

ISRAEL AT SIXTY

From Modest Beginnings to a Vibrant State

1948–2008

- *web extra* -

Address by the President of the State of Israel, Shimon Peres, at the United Nations General Assembly

September 24, 2008



*President Shimon Peres addresses UN General Assembly
(Photo: Reuters)*

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over 60 years have passed since the United Nations General Assembly voted on the historic resolution that would have put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Resolution 181 called for the establishment of a Jewish and an Arab state. Its title was: “Plan of Partition with Economic Union”. It envisioned two states for two peoples, each fulfilling a distinct national aspiration.

The Jewish people adopted the resolution and established the State of Israel. The Arabs rejected it and led to war. What happened in the ensuing years is much different from the resolution’s original intent. While much has changed, the ironies of history summon similar circumstances today.

Today, again, we are the middle of the lake. There is no sense in rowing back. Continuing forward will show how near we are to the shore of peace. Mr. President,

A year prior to Israel’s declaration of statehood, its first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, called me, a young man from a kibbutz, to serve in our national defense. Since then, I participated in Israel’s dynamic realities: the building of security, striving for peace. So, I need no book to learn the history. I witnessed its miraculous unfolding. We went through seven wars. All have paid heavily. Tears still flow down the faces of bereaving mothers.

Remembrance Days fill the air with silent prayers of widowed families who lost young boys and girls in battle. They are, today, at the same age, but lifeless. Israel turned military victories to a peace process, knowing that the cost of life renders imperfect peace superior to perfect victories.

We have also achieved two peace agreements. The first with the largest Arab country, Egypt. The second with the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan. All the land, water, and natural resources that fell in our hands through war, were repatriated after peace was signed. Our countries can now offer remedies to other disputed areas.

But for peace, the call in our region is to repair the damaged environment and wounded land leading to poverty.

If we shall not overcome the desert, the thirst, the pollution - they will overcome us. Joint ventures can meet this call. Nature does not carry a national passport.

With the Palestinians, we negotiate full peace. Both parties agreed to building a Palestinian state side by side with Israel, living in peace, security and respect. We tried to conclude the negotiations this year. It will take longer. But, I believe it can be accomplished within the next year. We agreed to progress in spite of possible changes that may take place in the leadership.

Gaps have been narrowed through negotiations. Particularly the territorial ones. But, peace is not just a matter of territorial compromise. Rogue politics reject peace even where territorial dispute was resolved.

In Lebanon, we implemented resolution 425. Yet Hizbullah paralyzed the country and cut the road to peace.

From Gaza, we withdrew completely and dismantled our settlements. Hamas responded with a bloody takeover and turned the strip into a basis of rocket fire.

These militants carry no positive alternative - but the agonies of Job.

They added kidnapping to bombings, bringing strife for innocent families. From this important stage, I call for the immediate release of Gilad Shalit. The son of Aviva and Noam. A peace-loving family. This honored assembly should make his release top of its agenda. Holding a hostage in Gaza determines its isolation and further deterioration.

Mr. President,

At the center of this violence and fanaticism stands Iran. It built a danger to the entire world. Its quest for religious hegemony and regional dominance divides the Middle East and holds back chances for peace, while undermining human rights. Iranian support for Hizbullah divided Lebanon. Its support for Hamas split the Palestinians and postpones the establishment of the Palestinian State.

Yesterday, on this very stage, the Iranian leader renewed the darkest anti-Semitic libel - the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. An attempt to bring to life one of the ugliest plots of history. Their despicable denial of the Holocaust is a mockery of indisputable evidence, a cynical offense to survivors of the horror. Contradictory to the resolutions adopted by this assembly.

Iran continues to develop enriched uranium and long range missiles. They introduce a religion of fear, opposing the call of the lord in respect of life.

The Iranian people are not our enemies. Their fanatic leadership is their problem and the world's concern. Their leader is a danger to his people, the region and the world.

He is a disgrace to the ancient Iranian people. He is a disgrace to the values of Islam. He is a disgrace to this very house, the United Nations, its basic principles and values. His appearance here is already shame.

The Jewish people have known, throughout history, to stand firm at the face of evil.

Alongside the enlightened humanity we shall know to enable good and freedom to prevail.

Tehran combines long-range missiles and short-range minds. It is pregnant with tragedies. The General Assembly and the Security Council bear responsibility to prevent agonies before they take place.

Israel has shown that democracies can defend themselves. We do not intend to change. Terrorism did not solve a single problem. It never has, and never will.

They will make the world ungovernable. If small groups of violent killers are allowed to threaten innocent masses, the world will be without order or security. A hopeless battleground. The free world must unite to combat it.

Israel, on its part, shall continue to seek peace. We suggest immediate peace with Lebanon.

Israeli prime ministers indicated to Syria that for peace, we are ready to explore a comprehensive compromise. In order to gain trust, and save time, we have suggested face-to-face meetings with President Assad: "Follow the successful example set by President Sadat and King Hussein." We still await an answer.

I know there is a growing concern that peace is far away. My life-long experience provides me with a different point of view. True, I have seen stagnation and regression in our journey. But, today, I can identify a road leading to the right direction.

In addition to the peace agreements, a series of summits took place - Madrid, Oslo, Wye, Camp David, Sharm and Annapolis. Their accumulated sum encourages a clear direction. In fact, Israelis and Arabs are marching towards peace.

After a long internal debate, Israel accepted the two-state solution. The Arabs replaced the three "nos" of Khartoum (no peace, no negotiation, no recognition) with a peace initiative, inaugurated by King Abdullah Abdul Aziz Al Saud. I call upon the king to further his initiative; it may become an invitation for comprehensive peace, one to convert battlegrounds to common grounds.

I invite, respectfully, all leaders to come and discuss peace in Jerusalem, which is holy all of us. Where we all pray to the same lord, as offspring of the same father. Israel shall gladly accept an Arab invitation at a designated venue where a meaningful dialogue may take place.

Mr. President,

We are facing a serious economic crisis. Maybe it has happened because we are rich and light with funds and poor and heavy with ideas. While we live in an era where science, not land, is the basis of economy.

Science does not stop at borders. Is not disturbed by distance. Wisdom is not conquerable by armies. Knowledge diminishes discrimination because it operates through good will and transcends race, nationality and gender.

The global dangers unite and divide us at the same time. The dangers are the deterioration of environment. The shortage of water. The lack of renewable energy. The spread of terrorism and the increased poverty.

Divisions of the free world will increase them. Unity offers the potential of alternatives. It will direct global investments to new areas and demanding challenges like health, security, education and environment.

The future is not in the hands of oil or gold. Intellectual assets, new inventions and superior education hold the key to our future. In our region, border areas can become open economic zones. Enabling free movement of people, commodities and ideas. They may encourage tourism and build

High Tech incubators. They will cultivate advanced agriculture.

Economic zones will provide a million jobs and produce billions of cubic meters of desalinated water. We started to do so. The first steps are promising.

The 21st century calls for pioneers. It is an opportunity to provide our children with peace and knowledge. Strength and friendship. It is their right. It is our moral obligation.

Mr. President,

The Jewish people are celebrating a new year. I would like to end with a quote from Rabbi Nachman of Breslav:

“May it be thy will to remove war and bloodshed from the world and perpetuate the wonders and greatness of peace. All the inhabitants of the world shall recognize and know the truth: that we have not been placed on this earth to wage war and not for hatred or bloodshed. “

Amen.

Shana Tova.

Thank you, Mr. President