Knesset Speaker Mr. Burg, Prime Minister Barak, Opposition leader Sharon,

I address the things you have said and thank you for them. This is my first visit to Israel. I have come here as the president of the Italian Republic in order to bring to you a message of friendship and a will to base on solid foundations the ties between our two nations and (the ties) with the European continent. But I have also come here to become more familiar with your country, culture and institutions.

It is an honor to be invited to speak before the members of this Knesset. I am aware of the Knesset's central role in the important and crucial decisions in the people's lives. I feel a special thrill in light of the historic significance and the civil values which are embedded in this institution. Its name essentially stems from the Great Knesset which would convene following the return of the Jews to Zion from the Babylonian Exile.

The Knesset serves as a loyal reflection of Israeli society. The large percentage of new immigrants in (Israel) serves as proof and testament of dynamism. The presence of minorities, mainly the Arab minority, serves as proof of ethnic and cultural pluralism that is worthy of admiration.

I am well aware of the universal values that are embodied in the city of Jerusalem. In the world's consciousness, Jerusalem, the holy city whose name contains the word 'peace', is a symbol of unique sanctity.

Today, like thousands of years ago, a pilgrim who sees Jerusalem hears in his soul the echo of the words of the Psalms hymn "Hine ma tov u'manayim, shevet achim gam yachad."

Perhaps I may express another thought as a man who experienced the years of World War Two and later dedicated a significant part of his life to the rehabilitation of Europe in order to establish a new peace between nations that have fought each other for hundreds of years: Perhaps shevet achim gam yachad is even more beautiful when these brothers were bitter enemies in the past.

Let us hope that all the nations will ascend Mount Zion in this spirit. This wish stems from the excitement Jerusalem's spirit instills in me. This spirit can be preserved only by the rule of co-existence, with mutual respect between all the recognized communities in the framework of the three monotheistic religions: The Jewish, Christian and Muslim (religions).

This hope has always existed in the Knesset. The words of (deceased) Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to the Knesset on December 5, 1949 still resonate today – when he officially
announced Israel's commitment to respect all the rights related to holy sites and structures in Jerusalem, to allow free access without discrimination and to preserve freedom of ritual.

Mr. Speaker, Italy and Israel have many things in common: A history that goes back thousands of years and which feeds the cultures, religions and civil values of society in our countries; a more recent past which drew inspiration from the ideal of national independence; a present characterized by a democratic and pluralistic state that is based on law; economic and social advancement and, ultimately, the aspiration to establish a future of peace in the world.

We can and must work together since we belong to the same region of the world and because we want to promote the Mediterranean Basin as an economic and cultural center, as was the case throughout history.

Most of our thoughts focus on the dream of peace. Today, in this area, which has seen much suffering, it is not just about a dream; it is about real opportunity. The peace process has overcome great obstacles. First and foremost, I wish to express my appreciation for those statesmen who knew how to elevate themselves above decades of hatred and conflicts, since that day in November 1977 when Anwar Sadat, during his historic visit to the Knesset, following Menahem Begin's invitation, was the first to smash the Arab world's 'wall of refusal' with regards to the State of Israel. In the ensuing negotiations, until the signing of a peace agreement with an Arab country, President Weizman had a key role. We also have to thank President Mubarak for his important role in the peace process.

And once again I recall the Yitzhak Rabin's words, his last words, before the hand of the crazed murderer etched them in Israel's consciousness forever. I believe, he said, that there exists today an opportunity for peace, a big and real opportunity, and we must seize it. The people truly want peace; peace not just in prayer; peace that is the aspiration of the Jewish nation.

And there were King Hussein's remarks at Rabin's grave: "You lived as a soldier; you died as a soldier for peace...We belong to the peace camp. We believe in peace. We believe that the one and only God wishes peace upon us."

Allow me to express my warm appreciation for the memorandum of understandings reached at Sharm el-Sheikh, which updates the Wye accords, which are also the result of a process that is accompanied by great courage; and the leaders who made the signing of the accords possible: Benjamin Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat, and alongside them President Clinton and King Hussein. The implementation of those agreements and the agreements that still need to be completed by September of next year, as well as the negotiations for a permanent agreement, will require wisdom and long-term vision. The latest agreements between Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat represented a new phase on a long and winding road, but also the beginning of a critical phase in which a timetable, which must be respected, was set.
And end to hostilities is not enough. The signing of agreements is not enough. What is needed is peace – a peace that will remove the anxiety and the need to look over one's shoulder in fear of the human and economic costs; a peace that will guarantee full security from the threat of war, the nightmare of terror and the trap of the weapon of mass destruction.

Israel must know that the call for peace coming from Italy and Europe, and from all the friendly countries, is a call for a just peace, but also for a secure peace; security that will allow the people of Israel to benefit from the peace without fear.

Mr. Speaker, you are not alone on the road to a lasting peace. The United States has confirmed its commitment to support the efforts to bring about peace. The European Union promised every possible support. On behalf of Italy, which is one of the founding countries of the Union, I officially confirm this promise today.

It is clear that the path to an agreement was a choice of Israel and the Palestinians. It could not have been any other way. Only they can decide on the fate of the future negotiations. Friendly countries cannot replace the sides and determine their fate. The United States and Europe can assume the role of helping to achieve peace and complete the rehabilitation and development work, which is so vital. We, on our part, suggest that those goals be determined. Much work is required in order to achieve them, and we will never have an excess of means towards this goal. Together, Americans and Europeans can promote the international community's commitment to support the peace efforts and bring about a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East on the basis of the Security Council's resolutions.

