

The Six Day War - That was when I realized that being Jewish was an exceptionally odd thing to be

We began to hear disturbing news from the Middle East. The Egyptians had blocked the gulf of Akaba. They demanded the withdrawal of the United Nations troops, who instantly complied. War was in the air. The State of Israel was exposed to attack on all fronts. A catastrophe seemed to be in the making. I, who had not lived through the Holocaust nor even thought much about it, became suddenly aware that a second tragedy might be about to overtake the Jewish people.

It was then that an extraordinary thing began to happen. Throughout the university Jews suddenly became visible. Day after day they crowded into the little synagogue in the centre of town. Students and dons who had never before publicly identified as Jews could be found there praying. Others began collecting money. Everyone wanted to help in some way, to express their solidarity, their identification with Israel's fate. It was some time before we realized that the same phenomenon was repeating itself throughout the world. From the United States to the Soviet Union, Jews were riveted to their television screens and radios, anxious to hear the latest news, involved, on the edge, as if it were their own lives that were at stake. The rest is history. The war was fought and won. It lasted a mere six days, one of the most spectacular victories in modern history. We could celebrate and breathe safely again. Life went back to normal.

But not completely. For I had witnessed something in those days and weeks that didn't make sense in the rest of my world. It has nothing to do with politics or war or even prayer. It had to do with Jewish identity. Collectively the Jewish people had looked in the mirror and said; we are still Jews. And by that they meant more than a private declaration of faith, "religion" in the conventional sense of the word. It meant that they felt part of a people, involved in its fate, implicated in its destiny, caught up in its tragedy, exhilarated by its survival. I had felt it. So had every other Jew I knew.

Why? The Israelis were not people I knew. They were neither friends nor relatives in any literal sense. Israel was a country two thousand miles away, which I had visited once but in which I had no plans to live. Yet I had no doubt that their danger was something I felt personally. It was then that I knew that being Jewish was not something private and personal but something collective and historical. It meant being part of an extended family, many of whose members I did not know, but to whom I nonetheless felt connected by bonds of kinship and responsibility.

It made no sense at all in the concepts and categories of the 1960's. That was when I realized that being Jewish was an exceptionally odd thing to be, structurally odd. Jewish identity was not simply a truth or set of truths I could accept or reject. It was not a preference I could express or disavow. It was not a faith I could adopt or leave alone. I had not chosen it. It had chosen me. Everything I had studied in modern philosophy, everything I had experienced in contemporary culture, told me that truth was universal and all else was individual – personal preference, autonomous choice. But what I had experienced was neither universal nor individual. Jewish identity was not, nor did it aspire to be, the universal human condition. Nor had I chosen it. It was something I was born into. But how can anyone truly be born into specific obligations and responsibilities without their consent? Logically it didn't add up. Yet psychologically it did. Without any conscious decision I was reminded that merely by being born into the Jewish people I was enmeshed in a network of relationships that connected me to other people, other places, other times. I belonged to a people. And being part of a people, I belonged.

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