

VILÉM FLUSSER The Jewish War.

(A Testimony of Commitment).

The fighting that started on October 6th is, of course, a typical event of the second half of this century, if it were seen from the bird's eye perspective: it is one more of those border clashes through which the two super powers try to define the zone of hegemony with regard to each other. This is why all those not directly involved in it and who are committed against the Soviet form of society must side with Israel, and all those who have some trust left in the Soviet model must side with the Arabs. And this is also why those who believe that the two-power system which structured the post-war situation is now being challenged by some multiple-power system may hope that border clashes like this represent openings for the active intervention by the newly arising powers. If seen thus, from the almost inhuman distance of geopolitics, the fighting, though not very important in itself, may hold dangerous and challenging possibilities for the future. Although, of course, such a perspective of the event is perfectly accessible for every Jew, (as it is for every man), it will not fully satisfy him. He will tend to believe that such a perspective, while revealing very important aspects of the event, will not allow to see its characteristically Jewish aspect. It will not show that this is a "Jewish" war, and, for its being Jewish, it is essentially unlike any other war in similar contexts. He will tend to believe that everything that is Jewish cannot be fully understood through general categories, because "Jewishness" seems to be a species which does not fit well any classification. Now if it were true that the adjective "Jewish" always implies difficulties of classification, (for instance: Jewish religion is unlike religion in general, Jewish people is unlike people in general, Jewish state is unlike state in general), if it were true that the specificity of Jewishness is to be no true species of any given genus, then any generalisation of the Jewish war under the heading "border clashes" will fail to really explain it.

No use of trying to deny it: the believe that to be Jewish is to be something special and not easily generalizable is an important element of Judaism. All efforts to deny this believe amount to a denial of Judaism. The paradox in it is this: if such an effort to deny Jewish specificity is made by Jews, it aims at Jewish "normalisation", which means the disappearance of Judaism. And if it is made by non-Jews, it aims at the acceptance and absorption of the Jews in their context, which also means the disappearance of Judaism. The paradox is that what is "antisemitism" in non-Jews, (acceptance of Jewish specificity), is fidelity to Judaism in Jews, (the same acceptance). The fact of the believe in Jewish specialness seems to divide all those who consider it in two camps: Jewish assimilants and unprejudiced non-Jews on one side, faithful Jews and antisemites on the other. The paradox is resolved if one considers what is meant by "Jewish specialness". Judaism means by this some sort of special and not generalizable obligation toward mankind assumed by every

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true Jew. Antisemitism means by this some sort of biological or cultural characteristic. This resolution of the paradox permits the following consideration:

Jews who try to deny the believe in Jewish specialness do not want to assume the specific obligations it involves. Non-Jews who deny this believe do not see any use for those specific obligations nor for the sufferings it usually brings on the Jews. Jews who accept the believe have no reason to prove its "truth": Jews are not believed to be special in what they are, but in what they ought to do. Antisemites however must prove their belief that Jews are special, and such a proof is of course impossible. Therefore: The Jewish war is seen basically under four perspectives, as far as its "Jewishness" is concerned. Jews who try to deny Jewish specialness must try to see it as if it were like any other war, because, for them, it ought not to be different. Non-Jews who try to deny Jewish specialness really do see it like any other war, because it cannot be different. Antisemites see it as a characteristically Jewish war, because the Jews are different, (more cunning, more calculating, more intelligent, more heroic). But Jews who try to accept Jewish specialness, (and those non-Jews who try to do it in the Jewish meaning, and almost impossible feat), must see it as a challenge to Judaism: namely to do what ought to be done according to the specialness of Judaism.

All this seems to be pretty obvious, but reality does not allow to see it. The Jewish state which is now at war is the result of an attempt to "normalize" Judaism, to deny Jewish specialness, and therefore to refuse the specifically Jewish obligations. Therefore the Israeli establishment and a large part of Israeli population would like to see this war like any other war, and therefore do, not what they ought to do as Jews, but what any other state does. But it feels that it is not like any other state, because to some extent it is still Jewish. It therefore mixes normalcy with specialness which could be called opportunistic, were it not fighting for its survival. The Arab states who fight Israel seem to agree with Israel that this is a normal war, (more or less a war of liberation from Imperialistic oppression), but they feel that there is something special about it, (the Israeli state not being easily classifiable as Imperialistic), and they therefore tend to become antisemitic. The other states involved more or less directly in the conflict try vainly to eliminate the Jewish aspect from it, but cannot, partly because their own history, and partly because Israelis and Arabs do not allow them to forget it. So that the four perspectives under which the war can be seen in its Jewishness are now all mingled. Except for non-Israeli Jews, whose duty is to point to them.

