

The speech of President Isaac Herzog at the 80th Anniversary of the Outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising ceremony in Warsaw

Eighty years ago today, on April 19, 1943, a Jewish resident of the Warsaw Ghetto, whose name remains unknown to this day, wrote in his diary: “We walk in threes, stepping on the cobblestones on which, on this very route, 300,000 Jews have trodden. This is the end,” he wrote. “The end of the road. Calmly, I calculate: it is now 2 p.m. I look at the clear April skies. Come nightfall, we will be taken to Treblinka. When dawn breaks, I will no longer be alive. It’s a simple calculation: this is the last time I am seeing the blue skies between the clouds.” Today, exactly eight decades later, I think about that anonymous Jew. I look at the skies, like he did. The same cloudy April skies. And the pain pierces my heart.

President of Poland, Andrzej Duda,

President of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier

Our dear survivors,

And Second World War heroes,

Families,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I come here today from Jerusalem, the eternal capital of the free, sovereign, Jewish, and democratic State of Israel. I come here, and with me—with us—here, are the sons and daughters of entire families, entire communities, who were, and continue to be, symbols of vibrant Jewish life, a millennium-old history, the rich and prosperous civilization of Polish Jewry; they stand as symbols, of course, of immense courage, in ghettos, camps, and forests, everywhere, always, and by every means, during the carnage of the terrible Holocaust that befell us during the Second World War. We have come here, eighty years to the day since the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the emblem of heroism, during humanity’s darkest hour.

Here, at this place where we gather, stood the ghetto, cramped, bustling, and bursting with life. Nearby was the “collection point,” or Umschlagplatz. It was there that the fate of 300,000 Polish Jews was sealed: children, the elderly, women, and men who were deported to the Treblinka Death Camp. When I close my eyes, I can see the brave warriors of the revolt, the members of the Jewish Combat Organization and the Jewish Military Union, the few hundred souls who faced the thousands of Nazi soldiers who stormed the ghetto to annihilate them. Facing the forces of the Nazi oppressor—trained, monstrous, and armed to the teeth—who broke into door after door, house after house, in a vicious and inconceivable hunt for Jews, who faced only one fate—death and extermination—a group of young Polish Jewish stood determined, full of faith and hope, drawing their strength from the heroic streak that runs like a thread through Jewish history, from King David’s brave men to the warriors of Masada, Bar Kokhba, and the Maccabees. They fought

against all the odds. From the rooftops, from sewers, from the deepest cellars, in the streets and in the courtyards, behind crumbling walls, and in rooms going up in flames. And they won.

“We had no chance of victory in battle,” recalled Zivia Lubetkin, a woman I have admired my whole life, a member of the leadership of the Jewish Combat Organization, a heroine of the revolt, whose granddaughter Eyal, named for the Hebrew acronym of the Jewish Combat Organization, is here with us today. “It was clear to us that we had no chance of victory, in the usual sense of the word. But we knew that at the end of the day, we would emerge victorious. We are the weak ones. But our strength lay in this: we believed in justice. We believed in humanity.” Zivia Lubetkin and her comrades were right, and doubly so. Most of the warriors of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising did not survive. But their spirit, the spirit of man, won here, on this soil, sanctified with the blood of our heroic brethren.

“Who is a hero?” That is one of the core questions of Jewish existence. Here, the answer is clear. They were the heroes. Not only here, but all across Europe. In the trails of tears, in the depths of carnage, in the confines of the ghettos, and in the camps of extermination—in all nine circles of hell. In a world falling apart, in the shadow of death, under conditions of humiliation, famine, and forced labor, in the ghettos, in the killing pits, on the death trains, in the gas chambers and crematoria, facing concentration camps and extermination camps—they succeeded, mothers, fathers, children, grandfathers, and grandmothers, in upholding human morality, mutual responsibility, faith, and basic humanity. And a love of humankind. They upheld the most fundamental and basic Jewish imperative: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” They were not alone. With them, in a heroic battle against the Nazis and their accomplices, in every country, were the Righteous Among the Nations and members of the local resistance movements, including, of course, here in Poland, the Polish Righteous Among the Nations and members of the Polish underground, who risked their lives and chose to not stand idly by.

