

**Address by President Shimon Peres to the United Nations General
Assembly Interfaith Conference - High Level Meeting on the Culture of
Peace**

November 12, 2008

Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary General,
Your Majesty,
Your Majesties,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Earlier this week, we commemorated 13 years since the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin - my friend and partner to our journey. He was murdered while singing a song of peace. Assassins may take a life, but they cannot kill a dream. That fateful night at the square, we stood together and sang of peace, the aspiration of my people for generations. Then came three shots.

However, we were not alone in our despair. Many who cherished Rabin's vision from around the world came to stand at our side and share our grief. Arab and Muslim leaders came, and at the time it felt like sorrow shattered barriers. Tragedy had united the sons and daughters of all religions. Our shared agony shed light on our shared hopes, our hunger for fraternity, the dream of peace which we nurtured in our hearts.

Mr. President,

In our region, children bear the names of prophets who are sacred to us all. Why should Moses, Moshe, and Musa, Avraham, Abraham and Ibrahim grow up as adversaries, in animosity? As our prophets asked: "Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us? Why do we deal deceitfully every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers?" And Abraham added to his nephew Lot: "Please let there be no strife between me and you, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are kinsmen."

That was the first call for peace among brothers in history. Brotherly relations should not involve violence or domination. We all worship the same Lord in Heaven.

Religion carries the word of God to man, as is written in Psalms: "What man is he that desires life and loves many days that he may see good? Depart from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it."

Religious belief requires that we recognize the eternal message that all men were created in God's image. Harming a human being is tantamount to harming God himself. When nuclear weapons, long-range missiles, indiscriminate terror and fanatical incitement determine the agenda, we have to change that agenda.

Mr. President,

The Jewish and Arab national revivals occurred at almost the same time and in almost the same place. They occurred rapidly and in a land that was small. However, after the First World War, a window of opportunity was opened when Emir Feisal and President Weizmann aspired to create a new environment. They met 89 years ago, in November of 1919 to announce an understanding between the two peoples from the same crib, who could have lived under the shadow of the same trees - the old olives and tall date.

Their declaration states: "Mindful of the racial kinship and ancient bonds existing between the Arabs and the Jewish people, and realizing that the surest means of working out the consummation of their national aspirations, is through the closest possible collaboration."

This was great statesmanship and timely wisdom.

Alas, we did not take heed of them. Instead, we confronted one another, abandoning faith for greed and forging swords instead of peace. They tore apart the land and increased hostility, resulting in a region of barriers and walls that rose higher, destroying any bridges that may have been built. Hundreds of thousands of men and women from all sides lost their lives. Many were incurably injured; others lost their homes and became refugees. Fortunes were wasted on the purchase, maintenance and replacement of new weapons that inevitably became obsolete - resources were spent on sustaining hostility instead of advancing life.

There can be no consolation for the bereaved families or orphaned children other than the end of violence and bloodshed.

There is an Arab proverb that states that there are three events that cannot be reversed: an arrow released from its bow; a word which has escaped one's mouth; and a bullet that splits the heart. We cannot change the past. However, we can shape our future.

This seems more feasible today in light of the Saudi proposal which evolved into a Arab peace initiative. The initiative's portrayal of our region's future provides hope to the people and inspires confidence in the nations.

Yes - in order to change the world we have to change ourselves.

The Arab peace initiative states that: "A military solution to the conflict will not achieve peace or provide security for the parties." Israel agrees with that assumption. Further on, the initiative states that: "A just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East is the strategic option of the Arab countries."

This is Israel's strategy as well.

It continues that its goals are to: "...consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the

states in the region. Establish normal relations with Israel in the context of comprehensive peace. Stop the further shedding of blood, enabling the Arab countries and Israel to live in peace and good neighborliness, and provide future generations with security, stability and prosperity."

These expressions in the Arab peace initiative are inspirational and promising - a serious opening for real progress.

A comprehensive regional peace requires the completion of the bilateral negotiations with the Palestinians and sharing the painful cost. We are ready for this as we have proved many times in the past. 30 years ago when the peace accords with Egypt were signed; 15 years ago when the Oslo process began; 14 years ago when the peace agreement with Jordan was signed; eight years ago when we withdrew completely from Lebanon; and three years ago when we evacuated Gaza and dismantled willingly all our settlements there. Today we are making progress with the negotiations with the Palestinians; we are exploring the possibility of real peace with the Syrians, the last in the list of the historic conflicts.

However, there are those in our region who sow hatred and try to widen the abyss and erect barriers, those who seek to wipe out other people and encourage killing. In order to stand up against those who instigate discord and violence, we must bear the flag of brotherhood and peace. This will be a beacon for a world in trouble. It will end many conflicts and offer a comprehensive peace for all people - real freedom without domination or occupation; global economic cooperation and cultural relations - a new vision for the entire region.

I know it is harder to pursue peace than to wage war; building is more difficult than destruction. Yet, this is my life experience - it is worthwhile to strive for peace and build homes. This is the proper biography for men of good will. For the sake of our children, let us break the bonds of hostility which stem from the past. When the world faces a serious crisis, let us offer a new remedy to overcome old maladies. The global crisis worries us just as our crisis worries the world. However, we can adopt a position acceptable to the entire world without erasing our national identities and offering global opportunities.

This meeting of religious leaders can produce a movement of profound significance and one which will bear great responsibility. By calling on their believers to serve peace in every nation for all nations, for every person and for all peoples, the bridges we build will render the barriers useless. Let us free the world from the perception that an irrevocable curse darkens the skies of our region.

Our shared history has known golden ages during which we lived as friends and brothers. Interfaith dialogue will elevate our spirits, bring a breath of fresh air to our peoples today and live on in posterity. Let us renew our faith in one God. This is the duty and responsibility of all states and religious leaders. Let us not recoil from hardship; we must not hesitate when faced with risk.

Working for peace will justify our prayers and bring a new sense of purpose to our lives; it will demonstrate our values to our children. Peace is not just a goal. It is a promise made to us at the dawn of time and the pinnacle of the holiest mountain. Let's claim them together.