the peace treaty as opening a new era in Israeli relations with its Arab neighbors. Short of that, the peace with Egypt was interpreted as eliminating the most formidable threat to Israel's security. It is commonplace for Middle East observers to see the Yom Kippur War as an important component in the events that led to the Camp David accords. The Yom Kippur War, in other words, lends itself to mythologization as a war which resulted in a peace treaty with the country which provided the most formidable threat to Israel's existence. In that case, whatever cost Israel might have paid in human life could have been deemed worthwhile.

The potential for interpreting the Yom Kippur War as the price which Israel had to pay in order to obtain peace has been available since the conclusion of the war. Israel's current president Chaim Herzog, in two books written before the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, described the war as the possible prelude to peace.[25] In a 1980 article, Moshe Dayan argued that it was only because of Sadat's setback in the Yom Kippur War that he was willing to discuss peace with Israel according to the terms of the Camp David agreement.[26] In November,

1990, five Israelis were killed and 25 wounded by an Egyptian military policeman near the Egypt–Israel border. Describing the incident on Israeli television, Israel's foreign minister David Levy commented on the fact that Israel had fought a bloody war in order to secure a peace treaty with Egypt. This presumably made the absence of proper security arrangements by the Egyptians all the more reprehensible.[27] But statements of this sort are unusual. The question is why are they so unusual? Why does Israeli society not remember the war as a case of 'miraculous' salvation, by human if not by divine hand, in which the courageous Israelis achieved, against great odds and by dint of self-sacrifice, a military victory which resulted, a few years later, in a peace treaty with Egypt?

THE YOM KIPPUR WAR AS FAILURE: THREE EXPLANATIONS

My argument is that the Yom Kippur War has been mythologized but not in a manner that students of myth would have anticipated. It has been mythologized into a myth of defeat. I suggest three explanations for this. They are not mutually exclusive and are offered as hypotheses which merit study rather than conclusions based upon extensive research. All are based on the assumption that if Israeli society insists on viewing the Yom Kippur War in negative terms then we ought to ask about the function which that view serves.

The Shattered Promise of the Six Day War

Three weeks of growing tension and acute concern for Israel's security preceded the June 1967 war. The lightning victory of the Israeli forces, the total destruction of the Egyptian air force and the rout of its land forces, the capture of Ramat HaGolan from the Syrians, but especially the acquisition of territory with deep historical associations, the old city of Jerusalem in particular, generated a sense of euphoria among Israeli Jews and a new set of perceptions and expectations about Israel. Sociologist Zvi Sobel has suggested that these perceptions and expectations involved three major realms of life – Israeli security (Israel no longer had to fear military threats from its neighbors), *aliya* (the expectation that masses of diaspora Jews would flock to Israel), and economic prosperity resulting from large scale economic investment from abroad. But beyond the specific realms in which Israelis anticipated change, a new self-image emerged – that of a self-sufficient Israel, capable of any achievement.[28] If not an entirely new Israel, it was an Israel which had reached a new stage

of life.[29] As Eliezer Schweid put it, 'the great things for which we no longer hoped became realities' and, in the words of the Bible, 'we were like unto them that dream'.[30]

Within a few years the dream had shattered. The hopes, expectations and the new self-image generated by the Six Day War dissipated. Jewish society in Israel was left with a realitytotally dissonant with the myth of Israeli society. Israelis felt themselves incapable of living up to the promise which the Six Day War had engendered. The sense of defeat associated with the Yom Kippur War, therefore, resolved the tension. To narrate the Yom Kippur War as a defeat is not only a myth but a distortion of reality because the successful conclusion of the War and the subsequent outcome were significant achievements. But the frustrated promise of the Six Day War generated the need for a myth of defeat to close the circle which begins with the June War of 1967. The myth of defeat excuses Israeli society its failure to live up to the promise of the June war by suggesting that it was the promise of that victory which was false. Only further study can illuminate the details of whether, how and when this came about, among which segments of the population it began, how deep into Israeli society it reached, and whether there were groups whom it never affected or may have affected in a different manner. All of this is very much related to the next point.

