

**Address of the President of Portugal, Mário Soares
to the Knesset Plenum
Jerusalem, 1 November 1995**

(Unofficial translation)

Honorable prime minister, distinguished Knesset members, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great excitement and a sense of great respect that I address the Knesset – the parliamentary institution which turns the wheels of democracy and whose very name relates to thousands of years of the Jewish nation's history.

I do not want to continue with my speech without first expressing my gratitude for the inspiring words spoken by the speaker, by the prime minister, my friend Yitzhak Rabin, and by the Knesset member who just spoke on behalf of Likud. I thank them all for their words.

I am aware of the major significance attached to the fact that during my visit to Israel I have been given an opportunity to meet with you, distinguished members of Knesset, in this place, which is a real "Beit-Knesset."

I have been a member of parliament since the establishment of democracy in Portugal, and I am very proud of this, because in these times – in a modern society that gets so much coverage from the press - the institution of the parliament constitutes a crucial center for any democratic regime, despite the obvious current crises in every democratic regime – governmental crises. The parliament reflects the strength and value of freedom.

Prior to the inception of the State of Israel, the Jewish people walked along a very long path, which often involved uncertainty and difficulties, and often involved the horrors of violence and persecution. Despite this, the Jewish nation has never lost its identity.

The Inquisition in certain Catholic states, such as my own, was a movement that persecuted the Jews with unusual violence. As for Portugal, it was one of the saddest and darkest periods in our history. During that time and in its aftermath, Portugal's Jews were forced to convert to Christianity or leave Portugal in order to flee the intolerance and the auto-da-fé, merely because they believed in a different religion and because some of their leaders were a bit different from the leaders of their compatriots.

My family is a family with a republican and liberal tradition, and since I was a teenager I participated in the struggle against oppression and in favor of the noble values of liberty, respect for the other and the different, tolerance and solidarity. These struggles made me very familiar with prisons, torture and deportations. It is obvious, therefore, why I understand the persecutions so well.

This past of mine explains why I felt obligated, as president of the Republic of Portugal, to ask in Portugal's name forgiveness from the Jews for the persecutions they fell victim to during the Inquisition and in its aftermath, although those were more concealed

persecutions. In this request for forgiveness, it is inconceivable to me that it is possible to apologize for the unforgivable or to fix the unfixable. My only desire is to stir the conscience of my compatriots and cause them to accept responsibility and reconciliation with an act of justice; a lone but symbolic act.

With this act toward the Jewish community and an ancient nation that was rehabilitated, I wanted to prove that following the democratic revolution of April 25, 1974 Portugal is now a free, open and tolerant country which has returned to its ancient tradition of humanism.

The Holocaust of the Jewish people in this century shows what horrors fanaticism and racism can lead to in the name of totalitarian ideologies. I honor here the memory of the millions of Jews who fell victim to the Nazi persecutions and other persecutions. My intention in mentioning these atrocities is to contribute to preventing them from ever happening again.

As my esteemed friend Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel said - by virtue of the status his past has granted him – "To forget a Holocaust is to kill twice." It is not an exaggeration to quote him, particularly when racism, the hatred of foreigners and religious fundamentalism are resurfacing from different sides and are succeeding in establishing themselves and posing a threat within a wave of intolerance which proves how short some people's memory is, and how much this memory continues to be short.

For ideological reasons, the Salazar dictatorship did not forge diplomatic ties with Israel. We were forced to wait until the revolution dubbed the "Carnation Revolution" - meaning the democratic revolution of April 25, 1974 - in order to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries. By virtue of my role as foreign minister I began this process, which I had the honor of completing while serving as prime minister.

As deputy president of the Socialist International I was appointed by Willy Brandt to monitor the problems in the Middle East because I visited the region - and particularly Israel, your country - on several occasions. These [visits] allowed me to establish ties with political parties and distinguished figures such as Golda Meir, Abba Eban, Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, as well as with my friends Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

Therefore, I followed from up close the development of the peace process in the Middle East. As fate would have it, two of these figures, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, played - with a lot of courage and with a very realistic approach – a decisive role in the launching of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, which eventually led to the historic peace agreements.

Allow me to emphasize the part Yasser Arafat played in these agreements. He also displayed a lot of courage when he chose to follow the path of dialogue.

The actions of these people were appreciated by most of the international community, and they were justifiably praised and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

I hope the current peace process will expand to other countries in the region - as was the case with Jordan - and will eventually bring about a comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East. All efforts must be put into achieving this goal, so that the two nations, the Jewish and Arab [nations], which have suffered so much in the past, will finally be able to build co-existence in peace out of mutual respect for their cultural and religious identity.

The solution to the Mideast problem lies in the solution to the Palestinian problem, but by the same measure Israel's right to exist in peace and security within its borders should be given precedence. Therefore, the fact that fanatical groups continue with acts of terror against defenseless civilians while so many [problems] are resolved through dialogue is unacceptable and arouses contempt.

The dialogue which began in the Middle East and the negotiations on the expansion of cooperation will undoubtedly allow Israel and its neighbors to develop a genuine mutual economic policy that will surely contribute to improving the conditions of life and to the wellbeing of the populations.

There is both a challenge and a sacred obligation here, because while it is true that peace cannot be established on the basis of injustice and intolerance, it is also true that it will be difficult for peace to come amid conditions of intolerable poverty and under-development.

The European Union - which unites within it countries that had fought each other for hundreds of years and knew how to end the rivalry, then reconciled and created a real society which the entire world looks up to – will not shirk its responsibility regarding the large amount of support that should be given to the countries of the Middle East, particularly Israel, because solidarity is one of the values of the Europe we are currently building.

In conclusion, I wish to thank you for the warm welcome and once again say what a pleasure it has been for me to be here with you in this honorable House, the Knesset, and what an honor it has been for me to speak here before all of you.

Mazel Tov. Peace for all of us.