

Address of President Shimon Peres at the Opening Ceremony of Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day 2009

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu,
Speaker of the Knesset Reuven Rivlin,
President of the Supreme Court, Judge Dorit Beinish,
The Chief Rabbis, Rabbi Shlomo Moshe Amar and Rabbi Yona Metzger,
Chairman of the Yad Vashem Council, Rabbi Israel Meir Lau,
Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate, Mr. Avner Shalev,
Holocaust survivors,
Righteous Among the Nations,
Distinguished guests,

Six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, simply because they were Jewish. 1.5 million children were annihilated just because they belonged to the Jewish people. They were called Moshe, Avraham, Rivka and Leah – even though they had not yet understood the meaning of their names. One out of every three of our people was murdered during those six cursed years. Each victim had a name. Each murdered Jew had a future. The genocide committed by the Nazi murderers was a historic crime of unprecedented proportions.

The State of Israel is our historic victory over the Nazi beast that left no stone in Europe unturned. Soul-searching about the Holocaust is not yet over, and may never be over, not for us, and not for the world at large. Nazism was defeated, but antisemitism is still alive and well. The gas has dissipated, but the poison remains. There are still Holocaust deniers and hot-headed skinheads in the world, those who bear the sort of visceral hatred that leads to racist murder.

The conference opening today in Geneva constitutes an acceptance of racism, rather than the fight against it, and its main speaker is Ahmadinejad, who calls for the annihilation of Israel, and denies the Holocaust.

There are also the Righteous Among the Nations – we will never forget them.

Criticism of the Jewish State is also tinged with chilling antisemitism. Among those who collaborated with the Nazis, and those who stood by and let the Holocaust happen, there are those who criticize the one state that rose to grant refuge to Holocaust survivors. The one state that will prevent another Holocaust. Antisemitism is not a Jewish disease, and its cure is incumbent upon those who perpetrate it.

It is hard to fathom why despots such as Hitler the Nazi, Stalin the Bolshevik and Ahmadinejad the Persian chose the Jews as the main target for their hatred, their madness and their violence. Perhaps they targeted the Jewish people because of its spiritual power – a nation poor in material possessions, but rich in values - for he who is infected with megalomania, fears the power of the spirit. The Jews did not worship idols or authority, and their G-d gave mankind its conscience. We were the first to believe that every person is created in G-d's image, and we were commanded to sanctify life and prevent murder and discrimination.

We have learned that our spiritual heritage is dependent on physical security. A people which lost a third of its members, a third of its children to the Holocaust, does not forget, and must not be caught off-guard.

The first answer to the Holocaust was the establishment of a Jewish homeland. Its first lesson was therefore the immediate establishment of the Jewish state. Without it, the survivors would have been left homeless, and their lives would have remained exposed and prey to destruction. The State of Israel is not merely the Jews' protective shield but an ideal of historic import: to be a nation with a moral message.

Existence and heritage are inextricably linked. We never asked other nations to defend us, and we have made the decision that spiritual conflict will not divide us.

We must not let the memory of the Holocaust diminish, and we must ensure that the memory-bearers do not lessen in number. The Jewish state must ensure the continuity of the Jewish people, for our people has just one country. Our Forefathers gave the world the Ten Commandments over 3,000 years ago, and yet there is no need for an updated version. The greatness of the Jewish people is derived from the might of its spirit.

Israel must be an example to its children, and a source of pride for those Jews who do not live here. The Jewish people helped establish the State, and the State must now help its people, preserve its identity, give its children a Jewish education, enable the Jews to ensure that their descendents remain Jewish.

The IDF has given security to the State of Israel whose soul thirsts for peace. In Israel's eyes, peace is not just a matter of political wisdom, but a fundamental Jewish imperative.

We never set out to conquer. We did not rush towards dominion. We rejected lordship, we fought discrimination, we protested slavery, we forbade violence. We believe in the preeminence of man, and we pray for *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world) and world peace.

The Shoah gave rise to both grief and rebirth. We were struck by this unprecedented Holocaust and displayed extraordinary fortitude. This is also the lesson for the future – to combine faith and power. To be a just people in a just world. Whoever tries to break our spirit will learn that the spirit cannot be extinguished. Even though our ship may be narrow, it is a mighty wind that blows through its sails.

The Holocaust will always be in our hearts, and we realize that there is much work ahead of us: to build a state that is worthy of its fathers' sacrifice, and is an answer to its sons' prayers.