

Speech by Israeli Prime Minister Begin to the Knesset (20 November 1977)

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(L-R) Prime Minister Begin, President Sadat, Knesset Speaker Yitzhak Shamir, and Israeli

President Ephraim Katzir pictured during Begin's Address. Photo: Public Domain.

Israel Does not Wish to Rule and does not want to Disturb or Divide

Mr. President of Egypt, ladies and gentlemen, members of the Knesset.

Our blessing is sent to the President and to all members of the Islamic faith, in our land and everywhere, on the occasion of this special holiday of the sacrifice.

This holiday reminds us of the sacrifice. This was the first test that the Lord, the Lord of the Lord, placed our father, our joint father, in his faith and Abraham passed this test.

From the point of view of the advancement of mankind, this was forbidden to sacrifice a human being. Our ancient tradition had taught this forbidden practice and to the nations around us, who were in the habit of sacrificing human beings to their gods, and so the nation of Israel and the nation of the Arabs contributed to the advancement of mankind and so do we continue to contribute to human culture until this day.

Bless the President of Egypt

I bless the President of Egypt and his coming to our country and to his participation in this meeting of the Knesset.

The time of the flight between Cairo and Jerusalem is short. But the distance between them was, until yesterday, quite large.

President Sadat passed this great distance with courage, heartfelt courage. We the Jews, know how to appreciate this courage of heart and know how to assess it with our guest. For with a courageous heart we were created and with a courageous heart we will live.

Mr. Chairman, this small nation, the remnants of the destruction of the Jewish nation that has returned to our historical homeland, always wanted peace.

Thoughts of Redemption

And when we thought of our redemption, and independence arose, on the 15th of May, 1948, with the proclamation of independence and our state of independence, said Mr. Ben-Gurion:

We stretch out a hand of peace to our neighbors and to all the nations that are our neighbors and to the English, and call upon them to cooperate in joint mutual cooperation with the independent Jewish nation in our land... A year before that, in the days of the underground, when we stood in the battle for the redemption of the country and of the nation, we showed our neighbors and made clear to them in this tone of language: In this land we shall live together and we shall progress together for-lives-of freedom and wealth. Our Arab neighbors, don't turn down this hand that is stretched to you in peace.

But it is my obligation, Mr. Chairman, not only my privilege, to decide today and to declare today, according to the truth, our hand that was stretched out for peace was not accepted.

And one day after the arrival of our independence, according to our right that cannot be denied or cannot be discussed, we were attacked on three fronts.

Understand, almost without reference, a few against the many, weak against the strong, that we stood in this test, one day after the proclamation of independence, to choke and destroy the birth and to call an end to the last hope of the Jewish nation in the century of destruction and of redemption.

No, we do not believe in might and we never based our relationship for the Arab nation of strength. The opposite, the strength worked against us.

In all the days of this generation we did not stop in order to stand against the strength that was stretched out to destroy us and destroy our independence in order to destroy our rights.

We Defended Ourselves

We defended ourselves -- correct. We fought and protected our right, our honor, our women and children against a repeated test to bring against us the strength, not only on one front, but two.

With the help of the Lord, we succeeded in overcoming the attacking forces and we guaranteed the independence of our nation not only for this generation but for coming generations.

We do not believe in might. We believe in right -- only in right. And, therefore, our hope from the depths of our heart, from then and always, and to this very day, it is for peace.

Mr. President, Mr. President of Egypt, in this democratic house sit the commanders of all of the Jewish underground that fought, and they were required to fight against a worldwide power. And sit here, the electors of ours, despite the fact that forces were raised against them because they defended their rights.

Different Viewpoints

They belong to various parties, they have different viewpoints. But I am sure, Mr. President, that I will express the viewpoint of all of them, without any exception, that we have one hope belonging in our heart, one will in our spirit -- in our soul.

And all of us are united in this one hope and longing to have peace -- peace for our nation that has not known peace even one day from the time we started to come back to Zion.

And peace for our neighbors, that we wish them all good and we believe that if we do make peace, a true peace, we shall be able to help one another in order to enrich life and to open a new epic period in the history of the Middle East. A period of growth, of development. Growth as it was in days of old.

Therefore permit me today to indicate what is the schedule for peace according to our understanding.

We seek peace, a full peace, true peace, with true reconciliation between the Jewish nation and the Arab nation.

Not to remember about the...what has happened in the past. There was much blood spilled. Many wonderful, young members of the generation fell on both sides. We, all our days, shall remember our heroes who sacrificed their lives in order that the day may arrive, and this day shall arrive. And we honor the courageousness, and we give honor to all members of the younger generation that too fell.

Not to remember the past even if they are difficult but to be concerned with the future, to our children, to our joint future, because we shall live in this region all together for generations to come. The great Arab nation in its states and its lands and the Jewish nation in its land, Herod's Israel.

