

## **The Photograph: A Search for June 1967**

*Yossi Klein Halevi*

S ometime around 10:15 on the morning of June 7, 1967, the first reservist paratroopers of Brigade 55 broke through the Lion's Gate leading into the Old City of Jerusalem and reached the narrow enclave of the Western Wall. Having just fought a fierce two-day battle in the streets of east Jerusalem, they grieved for lost friends, and grieved as well for their own lost innocence in what for many was their first experience of combat. They leaned against the Wall, some in exhaustion, some in prayer. Several wept, instinctively connecting to the Wall's tradition of mourning the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty—precisely at the moment when Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem had been restored.

Several hours later, Yitzhak Yifat, a twenty-four-year-old reservist about to begin medical school, reached the Wall. As part of the brigade's 66th Battalion, he and his friends had fought in the Six Day War's toughest battle: Intimate combat against elite Jordanian Legionnaires in the trenches of Ammunition Hill, on the road to Mount Scopus. Something in their faces—perhaps a combination of exhaustion and uplift—caught the eye of news photographer David Rubinger. He lay on the ground and photographed the paratroopers, who appeared, in the subsequent photograph, almost statuesque. Though the newspaper captions claimed the paratroopers were gazing up at the Wall, they were in fact standing with their backs to it, looking off into the distance, at an object or a scene beyond the pho-

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tograph's reach.

Yifat is the centerpoint of the photograph, and not only because he is physically positioned there. Among his friends, only Yifat's face is truly memorable; the faces around him seem to blur into his. Partly that is because he alone has removed his helmet, revealing the civilian beneath the soldier. Yifat also allows himself to appear vulnerable: While the men around him are tight-lipped, suppressing emotion, his mouth is open, as if trying to express the ineffable.

One more iconic image emerged from the Six Day War: A photograph, which appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine, of a grinning, tousle-haired Israeli soldier, holding high a captured Egyptian Kalashnikov as he bathes in the Suez Canal. Like the paratroopers at the Wall, he too is gazing upward, and appears exhausted; but there all resemblance ends. Taken together, the two photographs offer opposing images of victory. The *Life* photograph lacks the emotional complexity that marks the face of Yitzhak Yifat and the other paratroopers at the Wall. Instead, it reflects the exuberance of a young man celebrating victory—his nation's survival, and his own. It is the face of Israeli normalcy: Having achieved its greatest victory, Israel has vindicated Zionism's promise to ensure the happy ending of the Jewish story.

Forty years later, the snapshot of the soldier at the canal has been mostly forgotten, while the picture of the paratroopers at the Wall has become, arguably, the most beloved Jewish photographic image of our time—appearing in Passover Hagadas and on computer screen savers and posters in college dorm rooms. When Israel recently marked forty years to the Six Day War, the photograph at the Wall served as the media logo. Despite attempts to transform the picture into political parody and commercial kitsch—it has been co-opted for a protest poster by an artist opposed to the occupation, painted in rainbow colors by a gay group, and featured in a cigarette advertisement—its power to inspire hasn't diminished.

The image endures, in part, because of the humility it conveys: At their moment of triumph, the conquerors are themselves conquered. The paratroopers, epitome of Zionism's "new Jews," stand in gratitude before the Jew-

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ish past, suddenly realizing that they owe their existence to its persistence and longing. Rubinger's photograph catches a precise historical moment: The return of the last two thousand years of Jewish history to the Zionist story. Many of the paratroopers identified themselves as Israelis first, Jews only a distant second; some weren't quite sure whether they identified as Jews at all. And yet it is at the Wall of all places, symbol of the quietism of exile, where secular Israelis become reconciled with their Jewishness. As one paratrooper put it, "At the Wall I discovered that I'm a Jew." Yifat's face seems to instantly age—exhausted not only from battle but from encountering his own venerability.

The recovery of Jewish identity was reinforced by the trajectory of the war. The genocidal threats emanating from Arab capitals in May 1967, along with the absence of tangible international support for Israel at its most desperate time, evoked old Jewish fears, even among sabras. At the same time, the diaspora became assertively pro-Israel: Jews around the world suddenly realized how much the existence of a Jewish state meant to them, and how unbearable it would be to live in a world that could tolerate two holocausts in a single generation. The powerful expressions of Jewish solidarity that emerged in Paris, New York, and even Moscow in May and June of 1967 were reciprocated by the paratroopers at the Wall. "How does it happen that paratroopers weep?" asked Haim Hefer in a popular poem he wrote after the battle for Jerusalem. "Perhaps it's because the boys of nineteen who were born with the state / carry on their backs two thousand years."

