



YITZHAK RABIN CENTER
מרכז יצחק רבין

Address by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize

Oslo, Norway

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Your Majesty the King; Your Royal Highness; esteemed members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee; the Honorable Prime Minister Madame Gro Harlem Brundtland; Ministers; Members of the Parliament, and Ambassadors; fellow laureates; distinguished guests; friends; ladies and gentlemen.

At an age when most youngsters are struggling to unravel the secrets of mathematics and the mysteries of the Bible; at an age when first love blooms; at the tender age of 16, I was handed a rifle so that I could defend myself – and also, unfortunately, so that I could kill in an hour of danger.

That was not my dream. I wanted to be a water engineer. I studied in an agricultural school, and I thought that being a water engineer was an important profession in the parched Middle East. I still think so today. However, I was compelled to resort to the gun.

I served in the military for decades. Under my command, young men and women who wanted to live, wanted to love, went to their deaths instead. Under my command, they killed the enemy's men who had been sent out to kill us.

Ladies and gentlemen, in my current position, I have ample opportunity to fly over the State of Israel, and lately over other parts of the Middle East as well. The view from the plane is breathtaking: deep-blue lakes, dark-green fields, dun-colored deserts, stone-gray mountains,

and the entire countryside peppered with whitewashed, red-roofed houses.

And cemeteries. Graves as far as the eye can see.

Hundreds of cemeteries in our part of the Middle East – in our home in Israel but also in Egypt, in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. From the window of the plane, from thousands of feet above them, the countless tombstones are silent. But the sound of their outcry has carried from the Middle East throughout the world for decades.

Standing here today, I wish to salute loved ones – and foes. I wish to salute all the fallen of all the countries in all the wars; the members of their families who bear the enduring burden of bereavement; the disabled whose scars will never heal. Tonight I wish to pay tribute to each and every one of them, for this important prize is theirs, and theirs alone.

Ladies and gentlemen, I was a young man who has now grown fully in years. And of all the memories I have stored up in my 72 years, what I shall remember most, to my last day, are the silences.

The heavy silence of the moment after, and the terrifying silence of the moment before.

As a military man, as a commander, I issued orders for dozens, probably hundreds of military operations. And together with the joy of victory and grief of bereavement, I shall always remember the moment just after taking the decision to mount an action:

the hush as senior officers or cabinet ministers slowly rise from their seats; the sight of their receding backs; the sound of the closing door; and then the silence in which I remain alone.

That is the moment you grasp that as a result of the decision just made, people will be going to their deaths. People from my nation, people from other nations. And they still don't know it.

At that hour, they are still laughing and weeping; still weaving plans and dreaming about love; still musing about planting a garden or building a house – and they have no idea these

are their last hours on earth. Which of them is fated to die? Whose picture will appear in a black border in tomorrow's newspaper? Whose mother will soon be in mourning? Whose world will crumble under the weight of the loss?

As a former military man, I will also forever remember the silence of the moment before: the hush when the hands of the clock seem to be spinning forward, when time is running out and in another hour, another minute, the inferno will erupt.

In that moment of great tension just before the finger pulls the trigger, just before the fuse begins to burn; in the terrible quiet of that moment, there is still time to wonder, alone: Is it really imperative to act? Is there no other choice? No other way?

And then the order is given, and the inferno begins.

"God takes pity on kindergartners," wrote the poet Yehudah Amichai, who is here with us tonight.

"God takes pity on kindergartners,
Less so on schoolchildren,
And will no longer pity their elders,
Leaving them on their own.
And sometimes they will have to crawl on all fours
Through the burning sand
To reach the casualty station
Bleeding."

For decades God has not taken pity on the kindergartners in the Middle East, or the schoolchildren, or their elders. There has been no pity in the Middle East for generations.

Ladies and gentlemen, I was a young man who is now grown fully in years. And of all the memories I have stored up in my 72 years, I now recall the hopes.

