

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA
MR. ALGIRDAS BRAZAUSKAS, DELIVERED
AT THE KNESSET IN JERUSALEM,
AT 4 P.M., 1 MARCH 1995

*Mr. President of the State of Israel,
Mr. Chairman of the Knesset,
Distinguished Members of the Government and of the Knesset,
Ladies and Gentlemen!*

It is difficult to convey my emotions and the meaning of this moment through words alone. I stand here, before you as the first president of Independent Lithuania to go to Israel at the invitation of your President, and as a person for whom the land of Israel is the Holy Land which has been visited in the past and continues to be visited by Lithuanian travelers and pilgrims.

I stand here before you, elected delegates of the Israeli nation, as the representative of the nation whose history is inexorably intertwined with that of the Jews. Over centuries, Jews and Lithuanians lived in harmony. The past of Lithuanian Jewry forms an integral and significant portion of the history of our country. As early as the fourteenth century, the ruler of Lithuania, Grand Duke Vytautas, acknowledged the merits of the Jews and granted them special privileges. In time, an ethnic group of Litvaks formed. It played a significant role in spreading the light of Judaism throughout the Jewish world. In the country which you call LITA (or LITE in Yiddish), and we call LIETUVA, the Jewish thought, culture, theology, literature, and social life flourished. It significantly enriched Lithuanian culture imparting a distinctive image upon our land.

It was virtually impossible to visualise a traditional Lithuanian town or city without its active, devout and talented inhabitants - the Jews. Lithuania was the locale of the activity of the great Rabbis, of the first writers in Hebrew and Yiddish, and of the Zionist enthusiasts of the organisation Khovevai Cion - Lovers of Zion. Lithuania was also the cradle of Yiddish culture; indeed, Yiddish was one of the principle in Lithuanian

towns and cities. It was used in educational institutions, in editorial offices, and in business establishments. Vilnius became known, among the Jews of the world, as Yerushalaim de Lita, the Jerusalem of Lithuania. Gaon Street in the present-day old town of Vilnius serves as a reminder of the genius of the Jewish people. Many scholars of Jewish descent worked in the pre-war University of Vytautas the Great, at the time the only university in the country. And the contribution of the Jewish industrialists was significant to the independence of Lithuania in the aftermath of World War One. Our museums keep banners of Jewish veterans of the War of Independence. It is simply difficult to enumerate everything. The role of the Jews as an ethnic group was of such a significance that until the coup of 1926, there was even a Minister for Jewish Affairs in the cabinet and a distinct Jewish faction in the parliament. No conflicts of any significance between Lithuanians and Jews occurred during the inter-war period of independence.

Honourable Members of the Knesset!

I thank you for your sincere welcome and the wonderful impressions which I have experienced here in Israel - in Jerusalem whose small streets remind me very much of Vilnius. However, I need to answer the question which, I sense, hangs in the air in this chamber and to which you all await an answer. It is not merely a formal question to me as Head of State. It is one with a human dimension as well as one of conscience which touches me as a citizen of the country which I represent. It is a painful and difficult topic. For a long time it has been skirted, for a long time it has been avoided, and, perhaps, there has been fear in facing it straightforward.

But the memory of hundreds of thousands of Jews who lived in Lithuania, and of their sufferings does not allow many among my decent countrymen to remain at peace with themselves.

It must be admitted that the tendencies to suppress and to overshadow that which occurred, to relegate the very question to history and forget about it altogether, did exist among us, and not only in Lithuania alone. That was facilitated by the Bolshevik system which did not allow any open discussion of the events. Subsequently, when Lithuania became free, when everyone raised his own grievances, insufficient attention was unfortunately devoted to an appreciation of the Holocaust of the Jewish people.