Perhaps the photograph continues to endure because it caught an even more profound moment in the story of Zionism—the return not only of Jewish identity but of the Jewish God. Judaism posited a daring idea: That God's power and goodness would be revealed not only in the majesty of nature but in the messiness of history—and even more improbably, in Jewish history. The meaning of Jewish history, then, is that history has meaning.

After the Holocaust, though, the notion of a God at once omnipotent and benevolent seemed to many Jews not merely implausible but offensive. In that sense, the Nazis had won a significant victory; discrediting the Jew-

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ish God of history had been a central goal of the Final Solution. The Final Solution was, in a sense, a theological project, an attempt to confirm the ancient pagan taunt against the Jews: “Where is your God?” The Nazis deliberately scheduled *aktionen* for Jewish holidays—commemorations of moments of divine intimacy with Israel—to reinforce the message of the absence of the invisible God of the Jews.

The return of the Jews to Jerusalem challenged, if not negated, the Nazi assault on the God of Israel. History had yielded the moment of consolation that generations of believing Jews had insisted, against all logic, must come. Once again, it was possible for Jews to at least consider that the traditional Jewish view of God may be right after all. The reverence that many Jews felt toward the photograph of the paratroopers was the stunned realization—seemingly reflected in Yitzhak Yifat’s upturned face—that skeptical secularism may not be an adequate way of understanding the Jewish story, that God may be real after all. Not the confirmation of faith, then, but the *possibility* of faith. “We received the Tora at Mount Sinai,” wrote the Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein, “and in Lublin we gave it back.” In Jerusalem, at the Wall, if only for a moment, we considered accepting it again.

As I waited for Yitzhak Yifat to emerge from the locker room of the health club where he had asked me to meet him, I reminded myself not to expect too much from an encounter with Israel’s most mythic image. “He doesn’t have anything interesting to say,” one of his fellow paratroopers had warned me. And in fact, Yifat’s opinions were relentlessly conventional: The Israeli Everyman.

I had sought him out because I had begun working on a book about the paratroopers who reached the Wall on June 7, 1967. In part, the book is a search for that moment of transcendence caught in David Rubinger’s photograph. In seeking out Yifat, I was hoping to discover something of mythic Israel still stirring beneath normalized Israel, some trace of June 1967 in the man who, however accidentally, came to represent that tran-

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scendent moment.

Yifat appeared, sweating, towel around his shoulders. Despite his gray hair, his face had retained its youthful vitality. His nose was flattened at the tip, as if from a boxing mishap. He was shorter than I had expected: In the photograph, shot from below, he and his friends appear towering. We sat on a leather couch near the front desk; New Age music played in the background. From this vantage point, 1967 seemed inaccessible. Normalized Israel had clearly vanquished mythic Israel.

Yifat told me that he wasn't sure what time of day he had arrived at the Wall on June 7, 1967. He recalled the light turning gray, as if, in penetrating the narrow courtyard of the Wall, the rays of the sun had taken on the color of stone. He recalled noting how the stones gradually grew smaller the higher the Wall rose. He recalled a photographer approaching him and several of his friends and taking their picture, but didn't recall what the photographer said to him.

"What were you looking at as you gazed toward the distance?" I asked.

"I don't remember. Maybe a flag."

"What moves me about the photograph is your expression of humility," I said.

"Humility, yes. But mixed with strength."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Jewish history. Judah Macabee and Bar Kochba. And the Holocaust."

The Jews who fought back, and the Jews who had no means of fighting back.

"Did you experience religious feelings?"

"No, I'm totally secular. But"—the symbol of consensus hastily added—"I respect everyone."

Yifat, a gynecologist, recently lost his wife to cancer; he couldn't speak of her without visibly grieving. They had met as university students, working together on a volunteer project to rehabilitate prisoners. At age sixty, he still volunteered for reserve duty, serving in the medical corps. "That's right, every year. I don't see myself as a *freier* [sucker]; I don't know what the word means.

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What, helping make this a better, safer country for your children—that's being a *freiier*? It's a privilege to serve with men who have honor—these are the best people in this society.”