Therefore one has to establish what is the schedule for peace. Let us continue a dialogue and negotiations, Mr. President, on a treaty of peace and with the help of God, so we believe with the true faith, the day will come and we shall achieve this with joint mutual respect. And then we shall know that instead of the wars we have stretched out a hand, one to another, and we shall grasp the hand of one another. The future will be bright for all nations of this region.

End to State of War

The first wisdom in the schedule of peace is the ending of the state of war. I agree, Mr. President, that you didn't come and we didn't invite you in order, as it was accepted in the past few days, in order to establish a treaty with the nations of the Arabs.

Israel does not wish to rule and does not want to disturb or divide. We are looking for peace with all our neighbors, with Egypt, with Jordan, with Syria, with Lebanon.

We wish to have negotiations for a peace treaty...

[At this point there was an interruption from the door.]

Mr. President, my parliamentary colleague of the Communist Party is interrupting me, but I am glad at this price, he didn't interrupt you.

First Paragraph of Treaty

And there is no reason to distinguish between a treaty of peace and end of belligerency. We do not suggest this. On the contrary, the first paragraph in a peace treaty is the cessation of hostilities.

We wish to establish normal relations between us, as they exist between all the nations, even after many wars.

We learned from history, Mr. President, that war can be prevented. Peace does not have to be prevented. Many nations have had wars between them, and even on occasion have used terms such as eternal enemies. After every war comes the peace.

And therefore we seek to establish in a treaty of peace diplomatic relations between the nations. Today, two flags are flying in Jerusalem -- the Egyptian flag and the Israeli flag -- and we saw together, Mr. President, our small children who were carrying both flags.

Waving Two Flags

Let us sign a treaty of peace and establish such a situation forever also in Jerusalem and also in Cairo. And I hope and pray that the day will come when the Egyptian children will also be waving the Israeli and Egyptian flags as the children of Israel were waving in Jerusalem these two flags today.

And you, Mr. President, will have an ambassador in our capital and we will have an ambassador in Cairo. And we will even have differences between us. We will discuss them like cultured nations through our accredited representatives.

We propose joint economic cooperation to develop our countries. In the Middle East there are many wonderful countries. The Lord so created them. There are oases and deserts, and it is possible to change the deserts. Let us cooperate together in this area. Let us develop our countries. Let us raise our nations to the high level of a developed country and let the world not call us developing countries.

And with all respect I am prepared to endorse the words of His Excellency, the King of Morocco, who said publicly that when the peace will come to the Middle East, the cooperation of the Arab genius and the Jewish genius together will change this region into a Garden of Eden.

Open to all Egyptians

Let us open our countries to free passage. Come you to us and we shall visit with you. I am prepared to announce, Mr. Chairman, today that our country is open for all citizens of Egypt. And I do not have this depend on any condition. I think it is only right that there should be a joint announcement in this case. That just as there are Egyptian flags in our area, and today an honored

delegation in our capital and in our country, may the visitors be many. Our borders will be open in front of them. And all other borders, we wish, in the north and in the south and in the east.

And, therefore, I renew my invitation to the President of Syria to follow in your footsteps, Mr. President, to come to us in order to open negotiations for purposes of peace between Israel and Syria and the signing of a peace agreement between them.

I'm sorry to say there is no justification for the poison that comes from our northern border. Let us change and have such visits and such ties. And visits and events such as that can take place, there can be days of happiness, days of raising the spirit for all nations.

I invite King Hussein to visit us and to discuss with us on all the problems that require discussions between him and us.

And also the legitimate spokesman of the Arabs of Israel, I invite them to come and meet with us for discussions on our joint policies, on justice, on social justice, on peace, on joint mutual respect.

[Other translations indicated that in the preceding paragraph, Mr. Begin referred to "Palestinian Arabs."]

And if they invite us to come to their capitals, we shall answer their invitations. And if they invite us to open negotiations in Damascus and in Amman and in Beirut, in any one of these capitals, we shall go to any of these capitals in order to discuss with them.

We do not want to separate or divide. We want a true peace with all of our neighbors, to be expressed in treaties of peace, on all of the points that I just mentioned.

Mr. Chairman, it is my obligation today to tell our guest, and the ears of all those nations who are watching and listening to us today, of the ties between our Jewish nation and this land. The President referred to the Balfour Declaration. No, my Mr. President, we did not take strange land, we returned to our homeland. The tie between our nation and this land is eternal.

Dim Days of History

It began in the dim days of ancient history. It had never been cut. In this land we created our culture, here our prophets prophesied, as you briefly heard. Here the kings of Judah and Israel ruled. Here we became a nation. Here we established our kingdoms. And when we were exiled from our land because of the force that was applied against us, and when we were thrust far from our land we never forgot this land, even for one day. We prayed for her. We longed for her.

We believed in our return from the day on which the words were said, in the words of the Psalmist: When the Lord returned the captivity of Zion, we were as dreamers. Then will our lips be filled with song. And that song applied to all of our exiles and of all of our travels -- the consolation of returning to Zion that would come.

The right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration and was embodied in the League of Nations Mandate. And the introduction to that international document read: "Whereas recognition has thereby been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine, and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country."

