

My friends, I remember very clearly my beloved Rabbi Howard Kahn, *alav hashalom*, saying that our synagogue might have speakers come in on any six nights, but on Friday night, it was his pulpit. I've never wavered from that. But this is a special year, the English year 2017, and today, someone near to our hearts will be addressing you now.

Dear friends, I am so happy to be with you this year on Rosh Hashanah. I've been with you most every year, but I was not here last year. I am so happy to be back.

I should start out by introducing myself to you. I've been known by different names at different times in history. If you look in the Bible, you will see me called *eretz Israel*, the Land of Israel. The Torah describes me as אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ, a land flowing with milk and honey. For centuries, I was incorrectly called Palestine. Palestine was never my name, any more than the Midwest is the name of Indiana. Indiana is in the region called the Midwest, and I was in the region called Palestine, but that was never my name. The region was called Palestine to irritate my Jewish children. The name derives from the Philistines, a great enemy of my Jewish children in the Bible.

Goliath was a Philistine, and David was an Israelite. We'll talk more about David and Goliath later. For now, I'll go on introducing myself. Today you know me as *medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel. Yes, my friends, my children, it is I who have come to speak to you today. I am Israel. I am much smaller today than I was in Biblical times, but I am still here.

As the State of Israel, I am sixty-nine years old. I remember well when I was born. I was supposed to have a twin sister. We would not have been identical twins, she would have been bigger than I was, but we would have been born at the same time, children of the same mother. Sadly, my twin sister was never born. Those who would have cared for her refused to let her be born. Had they let her be born, they would have had to accept that I, too, would be born. They chose not to have a child at all rather than have a child with me as her sister. How different history would have been had they made a different choice.

So I was born in May of 1948, but I almost died at birth. One I was only one day old, I was stricken with five potentially fatal diseases: Egypt, Lebanon, Transjordan, Syria, and Iraq. Most people think any one of them could have killed me. How could I

survive an attack by all five as a newborn? I did survive. Some still consider it a miracle. I survived, but even on my first day of life, I had children. I survived in 1948, but almost 6,400 of my children died fighting to save me.

Today, at sixty-nine, I am the most misunderstood country on Earth. I am seen as an oppressor, and some even accuse me of apartheid. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am one of the most decent and liberal democracies in the world. I have the most moral army in the world defending me, one that warns its enemies of its plans to try to save innocent lives. I need my army. I am the only country in the world whose right to exist is questioned. Do I claim to be perfect, or to have only perfect defenders? Of course not. But I do claim to be good and decent. My defense forces have kept me alive through many crises in my sixty-nine years. That is a blessing, but it seems that with every blessing comes a curse. The world no longer sees me as a one day old David battling for life against five Goliaths. Much of that perception is the result of something that happened to me fifty years ago, when I was just nineteen. What happened when I was nineteen, fifty years ago this past June, was what you know as the Six Day War.

Many accuse me of starting that war. I didn't. Those who had tried to kill me at birth still wanted me dead. Nasser of Egypt had been bellowing about destroying me and pushing my children into the sea. But he went beyond mere threats. I am at the north end of the Red Sea, the real Red Sea, not what we call the Red Sea which is really the Sea of Reeds, the one that Moses split. My ships would reach international shipping lanes by sailing south and leaving the Red Sea through a narrow pass called the Strait of Tiran. That was how my commercial ships would get to the Gulf of Aqaba. Nasser did not want me there. He cut off my access and used sea mines to stop my ships from trying to pass through. Under international law, that was an act of war.

But that was not all. Egypt and Syria began massing troops on my borders. So let me ask you a question, my friends. If someone said he wanted to kill you and then put a gun to your head, would you wait to defend yourself until after he pulled the trigger? So yes, I attacked first, but a state of war already existed.

Many accuse me of starting the war, and not in order to protect myself. I had no intention of capturing the Golan

Heights, or the West Bank, or even unifying the divided city of Jerusalem. People who think that way are making a mistake. They are not looking at me through the lens of 5727, or as you would might remember it better, 1967. Of course it broke my heart to have Jerusalem divided, with one of those who tried to kill me, Jordan, controlling my heart and soul, the ancient walled city of Jerusalem. But do you know how I can prove I had no intention of even reuniting my capital? **Because I did not think I could win that war.** At nineteen, I was still very much a David, an underdog with not one but many powerful enemies. Today, my best friend is the United States, but we had no strategic alliance yet. Just as when I was born, my very survival was in jeopardy.