He goes wherever he is invited to speak about that day at the Wall: To elementary school classes, to Israel Bonds dinners. When I'd first called him for an interview, he was overwhelmed with work; but rather than turn me away, he offered to meet me at his home—at 11:30 P.M. He explained that he felt a sense of responsibility to history, even though he didn't particularly enjoy giving interviews.

His is one of the most recognizable faces in the country. He gets spotted on the street and in the supermarket. Patients who discover that he is “the paratrooper who looked up at the Wall,” as the Israeli media refer to him, feel a little more secure entrusting him to deliver their babies. Once, in Rockefeller Center in New York, a woman with numbers on her arm stopped him and asked, “Aren't you the boy from the Wailing Wall?” He relates to fame with bemused detachment. “It could have been anyone in that photograph,” he said to me. “I don't feel in any way that this is about me. It's about my friends, all those who fought.” I asked him whether he had hung the photograph in his home or in his office. “Are you *kidding*?” he replied.

“What does the Wall mean to you today?”

“I'll be honest with you. It was one thing when the Wall was the national symbol. But since it has become a synagogue, I feel less at home there.”

“Have you ever experienced faith?”

“Most definitely not. What God? Where was God when my wife was dying of cancer? We had such a happy marriage. We traveled everywhere together. Everyone loved her. She was such a good person. She only wanted to do good for others.”

A big man with a shaved head and leather jacket passed us, abruptly stopped, pointed: “The Wall?” Yifat nodded without enthusiasm: Caught.

“I'm the chief police detective for the Tel Aviv area,” the man explained. “Lots of people know me. But when I leave this world, no one will remember that I was ever alive. But you will be remembered forever.”

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“I’m going to die just like everyone else,” Yifat said.

“Don’t make fun,” said the detective, mistaking Yifat’s modesty for contempt. “You should appreciate the gift. I’d give anything to be in that picture.”

Afterward, Yifat said to me, laughing, “How do you know I didn’t set that up?”

I asked him about politics, the state of the state, and he condemned corruption and traffic jams. “Whom did you vote for in the last election?” I asked. He held up his hand and said, “I don’t talk about it”—probably the only Israeli I’ve ever met who refused to discuss his political beliefs. Politicians offered him safe seats on their Knesset lists, he said; he always declined. “I have friends among politicians from Left and Right,” he added, careful to maintain balance.

There was nothing left to say; the interview was over. Despite myself, I was disappointed. Only afterward did I realize how easy it was to miss Yifat’s significance. Though Yifat is an exemplar of devotion and sacrifice, we Israelis have taken for granted this good man who grieves for his wife and brings new life into the world, our poster boy whom we display whenever the media need a Six Day War anniversary story and a few banal quotes. And he dutifully complies, without complaint and without pleasure, just as he has continued to serve in the army long after his obligation has lapsed. Conscious of his role as icon, he does his best to represent consensus. He has become our symbol, then, not just by accident but by right: The normal secular Israeli, without faith, whose capacity for service would be considered mythic in more normal nations; proof that the Israeli Everyman can contain our highest expectations of ourselves.

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David Rubinger didn't want to discuss the photograph. Not again, the tone of his voice suggested when I asked him for a meeting. What was left to say that he hadn't already said so many times before? I persisted; reluctantly, he relented.

He suggested we meet in a café in downtown Jerusalem. He arrived late for our meeting and announced that we had fifteen minutes before his next appointment. Fifteen minutes to discuss the return to Jerusalem and the meaning of Jewish history.

Rubinger, about to turn eighty yet still dapper in a goatee, camera hanging from his shoulder, told me something of his biography. He was born in Vienna and, in 1939, moved to Palestine on the Youth Aliya rescue program. He joined the Jewish Brigade, fought against the Nazis, lost his mother in the Holocaust, married a survivor.

He had been in Sinai on June 6, 1967, when he heard rumors that the paratroopers were about to enter the Old City. He tried to get onto an army helicopter transporting wounded soldiers back to Israel, was denied access, and then, just as the helicopter was taking off, leaped on board; he arrived in Jerusalem early in the morning on June 7, then walked through the deserted streets toward the Old City. He came to the Lion's Gate just as the paratroopers began breaking through.

The photograph at the Wall, he said, was hardly his favorite among his work; in terms of composition, he insisted, it wasn't even a particularly good photograph. Initially, he continued, he didn't realize that he had taken a memorable picture. "I came home and told my wife, 'I have a great photo—of Rabbi Goren [chief rabbi of the IDF] blowing a shofar while being held on the shoulders of paratroopers. My wife looked at the contact sheets and said, 'That's your photograph.' I said, 'What, three soldiers standing there?'"

