

# Report

## In Israel, When Desperation Seems Reasonable

Alan Mintz

JERUSALEM—Nov. 9. On Israel's state-sponsored radio network, her only one, the hourly news is preceded by four high-pitched beeps easily heard above the noise of a crowd. In stores customers gather around the nearest transistor like metal filings around the poles of a magnet, in buses the pushing stops and the driver turns up the volume, in cafés the murmur of talk subsides altogether. Israel becomes one vast ear straining to catch the nuances of the latest twist in the international situation. The news is over and the volume turned down, then discussion begins again: What did Golda really accomplish on her last trip abroad? How far are the Soviets willing to go? What did Sadat's latest statement mean and at whom was it really aimed? Here everyone is an analyst and everyone a strategist.

Behind the welter of opinion since the October war there seem to be several shared realizations. Chief among these is a tragic sense of the costs of war. In a country of a few million which has undertaken full male mobilization, loss of life becomes very intimate. In America's war in Vietnam blacks and poor whites did most of the fighting; the upper middle classes watched on TV a war that never quite lost the abstractness of its video image. In Israel death is, if not in one's own home, down the street or with the fellow at work or in an empty chair when classes resume at the university.

In discussions of the war itself one no longer senses the cockiness so common after the '67 war. Israelis have abandoned the conviction of

their superior ability, but one infers from the gaps in their conversation that they were deeply impressed by the military savvy of the Arabs and by their efficiency in using new strategic weapons. Surface-to-air missiles, with the power to neutralize Israel's most outstanding advantage, have raised the prospect of protracted battles in which punch-drunk endurance rather than spirited agility will prevail.

Perhaps most sobering for the Israeli mind is the emergence of the Great Powers as principal actors in the Middle East. In reality, of course, America and Russia have been principal actors all along. Yet in a public imagination nurtured on the '67 victory the intervention of the Great Powers has been a kind of castration. Left to deal with the Arabs on their own with interference from neither East nor West, Israelis are sure that they could secure their survival—and perhaps bring peace. But in the current patron-client relationships which prevail on both sides, not only is Israel not her own man, but the entire region has been subordinated to nonregional interests. Israelis are outraged at the prospect of their fate being negotiated in councils in which they have no say; they believe they may be turned on at any moment as an obstacle to détente, or used as a battleground signaling the end of détente.

This new feeling of impotence, of being manipulated, particularly rankles, because the central point of Zionism, the ideology which brought the state into being, was to preclude just such a situation.

Instead of being a people dispersed among, and at the mercy of, other peoples, Jews sought to create a political entity which would generate its own temporal history. No longer would Jews be a helpless footnote to the histories of the nations. Now not only macropolitical forces impinge on Israel but geology itself seems to conspire to rob the Jewish people of its chance to create its own history. Oil and the caprice of its distribution force the helpless Israelis to watch as a giant vise is closed on nations who might otherwise be friendly to Jewish aspirations.

The outlines of two basic attitudes toward the future seem to be emerging. The attitudes are as evident in the editorial columns of the respected daily *Ha'aretz* as in the chatter of the vendor who sells it to you. Even if there are new outbreaks of war, it seems likely these attitudes will make the division of mind which will occupy Israelis for some time to come.

The first position, to state it simply, is that the status quo should be held onto for as long as possible. Israel should go through the motions of negotiating but not really give anything back. Occupied territories are buffers—not colonies, although there are many who would have it that way—between Israeli settlements and Arab armies, and are essential to security. If they had not been there this time the cost in civilian lives would have been immeasurable. What could possibly be gained, it is asked, from negotiations? Declarations of recognition and promises of security mean little when offered by despotic regimes whose days are, in all likelihood, numbered. As for peace arrangements guaranteed by the Great Powers, they are only as lasting as the configurations of power that gave them birth. International politics aside, many Israelis believe that Arab aggression against Israel will not be appeased by concessions of

---

ALAN MINTZ, a graduate student at Columbia University, is writing his doctoral dissertation in Israel.

any sort, that nothing short of dismantling the state will satisfy the demands of Arab "justice." Because it cannot trust others, Israel will have to rely on herself, especially in the area of arms. In addition to the light arms already produced here, heavy arms and vehicles will have to be manufactured at an ever increasing pace.

