



WAR
OR
PEACE

*Hear you indeed, but understand not:
and see you indeed, but perceive not.*

ISAIAH 6:9

THUS SPOKE YEHOSHUA

by Bruno Segre

In November, 1975, the French Section of the World Jewish Congress held the 16th conference of the Jewish francophone intellectuals in Paris. Numerous representatives of the Jewish intelligentsia, then active in France, participated at the meeting, including Emmanuel Lévinas, Robert Misrahi, Annie Kriegel, and Elie Wiesel.

Exactly two years had passed since the Yom Kippur War, and the theme of the conference, “The Jewish Conscience Facing War,”¹ had not been selected at random. No less deliberate, I think, was the decision to invite Abraham B. Yehoshua, rightly regarded as the person to offer concrete, honest opinions on war and peace in the Middle East.

His background conferred an inside view of Israeli society. Though educated in Paris, he defined himself

At the Paris conference, he titled his lecture “The State of War: Repercussions on the Individual and on Society.”²

Three decades have passed since 1975, but the Arab-Israeli conflict is still with us, the questions of 1975 are still menacingly present (if more complicated, due to the increased hostility), and Yehoshua’s answers, first posed 31 years ago, are still relevant. Which is why, in 2006, his insight should still be food for thought: not just for Israelis, but for all Jews.

In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war, Yehoshua believed the situation of Jews around the world was worsening. He pointed to “a new, disturbing phenom-

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as a “pre-Zionist Jew,” with deep roots in *Eretz-Israel*. After completing his studies, he distinguished himself with a series of short stories, skillfully mixing personal history and social observation, so that by 1975, he was already admired in France, Germany and the United States, where critics compared him to Faulkner. He was artistically detached, politically engaged and boldly intellectual. “I am not a historian, nor a scholar on Zionism,” he said then. “I don’t claim to arrive at scientific conclusions. But the Diaspora, the *Shoah*, the moral questions relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict are not questions to be left exclusively to the experts. They are part of our existence and of the make-up of the identity of each one of us.”

enon. . . . we are, once again, pushed back to the fringe of history.” To Yehoshua, conflict between “Jews” and “the world” had a long and varied history, spread over time and space, at times latent and at times volatile. These conflicts had taken various forms: some had been religious; others ideological; still others economic.

In 1975, they seemed to converge “on a well-defined area in which all forms, like it or not, had political connotations. All the Jews of the world are involved in the State of Israel, whether they accept or reject it.”

The new conflict was not, however, spiritual. “I don’t see the Jews as a kind of spiritual sect, vested with a specific ‘mission,’” said Yehoshua. “Without even leaving this room, right here, there must be at least one

hundred different interpretations of what Judaism is.” And, because ideas and opinions “have always been something very vague among us,” Yehoshua did not see the conflict as having to do with ideas and opinions specific to the Jews, but rather, as “a conflict in the interior of the *Jewish condition*.”

As Yehoshua reminds us, we must acknowledge—and take responsibility for—our role in a conflict. “In our conflict with the world we are not passive, we are active; we are not simple objects, we are subjects. The only period during which we were exclusively objects was during the *Shoah*. Presently, we are subjects, we too are contributing to the conflict.”

After this premise, Yehoshua began a meditation of the effects of war—a long war, with no discernable end—on Israeli society. He cited several factors in his analysis, of which I’ll quote just a few.

He began with the notion of “wasted time.” “This waste of time that is war, the war fought in Israel, by Israel, against Israel, the war that upsets the normal, precise rhythm of life. War, this state that opposes the natural order of time.” In Israel, history is divided into wars, he said. “We talk of the ‘generation of the War for Independence,’ or of ‘the literature before the Sinai War.’ Israeli time is a completely unbalanced time, because of this conflict that relentlessly pierces our body.

“Now and then we have these strange times, these ‘military periods,’” he went on, recalling “the annual recalls of the reservists. After the Yom Kippur War, college professors, businessmen, factory workers were torn from their normal cycle of life for four or five months and immobilized, on a hill.” To Yehoshua, this epitomized the notion of wasted time, “time slipping through their fingers.”

Until the Yom Kippur War, “time seemed to advance in a linear pattern, following the path of the

history of Zionism. . . . We were making headway. We were moving forward,” Yehoshua said then.

“Time was on our side,” he went on. But with the Yom Kippur War, “all that changed, giving birth to Israel’s most acute depression. We had the disheartening impression of circling around peace. Peace is in the middle and we constantly surround it without ever being able to attain it. A vicious circle.” But “giving in” to mistrust, Yehoshua tells us, “is an incorrect feeling. Our time is not described as a vicious circle. Sometimes we feel that, perhaps, we are approaching peace. . . . Neither a vicious circle nor a linear time, but rather a spiral process.”

When at war, a society becomes centralist: war penetrates everything. If centralizing is a value—and Yehoshua doubts it—then “war may appear to be a ‘value,’ because it mingles and brings social classes together, produces encounters. . . .