How could it come to be that in full view of their fellow-citizens, and even with the direct participation of so many of them in the crimes, hundreds of thousands of Lithuanian Jews perished or were exiled, imprisoned, robbed, and humiliated during the course of World War Two? I, of course, can never agree that any nation could be inculpated with collective guilt. The Jewish people, more than any other, appreciates the baselessness of such accusations. Nevertheless, there exists a moral imperative for the nation as well as a personal obligation for the individual to comprehend that which occurred. In the final analysis, conscience and shame do exist. And we, in building a new, civil, and democratic Lithuania which extends her hand to the nations of the world, raise this question among ourselves.

We cannot bring the dead back to life or to lessen their agony. We cannot quiet those whose parents, brothers and sisters were killed. There were thousands of them, many thousands who could have lived, loved and taken pleasure in life. How many innocent souls today ask us in silence - why?

I am sorry that the Nazi occupation paralysed the powers of the nation and the state. The dark rabble which was unleashed began to annihilate the Jewish people. I deeply regret that at the time only selected citizens were able to extend a helping hand.

Honourable representatives of the Jewish nation!

If I could, I would address you in the words with which you begin every day and repeat thereafter: "Listen, Israel." From this podium, where many heads of state have stood, in the very heart of your history and of your state, I, the President of Lithuania, bow my head to the memory of the more than two hundred thousand Jews of Lithuania who were killed. I ask you for forgiveness for those Lithuanians who ruthlessly killed, shot, deported, and robbed Jews.

These are not easy words to pronounce. Not only Israel and the Jews need them. They are likewise needed by Lithuania and the Lithuanians. That is so because the Holocaust of the Jews was also the misfortune of Lithuania. That is so because the only way to achieve reconciliation and a coming to terms with history is through an acknowledgement of the truth. It is not enough just to ask for forgiveness. It is necessary constantly to be aware of what occurred. That is our path to the world of civilized Euro-

pean states from which we were severed over fifty years, first by the Nazi and thereafter by the Soviet occupations.

Difficult trials faced Lithuanians during the war and post-war years. The nation, and the members of the resistance in particular, were presented with a fate of prisons, camps, and deportation to Siberia. Other nations also faced losses, huge losses. But only the Jewish people became a victim in its own right as a whole nation. That must never be forgotten.

I am pleased that today, while building bridges between an independent Lithuania and Israel we are able to report more and more names of those Lithuanians who in the dark hour of history managed to maintain the honour of the Lithuanian nation, of those who can be numbered among the righteous of the world. We are creating laws corresponding to international norms which are designed to block expressions of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism in Lithuania. The Lithuanian Seimas adopted such a declaration last month. We are prepared to persecute war criminals and will do so publicly, consistently, and conscientiously.

In my country, mass graves of the killing of your people exist. In recent years, we have put into order hundreds of old Jewish cemeteries and places of mass execution. We utilise the full force of the law against vandals of cemeteries.

We are pleased that contemporary Jewish life continues pre-war traditions. Government funds have been used to restore the Jewish education. The State Jewish Museum inherited the property of the Jewish Museum closed by the Soviets which had been saved from destruction by the members of the Lithuanian intelligentsia. Genocide Day has been declared a day of national mourning, and the tragedy of the Jewish people is recounted in the textbooks of secondary schools.

It is a pleasure to announce that the State Archives of Lithuania and the YIVO Institute in New York have entered into cooperation agreement on the restoration, microfilming, cataloguing, and research of historical material of particular significance.

The cooperation which has begun in the investigation of instances of rehabilitation of individuals suspected of having participated in the genocide of the Jewish people is of particular importance. Just last week I issued a decree on this matter.

In general, it can be said that in spite of a not insignificant opposition from certain individuals and groups, the process of overcoming the past has begun. We are fully determined to continue that process.

On the question of the return of property of religious and social groups which had operated in Lithuania, I should like to note that buildings have been returned to Jewish communities in Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda. Others can reclaim property in accordance with the laws of the Republic of Lithuania, and on the basis of international law and good will.

Honourable Members of the Knesset!