"What did you experience while taking the photograph?" I asked, speaking loudly over an MTV broadcast behind the counter.

"Whatever I felt then is irrelevant now. Today, if I stood bareheaded at the Wall [as I did then], three rabbis would rush to put a cardboard *kipa*

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on my head. Yitzhak Yifat says that he feels the Wall has been taken from him.” The Israel he loved, said Rubinger, began to go wrong with the Six Day War—unleashing messianic hysteria, nationalist arrogance, and clerical rule.

In Rubinger’s detachment from his most famous work was the tragedy of secular detachment from Judaism, the squandering of that moment when all of Israel seemed prepared to accept, on some level, a return to Jewish roots. In Rubinger’s case, the tragedy was compounded: The man who had given the Jewish people one of its most profound contemporary symbols of faith seemed to have lost his love for Judaism because of the consequences of the very event he had helped immortalize.

Despite his ambivalence, I sensed that our conversation remained unfinished. When I called him back and asked for another meeting, he surprised me by inviting me, without hesitation, to his home. Perhaps he too felt the need to express some elusive insight.

Rubinger’s living room was a photographic gallery of his work, a reminder of why he has become our most important visual chronicler: For all his irony and disappointment, he is hopelessly in love with Israel’s story. There, on the wall, were Israel’s defining images: Egyptian President Anwar Sadat whispering to Prime Minister Menachem Begin; Begin tenderly placing a shoe on the foot of his wife, Aliza; a kerchiefed, elderly woman clutching the gravestone of her son who fell in the Yom Kippur War, while her bearded husband sits on the ground beside her, staring blankly; a slumped Golda Meir holding her head on the day her government fell. Crowded among all the other images were Yitzhak Yifat and his friends.

“Which one is your favorite?” I asked him. Wordlessly, he led me into his study and pointed to the lone photograph hanging over his desk. It depicted a blind boy, a new immigrant in the 1950s; wearing a *kova tembel*, the conical kibbutzniks’ hat, his mouth open in wonder, he strokes a relief map of the land of Israel. “I call it, ‘Seeing the Homeland,’” Rubinger explained. For a photographer, blindness holds a special terror; yet this boy, Rubinger was saying, was teaching us that love provided a deeper way of

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seeing than mere physical sight.

“What I love about your photograph at the Wall,” I told Rubinger, “is that it was the image of our highest self, the moment before we fell into gloating in the summer of 1967—the jokes we told about Arab cowardice and the mocking songs we sang about Egyptian leader Gamal Abd al-Nasser and the bullets we wore around our necks.”

“I came from a religious home,” he said. “My father was strictly Sabbath observant. He *davened* in a *shteibl* [Hasidic synagogue]. I used to love cantorial music. But now I wouldn’t listen to it if you paid me. I feel such disgust for the way religion has been abused in this country.

“You know,” he continued, “when I took the photograph, I cried. It was the first and last time that that ever happened to me. I felt something similar when Sadat came off the plane and saluted—but no, it wasn’t the same.”

“You mean not only the paratroopers wept, but the photographer wept too?”

“Everyone was emotional. Michael Elkins [the veteran BBC correspondent and passionate Zionist] stood near me, leaning against the Wall; he wasn’t a religious Jew, but he wept too. Now I cry for the results of the war.”

I asked him to explain how a photographer, who considers himself an onlooker rather than a participant, managed to get so caught up in the event he was recording that his lens had blurred with tears. He said, “I had been to the Wall once before, in 1946. It didn’t make a big emotional impact on me. After 1948, I used to go up to Mount Zion to the Dormition Abbey and try to photograph the Wall from there. But you couldn’t see it. It was farther away than the moon; unlike the Wall, you could see the moon.” The emotion on June 7, then, was partly in response to those years of enforced separation.

And then, of course, there was the victory over Nasser’s genocidal threats. “We all felt tremendous relief. A sense of reprieve. It’s as if you are about to be executed and suddenly, instead, you are crowned king.”

“Did you experience a sense of the transcendent?”

“No, it wasn’t religious.”

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“Some acknowledgment of *netzah Yisrael*—the eternity of Israel?”

“I suppose that once I would have believed in those big words.”

