

The Tunic of Nessus by Uri Avnery

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IN A few weeks, Israel will celebrate the 50. anniversary of the Six-Day War.

Millions of words, most of them hollow, will be poured out. As usual.

But the event deserves better. It is a drama unique in human history. Only a biblical writer could do it justice. William Shakespeare could have turned his hand to it.

I suppose that most readers were not yet alive at the time, and certainly not yet able to understand what was happening.

So let me try to recount the drama as I saw it unfolding.

IT STARTED on Independence Day, 1967, the annual celebration of the official founding of the State of Israel. It was only the 19th anniversary.

The Prime Minister, Levy Eshkol, was standing on the tribune reviewing a march-past of the armed forces. Eshkol was as far removed from military ceremonial as one can imagine. He was a civilian through and through, the leader of a group of party elders who had drummed the authoritarian David Ben-Gurion out of the ruling Labor Party four years earlier.

At the height of the ceremonies, somebody handed Eshkol a piece of paper. Eshkol glanced at it and continued as if nothing had happened.

It was a short message: The Egyptian army is entering the Sinai peninsula.

THE FIRST public reaction was disbelief. What? The Egyptian army? Everybody knew that the Egyptian army was busy in far-away Yemen. There, a civil war was raging, and the Egyptians had intervened, not very successfully.

But the following days confirmed the unbelievable: Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, the Egyptian president, was indeed sending military units into the Sinai desert. It was a clear provocation of Israel.

The Sinai peninsula belongs to Egypt. In 1956 Israel had occupied it, in collusion with two declining colonial empires, France and Britain. Ben-Gurion, then the Prime Minister, had declared the "Third Israeli Empire" (following David and the Hasmoneans more than two thousand years before), but had to retract mournfully.

US President Dwight Eisenhower and Soviet President Nikolai Bulganin had both sent ultimatums, and Israel had no choice but to obey. So Israel gave back everything it had conquered, but got two consolation prizes: the Sinai was demilitarized. UN troops occupied key positions. Also, the Egyptians had to open the Strait of Tiran, the exit from the Gulf of Aqaba, on which Israel's (small) exports to the East depended.

What had induced Nasser, a great orator but sober statesman, to start another adventure?

IT STARTED in Syria, a competitor of Egypt for the leadership of the Arab world. Yasser Arafat's guerrillas were raiding Israel from the Syrian border, and the Israeli Chief-of-Staff had declared that the Israeli army would march on Damascus if this nuisance did not stop.

Nasser saw an opportunity to reassert his leadership of the Arab world. He warned Israel to leave Syria alone, and in order to underline his message he sent his army into Sinai. Also, he told the UN troops in Sinai to evacuate several of their positions.

This angered the UN Secretary-General, the Burmese U Thant, who was not a very wise leader either. He answered that if Nasser insisted, all UN troops would leave. Since Nasser could not back down without losing face, all the UN troops left.

A mood of panic swept Israel. All the army reserves were called up. Men disappeared from the streets, Israel's manhood was concentrated on the Egyptian border, doing nothing and getting more impatient from day to day.

As if by design, the fear in Israel became worse from day to day. The civilian Eshkol inspired no confidence as a military leader. To make matters much worse, something curious happened. To quieten the panic, Eshkol decided to address the nation. He made a speech on the radio (no TV yet) which he had written down in advance. Before reading it out, he gave it to his main advisor, who made some small corrections, but at one place this man forgot to strike out the corrected word.

When Eshkol reached this place, he hesitated. Which version was the right one? It was as if the Prime Minister (who was also the Minister of Defense) was stuttering when the fate of the nation was hanging in the balance.

BUT WAS it? While the panic grew all around me, I was walking around like a bridegroom at a funeral. Even my wife thought that I had become a bit crazy.

But I had good reason. Some months before the start of the crisis I had been invited to give a talk in a kibbutz. As usual, after I was done I was invited to coffee with some of the veteran members. There, a member told me in confidence that a week earlier the army commander of the northern front had also given a talk and been invited to coffee, and confided to the veterans: "Every night, before going to bed, I pray to God that Nasser will send his army into the Sinai. There we shall annihilate them."

At the time I was the editor of a mass-circulation magazine, as well as a member of the Knesset and the Chairman of the party that had sent me there. I wrote an article called "Nasser has Fallen into a Trap", which only reinforced the impression that I was off my rocker.

But Nasser soon realized that he had indeed fallen into a trap. He frantically tried to get out – but the wrong way. He issued blood-curdling threats, declared the closure of the Straits of Tiran (but also quietly sent a trusted colleague to Washington, urging the President to restrain Israel. Like all Arab leaders at the time, he sincerely believed that Israel was just an American puppet.)

In fact, the straits were never really closed. But the announcement made war inevitable. Under immense public pressure, Eshkol had to give up the Ministry of Defense and turn it over to Moshe Dayan. Several of the most respected generals demanded a meeting with Eshkol and threatened to resign if the army was not immediately ordered to attack. The order was given.

ON THE second day of the war I was called to the Knesset. I was sick with influenza, but got up and drove to Jerusalem. My shining white car shone like a meteor among the mass of tanks also hastening to Jerusalem, but the soldiers let me through, showering me with jocular comments.

The Knesset was under fire from Jordanian artillery. We hurriedly voted on the war budget (I voted for it and do not repent it, as I repented two other votes, but that is another subject). Then we were rushed to the shelter.

There, a high-ranking friend whispered in my ear: "It's all over. We have destroyed the Egyptian Air Force on the ground." And so we had. The real founder of the Israeli Air Force, Ezer Weitzman, had been planning this day for years and had created a force specifically shaped for this one job.

The following is history. In six incredible days the Israeli army easily destroyed three Arab armies, and elements of some more, which were left without air cover. The country was in a delirium of joy. Victory songs and victory parties abounded. All reason was sent to the devil.

ON THE fifth day of the war I published an "open letter" to the Prime Minister, calling on him to order an immediate plebiscite among the Palestinians in the territories we had just conquered, allowing them to choose between return to the Kingdom of Jordan, or Egypt in the case of Gaza, annexation by Israel, or a national state of their own.

A few days after the end of the war Eshkol invited me to a private meeting, and after listening to my ideas about a Palestinian state side by side with Israel, asked me good-naturedly: "Uri, what kind of merchant are you? If one wants to make a deal, one starts by asking the maximum and offering the minimum, and slowly nears a compromise. You want us to offer them everything in advance?"

So nothing was offered the Palestinians. 50 years later we are stuck with the occupation. Israel has changed completely, the despised Right-wing has assumed almost absolute power, settlers roam the West Bank, and Gaza has been turned into an isolated ghetto. Israel has turned into a colonial apartheid state.

IF I were religious, I would describe it this way: many years ago God sent his chosen people, Israel, into exile from the Holy Land as punishment for their sins. 130 years ago a part of the people of Israel decided to return to the Holy Land without God's permission. Now God has punished the people of Israel again by giving them a miraculous victory,

and turning that same victory into a curse that is leading to disaster.

For this purpose, God borrowed an idea from his Greek colleagues. He has turned the occupied territories into the Tunic of Nessus.

Nessus, the centaur, was killed by the hero Hercules. Before he died, Nessus covered his tunic with his tainted blood, which was a deadly poison. When Hercules put it on, it adhered to his skin and he could not take it off again. When he tried, it killed him.