

The commander who ignored Military Intelligence — and saved his troops

Ofer Aderet

On October 3, 1973, Lt. Col. Shlomo (Moni) Nitzani, commander of the 79th Armored Corps Battalion, assembled his soldiers in the Shekem commissary at the Rephidim base in Sinai. He began with an update on the alert that had been declared in the sector following an extensive military exercise being carried out by the Egyptian army. Toward the end of his remarks, he dropped a bomb: "I believe this is going to become a war, and therefore we will prepare accordingly."

He was right, but in real time, the assessment of the situation that Nitzani shared with his soldiers was contrary to that of the top brass. In a discussion at the General Staff held on October 5, 1973, the transcript of which was published this week by the Israel Defense Forces and Defense Establishment Archives, Military Intelligence head Eli Zeira thought that the likelihood of war "was still very low, even lower than low." Chief of Staff David Elazar accepted this assessment and noted that he saw "the danger of a war breaking out as less likely than the danger of a war not breaking out."

However, Lt. Col. Nitzani from Moshav Kfar Hittim, who had received the Medal of Valor (the highest decoration awarded by the IDF) in the 1956 Sinai Campaign, refused to go with the flow. "He acted contrary to all the powers in the division and the brigade," says Dr. Ofer Drori, who at age 19 was one of Nitzani's soldiers in the armored infantry company of the battalion.

After the briefing the soldiers hastened to implement the battalion commander's orders: They took all the heavy vehicles out of the camp and deployed them under camouflage nets on open ground far from the base. "We climbed into the tanks and the armored personnel carriers, we went out

into the field and we spread camouflage nets. We acted as though we were in the midst of a war," said Drori.

Initially, he recalls, the soldiers grumbled about what they saw as the battalion commander's caprice. "I remember it as though it were yesterday," he says. "We were really dejected by this story, like any soldier whose furlough is cancelled." After the IDF's victory in the Six-Day War and the feeling of invincibility that had engendered in the army, "we didn't think there was any justification for us hiding under camouflage nets in Sinai. We saw the Egyptian planes through the netting. Thanks to the full alert Nitzani had declared, they dropped their bombs on an empty camp." To this day, Drori is profoundly grateful to Nitzani. "I think we were the only battalion in Sinai that didn't have any casualties from that attack. It could be said that he saved lives right in the very first moments of the war."

In a 2011 interview with the local newspaper Zman Haifa, Nitzani himself commented on this with his characteristic modesty: "It could well be that this is the reason my battalion wasn't hurt right at the outbreak of the war, which to our regret is what happened to others."

One step ahead

Shortly thereafter the situation changed. "It was clear to me that we were going into something a lot bigger than us," Nitzani told Channel 1 Television in 2003. On Sunday, October 7, 1973, after 24 hours of nonstop fighting, Nitzani was gravely wounded in the head by shrapnel during the holding action.

The battalion, which had suffered additional casualties and losses, continued to fight while Nitzani was evacuated and went into surgery at a hospital behind the lines. "This is where my second war began," he said lat-



Col. Nitzani, left, with his troops in 1973.

Rami Shilush

er, speaking of the lengthy rehabilitation process and the physical and psychological scars he bore for the rest of his life. "A lifelong war" was the headline of the report about him by Renan Shor that was published in the military magazine Bahane 15 years later.

The injury disabled him for life. He suffered from sudden bouts of anger and drop attacks, and dealt with health, family and economic problems for many years. His wife, Zohar, died young of an illness. Their young son, Michael, who was born after the Yom Kippur War,

suffered from brain damage and a few years ago he too passed away.

Years later, when Drori heard of Nitzani's distress, he contacted his former commander and mobilized buddies from the 79th battalion to help him. When they met with Nitzani, Drori asked the \$64,000 question: How did he see what was coming in 1973? Nitzani answered: "I raised my binoculars and I saw the whole Egyptian army on the bank of the canal."