Completing the Reintegration into Jewish History

The Six Day War strengthened the Jewish identity of Israeli Jews. The secular Zionist vision which dominated Israeli Jewish society prior to and through the first two decades of statehood was of an Israeli Jew totally different than the diaspora Jew. The Israeli Jew (the term Hebrew was preferred to the term Jew, a further measure of alienation from traditional conceptions), understood the Jewish people to be a national rather than a religious collectivity, and believed that those who lived in the Jewish state had transformed themselves from a pariah people into a normal nation. This image began to decline in the late 1950s, but the 1967 War marks a dramatic turning point. Israeli Jews once more began to think of themselves as linked to diaspora Jews and Jewish history, and to reaffirm their associations with Jewish religious symbols.[31]

But there is a paradox about the Six Day War as a turning point in the reintegration of Israeli Jewish society into Judaism and Jewish history. There is no historical Jewish paradigm, certainly none since the destruction of the second Temple 2,000 years ago, to describe the kind of optimism generated by the Six Day War. Jews might defeat their enemies, as the Purim paradigm illustrates, but the victory is always temporary. The fate of the Jew is to be despised by the non-Jew and to

suffer thereby, because the non-Jew is more powerful than the Jew. The metaphor most frequently invoked within the tradition to describe the condition of the Jewish people in the world is 'the lamb among seventy wolves'. Jews have no recourse other than the help of God. The only appropriate strategy for Jews to adopt, besides fulfilling God's will and beseeching Him for mercy, is to behave with great caution in worldly matters. There is no room for pride and least of all for confidence. There is no way in which the victory of the Six Day War, the display of Israeli might, the conquest of territory, the subjugation of the Palestinians, and the supreme confidence in the future could be squared with historical Jewish paradigms.

Two segments of the Israeli-Jewish public were untroubled by this paradox – the unregenerate Jewish secularists who continued to feel total alienation from the Jewish tradition and had no need to fit contemporary developments into some historical Jewish paradigm, and the ultra-nationalist religious messianists who believed that the victory in the Six Day War signaled the imminence of Divine redemption, as a consequence of which traditional historical paradigms were no longer applicable.[32] But one might have expected that the largest segment of the public would be troubled, if only at the unconscious level, by the contradiction between the reintegration of Israel into the stream of Jewish history and the seeming transformation of history wrought by the Six Day War. The Yom Kippur War, viewed as a defeat, represents the final step in the reintegration of Israel into traditional Jewish historical paradigms. This explanation is especially applicable to the religious sector.

The Yom Kippur War as the integration of Israel into Jewish history is illuminated by comparisons between the Yom Kippur War and the Holocaust. The Holocaust, within many segments of Israeli society, is understood as the inevitable outcome of life in 'exile', a fulfillment of the Zionist conception of Jewish life in the absence of a Jewish state. Hence, any analogy between the Holocaust and events within Israel challenges a basic Zionist tenet but does affirm the Jewish normalcy of Israel. Comparisons between the Holocaust and the Yom Kippur War were common in the period immediately following the war. They are almost unheard of today for reasons which will become clear in the following section. The continuing appropriation of the Yom Kippur War as a mode for integrating Israeli society into the stream of 'normal' Jewish history is most evident among *haredi* elements.

Although the ultra-Orthodox segment of the Israeli Jewish population, the *haredim*, are charged with antagonism to the state, their political leaders have adopted an increasingly pragmatic attitude[33] and the con-

cerns of the bulk of their followers with the general welfare of the society are increasingly indistinguishable from those of other Israeli Jews. This development was accelerated by the 1977 election that brought a nationalist government especially sympathetic to religious concerns to power. But the tendencies are to be found much earlier as was evident in recognition by *haredi* writers of the great victory which Israel enjoyed in the Six Day War.[34] Amongst *haredim*, Jews are perceived to be a persecuted minority, the object of Gentile hatred, physically weak, sustained only by the miracles of Divine intervention. The myth of the Yom Kippur War facilitated the integration of Israel into their conception of Jewish history and reinforced *haredi* conceptions of that history. The single most influential leader of *haredi* Jewry, Rabbi Eliezer Schach, emphasized that the suffering which resulted from the Yom Kippur War is a sign to Jews that they must repent of their sins and become religiously observant. Those who argue that this is the suffering that precedes Redemption, according to Rav Schach, were distorting the true message of the War and misleading Jews about their obligation to repent.[35] Another *haredi* writer was more explicit about the connection between the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War. Following the Six Day War, he claims, Jews deceived themselves into believing that the victory was theirs rather than the result of God's help. 'The leaders and the broad public were blinded by dangerous pretensions . . .'[36] The Yom Kippur War forced Jews to ask:

