

**Statement by Rabbi Michael Melchior,  
Deputy Foreign Minister of the State of Israel**

**Delivered by Ambassador Mordecai Yedid,  
Head of Israeli Delegation**

**World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia  
and Related Intolerance**

**Durban - September 3, 2001**

Madame Chairperson,

Why, when the world was created, did God create just one man, Adam, and one woman, Eve? The Rabbis answered: so that all humankind would come from a single union, to teach us that we are all brothers and sisters.

This Conference was dedicated to that simple proposition. We, all of us, have a common lineage, and are all, irrespective of race, religion or gender, created in the divine image. Indeed, this single idea, unknown to all other ancient civilizations, may be the greatest gift that the Jewish people has given to the world, the recognition of the equality and dignity of every human being.

The foremost right that follows from this principle is the right to be free, not to be a slave. It is imperative that international community address and duly acknowledge, already far far too late, the magnitude of the tragedy of slavery.

The horror of slavery is profoundly engraved in the experience of the Jewish people - a people formed in slavery. For hundreds of years the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt until, as the Book of Exodus recounts, the call: 'Let my people go' heralded the first national liberation movement in history, and the model for every liberation which was to follow.

The Jewish response to slavery was remarkable. Rather than forget or sublimate the suffering of slavery, Jewish tradition insisted that every Jew must remember and relive it. And to this day, on Passover, every Jewish family reenacts the experience of slavery, eats the bread of affliction, and appreciates once again the taste of freedom. Through the ages of our exile this psychodrama has had a profound impact on the Jewish psyche: making sure that every child born into comfort knows the pains of oppression, and every child born into oppression knows the hope of redemption.

But remembrance of our suffering as slaves has a more important function - to remind ourselves of our moral obligations. The experience of oppression brings no privilege, but rather responsibility. We have a responsibility to protect the weak, the widow and the orphan and the stranger, because as the Bible says: "You yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt." Even God, in the first and most fundamental of the 10 commandments, identifies Himself

not as 'Creator of the World' or 'Splitter of the Red Sea', but as 'the One who freed you from slavery'.

And indeed in every country in which they have lived, Jews have been in the forefront of the battle for human rights and freedom from oppression. The same urge for national liberation, that led to the Exodus, and that led to the Zionist dream that Jews could live in freedom in their land, was intrinsically bound up with the belief that not just one people, but all peoples must be free. It was this conviction that Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, expressed in his book *Altneuland*, as early as 1902:

"There is still one problem of racial misfortune unsolved. The depths of that problem only a Jew can comprehend. I refer to the problem of the Blacks. Just call to mind all those terrible episodes of the slave trade, of human beings who merely because they were black were stolen like cattle, taken prisoners, captured and sold. Their children grew up in strange lands, the objects of contempt and hostility because their complexions were different. I am not ashamed to say, though I may expose myself to ridicule for saying so, that once I have witnessed the redemption of Israel, my people, I wish to assist the redemption of the Black people."

As Herzl understood, remembrance of slavery is integral to the Jewish experience. A Jew cannot be truly free if he or she does not have compassion on those who are enslaved.

Madame Chairperson,

If slavery is one form of racist atrocity, antisemitism is another. And by antisemitism, let us be clear, we mean the hatred of Jews. The word 'antisemitism' was deliberately coined in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, an anti-Jewish racist in Germany, to replace the term *judenhass*, Jew-hatred, which had gone out of favor. It has always, and only, been used to describe hatred and discrimination directed at Jews. Attempts to eradicate the plain meaning of the word are not only anti-semitic, indeed they are anti-semantic.

Those uncomfortable recognizing the existence of antisemitism not only try to redefine the term, they try to deny that it is different from any other form of discrimination. But it is a unique form of hatred. It is directed at those of particular birth, irrespective of their faith, and those of particular faith, irrespective of their birth. It is the oldest and most persistent form of group hatred; in our century this ultimate hatred has led to the ultimate crime, the Holocaust.

But antisemitism goes far beyond hatred of Jews. It has arisen where Jews have never lived, and survives where only Jewish cemeteries remain. And while Jews may be the first to suffer from its influence, they have rarely been the last.

