



Speech at Mt. Herzl Torch Lighting Ceremony by Knesset Speaker Reuven (Ruby) Rivlin

Yom Ha'atzmaut 5769

My brothers and sisters, all the people of Israel,
Happy Independence Day!

We stand here once again on this hill –
leaders, tribes, elders, police, children, women, all of Israel

We have come once again to this hill – on one side the grave of the prophet
[of Zionism], on the other the graves of our children –
to talk again of the Exodus,
to remind ourselves once again from where we came,
and where, with the grace of God, with the blood of our children and with
the sweat of our brow – we have succeeded in reaching so far.

We have returned here as we do each year.
But, perhaps now that all the excitement of the festivities of the Sixtieth
Anniversary of the State of Israel has died down, there may be those who
ask what is there left to talk of, that has not already been said?

True, those for whom Independence Day is merely a lively celebration, are
likely to feel a certain emptiness after the lights are turned off when the
festivities have ended.

On the other hand, those for whom the Independence Day festival is rooted
in the Hebrew Calendar (that gives expression, in the purest form, to our
national narrative),
probably realize that for a nation that has continued, for thousands of years,
to celebrate annually the Exodus from Egypt – the relevance of festivals and
days of celebration are measured not by their clamour, but rather by how
well rooted they are within the community, the family, and more than all
this within our hearts.

Our Independence Festival is so special – the silence of our personal communion on this day is the purest preparation for the heartfelt joy that erupts in the evening.

Our Independence Festival is so moving, because each one of us feels how the song of praise of the evening breaks through the grief of remembrance of the day.

The tears of pride of each one of us, here, on this hill of national memory, and wherever an Israeli heart beats at this special moment, when the flag is raised from half mast, at that moment when we pass from one holy time to the next, from "*Yizkor*", the memorial prayer, to "*Hallel*", the prayer of praise – those tears of pride tell the real story of this day, and prove to us how deeply rooted is this day within our hearts.

The special narrative of this day is not merely the story of the redemption of 5708/1948, it is also the narrative of the generation of 5769/ 2009, which also, day by day, has to continue to pay the price for our liberty, for our independence.

Just recently we watched with deep emotion those heroic fighters who risked their lives in the "Cast Lead" Operation. We were choked up at the sight of those noble figures who live here among us, here and now in Israel of 2009 (an Israel that so longs for a normal life, that more than anything wants a little peace and quiet) – figures like Second Lieutenant Aharon Karov, who leaped like a lion from his wedding in order to lead his soldiers into battle, where he was critically wounded.

Like the figure of Lieutenant Colonel Oren Cohen, commander of the 13th Golani Battalion, who is here with us this evening among those who will be lighting the beacons. Oren was also wounded during the "Cast Lead" Operation, and intends to return to full military service after rehabilitation. Their bravery (now in the rehabilitation wards, just as during the battles where they were in command) reminds us daily what strengths are and will continue to be demanded from us if we are to live a normal life here in an abnormal situation.

Independence Day also tells us, then, that impossible story: the story of normality that has been built up here, under totally abnormal conditions, and the price of a simple, quiet life that all parents wish for their children, for which we have to continue paying, in blood.

That simple, human desire for a little normality might have taken over our entire existence here. But we all know (and there is nothing like Independence Day to remind us of this) that the story of the State of Israel,

the story of Zionism, the story of the return to Zion, does not consist only of the desire for a little normality.

Millions of people left the land of their birth, preferring to live in the heart of the Middle East, at the centre of the most explosive conflict in the world, just so that they could live in the Jewish State. Their numbers continue to prove, today too, that there is an additional element to the Zionist enterprise; something beyond the simple desire to live a normal life.

It is this relatively quiet sixty-first Independence Day – not made extra special by bearing a round number – that can present us with the opportunity to once again link up with that additional element, with what Independence Day means for us in Israel of 2009.

And Israel of 2009, is no less impressive than Israel of 1949.

On the contrary:

It is more democratic, more open, and also more Jewish in both identity and culture; it is more tolerant, far more sophisticated, and a little less demagogic.

Families now are less often torn apart by arguments over "*Ihud*" or "*Me'uhad*" [reference to ideological divisions in the Kibbutz movement], and more often because of *HaPo'el* or *Maccabi* or *Betar* [football teams], although politics can still stir things up and rightly so.