> Why all this suffering? Why does the Jew always suffer? What is the purpose of the suffering? Little by little these thoughts awakened the search for the right path, and [Israeli Jews] began, little by little to return to Judaism until entire institutions were built and the number of Israeli penitents increased.[37]

In other words, it is the suffering which resulted from the Yom Kippur War, rather than the exultation following the victory of the Six Day War, which reminds Jews about the true nature of reality and which merges the fortunes of the state of Israel into the regnant paradigms of the nature of Jewish history.

THE MEHDAL AS A MYTH OF REASSURANCE

There is no question that the Israeli army emerged from the Yom Kippur War victorious. But equally clear is that, in the early days of the War some leaders, Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan foremost among them,

believed that the destruction of the state was a real possibility.[38] It would
also appear that, were it not for the American arms that were rushed to
Israel, the Arab armies might have prevailed.[39] Although these arms, in
effect, offset the Soviet arms with which the Egyptians and Syrians had
been liberally supplied both before and during the war, the fact remains
that the Yom Kippur War demonstrated that the state of Israel is not a
secure haven for Jews. Its security is precarious, its survival dependent
upon the support of a great power. This contradicts the central message of
Zionism, a message reinforced by the Holocaust myth, that there is no
secure place for Jews except in their own land where, unlike everywhere
else, they are an independent self-sufficient people. In other words, the
Yom Kippur War threatened this central message and myth of Israeli
society.

The work of Claude Levi-Strauss has sensitized students of society to
the role of myth in 'mediat[ing] contradictions or opposition as ex-
perienced by men'[40] by posing significant contradictions and then resolv-
ing them.[41] The question is, why are these contradictions posed and
resolved through myth, that is, in analogical terms, rather than in logical
or causal terms. The answer may be that the contradictions or dilemmas
are too frightening or challenging for society to confront directly. The
conscious confrontation would require the surrender of some other
societal norm or value. Therefore, like dreams, the contradictions are
cloaked in symbol. Myths present reality in symbolic form. The act of
representation is a form of catharsis and representation in symbolic form
conceals from our consciousness the full horror of the contradiction.
Hence, the resolution of the contradiction is also symbolic. Myth does not
provide a rational resolution to the contradiction but this is no problem
since the contradiction is only projected symbolically. Indeed, the resolu-
tion is of only secondary importance to the more important function of
the myth – the unconscious relief offered by the symbolic representation
of the dilemma.

Israelis refuse to accept the obvious implications of the Yom Kippur
War at the conscious level. A 1975 survey reported that only 17 per cent
of Israeli Jews harbored a fear that the state would be destroyed.[42] Only
weeks after the war ended, a random sample of adult Israeli Jews found
the vast majority denying that 'the myth of Israel's military invincibility
had been shattered'. They affirmed that the Israeli army could, if
necessary, repel an aggressor singlehandedly.[43] Most interesting of all,
Zvi Sobel, interviewing Israelis on the verge of emigrating from Israel in
1980 reported that 'notwithstanding the shock and upset of the 1973 war,
rare is the Israeli who would suggest the possibility of serious defeat in
future wars, at least aloud'.[44] But, whereas Sobel reports that his respon-

dents skirted the issue and refused to admit their deep feelings of fear, they made it clear that war and insecurity were potent elements in their decision to emigrate. He observes that:

> The 1973 war led to the rise of feeling of doubt with respect to the long-term survivability of the enterprise, the development of a certain morbidity, a kind of societal growth of intimations of mortality.[45]

This suggests that the contradiction between Zionist ideology and the experience of the Yom Kippur War is suppressed at the conscious level by denying concern over the threat of destruction. But it resurfaces at the unconscious level and is resolved by mythologizing the Yom Kippur War as a *mehdal*.