Antisemitism reveals the inner corruption of a society, because at its root it is fueled by a rejection of the humane and moral values the Jewish people

bequeathed to the world. As Anne Frank, the Jewish schoolgirl in hiding from the Nazis in occupied Amsterdam, wrote in her Diary:

"If we bear all this suffering and if there are still Jews left, when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held up as an example. Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason only do we now suffer."

Anne Frank was murdered by the Nazis in Bergen-Belsen for being a

Jew, just one of over one million Jewish children to be killed in the Holocaust.

Those who cannot bring themselves to recognize the unique evil of antisemitism, similarly cannot accept the stark fact of the Holocaust, the first systematic attempt to destroy an entire people. The past decade has witnessed an alarming increase in attempts to deny the simple fact of this atrocity, at the very time that the Holocaust is passing from living memory to history. After wiping out 6 million Jewish lives, there are those who would wipe out their deaths. At this Conference too, we have witnessed a vile attempt to generalize and pluralize the word 'Holocaust', and to empty it of its meaning as a reference to a specific historic event with a clear and vital message for all humanity.

Could there be anything worse than to brutally, systematically annihilate a people; to take the proud Jews of Vilna, Warsaw, Minsk, Lodz; to burn their holy books, to steal their dignity, their freedom, their hair, their teeth; to turn them into numbers, to slaves, to the ashes of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek and Dachau? Could anything be worse than this? And the answer is yes, there is something even worse: to do such a thing, and then to deny it, to trivialize it, to take from the mourners, the children and the grandchildren, the legitimacy of their grief, and from all humanity the urgent lesson that might stop it happening again.

Madame Chairperson,

The 20th century which witnessed the atrocities of the Holocaust also witnessed the fulfillment of the Zionist dream, the reestablishment of a Jewish state in Israel's historic land. For Zionism is quite simply that - the national movement of the Jewish people, based on an unbroken connection, going back some 4000 years, between the People of the Book and the Land of the Bible. It is like the liberation movements of Africa and Asia, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people.

And it is a movement of which other national liberation movements can be justly proud. It has strived continually to establish a society which reflects highest ideals of democracy and justice for all its inhabitants, in which Jew and Arab can live together, in which women and men have equal rights, in which there is freedom of thought of expression, and in which all have access to the judicial process to ensure these rights are protected.

The aspiration to build such a society was enshrined from the outset in Israel's Declaration of Independence:

"The State of Israel... will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of creed, race or gender; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture."

It is a tall task. It is a constant struggle. And we do not always succeed. But, even in the face of the open hostility of its neighbors and continued threats to its existence, there are few countries that have made such efforts to realize such a vision. Few countries of Israel's age and size have welcomed immigrants from over one hundred countries, of all colors and tongues, sent medical aid and disaster relief to alleviate human tragedy wherever it strikes, maintained a free press, including the freest Arabic press anywhere in the Middle East.

And yet those who cannot bring themselves to say the words 'the Holocaust', or to recognize antisemitism for the evil that it is, would have us condemn the 'racist practices of Zionism'. Did any one of those Arab states which conceived this obscenity stop for one moment to consider their own record? Or to think, for that matter, of the situation of the Jews and other minorities their own countries?

These states would have us believe that they are anti-Zionist, not antisemitic, but again and again this lie is disproved. What are the despicable caricatures of Jews that fill the Arab press and are being circulated at this Conference: what are the vicious libels so freely invented and disseminated by our enemies - about the use of poison

gas, or depleted uranium bullets, or injecting babies with the Aids virus - if not the reincarnation of age-old antisemitic canards?

To criticize policies of the Government of Israel - or of any country - is legitimate, even vital; indeed as a democratic state many Israelis do just that. But there is profound difference between criticizing a country, and denying it's right to exist. Anti-Zionism, the denial of Jews the basic right to a home, is nothing but antisemitism, pure and simple. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote:

"You declare, my friend, that you do not hate the Jews, you are merely 'anti-Zionist'. And I say, let the truth ring forth from the high mountain tops. Let it echo through the valleys of God's green earth: When people criticize Zionism they mean Jews... Zionism is nothing less than the dream and ideal of the Jewish people returning to live in their own land... And what is anti-Zionism? It is the denial to the Jew of the fundamental right that we justly claim for the people of Africa and freely accord to all other nations of the globe. It is discrimination against Jews because they are Jews. In short it is antisemitism."