“In your photograph, I see humility and awe.”

“Awe, yes. Humility, no.”

“But look again at the photograph,” I urged the photographer. “This is our moment of greatest victory. And what image emerges? The heroes surrendering to the wall of Jewish defeat.”

“The ‘Wailing Wall,’ we used to call it,” he said. “It took me awhile to get used to calling it the ‘Western Wall’ after ’67.”

He looked up at the photograph hanging on his wall. For a moment it seemed as if his upturned face merged with those of the paratroopers.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, “there is humility in their faces.”

He was silent. “When the state was created in 1948,” he said after awhile, “we felt no sense of God at all. But here, there was *something...*”

The photograph was first published in the newspapers on my fourteenth birthday, and I took its appearance as a personal affirmation. Though I had been raised in an Orthodox home in Boro Park, Brooklyn, I had grown up without faith. My father, a Holocaust survivor, insisted I practice Jewish rituals to “know how to be a Jew among Jews,” as he put it, but God had little to do with our Judaism. The same, I sensed, was true for the survivors who rushed through the prayers in the Hasidic synagogue we attended; for them, as for my father, remaining Orthodox was an expression of loyalty to their martyred families, not to the silent God who had seemingly abandoned them.

Toward the end of June 1967, my father and I flew to Israel. Standing at the Wall, my father suddenly found his lack of faith inadequate. “There is something about this little people that makes no sense,” he said to me. “Who can understand this history?” He meant: In the absence of reason, the presence of God in the Jewish story makes as much sense as his absence. With the magnanimity of a victor of history, my father forgave God. Sud-

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denly, the prayers I had always repeated by rote—“Ingather our exiles from among the nations,” “Return to your city, Jerusalem”—became urgent, messages of prophecy for precisely this moment. Along with my father, I too became open to the possibility of faith.

In 1982, I moved to Israel—in part, a belated response to the summer of 1967.

It was the beginning of the Lebanon War, which soon turned into the anti-Six Day War. The country I joined was, in certain ways, the opposite of the country I first encountered in late June 1967. Then, the entire people of Israel had been united by threat; now, not only had war failed to unite us, but the war itself had become the pretext for deepening our political and cultural schisms. In recent years, the Left-Right divide has eased, as a majority of Israelis have come to realize that both sides were partially right and partially wrong: The Right understands the dangers of permanent occupation and the demographic threat, the Left understands the dangers of a false peace with terrorists. Still, the wounds of our forty-year debate over the future of the territories won in the Six Day War haven’t healed and, for settlers and their supporters, have even intensified in the aftermath of the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

The disappointments that have marked much of Israeli life in the last twenty-five years have culminated in this year of political shame and military defeat. And so, even as we mark the fortieth anniversary of the Six Day War, the mythic lure that first brought me to Israel has largely faded. Every day I drive to work from my home in the French Hill, in northeastern Jerusalem to the other side of the city, along the route where the paratroopers fought in June 1967. Route 1 is built on former no man’s land; Paratrooper Street follows the Old City walls. Yet most mornings I am too preoccupied by traffic, by annoying drivers, and by vague security anxieties that never entirely recede to notice the view outside my window.

Sometimes, though, I catch a glimpse of the sun reflected on the gold dome rising behind the crenulated walls, and I suddenly remember where I

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am. I feel myself, then, like one of those barefoot and wide-eyed Ethiopian immigrants, silently stepping off the plane at Ben-Gurion Airport into Zion. I recall, too, my father's wonder at the Wall, whose fragile and improbable endurance he saw as a metaphor for the Jewish people. Like him, I ask myself what it is about this strange little people that continually finds itself at the center of international attention, repeatedly on the front lines against totalitarian forces of evil—Nazism, Soviet Communism, now jihadism—all of which marked the Jews as their primary obstacle to achieving world domination. At those moments, I feel gratitude for having found my place in this story.

Perhaps I sought out Yitzhak Yifat and David Rubinger to thank them for embodying the moment that eventually brought me here. Perhaps I wanted to thank them for helping me to speak about God without irony, to sense the inexplicable still stirring in Jewish history. Perhaps I wanted to reciprocate and offer them something of the faith that the Six Day War had restored to me—a hard Jewish faith that knows the abyss and denies none of the skeptic's questions but which has emerged from the twentieth century still praising God. But I didn't know what to say to them, because I haven't yet found the words worthy of their gift.

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