

**Address of the President of Bulgaria, Zhelyu Zhelev
to the Knesset Plenum
Jerusalem, 6 December 1993**
(Unofficial translation)

I could not refuse the courteous invitation to speak before the Knesset during my first official visit to the State of Israel. This forum symbolizes the wisdom and the ancient tradition of the Jewish people. Furthermore, as a modern parliament, it symbolizes the democratic aspirations of Israel's free citizens.

Bulgaria has a special historic connection with Israel, which began with the Roman Empire and the dawn of Christianity, when many Jews found refuge in our lands. We remember the criticism leveled by Pope Gregory II against Bulgarian King Ivan Asen II, as early as the 13th century, for giving the Jews refuge in his land.

In 1492 many of the Spanish Jews who were expelled from their land settled in Bulgarian cities and established their communities there. One such city is Nikopol on the bank of the Danube, where Rabbi Yosef Caro began his work on the famous "Shulchan Aruch," the masterpiece of Jewish theology, which he later completed in Safed.

Lately we have been sensing an increasing need to mention examples from the distant past which prove that many nations, including the Jews and the Bulgarians, have a part in the culture and tradition of Europe.

Bulgaria and Israel are countries at a crossroads. Both served as a melting pot for a variety of cultural and historical traditions from which a distinct uniqueness was formed, and [both countries] have an aspiration for cooperation, tolerance and mutual enrichment.

So wrote Elias Canetti, the Nobel Prize for Literature laureate, about the city of Ruse, his birthplace, in his book "The Tongue Set Free": "To simply say that it is in Bulgaria would not give you an accurate idea of the place inhabited by different races: Bulgarians and Turks, Spanish Jews and Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, gypsies."

I'll allow myself another quote, this time from reports sent to Berlin by Beckerle, the German ambassador in Sofia, in 1943. He explains the efforts to save Bulgaria's Jews from the fate that befell their brothers during the Holocaust in terms of "the mentality of the Bulgarian nation, which lacks the clarity of our ideological vision. Having grown up among Turks, Jews, Armenians, the Bulgarian people have not observed in the Jews faults which would warrant ... special measures against them."

Mr. Speaker, Members of Knesset, I recall these words not only because this year the public in Bulgaria, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom and in other places marked the 50th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews and bowed its head in memory of the Jews of Macedonia and the Aegean region, who passed through Bulgaria on their way to extermination. The mercy and the public spirit displayed during the dark years of World War Two are a valuable example, which is an inspiration for us, for the younger generations that learn about these events at "Yad Vashem," at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and other places.

Tolerance is a prerequisite for democracy; anti-Semitism is its contradiction. This is Bulgaria's message to all of Europe, and particularly to the Council of Europe, which is supposed to prevent any renewal of xenophobia and anti-Semitism in Europe.

One would be hard-pressed to find a greater challenge to Eastern Europe's democracy than wild nationalism, chauvinism, favoritism and calls for "ethnically clean countries." Indeed, this is just a small part of the problems involved in the transition to democracy and a market economy, but these problems are at the root of severe conflicts and they may embroil nations in wars and acts of hatred. It seems to me that it is pointless to speak at length to the people of Israel about such issues. Suffice it to say that you named a park in Jerusalem after Andrei Sakharov.

The collapse of the Communist system put an end to the artificial division in international life and to the division of the world into ideological camps and blocs. Still, we are not certain that we possess the necessary impetus to implement the change, but today the world is much more open to a new kind of communication and is willing to examine new methods of free development.

The latest wave of the resumption of diplomatic ties between Israel and most of the Eastern European countries is a good example of the natural expression of the new international relations, which are free of any ideological restraint. On May 3, 1990 Bulgaria and Israel agreed to renew the official relations between them, and today we can only be thankful for this decision from the grand perspective of this event.

Operation "Desert Storm" was needed in order to clear the air in the Middle East. Of course, we gave our full support and expressed our deep appreciation for the courage and restraint Israel displayed at that time.

It took even more courage on the part of the Israeli government to take steps toward peace and good neighborly relations; to take part in the Madrid Conference and the multilateral and bilateral negotiations which followed it; to sign and ratify the declaration of principles from September 13, 1993 along with the Palestinian representatives; to propose new methods of negotiation towards understanding with its Arab neighbors. We believe that your attitude will find a sympathetic ear and reciprocation on the other side, in order to resolve the entanglement of contradictions.