I address you as the president of a reborn Lithuania - a Lithuania which is aware that truth should unite and not divide us, a truth to be constantly and gradually restored by historians in order to prevent the past from repeating itself. Education, especially that of youth, is of particular importance in Central and Eastern Europe where democracy has yet not passed the initial stages of development. In order that every resident of the country fully grasps that which occurred, we have begun to tell our youth about the tragic fate in those days of the Jewish people. I feel confident that this is an area in which we will cooperate. It is the duty not only of the state, but also of intellectuals, men of the arts and sciences in Lithuania and in Israel as well, once and for all to establish the truth about the Jewish Holocaust without any exclusion. Only after having absorbed and evaluated that which occurred can we become truly free.

In this land, it is imperative to remember the millennia-old Israelite struggle for the establishment and maintenance of a state which began a thousand years before the birth of Christ. Your resolve, unity, preservation of national identity, and nurturing of democracy in the face of oppression and the abundance of adversaries is very inspiring. In this respect, many parallels can be found with Lithuania and Lithuanians who likewise devoted considerable effort in maintaining statehood and weathering oppression. The words of the Jewish sage Theodore Hertzl have a profound meaning for me: "If you yearn for it - it no longer is a dream to live freely in your own land."

It is a great honour for me to speak here, in view of the honourable place which your country occupies in the commonwealth of world states, of its international authority and influence.

Both our countries live in a time of great change, full of risk and challenge, but likewise full of promise of unheard of opportunities. We - I am accompanied by members of parliament and of the cabinet, as well as by a large number of businessmen - have come here to discuss, to resolve and to act jointly.

We shall seek ways to activate the work of the Lithuanian-Israeli Inter-parliamentary Commission, inviting lawyers and historians to work together. We will create most favourable opportunities for Israelis to visit Lithuania, to trade and work there.

It is said that culture is the best ambassador of a country. Cultural exchange between us is already taking place. Expositions of Israeli artists were held in Kaunas and Vilnius last year. Our writers, artists and musicians could say much to each other.

Dialogues are the first - so to say "pontoon" - bridges between nations. Thereafter more solid structures follow. Who, if not you, are the initiators of the historic dialogue with your erstwhile enemies, known throughout the world as the Middle East Peace Process? As far as I know, Peace and Truth are called the "cornerstones of the world" in the writings of your sages. I cannot leave your country without stating that we, in Lithuania, are following and welcoming every step in the direction of peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You received us with open heart; thousands of kilometres and climatic zones separating Vilnius from Jerusalem have as if vanished. May these sister-cities be together for all time, standing forever open to each other.

Let us not forget the past, but let us also turn our eyes towards the future. The Lithuanian Embassy, recently established, will, I trust, contribute in the turning of a new page in the relations between our countries. Relations between our peoples and states depend on a mutual understanding of democratic values, on a similarity of social values, and, of course, on a common history. Lithuania appreciates Israeli achievements in economics and sciences. I see no reason why Lithuania and Israel could not cooperate more widely. We are already cooperating successfully at the United Nations, and in the Council of Europe, whose Commission on Culture and Education will devote its session in Vilnius this year to Yid-

dish culture. We are not competitors but partners in the development of the economic and commercial ties in the international arena. We could cooperate more effectively in the areas of ecology and culture, and more actively struggle against international terrorism. I would like to remind you of the fact that during the first half of this year Lithuania will become an associate member of the European Union, a development which opens up new political and economic horizons.

I sincerely thank the President of the Israeli State for his kind invitation to visit your country and all those who have contributed in making our stay so productive and memorable.

SHALOM UVRAKHA TO ALL OF YOU AND TO THE ENTIRE ISRAELI PEOPLE.

**SELECTION
OF DOCUMENTS ON JEWISH
HERITAGE AND PROBLEMS**

Compiled by E.Zingeris

Seimo leidykla
„Valstybės žinios“
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