

Saban Forum 2007

Keynote Address by Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Olmert November 4, 2007

Distinguished Guests,

At the outset, I wish to say something personal.

Today, November 4, is the anniversary of the tragic murder of the late Yitzhak Rabin. We held the official memorial service according to the Hebrew date two weeks ago, and last night masses of people gathered in Rabin Square to commemorate his memory as they do every year.

However, today, November 4, is the day seared in our collective consciousness as the day of the murder. He will never be forgotten.

I bow my head in profound sorrow to the memory of Yitzhak Rabin. He was a special man who left his mark – which will never be erased – on the life of our country.

I mentioned that I would say something personal: from where I am now, I understand the difficult dilemmas and the power of the suffering Yitzhak Rabin dealt with. Rabin did not charge towards the peace process with excessive enthusiasm. More than anything, he exhibited doubt, hesitation, and was repeatedly tormented by the cost of peace and the risks it entailed.

However, when he saw a chance, he acted to realize it. When he recognized an opportunity, he did not undermine it, but rather he was willing to take chances, to expose himself to criticism, to face the accusatory voices both domestic and international. He did everything in order to realize the opportunity.

He made no political considerations. He did not take into account temporary benefits, inter-party balances of power, and what could be worthwhile. He weighed all the doubts against the hopes, the fears against the chances, the horrible loneliness against the weight of responsibility – and acted.

This is Rabin's legacy. All the rest are slogans which often cover up the lack of desire to act. This is a legacy to which I am obligated; this is a legacy according to which I intend to lead the State of Israel over the coming months – before the meeting in Annapolis, during it and most importantly after it.

Tonight, I wish to remember my predecessor, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Exactly two years ago, in this place, I sat together at the head of the table with the Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon. This was only days after the implementation of the Disengagement Plan, and ahead of the upcoming elections.

I have no doubt that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon intended to continue advancing the peace process between ourselves and the Palestinians.

Disengagement was not meant to be isolated from the wider context of our relations with the Palestinians. Arik contemplated the continuation of the path, versus the need to realize the Roadmap. It was necessary to reach purposeful, substantial, open and daring negotiations with the Palestinians.

I am committed to this inheritance with all my heart, with all my strength. I do not intend to be satisfied with statements. Chances and opportunities are not slogans, but rather a working plan – and they obligate me.

Why Annapolis?

Annapolis is a landmark, it is an international seal of approval, on the path to negotiations and of the genuine effort to achieve the realization of the vision of two nations: the State of Israel – the nation of the Jewish people; and the Palestinian state – the nation of the Palestinian people.

There will not be negotiations on the vision; there will be no bargaining about this fundamental goal which the U.S. President, George Bush, declared so eloquently: "Two countries for two peoples". A Jewish state for the Jewish people – a Palestinian state for the Palestinian people.

We will not negotiate about the right of existence for the State of Israel as a Jewish state. We will not bargain about the right of the Palestinian people to their own state.

Both are fundamental conditions, basic positions, obvious understandings which cannot be denied. All the basic questions, all the substantive problems, all the historic questions which are pertinent to the disagreement between us and the Palestinians are on the agenda. We will avoid none of them, we will not run from discussing any of them.

Annapolis will not be a place for negotiations, but it will certainly be a starting point. Annapolis will be the jumping-off point for continued serious and in-depth negotiations which will not avoid any issue or ignore any division which has clouded our relations with the Palestinian people for many years.

That is why – Annapolis.

Why now?

Because it is time. Years ago, the Oslo Accords were signed. I was not among its supporters. I feared its negative effects. At the time, I estimated that its results would not lead to peace between us and the Palestinians. The opportunity which ripened then collapsed under the furor of terror; the lack of credibility of the Palestinian leadership at time and the stormy disagreement in Israeli society, which ended with three bullets in Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's back.

There was another chance developing in 2000 – the special effort made by the State of Israel which reached its peak at the Camp David summit in July of that year. That meeting unfortunately ended with an explosion that led to the bloody Intifada, which even today continues in the most sensitive areas of our lives.

Now is the time. The Palestinian leadership is headed by men committed to all the agreements previously signed with the State of Israel. We do not ignore their weaknesses; we are completely aware of the failures of the Palestinian Authority – of the lack of stable governing mechanisms, of the total disintegration of the security mechanisms in Judea and Samaria, of the Hamas rule over the Palestinian parliament and of the violent control of the murderous organizations in the Gaza Strip. Their control allows for unceasing firing of Qassam missiles at residents in the south of the country.

We have abundant reasons to postpone Annapolis; we have very convincing arguments – why the conditions are not yet ripe in the Palestinian Authority to take practical and comprehensive responsibility to implement the understandings with the State of Israel which have yet to be enacted.

However, ladies and gentlemen, we are capable of facing these constraints. Under the existing circumstances, we have a partner and we are not willing to postpone negotiations to a later date, at which point our partner might not be capable of fulfilling the mission.

Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, and Salaam Fayyad, its Prime Minister, publicly state – without hesitation and despite the inherent difficulties of the complex relations within Palestinian society – that they want to live with us in peace. This is an opportunity – it should be taken.

We agreed that if and when we reach an understanding with the leaders of the Palestinian Authority, this understanding will be implemented according to the Roadmap, with all its phases and its sequence. The Palestinians are obligated to fight terrorism and to completely change their internal reality. It should be remembered that the Roadmap sets out a series of steps for the State of Israel. These steps, like the obligations of the Palestinians, have yet to be implemented. We will not concede to the Palestinians on any of the obligations outlined in the Roadmap, and we will not avoid fulfilling our own obligations to the letter. Some of them are difficult, some will create considerable political hardships – and I have no intention, no matter how difficult it is, of attempting to escape the obligations imposed on the State of Israel.

I recommend to each of the leaders and involved parties to deal bravely and unhesitatingly with all the components of this opportunity, this chance. Be open to hope and face the genuine and clear risks and difficulties so that the process may move ahead.

What next?

After Annapolis, we will enter into vigorous, ongoing and continuing negotiations. If we and the Palestinians act with determination, there is a chance that we can achieve real accomplishments perhaps even before the end of President Bush's term in office. There is no intention of dragging the negotiations on endlessly; there is no reason to suffer the same foot-dragging which previously characterized our discussions. There is no basis for the assumption that someone will attempt to circumvent dealing with the fundamental issues which are a condition for realizing the vision of two states living side-by-side in security and peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests,

This is a good moment. I am excited by the chance to contribute to our chances. I know all the excuses and arguments why not, but I believe – from the bottom of my heart – that the time has come.

In this spirit, I will come to Annapolis; to extend my hand in friendship and good will to all those who come to the meeting, and I promise: the State of Israel will be there. Indeed, we will come with caution; we will examine every issue responsibly; we will consider every proposal sensitively; but we come in good will, happily and full of hope.