



YITZHAK RABIN CENTER
מרכז יצחק רבין

“Our Tremendous Energies From a State of Siege”

Address by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the Levi Eshkol Creativity Awards Ceremony

Tel Aviv , Israel

October 6, 1994

The honorable Minister for Culture, the Sciences, and Communications, my friend, Chairman of the Board of Trustees Aharon Yadlin; the judges; Chairman of the Writers Association, Ya'akov Besser; award-winners; writers.

I wish to begin by greeting Mrs. Miriam Eshkol. The strain of my work in my role as prime minister and minister of defense tears me away from friends – and Miriam is one of them. Our meetings now occur but once a year, and always at this occasion. As someone who was alongside Levi Eshkol, of blessed memory, during beautiful days as well as difficult hours, I wish to reiterate and state that the politicians and the media at the time did Levi Eshkol a great injustice by not properly appreciating his contribution. In my opinion, it will be the task and duty of historians to rectify this injustice in the future. He may not have been, perhaps, one of a kind in his generation, but during his generation Israel had great achievements and set out on its main course.

On behalf of the government, I wish to congratulate the prize-winners. I can only wish you a creative, fruitful year, and, in contrast to the ancient saying, I say to you: "It is good to write many books" – provided they are good books. I learn from the newspapers that the distribution of books this year reached new heights. I wish for every one of you that you reap the fruits of your labor.

I know that these prizes are but a meager handful – fourteen scholarships are not so many. Perhaps by next year, Shula [Alloni] and I will confer and once again raise the number of awards, as this government has already done. This is not a promise at the moment; rather it is an expression of hope. In the meantime, today we shall have to make do with fourteen creativity prizes.

Ladies and gentlemen, writers, the situation is complex. On the one hand, peace has not yet come to our land. The Arab states surrounding us continue arming themselves and are getting stronger. Their military strength keeps increasing. The terrorist organizations continue to attack us in Israel, in the territories, and abroad. At this stage, it is still too early to return the sword to its sheath. Not just yet. On the other hand, promising signs appear on the horizon: we have reached a settlement with the

Palestinians, we are very close to signing a peace treaty with Jordan, and we are conducting peace probes with the Syrians.

Let us admit the truth: the atmosphere of siege, the hostility, and the war have elicited tremendous energies from us for almost five decades. Much of what has been achieved in the State of Israel in all areas is a direct or indirect outcome of the necessity to defend our existence, of the atmosphere of siege from which we are so glad to free ourselves these days. Ours was a productive unity, a healthy unity, standing shoulder to shoulder against the manifestations of enmity and facing a hostile world. Just between us, we have become accustomed to this lifestyle, and, already, we think we cannot do without it. Perhaps we have even come to love the pleasant warmth of power and the encircling siege.

And now? What are we to do now? What message should we deliver to our people these days? How should we avoid becoming entangled in delivering a double, and contradictory, message: are we on the brink of peace, or do we expect another war? How do we change the atmosphere that has characterized our state for generations? What should we choose – should we declaim again and again: "a state under siege," "the whole world is against us," "all the Arabs are the same"?

Or perhaps we should bear a new message: "the new Middle East," "the peace of the brave," "nation shall not lift up sword against nation," "He who makes peace in heaven above..."?

How do we become accustomed to a world of new concepts, to a different culture, a different style, and at the same time not completely abandon the old world, just in case, God forbid, we might need it again? How do we maintain the invigorating rhythm of our lives, the Jewish mind, all those tremendous energies of ours, our unity – without the sword hanging over our heads?

These days we are in the midst of a battle without cannons in a war without fire, which may turn out to be perhaps one of the most significant and decisive battles in the annals of the Jewish people in recent generations: the war over the nature of the State of Israel. We will have to choose, on the one hand, between the road of zealotry, the tendency towards dreams of grandeur, the corruption of ethical and Jewish values as a result of ruling over another people, the blind faith, the hubris of "I am, and there is no one else beside me"; and, on the other hand, the road of maintaining a Jewish, democratic, liberal way of life, with consideration for the beliefs of others, even among ourselves, as well as side by side with us, with everyone living their lives according to their own faith.

The battle over the nature of the Jewish state in the twenty-first century has begun. In this battle we return to the cemeteries, this time to bury old concepts, to bury a way of life in a state under siege. In this battle there will also be tactical withdrawals in order to achieve a strategic goal, and the strategic goal today is peace. Everything is measured against it. We take our leave, therefore, without great pain, from the realm of victory albums – even though we have not yet formed our own new world view.

At the last awards ceremony I told you that it would be inconceivable for us to ask you to write in the spirit that befits the establishment, the government. We made no such request, and we shall make no such request. We have no intention, God forbid, of impairing freedom

of creativity. We believe that the unique period we are in will come to be reflected in books, poems, plays, paintings, sculpture and music.

The appeal to you today is to be engaged writers but without turning your work into engaged literature. You must take a stand, you must continue to contribute to the debate over our nature, and to a great extent as well over our fate in this country.

The coming years will be overshadowed by questions. Following the signing of peace, following the borders that will open, following the walls that will tumble down, essential questions will arise: Who are we? Towards what are we striving? What is our new character? What kind of nation do we want to be? How shall we live with those surrounding us? Shall we be "a light unto the nations," or shall we be "a nation like all the nations"? Will religion continue to preserve Judaism? Preserve the Chosen People? And what is the place of secularism in it all? Will a new Jew arise, a new Zionist, a new Israeli?

The answers, at least in part, lie with you. You are few, but you possess great powers in shaping the nature of this state, and your duty is to provide us and the next generation over the coming years with what we lacked, up to a point, during those years we employed force: the spirit – the spirit of the Prophets, the spirit of Yavneh, and also the spirit of Athens.

Please consider me and my office, and the government, as the address for your attempts to provide the right answers. We await your answers.

My best wishes to all of you, and especially to the prize-winners.