Mehdal is the term most often associated with the Yom Kippur War, an association that dates to November 1973, if not earlier.[46] It is not easily translatable. Some Israeli authors, writing in English, use the word in the original Hebrew. The *Alkalai Hebrew English Dictionary* translates it as 'omission' or 'oversight'. A *mehdal* is something that happened which is bad but not, in and of itself, a major catastrophe. The best translation might be 'shortcoming'. The sentence 'there was a *mehdal*' is best rendered as 'something went wrong'. But, as the *Alkalai Hebrew English Dictionary* suggests, what went wrong was more likely the result of one's not having done something, an error of omission, rather than having done something wrong, an error of commission.

The association of the term *mehdal* with the Yom Kippur War tells us a great deal about how the War is remembered. It tells us that the War is recalled as something which went wrong, yet did not have to go wrong. It alludes to the possibility that under different perhaps even *slightly* different circumstances, things might have come out much better. This is the heart of the Yom Kippur War myth. Because only the myth of a *mehdal* can reconcile the threat which the Yom Kippur War raised to basic premises of Zionism with continuing adherence to Zionist ideology. This is especially evident if we recall that a second metaphor was associated with the Yom Kippur War in the first few years, the metaphor of 'earthquake'.[47] Unlike a *mehdal*, an earthquake is by definition a major event of frightening dimensions, one that is embedded in nature itself, one that man can do nothing to prevent and in the face of which, if he knows about in advance, he ought to flee.

The term *mehdal* suggests that something went wrong, but what went wrong is rectifiable. It might have been the wrong leaders at the wrong time or over-confidence or some other 'shortcoming', or omission, or

oversight but it is not inherent in Zionist ideology or the nature of the Jewish state. The term *mehdal* locates the key to the interpretation of the War in the surprise attack and the story of how the Israeli army eventually overcame the surprise. In fact, the use of the term *mehdal* reinforces Zionist ideology which emphasizes activity rather than passivity, doing rather than responding. The error of the Yom Kippur War, therefore, becomes the fact that Israel did not do enough, in this case properly evaluating and assessing intelligence information about the enemy and then acting on the basis of that information.

The term *mehdal* suggests the narrative structure of the Yom Kippur War myth. This structure, at least in quasi-narrative form, is implicit in Chaim Herzog's radio broadcasts during the first month of the war, and subsequently published as a book.[48] Herzog notes in his introduction that the Yom Kippur War was:

> A glorious war of the IDF [Israel Defense Force] and the Israeli soldier who, despite the mistakes, the faulty assessments and the shortcomings [*mehdalim*] had the spiritual strength, the courage, the capacity for innovation and the spirit of sacrifice to overcome a beginning which is the worst Israel has ever known. The moment of surprise and despair, the bravery, the resourcefulness, the suffering and the pain and the death joined together in a mighty effort that turned a dangerous situation into a glorious military victory that, if not for the intervention of the great powers, would have been decisive.

He concludes the introduction with an observation that does not seem to make any sense. He notes that the maturity, the intelligence and the fortitude which the nation as a whole as well as the army displayed under conditions which would have perplexed other nations 'are the legitimation of Zionism and of all the efforts invested in the state of Israel ... '[49] The only way I can understand this remark is Herzog's unconscious response to his own sense that the War has undermined the basic Zionist thesis. Herzog's narrative also responds to the problem of Israeli dependence on the United States. Massive American aid to Israel is interpreted as an effort to foil the Soviet Union. The initial Egyptian success is not only attributable to a *mehdal* but to the active role of the Soviets, partners in Egypt's 'machiavellian plan whose purpose was not only to deceive us but the entire western world'.[50] American intervention, therefore, became necessary for the sake of the West, not for the sake of Israel. It is, according to Herzog, a turning point in halting Soviet imperialism.[51] Finally, although Herzog acknowledges that the superpowers would not have allowed Israel to win a decisive victory anyway, Israel accepted the