Our peoples have chosen us to give them life. Terrible as it is to say, their lives are in our hands. Tonight, their eyes are upon us and their hearts are asking: how is the authority vested in these men and women being used? What will they decide? What kind of morning will we rise to tomorrow? A day of peace? Of war? Of laughter or of tears?

A child is born into an utterly undemocratic world. He cannot choose his father and mother. He cannot pick his sex or color, his religion, nationality, or homeland. Whether he is born in a manor or a manger, whether he lives under a despotic or democratic regime, is not his choice. From the moment he comes, close-fisted, into the world, his fate lies in the hands of his nation's leaders. It is they who will decide whether he lives in comfort or despair, in security or in fear. His fate is given to us to resolve – to the presidents and prime ministers of countries, democratic or otherwise.

Ladies and gentlemen, just as no two fingerprints are identical, so no two people are alike, and every country has its own laws and culture, traditions and leaders. But there is one universal message which can embrace the entire world, one precept which can be common to different regimes, to races which bear no resemblance, to cultures alien to each other.

It is a message which the Jewish people has borne for thousands of years, a message found in the Book of Books, which my people has bequeathed to all civilized people: "*V'nishmartem me'od l'nafshotechem*," in the words of Deuteronomy – "Therefore take good heed to yourselves," or, in contemporary terms, the message of the sanctity of life.

The leaders of nations must provide their peoples with the conditions – the "infrastructure," if you will – which enables them to enjoy life: freedom of speech and of movement, food and shelter and, most important of all, life itself. A man cannot enjoy his rights if he is not among the living. And so every country must protect and preserve the key element in its national ethos: the lives of its citizens.

To defend those lives, we call upon our citizens to enlist in the army. And to defend the lives of our citizens serving in the army, we invest huge sums in planes and tanks, in armored plating and concrete fortifications. Yet despite it all, we fail to protect the lives of our

citizens and soldiers. Military cemeteries in every corner of the world are silent testimony to the failure of national leaders to sanctify human life.

There is only one radical means of sanctifying human lives. Not armored plating, or tanks, or planes, or concrete fortifications.

The one radical solution is peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, the profession of soldiering embraces a certain paradox. We take the best and bravest of our young men into the army. We supply them with equipment which costs a virtual fortune. We rigorously train them for the day when they must do their duty – and we expect them to do it well. Yet we fervently pray that day will never come – that the planes will never take flight, the tanks will never move forward, the soldiers will never mount the attacks for which they have been trained so well.

We pray it will never happen because of the sanctity of life.

History as a whole, and modern history in particular, has known harrowing times when national leaders turned their citizens into cannon fodder in the name of wicked doctrines – vicious Fascism and fiendish Nazism. Pictures of children marching to the slaughter, photos of terrified women at the gates of crematoria must loom before the eyes of every leader in our generation and the generations to come. They must serve as a warning to all who wield power.

Almost all the regimes which did not place man and the sanctity of life at the heart of their world view, all those regimes have collapsed and are no more. You can see it for yourselves in our own day.

Yet this is not the whole picture. To preserve the sanctity of life, we must sometimes risk it. Sometimes there is no other way to defend our citizens than to fight for their lives, for their safety and sovereignty. This is the creed of every democratic state.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the State of Israel, from which I come today, in the Israel Defense Forces, which I have had the privilege to command, we have always viewed the sanctity of life as a supreme value. We have gone to war only when a fearful sword was poised to cut us down.

The history of the State of Israel, the annals of the Israel Defense Forces, are filled with thousands of stories of soldiers who sacrificed themselves – who died while trying to save wounded comrades; who gave their lives to avoid causing harm to innocent people on the enemy's side.

In the coming days, a special commission of the Israel Defense Forces will finish drafting a code of conduct for our soldiers. The formulation regarding human life will read as follows, and I quote:

"In recognition of its supreme importance, the soldier will preserve human life in every way possible and endanger himself, or others, only to the extent deemed necessary to fulfill his mission.