Further progress in the implementation of the timetable of the Sharm El-Sheikh memorandum will give further encouragement to the speedy resumption of negotiations between Israel and Syria and between Israel and Lebanon – as Italy hopes with all its heart.

The building of the peace process, which is based on the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, is currently placed high on the agenda of all of Europe, and not only in the Union states situated along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Our participation in the UN forces stationed in the region serves as proof of our commitment.

Israel has an economic and security-related interest in the economic growth of the Middle East and in cooperation with the Arab world. Security for Israel, which is surrounded by countries that are relatively poor, may be fragile. Regional prosperity is the better basis for lasting peace.

A lack of social and economic infrastructures, a relatively meager flow of foreign investments, a continued lack of water – these are just some of the most significant indications of the urgency of economic progress, which will be possible only with peace and will pave the way for new global stability in the Middle East region and the entire Mediterranean Basin, for the good of us all.

Mr. Speaker, together Israel and Italy can and even must revive the connection between the Mediterranean Basin and Europe; between the Mediterranean Basin and the Atlantic
community. This is the goal toward which joint efforts must be invested. The Mediterranean Basin must be connected to the new Europe - a Europe that wants to open to the east and south - while preserving the new alliance with the United States, for the interest of Italy, Israel and the entire region.

Apart from an economic reality, today the EU constitutes a political reality. This is a dimension which can be overlooked by one who observes the international scenario with the eyes of the past, without knowing to properly appreciate the role the EU is taking upon itself also outside the borders of the member states: In the Balkans, the Mediterranean Basin and in lands outside of Europe. Europe, which we are building with drive and decisiveness, is supposed to become more and more a preferred interlocutor for Israel and the entire region. Europe is busy with its strive for real unity and responsible authoritativeness, which will increase its scope. Relate to Europe with trust. Europe has not forgotten the horrors and the guilt of the recent past. It has not forgotten the Holocaust, but the generation which defeated fascism and Nazism is the generation which established new European peace; a generation which knows that the right way to condemn the past and perpetuate the memory is to build a world of cooperation between all the nations. It is not for nothing that Romano Prodi, the former prime minister of Italy who gained Europe's trust and was appointed to head the new European Commission, began his new position with a visit to Auschwitz, on behalf of all the Europeans.

Mr. Speaker, in this vision of Europe, which we would like to see reaching out to the Mediterranean Basin, Israel can take on a leading role while strengthening its position in the region, establishing its security and developing its economy. Your scientific and technological pool, which is the object of envy, the innovative spirit of your entrepreneurs, the intellectual energy and the dynamism which characterizes society in Israel makes it the ideal candidate to open the path toward regional integration while (advancing) a process of osmosis with Europe.

The economic regional integration is the basis for establishing tighter relations with other regions in the world. In Europe this process has reached a very advanced stage, similar to the transatlantic relations between Europe and the American continent. A similar picture can occur in the Mediterranean Basin. This is not utopia. It is a big plan. It is a realistic scenario, and we have begun to move on its path. It is within your reach and within our reach, on one condition: The success of the efforts to promote lasting peace in the entire region.

In order for peace to be lasting, it cannot remain merely an agreement between governments and brilliant political leaders. The peace must penetrate deep into the sentiments of the populations, penetrate the fabric of civil society, present real possibilities for dialogue between the nations, cultures and religions and also serve as an impetus for economic growth and prosperity.

I am speaking out of deep conviction, because my experience in life reminds me that due to a similar vision, and the faith that accompanied it, a Europe of peace and wellbeing was built on the ruins of the Europe that was destroyed in the war. Nations that had been enemies for hundreds of years became brothers. The miracle that occurred in Europe can repeat itself
anywhere. We must instill in the consciousness of all the nations the awareness regarding the vast potential of cooperation, beyond the proper relations of good neighborliness.

The starting point is mutual respect, acknowledging differences and striving for coordination that is based on mutual respect.

Mr. Speaker, Europe and the Mediterranean Basin constitute a unique space, as is indicated by the 3,000-year history and which necessitates today security for all – in the protection of the environment and economic development.

Italy, with its long history and in light of its Christian tradition and its geographic location, is immersed in the heart of the Mediterranean Basin, and despite being anchored deep in the European continent, where it still maintains a central role, it is well aware of this fact. Israel was the cradle of our culture. The drama of the long exile was a source of inspiration for the enrichment of your identity and culture and for the enrichment of the culture and identity of Europe and the entire West.

As an Italian and European - and today one cannot say 'Italian' without adding 'European' – I know that together, in cooperation with all the nations in the region, united and not separated by the real freeway – the Mediterranean Sea – we can implement a big plan for human society.

The suffering and tragedies of the past grant us the right to dream. They also obligate us to design the means needed to realize our dream.

On behalf of Italy and on behalf of Europe, I hope you will eventually reach the peace that the founders of the State of Israel dreamed of, in the framework of new friendly relations and cooperation with all the neighboring nations. Is it just a dream? You know that history is made with dreams, before the actions are taken. Thank you very much.