The second position begins by asking about the consequences of *not* negotiating. Is Israel willing every few years to endure a war of the dimensions of the one just past? How many sons must be sacrificed? It was thought that the occupied territories would secure peace, but that has been brutally disproved. The alignment of international power, it is argued, must be taken very seriously; the stubborn pursuit of a relentlessly independent policy will end in the kind of complete isolation Israel could never endure. Since the Great Powers seem to desire a settlement at this time, and since the Arabs might wish to avoid further military humiliations, Israel should be willing to make some moves—demilitarizing the Sinai, for example—which could lead to a peace, however fragile. This position views negotiation and compromise as the only alternatives to more frequent wars which will become increasingly bloody and prolonged.

For the Western liberal who finds himself in such discussions the dislocation of sensibility is violent. His emphasis on principle and rational discourse, his distaste for the manufacture and supply of arms, his opposition to America's involvement in the affairs of other countries—all are thrown into question by the rhetoric of death and survival which pervades even the most banal conversations here. The very facticity of war and the intimacy of its consequences make it impossible to use the accustomed language of politics. Yet neither is one at home with the language of realism and desperation which has become the daily speech of Israelis. One finds himself in a no-man's land between two strange tongues.

## Reader's Response

### Rationalizing the Hell of War

James T. Johnson

Early in Gordon Zahn's "War and Its Conventions" (*Worldview*, July, 1973) the author sets forth the proposal that "the Vietnam conflict be taken as a test case by writers who would persist in the illusion that just war standards and conditions are, or indeed could be, taken into account in the policy decisions reached by military leaders and magistrates." By the end of this same article Zahn has moved on to the more startling proposal that an international tribunal of "theologians and other specialists in religion and in the presumed influence religion has upon the affairs of man" be convoked to render judgment on the morality of the Vietnam war. Since these two propositions have no necessary direct relationship, and since in the pages separating them Zahn does not connect them, one is left wondering just what Zahn intends to say in this article.

Although Zahn appears at first to intend some kind of critique of the usefulness of just war doctrine to control war today, or at the very least to expose the nonapplication of that doctrine to Vietnam by those who "persist in the illusion" that it is still relevant to contemporary war, what emerges most clearly in the body of his argument is his conviction that conventional warfare today outstrips the bounds of traditional attempts to limit the prosecution of war. This, it would appear, is what Zahn wants most to say in this article. Thus, immediately after proposing an international religious tribunal to judge the Vietnam war, he names two practices from that war which deserve "the same condemnation."

The way he judges the examples he cites reveals that were Zahn a member of his proposed tribunal he would not have to attend any of its meetings; he already has in hand his condemnation of the practice of contemporary warfare. Whether or not anyone has judged, or could judge, the war in Southeast Asia by the standards of the just war tradition is thus, for Zahn, in the final analysis, irrelevant. This is why to attempt such a judgment is to "persist in . . . illusion."

The modern-war pacifist position which Zahn takes is not of recent vintage. Its origins are at least a century old, dating from the rise, in the last half of the nineteenth century, of large standing national armies of conscripts armed with mass-produced rifles and long-range rifled cannon. Our own Civil War was one of the first "modern wars," and the scale of destruction its armies were capable of producing was a quantum leap beyond the wastage caused by wars on the model of the eighteenth century, when armies and navies were relatively small and armed with comparatively scarce and inaccurate weapons. Though Zahn is convinced otherwise, what makes today's "conventional war" conventional is that it continues to apply and build on the technology of destruction of a century ago; compared to *this*, nuclear warfare represents another quantum leap. In its primitiveness the Hiroshima bomb might be set alongside the rifled

JAMES T. JOHNSON is a member of the Department of Religion at Douglass College, Rutgers University.