

It is an honour and a pleasure once again to visit Israel – a meeting place of cultures and religions the cradle of the Book of Books as well as a primary source of European culture, the land which has been known since ancient times as the Promised Land. Your Excellency, President Peres,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure once again to visit your country – a meeting place of cultures and religions the cradle of the Book of Books as well as a primary source of European culture, the land which has been known since ancient times as the Promised Land, and which has been restored to become again the Jewish State. If footprints could speak, each step taken here would tell a tale of the rich culture and history of your country and groan under the weight of battles fought on this narrow strip of land.

Our respect belongs to all who have shed blood, sweat and tears in the name of their country and freedom. For Estonians, too, the dream of our own state is sacred and inviolable; no one has ever managed to force us to give up that dream. We have fought to win independence, for which we must also thank the Jews of Estonia who participated in our War of Independence alongside many others. Today, we face new, cross-border threats: we have had to repel cyber attacks, and we are building our energy security.

Mr. President, you have said that everyone is obliged to plan with care the stages of one's journey, but everyone is also entitled to dream, and keep dreaming, of one's destination. A though you have reached the land of your dreams, you have continued to aspire to new goals and moved determinedly on the path of peace and understanding, just like the Israeli nation as a whole.

A large part of today's population of Israel has come here from elsewhere, including Estonia. Time, wars and persecutions has scattered Estonians in the same manner. I, too, was born far from my homeland and dreamed of returning to my ancestral home in Viljandi County. I know what it feels to be cut off from your homeland, and that is why I have devoted much of my life to restoring that bond.

As some dreams come true, others take their place. We shall continue to consolidate our security and contribute to the spread of peace around the world. The Middle East peace process is no exception. As a Member State of the European Union, we view the need to find a comprehensive solution in the Middle East as a priority in our foreign policy.

We wish to foster closer ties with Israel – a strategic partner for both Estonia and the European Union. This prompted us to open the first ever Estonian Embassy in Tel Aviv, a plan that was realised two years ago. Now, the embassy must be strengthened – this will make it possible to focus more on establishing political and economic ties as well as contacts in education and research.

Mr. President, in 1934, when your family arrived in Tel Aviv from Wiszniewo, Estonia's honorary consul there was Maurice Litwinsky, manager of Litwinsky Brothers, a company

trading in citrus fruits. The Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had instructed Mr. Litwinsky to place special emphasis on the development of business relations. The Honorary Consul helped drive economic contacts; yet he later had to admit that Estonian exporters failed to take full advantage of the opportunities. We face the same challenge today, and hence I hope that tomorrow's economic seminar will succeed in bringing together entrepreneurs from our two countries.

Although the global economic downturn has affected us all, we have learned our lessons and have started building better safeguards to face future storms. As largely export-oriented states, we both depend on foreign markets, but our recent accession to the OECD will certainly help secure a balance. This is definitely a mark of quality for both of us, as well as a platform enabling Estonia and Israel to benefit from shared experience.

Cooperation in the areas of education and research has good prospects as well, for example in the development of clean energy solutions – as we saw when visiting “Better Place” – and in genetic engineering. The Journal "Nature" recently published a study of the origin of Jews conducted by an international group of scientists led by researchers from the University of Tartu.

Their research confirms that in addition to being a nation with strong cultural links and traditions, Jews are also a nation with a common ethnic origin whose genetic continuity has remained unbroken for thousands of years, despite the twists and turns of history.

We hope to see more Estonian researchers working in Israel's research institutions and to welcome more Israeli students in Estonia. At the end of the 19th century some 300 Jewish students studied at the University of Tartu, accounting for as much as 20% of the total student body. In 1933 the University of Tartu also became the third university in the world to establish a chair of Jewish studies.

According to historical records, the first Jew – Johannes Jode – settled in Tallinn as early as 1333. A larger Jewish community began to form in Estonia in the mid-19th century, when those who had served in the Russian army were allowed to freely choose their place of residence. As a result, the first Jewish congregations were established in the country and the Jewish National School was opened in Tartu 135 years ago.

When Jaan Lattik, a writer and later the Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited the Holy Land in 1925, he met a local doctor who had been born in Viljandi County and graduated from the University of Tartu. He also met the doctor's son, who had studied at the Jewish school in Estonia and was able to play the Estonian national anthem on the violin, as well as several other Jews who spoke well of Estonia – the land in which they were born. I felt the same pride at yesterday's meeting with the Jews who have come here from Estonia.

Our paths are intertwined, and we share a similar historical experience. The greeting to the Constituent Assembly stated of the first Congress of Jewish Congregations in Estonia, meeting in Tallinn in spring 1919,: “The Estonian people have certainly understood the importance of the harmonious co-existence of nations and came to know the circumstances that make such

harmony between nations in a young democratic state possible.” We understood it then, and we understand it now. That is what prompted the young Republic of Estonia to include unique provisions protecting the rights of ethnic minorities in its very first constitution, and to respect these provisions. Thus, it is no accident that Estonia was the first country in the world where the Jews could proclaim their cultural autonomy, on 6 June 1926. That is why Estonia has the honour of being included in the Jews’ Golden Book.

I am also proud that during the Soviet Occupation Estonia was free of the anti-Semitism that plagued Russia, which led many Jewish intellectuals to seek a haven in the liberal environment of Tartu University. Most notably the renowned scholar Juri Lotman. The Jewish Diaspora in Estonia has been free to grow and develop, and this has expanded our world, too. Estonia has greatly benefited from the contribution of Jews in culture, science and economy. Take, for example, Juri, Mihhail and Aleksei Lotman; Anna and Eri Klas; and Adik Levin, to name but a few.

I am proud too, that the names of Uku Masing and his wife have been carved on stone on Yad Vashem’s Avenue of the Righteous among the Nations: the names of those who did not forget and who remained true to their ideals. A memorial tree grows there whose branches stretch towards the light, symbolising the aspirations of our nations, nourished for thousands of years. The tree blooms in Spring and each of its new leaves adds hope for the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us raise glasses to the State and people of Israel and to the success of peace efforts! Here’s to you, Mr. President!