"He didn't rely on Military Intelligence research and all kinds of assessments,

but rather did the most elementary thing, and from that derived his own assessment of the situation," says Drori. And thus, while in the IDF they believed the Egyptian army was carrying out training maneuvers, Nitzani saw one step ahead. In this sense, says Drori, "He was unique: He made an assessment and took action."

After the war Nitzani was awarded the Medal of Distinguished Service. The citation stated: "The force under his command carried out repeated attacks... and thus hindered and halted the Egyptian effort to cross the Canal."

Moreover, "The number of casualties in the force was large. Lt. Col. Shlomo Nitzani personally saw to rescuing the casualties despite the enemy's heavy barrage of fire. He was gravely wounded during the holding actions. His leadership skill, his staunchness, his courage and his level-headedness instilled confidence in his soldiers and strengthened their spirits."

This decoration, as noted, joined the decoration Nitzani was awarded for his part in the battle of the Mitla pass in the Sinai Campaign. There he rescued the wounded under heavy fire, operated weapons that had been in the hands of the wounded and thereby succeeded in silencing the enemy position. "Through this action he saved the lives of wounded men and the lives of soldiers in his unit," stated the citation.

Nitzani was one of only two soldiers ever to have been awarded both the Medal of Valor and the Medal of Distinguished Service. The other was Avigdor Kahalani, who later entered politics and became a member of the Knesset and minister of internal security.

"Moni's story is not well known to the general public, and he was not bathed in glory like others were because he wasn't a man who talked a lot," says Drori, now 64. He is a lieutenant colonel in the reserves and a specialist in information systems who established the website called Hagvura (Heroism), a comprehensive data base of Israel's heroes.

Nitzani, who married again, died on October 6, 2012, the anniversary of the war, at the age of 76. In his eulogy, Maj. Gen. Amnon Reshef (res.), the commander of the 14th Brigade, to which Nitzani's battalion was seconded during the course of the war, said: "It is impossible to talk about Moni without mentioning his sufferings. His story is an Israeli version of the Book of Job."

Israel probing conduct of PM spokesman Keyes

Tali Heruti-Sover

The Civil Service Commission has started examining allegations of sexual harassment by the spokesman of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, David Keyes.

They will examine whether there were any allegations made by women against Keyes while he was enlisted in the civil service. Keyes has denied the allegations and says he plans to fight to clear his name.

"We are working to check whether there are allegations of similar events even after Keyes became a public servant," the commission said. "If such cases

are found, they will be examined from a disciplinary point of view."

Nonetheless, the commission said in a statement that if the incidents described in testimonies against the spokesman occurred while he lived in the U.S. and predated his service, "these matters are not within the jurisdiction of the Civil Service Commission and it is correct that they be clarified in the United States and in accordance with the laws that apply there."

Keyes has been accused of sexual impropriety by 14 women, including politician Julia Salazar and Wall Street Journal reporter Shayndi Raice.

A request to God

Opinion Amira Hass

On the eve of Yom Kippur, the Pavlovian question of an ordinary atheist is: How do the judges who approved the demolition of a Bedouin village, along with the senior officials of the Civil Administration who are supervising it, reconcile this with fasting and asking forgiveness? Is there a pinch of regret when the stomach rumbles? A flash of embarrassment over the hypocrisy and cynicism when you pull on your non-leather shoes? A little shame when you chant "we have trespassed," and when you get to "we robbed," "we have done violence," "we coveted" and we "spoke deceitfully"?

Just asking this question shows how strong the indoctrination is to assume that a person of faith is more ethical than one who doesn't believe in God, that a person of faith is more attentive to questions of morality and justice toward human beings, no less so than he observes the commandments, from the smallest to the greatest. In this atheist's question hides the silly expectation that Agriculture

Minister Uri Ariel and Supreme Court Justice Noam Solberg, for example, both kippa-wearing settlers, will be hard on themselves on the day Jews consider the most sacred, and unlike Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, the secular settler, and will be embarrassed over the hypothetical gap between their Jewish faith and their role in promoting expulsion of Palestinians.