The pure antisemitic perspective should be as follows: the Jews being a special type of man, this war is a further proof that wherever they are and in whatever social organisation they appear, they cannot be assimilated. Therefore the context, (the Arabs), is trying to eliminate them. But since the

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Jews claim not to be special in this particular instance, (they claim to constitute a state like any other), this war is also a proof that any Jewish disclaim of specialness is a ruse, (the state of Israel not being a state, but a position conquered and expanded of international Jewry). The antisemitic perspective starts from a factually wrong position, and does not give therefore a true view of the war, but it is a very widely held perspective, (by Jews as well as non-Jews). (Jews holding that they are factually a special sort being antisemites in this sense of the term.)

The pure assimilatory perspective should be as follows: The Jews are fighting this war in order to impose on their context the fact that they are like any other nation. This the context tries to deny, because it is antisemitic. It is necessary to win the war, to establish strong frontiers, and then negotiate a settlement with the Arabs, under which the Israeli state might continue to grow and prosper. It is in this sense that Israel is seen to be fighting for its survival. (This is the perspective of the Israeli establishment, if purified from the Jewish elements that still adhere to it.)

The pure absorbtive perspective should be as follows: The Jews have nothing to do with this war, since it is a fight between local populations that are being manipulated by the great powers. The fact that one side in the fight is of Jewish origin does not matter to Jews abroad, because it is a population which claims to be a Near Eastern nation like all the others, whilst the Jews abroad are in a process of absorption into their various contexts. (This is the perspective of the Soviet establishment if purified from the antisemitic elements that still adhere to it.)

The purely Jewish perspective should be as follows: To be Jewish is to assume special obligations toward mankind, and these obligations have to do with justice. The special obligations may have a transcendental or an immanent explanation, but history seems to point to the fact that Jews have very often assumed it, and very often failed to assume it. This is why Jewish history is different from the history of any other group of persons. The history of the sgate of Israel is, both for internal and external reasons, a case of failure of assumption of these special obligations. The present war is both a consequence of that failure, and an opportunity to assume the obligations. This perspective requires some elaboration.

Had the Israeli state assumed its Jewishness, it would have assumed itself as a model for individual and social behavior in the future. As did all truly Jewish experiments of the past, (Biblical Judaism, original Christianity, Spinozism, Marxism, structuralism and so forth). This means that it would have assumed itself to be a model for the liberation of the so-called "Third world", (as for instance Christianity was a model ffr the liberation of the slaves, and marxism for the liberation of the workers). It failed to do so, (except for small experiments like the kibbuzim), and therefore it is coru

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rectly being excluded from all Third-world attempts at liberation and attacked by those who advocate it. This is an "explanation" of the present war, and it means that Israel is being attacked because it has concentrated its energies and imagination, not to assuming a modelar place within the third world, but to impose its alienating presence on the third world. It has failed in political, social and religious imagination, which means that it has failed to be Jewish. But this war may open new prospects. It may create a revolution in Israeli conscience, (and in Jewish conscience abroad), in the sense of an assumption of Jewish obligations. What seems to be needed now is not more generals, or traditional politicians, but more truly political, social and religious thinkers. Not one or two more military victories, but new ideas and visions of a future third-world society for which Israel and the Jews abroad should be spokesmen. In short: what is needed is not an enforcement of the will of Israeli establishment on Arab establishments, but a true and open understanding of and collaboration with Arab oppressed masses and oppressed masses in the third world.

Under this perspective the present war can have only two issues. Either it will lead to some sort of political settlement between the Israeli and Arab establishments, or it will lead to a radical change in Israeli conscience and its becoming truly Jewish. In the first case the war is of no great consequence, just like any other border conflict, unless it endanger the balance between the great powers. Israel will in fact become one more near Eastern state under American hegemony, and wider or narrower frontiers of it will be of no consequence, as will be further wars or a settlement of the Korea and Vietnam type. In the second case it might become the starting point of a new phase in the fight of the third world against power dominance, which means a new phase in the history of Judaism. Although there seem to be very few symptoms at present that would point to the second alternative, it is this to which he who assumes himself to be Jewish should be committed. He should try to stand above the events, not in the unhuman geopolitical distance, but in a distance that permits him to commit himself to his specifically Jewish obligation. One hopes and waits anxiously to see such commitments to manifest themselves, (in the form of contacts with Arab masses or any other form), and one hopes and waits anxiously that such manifestations should cancel out some of the chauvinistic exaggerations now being broadcast. This hope is not utopic, because Jewishness has had a way, in the past, to manifest itself in very adverse situations.