Do you remember I told you that I lost over 6,000 of my children fighting for my life when I was born? I am a country with a Jewish soul. When I see that number, I do not see over 6,000 lives. I see over 6,000 *universes*. I see the children, the grandchildren the great-grandchildren who would never be born, because that is how a Jew views life, and I am Jewish. So imagine how I felt when my crust was broken, time and time again, as my children prepared for the war they feared was

coming by digging *ten thousand graves*. *Ten thousand universes* were expected to be lost. Do you think I would start a war thinking that I would lose ten thousand universes?

Where was America, my closest and dearest friend? The answer is we became so close after the ceasefire, on the seventh day, so to speak. I did not have American arms in June of 1967. I had a little—very little—help from France. I had no proven track record that would have made America see me as a crucial ally to have. I am delighted at our relationship today, but it was very different fifty years ago.

Today, those who hate me call me an occupier. When I was nineteen and Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip, why were they not called occupiers? Why was Jordan, with a Hashemite king over a Palestinian majority not called an apartheid state, nor called an occupier for annexing the West Bank? Why did my enemies want to kill me decades before there were such a thing as settlements? When I was younger, I might have stamped by foot and cried, “No fair!” Today, I just try to do the best I can.

There are two more things I must say before I leave you today, especially to those who only see me as a powerful occupying force, and those who thought I would risk my

children' lives to take control of the West Bank. I made a promise to Jordan before the war started: if you leave me alone, I will not enter the West Bank at all. What was Jordan's response? They shelled my children from the West Bank. I tried again. I promised that if they stopped the shelling from the West Bank, I would pretend it never happened. I would not retaliate. They kept right on shooting rockets at my children, so yes, then we did enter the West Bank to stop them. That's when we reunited Jerusalem. That's when the famous three words went out over military radios, "*Har habayit b'yadeinu,*" the Temple Mount is in our hands. Many of my children wept with joy at those words. Many still cannot say them without their voices catching with emotion. "*Har habayit b'yadeinu,*" the most famous three words of the Six Day War.

The second thing I must say before I leave are the most infamous words associated with the Six Day War. Really, it is only one word that was said three times. Do you remember I said I have the most moral army in the world? My army made an offer no other army ever made, as far as I know, after capturing land in self defense. I made an offer fifty years ago: I will leave all the land we have captured in return for peace treaties. Did I

mean it? Ask the family of Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt in the 1970s. They will tell you that when he made peace with me, I gave him back the Sinai Peninsula, with all of its oil, a resource with which I am not blessed. Also, ask his family how he died. They will tell you, correctly, that he was murdered not by my children, but by his own people for making peace with me. So I meant what I said. Make peace with me, and take back your land. What word was said three times in response? No, no, and no. No peace treaties. No negotiations for peace treaties, and no recognition of me and my right to exist.

My dear friends, those days seem like a lifetime ago. Indeed, they are: I am only sixty-nine, and that was fifty years ago, most of my lifetime. My national anthem, as you know, is *HaTikvah*, The Hope, the hope that my children will live with safety and security in their land. But I also cling to a second hope, the hope that my unborn sister may yet come into this world. Yes, my friends, I want that and so do most of my children, but at sixty-nine, having survived so much since I was born, I have come to know that just any sister will not do. I cannot have a sister who wants to destroy me. I already have too many neighbors with that desire. But a sister who can live with me, even if she

doesn't love me the way I hope she will, but at least is willing to acknowledge that we both have a place on this earth, that we have an equal right to exist, and that both of us will have better lives and our children will have better lives if my sister is not obsessed with destroying me, and if I do not have to worry every day if some of my children will be killed or maimed or kidnapped. A sister who can simply accept that we live nearby one another—is that so much to ask? It is really all I want. You are my dear friends, and you work to help bring that day about. I do not ask to be seen as perfect. No nation is. I ask to be seen as worthy of your love, worthy of your support, and a valuable friend to your great nation. I ask for peace. My children grow up singing songs of peace. May we all live to see the day when those who say that peace with my neighbors is impossible are proven wrong. That is my *tikvah*. That is my hope. That, and that all of you and all of my children at home should be blessed with a good and sweet year. *Shanah tovah*.