Ariel is one of the ideologues of the Israeli religion of expulsion, and he shares this religion with both secular and religious people. The expulsion of the residents of the Latrun enclave in 1967 and the destruction of their villages (Amwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba) was carried out by secular commanders. Justice Aharon Barak, who is so excoriated by Ariel's party colleagues and identified in the eyes of many others with the "Ashkenazi secular elite," forged the interpretation of the regulations on entry to Israel, allowing the deportation of Palestinian Jerusalemites from the city of their birth and thus from Israel.

The demonstrators in Afula, who protested against Arab citizens moving to apartments for which they paid good money, are religious and secular Jews. Those who did not allow the inhabitants of Ikrit and Biram to return to their land, despite a High Court ruling and the promises of politicians, were secular. The secular kibbutzim benefit from the land of those who were expelled and fled in 1948, and barred from returning. The Israeli religion of expulsion is pluralistic, its umbrella is broad and it includes both consumers of non-kosher food and kissers of mezuzahs.

We've now gotten used to kippa-wearers, their ritual fringes dangling, throwing rocks at Palestinians or shooting them on the sacred Sabbath, or attacking Ta'ayush activists and injuring them with a holy passion. The question of whether they realize they are breaking the Sabbath laws is no more legitimate than the other question, which is: When their acts of violence allow them to steal more Palestinian land, do they know they are breaking one of the Ten Commandments on how to treat the other? They know very

well. And they don't care, because the establishment is with them and is assisted by them: police, judges, rabbis, army commanders, senior officials and the Education Ministry.

As Israeli law does not allow one to call for a boycott and sanctions against the state that harms its subjects and plans new expulsions, we can only turn to God — existent or not — and propose that He reject requests for forgiveness from some kinds of Israelis: prime ministers and defense ministers, bombers and those who give the orders to bomb buildings with residents still inside, architects who paved the way for pushing the Palestinians into crowded enclaves (on both sides of the Green Line), soldiers who do not refuse but snipe at unarmed protesters, administrators in the Civil Administration who approve house demolitions, officials in the Finance Ministry who approve discriminatory budgets, rabbis who incite others and police investigators who can't find pogromchiks and Jews who incite to violence. In the absence of hope, a little faith in a courageous decision by God couldn't hurt.

Otherwise Occupied Amira Hass

Seriously, Jewish leftists, don't make aliyah

For a moment I was concerned: Haaretz's lead editorial on Friday "snatched" the headline I had planned for this column, with a slight difference: "Leftists, don't immigrate," it said, while I had made do with "don't make aliyah." A quick jump to the end of the editorial reassured me. My colleagues were being ironic, while I am seriously asking leftists not to immigrate. Don't take advantage of your privilege, which allows you to become citizens in one day and thus join the master people. Even if the day after your arrive you join intense leftist activities, you won't be able to mitigate your collaboration with the regime of theft and expulsion that is inherent in your move.

I have much sympathy for the young Jews living in the "diaspora" who are involved in political and public activity against Israel's occupation policy and its apartheid characteristics. Many of them visit this country (Israel and some places in the West Bank) to see for themselves settler colonialism in action, and then they return to their countries and report, protest and organize. I also admire the tie they forge to their Jewish identity: their desire to know their families' and communities' special history; their pride in the universal, humanistic elements that they have no trouble finding in Jewish writings; the tradition of criticizing authority and asking questions, which can also be learned from Jewish heritage and from history; the attention they pay to undercurrents and overt expressions of racism toward Jews in the countries where they live.

Over the years I have met a number of groups like these in Israel and abroad. In one country, one such meeting was almost clandestine: the young people, members of a Zionist youth group, were afraid that an open meeting would push them even further to the margins of the Jewish community. Their concern was enough for me to realize the extent of the pressure they are under not to deviate from the official line, which supports the occupation. In another country, older people were the ones to organize the meeting, but in a private home. If I understood correctly, they believed that a public meeting would expose them and perhaps their families (among them some young people) to needless, tiring debates with members of official community institutions.