"The sanctity of life, in the view of the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, will find expression in all their actions; in considered and precise planning; in intelligent and safety-minded training and in judicious implementation, in accordance with their mission; in taking the professionally proper degree of risk and degree of caution; and in the constant effort to limit casualties to the scope required to achieve the objective."

For many years ahead – even if wars come to end, after peace comes to our land – these words will remain a pillar of fire which goes before our camp, a guiding light for our people. And we take pride in that.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are in the midst of building the peace. The architects and engineers of this enterprise are engaged in their work even as we gather here tonight, building the peace layer by layer, brick by brick, beam by beam. The job is difficult, complex, trying. Mistakes could topple the whole structure and bring disaster down upon us.

And so we are determined to do the job well – despite the toll of murderous terrorism, despite fanatic and scheming enemies.

We will pursue the course of peace with determination and fortitude. We will not let up. We will not give in. Peace will triumph over all our enemies, because the alternative is grimmer for us all. And we will prevail.

We will prevail because we regard the building of peace as a great blessing for us, and for our children after us. We regard it as a blessing for our neighbors on all sides, and for our partners in this enterprise – the United States, Russia, Norway, and all mankind.

We wake up every morning now as different people. Suddenly, peace. We see the hope in our children's eyes. We see the light in our soldiers' faces in the streets, in the buses, in the fields. We must not let them down. We will not let them down.

I do not stand here alone today, on this small rostrum in Oslo. I am the emissary of generations of Israelis, of the shepherds of Israel, just as King David was a shepherd; of the herdsmen and dressers of sycamore trees, as the prophet Amos was; of the rebels against the establishment, like the prophet Jeremiah; and of men who went down to the sea, like the prophet Jonah.

I am the emissary of the poets and of those who dreamed of an end to war, like the prophet Isaiah.

I am also the emissary of sons of the Jewish people like Albert Einstein and Baruch Spinoza; like Maimonides, Sigmund Freud, and Franz Kafka.

And I am the emissary of the millions who perished in the Holocaust, among whom were surely many Einsteins and Freuds who were lost to us, and to humanity, in the flames of the crematoria.

I am here as the emissary of Jerusalem, at whose gates I fought in days of siege; Jerusalem, which has always been, and is today, the eternal capital of the State of Israel and the heart of the Jewish people, who pray toward it three times a day.

And I am also the emissary of the children who drew their visions of peace, and of the

immigrants from St. Petersburg and Addis Ababa.

I stand here mainly for the generations to come, so that we may all be deemed worthy of the medallion which you have bestowed on me today.

I stand here as the emissary of our neighbors who were our enemies. I stand here as the emissary of the soaring hopes of a people which has endured the worst that history has to offer and nevertheless made its mark – not just on the chronicles of the Jewish people but on all mankind.

With me here are five million citizens of Israel – Jews and Arabs, Druze and Circassians – five million hearts beating for peace, and five million pairs of eyes which look to us with such great expectations for peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to thank, first and foremost, those citizens of the State of Israel, of all generations and political persuasions, whose sacrifices and relentless struggle for peace bring us steadier closer to our goal.

I wish to thank our partners – the Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Mr. Yasser Arafat, with whom we share this Nobel Prize – who have chosen the path of peace and are writing a new page in the annals of the Middle East.

I wish to thank the members of the Israeli government and, above all, my colleague Mr. Shimon Peres, whose energy and devotion to the cause of peace are an example to us all.

I wish to thank my family for their support.

And, of course, I wish to thank the members of the Nobel Committee and the courageous Norwegian people for bestowing this illustrious honor on my colleagues and myself.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to close by sharing with you a traditional Jewish blessing which has been recited by my people, in good times and in bad, from time immemorial, as a token of their deepest longing:

"The Lord will give strength to his people; the Lord will bless his people – all of us –with peace."