

International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust

Memorial Ceremony, General Assembly Hall

28 January 2015

President's Address to the UN General Assembly at the United Nations Memorial Ceremony on International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust

Your Excellency, Secretary General of the United Nations, Honorable members of the General Assembly, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

I stand before you, at a time of great tension in our region. My heart and my thoughts, are with my people in Israel. Terrorism does not distinguish between blood. In this war, all of us, all the nations united, countries of the free world, must form a united front. Today we are marking the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust. It is seventy years since the Red Army threw open the gates of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Now in its tenth year, this day was established in the calendar of the United Nations, at the initiative of the former Israeli Foreign Minister, Silvan Shalom, and each year since then, this Assembly has marked this day, with the commitment to preserve the memory of the Holocaust.

Paul Celan, the great Jewish poet of the 20th century, himself a prisoner in a Nazi work camp, once said, "Only in one's mother tongue can one speak one's own truth. In a foreign tongue, the poet lies." My friends, I am no poet, but I must agree, that there are truths, there are prayers, and there is pain, deep pain, that one can only express in one's mother tongue. Therefore, on this important day, I have chosen to stand before you, and speak in the language of my mother, my father, in the ancient language of my forefathers, the same language that my grandchildren speak today.

This is the same language in which my fellow Jews cried "Shema Yisrael" Hear O' Israel, as they were marched to the gas chambers. The language of my brothers and sisters, whose memory we honor today.

"Oh that my head was water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! . . . For the mountains will I take up a weeping and wailing, and for the pastures of the wilderness a lamentation." [Jeremiah, chapters 8,9]

Ladies and Gentlemen. In 1915, when the members of the Armenian nation were being massacred, Avshalom Feinberg, a leading member of Nili, the Jewish underground which cooperated with the Allies during the First World War, wrote the following and I quote, "My teeth have been ground down with worry, whose turn is next? When I walked on the blessed and holy ground on my way up to Jerusalem, I asked myself if we are living in our modern era, in 1915, or in the days of Titus or Nebuchadnezzar? Did I, a Jew, forget that I am a Jew? I also asked myself if I have the right to weep 'over the tragedy of my people' only, and whether the Prophet Jeremiah did not shed tears of blood for the Armenians as

well?"

Avshalom Feinberg wrote that exactly one hundred years ago, one hundred years of hesitation and denial. But in the Land of Israel of that time, in the Jerusalem in which I was born, no one denied the massacre that had taken place. The residents of Jerusalem, my parents and the members of my family, saw the Armenian refugees arriving by the thousands – starving, piteous survivors of calamity. In Jerusalem they found shelter and their descendents continue to live there to this day.

There were two questions reverberating then, whose turn is it next? And will we Jews weep tears of blood for the tragedy of others too? The first question was answered by history, some two decades later. The Jews were next. We, the members of my people, were next. In the valley of death of Europe it was the Jewish People who were the victims of a methodical, brutal, perverted and murderous extermination. Six million people, one third of my nation, about a million and a half of them children, were killed, slaughtered, suffocated, gassed to death, buried alive, burnt, massacred, died from hunger, from thirst, from disease, and other gruesome kinds of death, in the most horrifying crime ever committed in the history of the human race. The answer to the second question asked by Feinberg. Truly, shall we weep, each one of us, only for our own nation's tragedy, or shall we be able to cry also for the tragedies of others; for the tragedy of wounded children from Syria; for the tragedy of the young men and women from Europe, from the Middle East, from Africa and from Asia. This question still awaits an answer.

Ladies and Gentlemen. There has been no atrocity in the history of the human race to compare in its viciousness, its scope and its magnitude, with the Holocaust of the Jewish People. However, the slaughter of nations and of communities was not born in Nazi Germany and did not cease with the opening of the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and Buchenwald. Now, in our own time, when the fundamentalist viper is raising its ugly head, we must remember that evil is not the property of any specific religion; just as it is not the attribute of any specific country or ethnic group. It is evil, that by its very nature, seeks to differentiate and discriminate between one life and another, between one human being and another, while the only real difference is between good and bad; between humanity and darkness. For exactly that reason, those who regard Islam, Judaism, or Christianity, as enemies of the world are wrong and they mislead others. My father, Yosef Yoel Rivlin, of blessed memory, devoted his life to translating the Quran into Hebrew, believing in the importance of dialogue and the cultural significance of the Quran for all the children of Abraham. As my father's son, I too believe implicitly that neither the West, nor the Christians nor the Jews are at war with Islam. Right now, Islam encompasses, under its enormous wings, victims of persecution and of terrorism, while at the same time it also serves as the banner of the attackers. The victims consist of hundreds of thousands of Muslim men and women, together with Christians, Yazidis, Kurds and Druze, each one of them a helpless victim of vicious barbarity, of wicked terrorism that has nothing at all to do with the religion or with the words of the Prophet. It is our duty and our responsibility to fight without mercy against the attackers; just as it is our duty and our responsibility to protect all the victims.