The venal hatred of Jews that has taken the form of anti-Zionism, and which has surfaced at this Conference is, however, different in one crucial way from the antisemitism of the past. Today it is being deliberately propagated and manipulated for political ends. Children are not born as racists, racism is a result of lack of education and political manipulation. And today generations of Palestinian children are being deliberately and systematically indoctrinated, with textbooks stained with blood libels, and children's television programs dripping with hatred. This high risk strategy is bound to fail, but it will exact a heavy price.

The conflict between us and our Palestinian neighbors is not racial, and has no place at this Conference. It is political and territorial, and as such can and should be resolved to end the suffering and bring peace and security to the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. The path towards such a resolution is clear: an immediate cessation of violence and terror and a return to negotiations as recommended by the Mitchell Committee Report which both parties have accepted. The outrageous and manic accusations we have heard here are attempts to turn a political issue into a racial one, with almost no hope of resolution.

Barely a year ago, at Camp David, the Israeli Government demonstrated its deep commitment to peace by offering our Palestinian neighbors far-reaching compromises. These compromises, you will recall, were applauded by the entire international community. But, the Palestinians did not accept these proposals, nor did they put forward any compromise proposals of their own. To our deep dismay they responded with a wave of violence. Over the past year this violence has escalated into protracted and inhuman attacks on the Israeli civilian population, forcing Israel to assume a role we abhor, defending our citizens by military means which we had hoped and prayed would be relegated to the past.

I will not refer here to the disappointing statement we have heard from the head of the Palestinian Authority. Rather than utilize this vital forum to inspire his own people, and the people of the world, to seek peace, honor and harmony, he chose to use this podium to incite to bitterness and hatred. Another missed opportunity by the leader of the Palestinian people.

My own cousins, two little daughters and their brother, lost their legs only a few weeks ago in a terrorist attack on a bus carrying children to school. Many Palestinian children have likewise been wounded for life. The vicious libels, the delegitimization and dehumanization we have heard at this Conference will do nothing to prevent more Israeli and Palestinian mothers and fathers bringing their young ones to their graves.

But here today, something greater even than peace in the Middle East is being sacrificed - the highest values of humanity. Racism, in all its forms, is one of the most widespread and pernicious evils, depriving millions of hope and fundamental rights. It might have been hoped that this first Conference of the 21st century would have taken up the challenge of, if not eradicating racism, at least disarming it: But instead humanity is being sacrificed to a

political agenda. Barely a decade after the UN repealed the infamous 'Zionism is Racism' resolution, which Secretary-General Kofi Annan described, with characteristic understatement, as a "low point" in the history of the United Nations, a group of states for whom the terms 'racism', 'discrimination', and even 'human rights' simply do not appear in their domestic lexicon, have hijacked this Conference and plunged us to even greater depths.

Can there be a greater irony than the fact that a conference convened to combat the scourge of racism should give rise to the most racist declaration in a major international organization since the Second World War?

Despite the vicious anti-Semitism we have heard here, I do not fear for the Jewish people, which has learned to be resilient and to hold fast to its faith.

Despite the virulent incitement against my country, I do not fear for Israel, which has the strength not just of courage, but also of conviction.

But I do fear, deeply, for the victims of racism. For the slaves, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the inexplicably hated, the impoverished, the despised, the millions who turn their eyes to this hall, in the frail hope that it may address their suffering. Who see instead that a blind and venal hatred of the Jews has turned their hopes into a farce. For them I fear.

We are here as representatives of states, and states of their nature have political interests and agendas. But we are also human beings, all of us brothers and sisters created in the divine image. And in those quiet moments when we recognize our common humanity, and look into our soul, let us consider what we came here to do - and what we have in fact done:

We came to learn from our history, but we find it being buried to hide its lessons.

We came to communicate in the language of humanity, but we hear its vocabulary twisted beyond all comprehension.

We came out of respect for the sacred values entrusted to us, but see them here perverted for political ends.

And ultimately, we came to serve the victims of racism, but have witnessed yet another atrocity, committed in their name.