Security Council call for a cease fire because, 'weighing the price, in sons, was of primary importance'.[52]

Herzog's narrative cloaks the threat which the War raises to basic premises of Zionism. But the residue of fears which the War raised, the fear for the viability of the Jewish state, the realization that there are safer places in the world for the Jew than in Israel, and the knowledge that Israeli sovereignty depends on the goodwill of at least one superpower, remains present in the minds of Israeli Jews. That is why the Yom Kippur War cannot be recalled as an achievement or remembered with pride. What the myth of the *mehdal* does is to permit the masking of the real object of these fears and of the real cause for the gloom associated with the War.

NOTES

I am grateful to Robert Paine, Bernard Susser and Stuart Cohen for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. Note, for example, the recollection of the Yom Kippur War in Israel's most widely read newspaper in 1990. The country's most popular lyricist, Haim Hefer, writes a regular column of verse in the paper. On the seventeenth anniversary of the outbreak of the war he devoted his column to 'the shock, the humiliation, the disappointment as fierce as death' wrought by the war. 'The house was saved,' he writes, 'but we still see the signs of the fire.' Two other articles deal with the war and its outcome. One relates the life of a war widow since her husband's death in 1973 and the second reminds readers of the large number of soldiers who suffered from battle-shock, numbers whose dimensions were minimized and casualties who were treated inadequately. (*Yediot Aharonot*, 28 Sept. 1990, 'Yom Kippur Section'). A year later, on the eighteenth anniversary (eighteen is a number of special significance to Jews), the daily papers were filled with stories of the War and its aftermath along the same lines.

2. Such efforts have been made including, most recently, a television documentary shown on the fifteenth anniversary of the death of David Elazar, the Israeli chief of staff during the Yom Kippur War. Elazar resigned in the wake of a government commission report which held him responsible for Israel's lack of preparedness. A good part of the program was devoted to Elazar's success in the Yom Kippur War and it portrayed the war as a great victory. The battery of former generals, names well known to the Israeli public who appeared on the program praising Elazar and his achievements, suggest that at least among the former military elite there are many with a stake in recalling the war as a success. Their failure to convince the Israeli public of their case remains, therefore, a worthy topic of study.

3. In the preface to one of his two books on the war, Chaim Herzog, military analyst and former commander of Israeli intelligence (now President of Israel), labeled the war as the most impressive military victory in Israeli history (Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement* (Jerusalem: Edanim, *Yediot Aharonot* edition, in Hebrew, 1975). Retired army colonel Yaacov Hasdai, who served in the war, dismisses this argument which he admits is shared by political and military leaders across the political spectrum. He argues that Egypt won the war and the Israelis who claimed otherwise only sought to defend the establishment against the mass protest movements which demanded basic changes in Israeli society. Yaacov Hasdai, *The Iron Pen* (Jerusalem: Kvutzat Laor, 1983), pp.25–35, 40.