The historical connection between the Jewish nation and Palestine known in Hebrew as "Eretz Israel" has been renewed again.

In 1912 and 1919 we also received the recognition of the spokesman of the Arab nation. And in an agreement in January 1919, that was signed by Emir Faisal and Dr. Chaim Weizmann, it was said: "Mindful of the racial kinship and ancient bonds existing between the Arabs and the Jewish people, and realizing that the surest means of working out the consummation of their national aspirations is the closest possible collaboration in the development of the Arab state and of Palestine."

Cooperation with Eretz Israel

And afterward come all of the paragraphs relating to cooperation between the Jewish nation...between the Arab nation and Eretz Israel, this is our right.

What happened to us when our homeland was taken from us?

We went this morning, Mr. President, to Yad Vashem. With your own eyes you saw what has happened to our nation when this, its homeland, had been taken from it.

We have both agreed, Mr. President, that he who has not seen with his own eyes all that exists in Yad Vashem cannot understand what has happened to this nation when it was detached from its homeland. And the two of us read a document of 30 January 1939, with the words of destruction: If war will break out, the Jewish race in Europe will be destroyed.

Then it was also said: Don't pay attention. The entire world heard. No one came to ours...to save us.

The many months since the time of that declaration that had never been heard before, since the time that the Lord created man and man created the devil, and in those six years when millions of our people including one and a half million small Jewish children were destroyed, no one came to their saving -- not from the East and not from the West.

And, therefore, we have sworn an eternal vow, this entire generation -- the generation of destruction and rebirths: We shall never again place our nation in such danger.

We shall never expose our women and children -- our responsibility is to defend them, even if necessary at the cost of our lives -- we shall never permit them to be in a destruction.

Since then our responsibility for generations is to remember the specific things said against our nation. We shall take them in the full seriousness. And it is forbidden for us, for the future of our nation, to take any advice that it is not necessary to take such words seriously.

President Sadat knows, and knew from us before he came to Jerusalem, that we have a different position than his with regard to borders between us and our neighbors.

However, I call to the President of Egypt, and to all of our neighbors, do not say that we will not have discussions on anything.

I propose, according to the accepted majority of this Parliament, that everything is open to negotiation.

A serious responsibility is taken by anyone who says that in negotiations between the Arab nation and the Jewish nation there are things that must be taken out of the negotiations. Everything is given to negotiation. No side can say the reverse. No side can offer conditions. It is a pleasure, an honor, to have negotiations if there are differences between us. There is nothing that can be excluded.

He who has learned the history of wars and the history of making peace knows that all negotiations on a peace treaty began with differences between the nations. And through the negotiations they arrived at an agreement that made it possible to sign treaties of peace. And this is the way we propose to go.

And let us conduct the negotiations as equals. There are no victors, there are no losers.

All nations of the region are equal. And each one will have to relate to one another with honor and in the spirit of openness, of readiness to listen to one another to the facts and to the points and to the explanations.

With all of the accepted ability to convince one another, let us conduct the negotiations, as I ask and propose, to continue until we arrive at the hour of signing a treaty of peace between us.

We are not only prepared to sit with the representatives of Egypt but with the representatives of Jordan and Syria and Lebanon in a peace conference in Geneva. We have suggested to reconstitute the Geneva Conference on the basis of the two decisions of the Security Council -- 242 and 338.

If there are differences between us relating to the organization of the Geneva Conference, let us discuss and negotiate them today and tomorrow. And if the President of Egypt wishes to receive us in Cairo, or in a neutral place, there is no objection. In every place, let us together clarify, even before the reconvening of the Geneva Conference, the problems that may be related to the reconvening of this Conference.

Our eyes shall be open, our ears shall be open to listen to every proposal -- to every proposal.

Permit me to say a word about Jerusalem. Mr. President, you prayed this morning at the newly reconstituted mosque and then you went to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. You realized that from time immemorial this is the city that has been joined together. There is full freedom --

[Momentary loss of audio from Jerusalem. Mr. Begin was saying there is freedom of movement to and from Jerusalem.]

...Moslem world and for the Christian world and all nations, that forever there shall be free access and travel to holy places.

We shall defend the right of free entry. For in this we believe: equal right of all citizens and with honor and with full face -- with full face.

Mr. Chairman, this is a very special day to our Parliament. And undoubtedly for many years this day will be long remembered in the history of our nation and in the history of the Egyptian nation and perhaps in the history of the various nations around the world.

And this day, with your permission ladies and gentlemen, members of the Knesset, we shall raise a prayer that the God of our fathers, our joint fathers, will give us the wisdom of the heart that is necessary in order to overcome difficulties and pitfalls, to overcome the words of Satan, and the words of evil. And with the help of the Lord we shall achieve, we shall reach that day for which our entire nation is praying -- a day of peace. For verily that day -- the sweet singer of Israel, King David, wrote about the day -- when justice and peace embraced. And in the words of the prophet Zachariah, peace and justice embraced.