Ladies and Gentlemen. The United Nations Organization arose on the basis of the great visions of peace of the prophets of Israel, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares"; it was established on the foundations of human solidarity and the values of humanism. But above all, this Assembly arose on the ruins left by that war of devastation, the Second

World War.

This day, the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, is not just a gesture of memorial for the members of the Jewish People, the victims, or even the survivors. This day, this International Day of Commemoration, is not merely another memorial day on the UN's annual calendar. This day – so I believe – is the most important day on that calendar. "Never again", is not just a pledge by the survivors, and also not a pledge by the world only to the members of the Jewish People. "Never again" is, first and foremost, the very essence of this United Nations Organization, it is its mission, it is the primary and principal rationale for its existence.

Since the establishment of this organization following that world war that claimed so very many casualties, the UN has expanded and branched out. Today, its enterprises include economic and environmental development, preservation of heritage and the maintenance of peace. But despite all this, on this day, we once again remember the essence of the mission of this institution: all-out war against genocide.

To our great regret, since the UN was established – this rationale for its existence, its very *raison d'être*, has become ever more acute. Bosnia; Rwanda; Sudan; Cambodia; Syria; Nigeria. These are just a few of the places where nations and communities have been slaughtered in a way that reminded the world that the Holocaust of the Jews was not the final chapter in the brutal scheme of man against his fellow man. Each and every one of them were victims of genocide, even without wearing a yellow star. As a Jew, as a Zionist, as an Israeli, as a human being, even though my hands are tied – my heart weeps together with those anonymous people marching to a mass grave. When we stand here today and declare, "Never again", we call out, never again racism and incitement; never again anti-Semitism; never again systematic rape and humiliation; never again concentration camps and torture; never again killing pits and mass graves, gas chambers and crematoria; never again – this is the task set before the gates of this Assembly. This is the mission laid before us.

Ladies and Gentlemen. On this day we must ask ourselves honestly, is our struggle, the struggle of this Assembly, against genocide, effective enough? Was it effective enough then in Bosnia? Was it effective in preventing the killing in Khojaly? Of Afghans by the Taliban? Is it effective enough today in Syria? Or in the face of the atrocities of Boko Haram in Nigeria? Are we shedding too many tears, and taking too little action? I am afraid that the United Nations "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" that came into force as long as sixty-four years ago, has remained a merely symbolic document. It did not succeed in realizing its commitment and fulfilling the objective that underpins the establishment of the United Nations Organization. Therefore, this institution, where we are standing today, has a duty of unparalleled challenge not to make do with statements but rather to push ahead with decisive action. The international community that is joined together in this organization bears the duty to lay down the red lines that define genocide – and to agree that the crossing of those red lines makes it compulsory to intervene. On the other hand, and in the same breath, we must remember that definition of the red lines requires putting an end to the devaluation and the cynical, supposedly objective usage in rhetoric on human rights of concepts such as "genocide", for political purposes. Thus, for years, this Assembly (whose resolution validated the establishment of the State of Israel) identified Zionism – the Jewish revival movement – with its greatest enemy, racism. That shameful UN resolution, number 3379 – has since

been annulled. However, unfounded comparisons of that type, to which we, as Israelis, are constantly exposed (among them the attempt to make a link between Israel and genocide, and only recently, once again, with war crimes), not only do they confuse between partner and enemy; they also sabotage the ability of this Assembly to effectively fight the phenomenon of genocide.

My friends, at the end of the day, this Assembly too, like any political institution, is motivated by many different considerations and interests. Even if we agree on clear red lines – that is not enough. We must agree that in the fight against genocide – the humanitarian and moral consideration must take precedence over economic, political and other interests. As a member of the Jewish People, I stand here before you and say, nations cannot be saved and must not be saved 'as an afterthought', or from considerations of cost benefit.

Unless the moral fire burns within us, the lesson of the Holocaust will never be learned. Communities and nations will continue to be murdered, children, women, men and the elderly will continue to march to their death to the enlightened music of the 'orchestra of death', against the background of a cynical and apathetic world, and through no fault of their own. The oath of "never again" will remain hollow and defiled, and we, all of us, will remain forever – prisoners of the camps.

Ladies and Gentlemen, to the extent that we believe that the voice of justice has not been silenced; to the extent that we believe in the dream of a different, more compassionate human race; we have the duty, here, in this Assembly, to act together as a determined and unified international community, which does not yield to narrow and inappropriate interests. In the name of the members of my People, victims of the Holocaust; in the name of the hopeless, persecuted people; in the name of our children; we must remain silent no longer we must rise up and take action.

As I conclude, I would like to return to the words of the ancient and sorrowful Jewish Yizkor memorial prayer for victims of the Holocaust: 'Judge of the earth, please remember the rivers of blood shed like water, the blood of fathers and sons, the blood of mothers and their babies . . . The cry of "Shema Yisrael" called out by those taken to their death are not silenced; and may the moans of the tortured rise up to thy heavenly throne.'

May the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, and the memory of the persecuted and the tortured be engraved upon our hearts forever. May their souls be bound up in the bond of life. Amen.