4. I am presently engaged in a study to determine how widely each of these arguments or others have indeed been evoked, by which segments of the population and in which period since 1973.
5. The column was written by Shlomo Avineri and is reprinted in his book *Essays on Zionism and Politics* (Jerusalem: Keter, in Hebrew, 1977), p.83.
6. Louis Guttman and Shulamit Levy, 'The Home Front', *Encyclopaedia Judaica Year Book 1974*, pp.88–91.
7. Ibid., p.91.
8. Ibid., p.88.
9. Hasdai, op. cit., p.50.
10. Eva Etzioni-Halevy with Rina Shapiro, *Political Culture in Israel: Cleavage and Integration Among Israeli Jews* (New York: Praeger, 1977).
11. Ibid., p.117.
12. Etzioni-Halevy, op. cit., p.188.
13. Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London: Macmillan, 1972).
14. The point is discussed in some more detail in Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). The most recent and complete description of the memory of the Holocaust in Israeli society is Eliezer Don-Yehiya, 'Memory and Political Culture: Israeli Society and the Holocaust', Peter Medding (ed.), *Studies in Contemporary Jewry: An Annual*, VIII (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
15. Martin S. Jaffee, 'The Victim-Community in Myth and History: Holocaust Ritual, the Question of Palestine, and the Rhetoric of Christian Witness', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol.28 (Spring, 1991), pp.230–1.
16. The mythical nature of these two events are treated in Yael Zerubavel, *The Last Stand: On the Transformation of Symbols in Israeli Culture* (Philadelphia: Dissertation submitted to the University of Pennsylvania, 1980).
17. Henry Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974).
18. Rosenberg might have observed that the events of Saul and Jonathan's death are related somewhat laconically at the end of *First Samuel* and retold, in mythic form, a page later at the beginning of *Second Samuel*, especially in David's eulogy.
19. Lucette Valensi, 'From Sacred History to Historical Memory and Back', *History and Anthropology*, Vol.2 (1986), p.287.
20. The list is not complete. Jews of Baghdad declared a second Purim to celebrate the miracles associated with the British capture of the city in 1916. Nissim Kazzaz, *The Jews in Iraq in the Twentieth Century* (Jerusalem: The Ben-Zvi Institute, in Hebrew, 1991).
21. That is probably true of the Purim paradigm though it is not true of the exodus from Egypt paradigm.
22. Menachem Friedman cites two prominent *haredi* writers who describe that War as a miraculous experience which 'serves as their point of departure for a new look at reality'. Menachem Friedman, 'Israel as a Theological Dilemma', Baruch Kimmerling (ed.), *The Israeli State and Society: Boundaries and Frontiers* (Albaby: SUNY Press, 1989), pp.204–5. See also Eliyahu Kitov, *Kivsei d'Rakhmana: Al Hayamim Hey B'iyar V'kaf-het B'iyar [The Secrets of God: On the Days of Fifth of Iyar and Twenty-eighth of Iyar]* (privately printed, in Hebrew, 1987). The importance of this pamphlet should not be underestimated since Kitov's commentary upon and interpretation of the Jewish holidays and of sacred texts is widely accepted in *haredi* circles and among many within the religious Zionist camp as well.
23. See, for example, Yoel Schwartz, *Yemot Olam [The Days of the World]* (Jerusalem: D'var Yerushalyim, in Hebrew, 1980), pp.123–6.
24. George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
25. Herzog, op.cit. and *Days of Awe: Commentaries on the Yom-Kippur War* (Jerusalem: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, The Ma'ariv Book Guild, in Hebrew, 1973).

26. Moshe Dayan, 'Footnotes in the Wake of the Yom Kippur War', *Yediot Aharonot* (24 Sept. 1980, '*Erev Succot* Supplement', in Hebrew).

27. This televised appearance by Levy is cited from memory. It was Levy's statement which was the original trigger for this research project.

28. Zvi Sobel, *Migrants From the Promised Land* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1986), pp.24–38.

29. Jay Gonen, 'The Israeli Illusion of Omnipotence Following the Six Day War', *Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol.6 (Fall, 1978), pp.241–71, cites, for example, an article in the *Jerusalem Post Week-End Magazine* (16 June, 1967) by columnist David Krivine under the title 'A New State Has Emerged'. According to Krivine:

> It may be said that the Jewish State underwent its *Brit Mila* [circumcision] in 1948 and its *bar-mitzva* [rituals associated with reaching the age of thirteen] in 1956. Today it has achieved its majority. Israel is no longer a ward of the benevolent powers of the UN which acted as mediators between herself and the countries around. From now on, any talking about Mideast problems concerning Israel is done with Israel. Her power is unquestioned in the zone. (p.249 in Gonen).

30. Eliezer Schweid, *Israel At The Crossroads* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), p.159. Schweid cites the biblical phrase.

31. The evidence for this change is presented, in some detail, in Liebman and Don-Yehiya, op. cit.

32. For a survey of the political implications of the messianist theology, see Uriel Tal, 'Totalitarian Democratic Hermeneutics and Policies in Modern Jewish Religious Nationalism', The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, *Totalitarian Democracy and After* (Jerusalem: The Magnus Press, 1984), pp.137–57.