In its active policy of dialogue with all the countries of the Middle East, Bulgaria is willing to contribute as best it can to the success of the peace process, which is the only way to overcome the hostile atmosphere that has been created over the years between the countries involved in the conflict.

I promise you once again that Bulgaria views the existence and security of the State of Israel as a crucial component in any agreement in the Middle East, based on Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.

We are aware of the significance of building a comprehensive and long-lasting peace in the Middle East. This is both a difficult and noble task. It requires a consistent and well-planned approach ahead of a solution to the severe problems which befall every nation; this includes a just and long-lasting solution to the Palestinian problem.

Bulgaria understands very well and joins the regional policy that aims to integrate national interests with the prosperity and stability of all the neighboring nations. The Balkans and the Middle East are sensitive from a diplomatic perspective, and the rule "choose your neighbor before you choose your home" does not apply within [these regions]. We are very familiar with the sad sight of disconnected train tracks at the border, like at Rosh Hanikra, and we know that every bridge, be it on the Jordan River or the Danube River, is built to bridge between people, between two banks.

From this stems Bulgaria's desire to contribute in practice to the building of peace, to mutual trust and to the economic prosperity of the Middle East through the direct participation of construction workers, engineers and other experts. An economic surge is possible only under the conditions of free trade, business relations and exchange of information, which eventually work against any economic boycott.

The State of Israel is a state of stones, not only due to its geological nature, but also because a stone was lifted from the heart of every Jew who came here, and the land became a flourishing garden. You have done wonders in agriculture. The Bulgarians were also good gardeners, particularly along the Danube River. Gardens flourished wherever Bulgarians settled. We will be able to accomplish a lot if we share our experience and traditions in the field of agriculture.

Furthermore, the complicated agrarian reform we began in Bulgaria may contribute a lot to the cooperation between us in the future.

An additional point: When peace will have existed for a long time between the olive trees of Gethsemane, the number of tourists and pilgrims will grow. When we read the travel records and the memoirs of pilgrims from the past, we often find compliments on the reception at the monasteries and hostels in Bulgaria, to which the pilgrims came in order to rest during their journey to the Holy Land. Within this there is another common element of our good historic tradition, with implications on the times we live in today.

Boris Schatz, one of the people who founded Sofia's Royal Academy of Art at the end of the 19th century, would later found the Bezalel academy. There is a

long list of authors, poets and artists who have the ability to shape and advance the cultural relations between us, providing that we give them the proper conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Members of Knesset, as a continuation to this week, the foreign ministers of the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation will meet in Sofia. One of the topics that will be on the agenda is granting Israel observer status.

Among other multilateral documents, our countries' foreign ministers will sign an agreement for defense and mutual encouragement of investments, and I hope it will be ratified by the Knesset and the Bulgarian National Assembly.

Moreover, about a tenth of the Knesset Members, from various political parties, set up a friendship group with Bulgaria which plans to maintain direct ties with Bulgarian members of parliament.

The special sittings of the Bulgarian National Assembly, which the president of the State of Israel and the Knesset Speaker addressed, were important milestones in the life of the Bulgarian parliament. It should be noted that Mr. Shevach Weiss dedicated his speech to the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews.

I hope Israel is willing to participate, with all its force, in the process of transitioning to democracy and a market economy, which is currently underway in a number of Eastern European countries, including Bulgaria. The experience the State of Israel has gained since the day Resolution 181 was passed, as well as its current role in international organizations, serves as undeniable proof of the invaluable support the West can and should give to our country, which chose democracy and free enterprise.

Indeed, we can describe this crucial period in Bulgarian history as a time of decision-making. These days, people and nations must choose the right values as they develop. Now that we have done this, we can combine our efforts on the basis of the common interests, the friendship and the mutual trust that exists between us, in the spirit of our joint tradition and our understanding of the meaning of good and evil, in order to renew the ancient bridges between us and to build new ones.

You are correct when you say in Hebrew that a person does not merely arrive in Jerusalem, he ascends to it. I saw this today on my way to the Knesset in order to bring you the best wishes of my people.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here and for your patience.