“But how much of the local, individual traits, of the diversities which are part of each of us are lost!” he went on. In Israel, the endless conflict (and the intermittent wars) has a leveling effect: the specific aspects of places and people are worn down.

No less implacably, war affects the psychological, inner landscape of Israelis. “You, the French, enjoy open borders,” said Yehoshua. “Whenever you want, you can cross them. The Israelis need to move all the time, to run; for them, to cross a border is a pleasant thing, an important experience. War has confined them inside their frontiers, lending a sense of claustrophobia.” The spatial constriction produces a “psychological smothering” for Israelis. They experience “a kind of relationship with their land that you, Jews of the Diaspora, do not know. . . . For the Jew, the landscape is something merely instrumental. It is not so for us in Israel, where relationships are deeper. When you live for two months

on a hill, your relationship with the landscape becomes completely different. . . . Because of the war, some hills convey serenity, while others are threatening, blood-stained places without any meaning. The map we are looking at...war..."

Once in a while, one may meet someone in Israel who thinks that war is a magnificent thing, stimulating spiritual energies; someone who thinks, in other words, that war favors progress. Yehoshua disagreed, so much so that he branded the idea "fascist." "The state of war is abnormal," he said. "War does not stimulate the spiritual life. . . . We should never forget that war is evil. Always."

After the Yom Kippur War, one felt that Israel had changed, according to Yehoshua. "If, for example, we analyze the use of the term 'peace' in the Israeli political language, we realize that the expressions 'eternal peace' or 'true peace' were used, not just peace *tout court*. True peace! What is 'true peace'? The word 'peace' is always accompanied by adjectives, even in the political language of Golda or Dayan. All this is wrong. Peace, yes. Peace is relative everywhere in the world, but when one pretends to attain 'absolute peace,' it means that one doesn't want pure and simple peace.

"Israel is weary," he went on. "We are tired and we realized this following the Yom Kippur War."

Yehoshua reminds us that a society involved in a long-lasting conflict ends up adopting defense mechanisms, and may assume a sense of moral superiority—"a tendency to discredit the world."

He saw this happening in Israel.

"The fact that a man may be a victim does not make him a moral being," Yehoshua observed. "To be moral he must perform moral acts."

At the same time, he singled out the inverse process—self-hate—which, according to Yehoshua, is

deeply rooted in Jewish culture. "We are disgusted with ourselves," he observed. "Identification with the aggressor is like saying 'yes, Israel is wrong, we only make mistakes, do foolish things, we continually indulge in the vice of self-accusation. We are mean by nature and are therefore incapable of peace.' . . . And it is evident that, when combined, these two mechanisms—self-hate and a sense of superiority—bring about a detachment from the world. We isolate ourselves, we feel isolated, and we lose the sense of reality."

In Yehoshua's final analysis, war is synonymous with death. The gravest peril a society faces is growing accustomed to death. What makes Israeli society strong and united, said Yehoshua, is that it has never come to terms with death. "Never have the Israelis accepted death as a normal event. In that country nothing has ever been done to accustom people to death. Nobody has ever said to somebody: 'It is your duty to die.' Every death creates, in Israel, a kind of bewilderment.

"The kamikaze notion is completely foreign to us," he went on. "Sadat's declaration, 'I am ready to sacrifice a million people,' is repugnant to us. . . . I was asked whether I intended to talk about the sacrifice of Isaac. I answered no. I don't think this myth finds many supporters in Israel. It's a false myth, it's a story that throws me into confusion, even if it is written in the Bible. I find it a humiliating story. . . . In our country there are no fathers who sacrifice their sons for some grand idea. Fathers have been themselves soldiers, and therefore say: 'I have done my duty, now it's your turn.' That's all."

In Israel, nothing is done to prepare for death. When it strikes, there is a celebration of death, or rather, a cult in honor of the dead. "And this is important," said Yehoshua, "it is very positive. . . . Death should not be suppressed, should not be kept hidden, but must be lived in all its tensions and in the fullness of grief."

According to Yehoshua, it is useless to seek consolation in some pious expression, or to seek religious or supernatural justifications. "The intrusion of religious language in the speeches pronounced when taking leave of the dead is dangerous. It is risky to invoke the Name of God on the coffins of dead soldiers," he admonished. "I really do not think that the soldiers who died on the Golan were killed for God. God was not at issue. There was never a conflict about God between us and the Arabs. I don't like to hear that the Syrians are dying for Allah. If there are conflicts between us, the subject is territory or the right of Israel to exist. God has nothing to do with all this. . . ."

"If we charge the conflict with metaphysical values, we can be certain that it will never end."

Nineteen hundred seventy-five. We are now in two thousand six...

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Mr. Segre is the editor of *Keshet* magazine, where this article first appeared as an editorial (September-October 2003). It was translated from the Italian and reprinted with the author's permission.

1 See Congrès Juif Mondial, *La Conscience juive face à la guerre. Données at débats*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1976.
2 *ibid.*, pp. 127-147