33. Yosef Fund, *Agudat Israel Confronting Zionism and the State of Israel – Ideology and Policy* (Ramat Gan: Doctoral dissertation submitted to Bar-Ilan University, 1989). See also Efraim Inbar, Gad Barzilai and Giora Goldberg, 'The Positions of the Ultra-Orthodox Parties in Israel on National Security', forthcoming.

34. See note 21. (Friedman, whose study is cited in note 21, draws very different conclusions than I about the integration of the state into *haredi* conceptions of Jewish history). *HaModia*, the daily newspaper of Agudat Yisrael, the major political party of the *haredim* in this period, is filled with stories of the great Israeli victory during and immediately following the Six Day War.

35. Rav Schach's message, delivered shortly after the War, was reprinted in *Yated Ne'eman*, the Hebrew language newspaper which accepts his unquestioned authority. See the *Yated* supplement, 'The Weekly Yated' (3 Oct. 1990), p.16.

36. Schwartz, op. cit., p.90.

37. Ibid.

38. The war aims of the Egyptians and the Syrians are a matter of some dispute. The notion that the Arabs harbored 'limited objectives *vis-à-vis* the idea of totally exterminating the state of Israel' (Frank Aker, *October 1973: The Arab-Israeli War*, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1985, p.19) finds support in the Egyptian conduct of the war. On the other hand, even Aker suspects that Syria might have wanted to achieve total victory. However, the Israeli public, with whom this paper is concerned, never doubted that the Arabs sought the total destruction of Israel. Thus, in a newspaper column of 16 November, 1973, political scientist Shlomo Avineri, destined to serve as director general of the Foreign Office within a couple of years, called the war 'the most serious threat to its [Israel's] existence since 1948', *Ma'ariv*, (16 Nov. 1973) cited in Avineri, op. cit.

39. According to Aker, 'when convinced that Israel's survival hung in the balance, America responded so massively that the results turned the tide of the war'. Aker, op. cit., p.57.

40. Percy Cohen, 'Theories of Myth', *Man*, Vol.4 (Sept. 1969), p.346.

41. See also Hide Ishiguro, 'Myths and False Dichotomies', *Social Research*, Vol.52 (Summer, 1985), p.368.

42. Rachel Katz, 'Concerns of the Israeli: Change and Stability from 1962 to 1975', *Human Relations*, Vol.35 (1982), pp.83–99. In all fairness, the figure was none in a comparable 1962 survey.
43. Guttman and Levy, op. cit., p.91.
44. Sobel, op. cit., p.109.
45. Ibid., p.113.
46. I found the term used in the press as early as November, 1973, with indications that it was already in public use. It may have been used earlier. The extended research, to which this paper is only a prelude, will determine when it was first invoked.
47. A bibliography of serious works concerned with the Yom Kippur War lists 25 books in Hebrew, Shmuel Zabag, *Israel's Foreign Policy: A Selected Bibliography* (Tel Aviv: The Open University, 1990). Two of the books include the term *mehdal* in the title, one uses the term earthquake. My own survey of colleagues, scholars whom one might suppose have better memories of national events found that whereas everyone associated *mehdal* with the Yom Kippur War, only one associated the term earthquake with that war.
48. Herzog, *Days of Awe*, op. cit.
49. Ibid., p.2.
50. Ibid., p.39.
51. Ibid., p.40.
52. Ibid., p.57. Herzog's broadcasts were not simply narratives or quasi-narratives in which the story he tells lends itself to mythic interpretation. Herzog, on occasion, especially toward the end of the book, addresses at least one of the value contradictions which the War raises. He feels called upon to explain why Israelis ought not to feel depressed because the War demonstrated their dependence on the United States. He suggests that dependence is a two-way street and if a superpower supports a small country in the manner in which the United States has supported Israel it is a sign that this is important for its own national interest. Under such circumstances the superpower will not dictate policies to the smaller country (p.91). But this argument is quite secondary to the narrative of the war which unfolds in the volume.