The young Jews I met in Israel had returned from tours of areas where the Israeli military controlled the lives of Palestinians. In a week or two they had gotten to know the situation better than many Israelis their

age who "know" it from their military service and from the deficient Israeli media reports. They always visit the Old City of Hebron and are shocked. Everything they thought they knew about Jews and Judaism is blown to smithereens. Hebron holds within it, as in a nutshell, all the sadistic characteristics and skills we have taken on as abusive foreign rulers and the dreams of expulsion fostered secretly and publicly.

In all my meetings with these exciting young people, I ask them not to immigrate to Israel. I'm happy to say that they usually reassure me they don't intend to do so. But there are always a few who are sure they'll be able to have a positive impact and contribute to the struggle. To them I say: You're wrong. From the water you drink, to the beach you enjoy, when you pop over for your brother's or your cousin's bar mitzvah back home, and on to the subsidized apartment you'll get in Jerusalem or Ra'anana, you're choosing to be superior, and that is patently immoral.

You won't be able to mitigate your collaboration with the regime of theft and expulsion.

Palestinians sometimes angrily ask me: If you're such a leftist and against the occupation, why don't you leave the country? Sometimes I argue with them and sometimes there's no point. But in contrast to the Jewish leftists, we were born here, we have no choice. We have no other language or country, not even Berlin. And by the way, emigration takes advantage of our privileges as belonging to some sort of international mutation of a white elite: Israeli Jews can easily emigrate to Europe or the United States and former colonialist countries, and be accepted there, more so than Palestinians, whose horizons in their own homeland — both material and psychological — Israel has blocked.

Israel has crossed all possible lines of repair from within. If you immigrate here, you are contributing to the illusion of normalcy that Israel seeks to project domestically and abroad. Your place, Jewish leftists, is in your communities abroad. There you can make clear that Israel has not given up its colonial project and abuses its Palestinian inhabitants (citizens and subjects). There, you can warn that Israel is a dangerous country and find an attentive ear. If you immigrate, you will normalize the expulsion and the danger.



Khan al Ahmar this week.

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MOSSAD

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to the source, this would have an influence in Egypt." Professor Uri Bar Joseph of the University of Haifa feels there was no significance to the theoretical discussion about whether to publish this warning or not. "My impression is that Zvika Zamir, for all sorts of reasons, was looking for a way out of a helpless, difficult situation in which we were caught off guard," Bar Joseph says. "In effect I don't think it held much water... perhaps it may have

helped had Israel published something beforehand. But I find it hard to believe that a report by the BBC would have substantially changed an Egyptian-Syrian decision to go to war."

The five-page cable completely altered intelligence assessment of the situation. Until then the IDF believed there was a "low possibility" of a war breaking out. Now they understood that there was great certainty of a war, which broke out later that day. Freddy Eini, the head of the Mossad bureau, moved this cable to Yisrael Leor, Meir's military adviser, and showed it to her a few hours before the attacks started. The second page contains

a note from Meir's adviser: "Please note that the material points clearly to the source, hence the caution."

The Mossad chief writes in point 14 of the subsequent pages of the document: "The source assesses there are '99 percent chances' the attack will begin on October 6, one percent he leaves for the chance that the president can have second thoughts even while 'his finger is on the button.'" According to the source, Sadat thinks he can surprise us. The source thinks the president has gone too far this time on the matter of war."

On the eve of his departure for the meeting with the source in London, Zamir told

the head of military intelligence Eli Zeira that the fact they were holding a meeting meant a war alert, even before he knew what he would hear. "I telephoned Zeira on Thursday at 2 A.M. and told him, 'listen, I received information from Freddy by phone that the source wants to see me on the issue — that's code for war,'" the Agranat Commission which investigated the war's failures quoted Zamir as saying.

After the meeting in London, Zamir telephoned a war alert to his office using a predetermined code. He then also sent a cable which reached the nation's leaders a few hours before the war broke out.