Israel of 2009 may be less ideological – but there are more idealists. Their ideology may be less clearly formulated, less intense, but it is more human, more loving, more closely attuned to the hearts of people.

Israel of 2009 may perhaps take itself less seriously – but it never forgets where it is located.

It may be more cynical - but it is far more realistic.

Most Israelis are less committed to the dogmas of the past, to the slogans of the past, to social categories of the past, to the exclusivity of the politics of the past, to the hatreds of the past and to the settling of accounts of the past – but they are no less Zionist, no less Israeli, no less involved, no less committed.

This situation may, perhaps, be a little confusing.

There are those among us who see this post-modern spirit as a great danger. There are those who see the erosion of the old values as a symptom of ideological decline, of weakness, of weariness.

There are those who fear we may forget what world we live in, how hostile is our environment (where they continue to hate us and to threaten us just as in the past).

But I believe that the heroes who live among us, the very many good people among us, prove differently.

I believe that this ideological dynamic does not indicate that we are less principled than we were a generation or two ago, it rather proves that we have here, today too, exceptional powers of vitality, of original thought, of thinking "outside the box", of creativity that breaks through boundaries.

I believe that this additional element has been the secret of our existence as a nation for thousands of years now and is also the secret of our survival here in this turbulent land.

This element – that caused the Zionist revolution to happen and enabled us, against all odds, to establish our State (that everyone regards as a wonder – **both those that love us and those that hate us**) – still remains vibrantly alive here today.

It is due to this element that we are able to continue renewing ourselves.

This element does not allow us to mourn the glories of the past that are no more, but drives us on to design the future, with that same pioneering, revolutionary spirit, with that same dedication that beat in the hearts of the generation of *Tashach*, the generation of 1948.

This is also the reason, I believe, that even an appreciation of the difficult situation in which we live – a situation that refuses to retreat even before sophisticated dreams, before castles in the air – does not cause us to lose hope, does not bring us to total despair.

It is this ability to build, to be built, and to renew, that allows us to look straight at the complex challenges that face us today.

It is this ability that will allow us to deal with the world economic crisis, and with the tidal wave of employment problems that are right now hurting so many families in Israel.

It is this that will also enable us, with God's help, to deal with both the threats against us and with those who threaten us.

It is this Day of Independence, my brothers and sisters, which symbolizes so well that wonderful ability.

Independence Day is not merely the event when we count the number of years that have passed since the day the High Commissioner rolled up the Union Jack and sailed for home.

Independence Day is recharged each year with new meanings, new values – each generation and its values, each generation and its needs.

Just like our ancient festivals, Independence Day is not merely a mass of historical symbols.

It also brings us a break for joy, for true, authentic joy, which we deserve, which our State deserves, each year anew.

Joy for what we have – and we have so much;
joy for our liberty (which should never be taken for granted);
the joy of gratitude.

True, simple, Israeli joy, joy for the wonderful normality that despite everything has existed here for sixty one years now.

Happy Independence Day!

Lighting of the Beacon by the Knesset Speaker

I, Reuven Rivlin, son of my beloved father, Yosef-Yoel, and of my beloved mother, Rachel, may they rest in peace, descendent of the disciples of Rabbi Eliyahu, the Ga'on of Vilna, who made Aliyah to the Holy Land at his behest in 1809, am honoured to light this beacon, on the sixty-first Independence Day of the State of Israel,

In honour of – the Knesset, the faithful reflection of Israeli society and the supreme expression of Israeli democracy.

In honour of the residents of Sderot, Ashkelon, and all the towns and villages of the Gaza border area, unwilling heroes for eight years and more, whose spiritual strength and firm stand brings inspiration to the whole nation.

In honour of Gilad Shalit, who has not yet returned from the mission he was sent on by us, while we, as a State, as a nation, and as human beings never forget for a moment that the narrative of Independence Day is also the narrative of the oath of loyalty between the State and its soldiers.

In honour of the pioneers of Gush Katif, who are again holding onto to the soil of this Good Land, seeking a healing for their wounds and teaching us all, again, a poignant chapter in the history of Zionism.

And also in honour of Tel Aviv, vibrantly young, one hundred years old, that from time to time sweetens the solemnity of Jerusalem,

And to the glory of the State of Israel!