



Survival of a Nation

Exploring Israel through the Lens of the Six-Day War

A new six-session course from the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute

■ COURSE RATIONALE

In the spring of 1967, a mere nineteen years after gaining independence, the Jewish state appeared to be in mortal danger; its terrified population faced the prospect of a second holocaust.

Egypt led a military buildup and propaganda war against its Israeli neighbor. Its leader, President Gamal Abdel Nasser, declared his intention to lead the Arab attack and "push the Jews into the Sea," but on June 5, Israel launched a preemptive strike against Egypt. Jordan and Syria quickly entered the fray—leaving the Jewish state battling three nations on three fronts, with several other Arab nations lending military support to Israel's foes. In six short days, the hostilities ended. Israel had scored a crushing victory over its adversaries. In the interim, Israel tripled its size, having conquered the Sinai Desert, Gaza, the Golan Heights, Judea and Samaria, and the hallowed Old City of Jerusalem. Israel also found itself with about one million Arabs under its control, leading to considerable moral and political complications that persist until this day.

The Six-Day War permanently changed the landscape of Israel and world Jewry—its identity, its political discourse, and its view of its position in the family of nations.

To mark the war's fiftieth anniversary, the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute (JLI) has produced a comprehensive six-week course, *Survival of a Nation*. This course investigates the momentous—indeed historic—implications of the events that led up to the war, the war itself, and its aftermath. The goal of this in-depth evaluation is to determine the ways in which the lessons gleaned from the Six-Day War continue to be relevant, and how the pertinent dilemmas it generated might be effectively tackled.

Survival of a Nation addresses the social, political, and religious issues with which modern Israel grapples, and attempts to provide both clarity and an array of viewpoints. It discovers that many of

the major dilemmas that faced Israel fifty years ago have not disappeared, though some have morphed into new forms. *Survival of a Nation* provides an opportunity for contextualization and clarification of modern Israel and its challenges.

■ COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To cultivate a deeper sense of personal identification with the Land of Israel and its citizens. Numerous studies have indicated that identification with Israel is on the decline in the Diaspora; *Survival of a Nation* attempts to reverse that tide by igniting a sense of genuine affiliation with the Jewish homeland.
2. To provide a platform to discuss and debate a wide variety of issues that Israel contends with today. In an era of Twitter feeds, complex and nuanced issues are often simplistically reduced. *Survival of a Nation* provides well-researched and ample materials—allowing the students to form knowledgeable opinions.

■ LESSON ONE

Our Connection to the Land

The stated goal of Egyptian President Nasser was the utter annihilation of Israel. He and many others in the Arab world insisted that Israel had no right to exist, and that Israel's Jewish inhabitants were occupying lands stolen from Arabs.

What is Israel's right to exist? The last Jewish state existed in the region some two millennia ago, and although Jews throughout the ages have yearned to return to their Holy Land, what is the strong association between a particular territory and Judaism—a religion of beliefs and ideas? This lesson explores why Israel is important to Jews today, addressing this topic from both the religious as well as pragmatic perspectives.

■ LESSON TWO

If and When to Strike

Israel faced immense international pressure in advance of the war, and it received worldwide censure in its wake. What are the ethics of preemptive strikes? What are the Jewish perspectives on starting a war, and when is war sanctioned or required? To what extent should we recognize political considerations—or should we only consider military ones—as a factor in such decisions?

Israel faces similar deliberations today as it did in 1967. It faces a host of mortal threats, from Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and others. This lesson provides Jewish perspectives on preemptive strikes, and delves into a variety of ethical war-related deliberations, such as collateral damage.

■ LESSON THREE

Jerusalem of Gold

A consequence of the Six-Day War was Israel's acquisition of the Old City of Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount and the Western Wall. Jerusalem is of immense historical, cultural, and spiritual import. According to historians, Israel had no intention or even interest in capturing Jerusalem, due to its political sensitivity, until the realities of war resulted in a change of plan. The global Jewish spiritual awakening that followed the war was largely triggered by the reclamation of Judaism's holiest site.

This lesson discusses the history and significance of Jerusalem, along with the controversy surrounding its disputed status as Israel's capital. The lesson examines the Temple Mount and the Western Wall, and the allure it holds for its millions of annual visitors.

■ LESSON FOUR

Familiar Territory

Israel's victory in the Six-Day War led to the conquering of the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and Judea and Samaria.

Immediately following the war, the Israeli cabinet approved offering all the territories won in battle back to Egypt and Syria in exchange for peace. Abba Eban famously wrote, "This is the first war in history which has ended with the victors suing for peace, and the vanquished calling for unconditional surrender." The original Israeli overture was met with rejection, and numerous subsequent attempts at "land for peace" have yet to resolve this thorny issue. This has recently given rise to the global BDS movement that seeks to use diplomatic and financial means to pressure Israel to come to the negotiating table.

This lesson discusses contemporary Jewish perspectives on these territories: Should Israel hold on to them regardless of the cost? Is there a way to trade land to achieve a lasting and sustainable peace? The lesson also discusses the related theme of displaced Palestinians refugees who seek to return to their ancestral homes.

■ LESSON FIVE

Responses to the War

The Six-Day War had a profound and instant impact on Jews around the world. The remarkable victory raised the morale of Soviet Jewry and brought a surge of pride to Jewish America. Many Jews immigrated to Israel, while countless others experienced a spiritual reawakening.

Eventually, the dust settled to reveal extreme diversity in perspective and reaction to the war. Some saw it as a miracle of biblical proportions; for others, it was a chain of fortuitous events. Some experienced relief, while others were plagued by guilt. It was an act of Satan in the eyes of extreme anti-Zionist religious groups, but the beginning of the realization of the messianic dream in the view of religious Zionists.

This lesson explores the varied responses to the war and the manner in which these perspectives continue to influence Israel's political process as well as its relationship with the Diaspora.

■ LESSON SIX

Israel and the Nations

One of Israel's largest dilemmas—even before the Six-Day War, but especially in its aftermath—is its stance toward an often-hostile international community. Israel receives almost constant coverage in international media and foreign forums, greatly disproportionate to its geographical and population size, and the majority of this coverage is uncomplimentary. This lesson explores the roots of anti-Zionism and antisemitism and examines various means of countering these phenomena.

This lesson also surveys Israel's impressive contributions to humanity in the areas of human rights, technological and scientific advancements, and ethical and moral standards.