I stand here at these sacred moments, in a place where whole branches of our people were cut down, destroyed, tortured, and exterminated. In a place where Jewish hope and faith faced challenges the likes of which humanity had never known. And I cannot help but imagine the daughters and sons of my people, beloved and pleasant in their lives, and in their deaths never divided (Samuel II 1:23). I imagine what they would have said, what they would have thought, if in those dark hours, in the stench of the sewers and suffocating cellars, staring down the barrels of guns and tanks, someone had whispered in their ears that eighty years later, we—the Presidents of Poland, Israel, and Germany—would be standing here and saluting their heroism and swearing an eternal oath together to their sacred memory, an oath with a singular core: never again.

“O one, o no one, o no one, o you / Where did it lead, as it led nowhere? / O you dig and I dig, and I dig myself toward you, / and on our finger the ring awakens.” So wrote the great Jewish poet Paul Celan in a poem describing life as a forced laborer during the Second World War, translated into Hebrew by Professor Uzi Shavit, who passed away mere weeks ago. Those same hands that dug eighty years ago, today, in this place, meet the hands that dug here in recent months and years,

finding more and more evidence of the life that once existed, and the heroism that once existed: the heroism of soul and body. These moving discoveries are a binding imperative: a command to continue digging, discovering, finding every scrap of memory, every trace of the life that once was and is no more, to remember and to arouse recollection, especially within our nations' youth, until the end of time.

Your Excellency, the President of Poland, my friend, Andrzej Duda, I thank you for your colossal efforts and your commitment to the task of remembrance and commemoration, including right here, in this place. We must remember: there is nothing postmodern or relativistic about Holocaust remembrance. Absolute evil existed, in the form of the Nazis and their accomplices. And absolute good existed, in the form of the victims and the rebels, from every nation. And in passing this heritage down to posterity, it must reflect this indisputable axiom.

The heroism of the resistance and the rebels and the imperative to remember that terrible chapter of history, when the Jewish People faced complete annihilation, and destruction rained down upon Poland and many other countries, offer a platform for important dialogue between Poland and Israel and for the advancement of friendship between our peoples. A friendship that I believe and hope will flourish and develop and allow us to elucidate and analyze in depth disagreements and pain, while also building important partnerships, not only on the foundations of the past, but also on the basis of our shared future.

Your Excellency, my friend, the President of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in your unforgettable remarks at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, at the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp, you repeated two keywords, which point to the important connection between past and present: "guilt" and "responsibility." Thank you for your moral leadership and for being such an important and significant force in deepening the friendship between our peoples, centered on our eternal commitment to remembrance, responsibility, and to the future, security, and prosperity of the State of Israel.

Dearly beloved Holocaust survivors, families, ladies and gentlemen. Today we salute heroism, but heroism must be sanctified thus: through learning, drawing lessons, and through handing down this heritage and the torch of responsibility from generation to generation. This responsibility is, for us, a lifelong duty. When we stand here together, in the heart of one of the loftiest symbols of both the Holocaust and heroism, we remember that as great as the threat is, so too is the common front that we must form against it. There was no precedent for the fusion of solidarity, humanity, and mutual responsibility that alone defeated Nazi Germany and the Axis powers. Here, we understand well the sacred alliance that the family of nations forged in light of terrible tragedy: to sanctify the memory of the victims; to stand firmly and collectively for the State of Israel's right to exist and to thrive as the sovereign home of the Jewish people; to teach and educate in light of the lessons of the historic catastrophe that was the Holocaust; and to fight with all our might against any manifestation of racism, antisemitism, and hatred.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, a few weeks ago I had the honor of meeting Aliza Vitis-Shomron. Aliza was a 15-year-old girl in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. Now she's 95. Aliza's father, Shimek (Simcha), was murdered in the Majdanek camp. As a girl, a member in a youth movement and the underground, Aliza risked her life by distributing posters in the ghetto calling the Jews to resistance. Just before the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in the spring of 1943, her mother obtained forged papers. She wanted to smuggle Aliza to a hideout, away from the ghetto. But Aliza did not want to leave her underground fighter comrades behind. One of her friends encouraged her, implored her to flee. She left Aliza a chilling dying wish, saying: "Go. You will survive. Someone's got to stay alive, to tell people how we died. That will be your role, if you manage to survive." Yesterday Aliza told me in our meeting at the Knesset, and previously at the President's Residence in Jerusalem: "I took these words to be my life's mission, my calling on earth."

Aliza was unable to come here today. But on her behalf and in her name, in the name of the victims and survivors, in the name of the many millions who cannot stand here, I, humbly, as the President of the nation-state of the Jewish People, the State of Israel, a descendant of the community of Łomża, which was completely wiped out in the terrible Holocaust, stand before you and pledge: never again! The eternity of Israel shall not lie! Am Yisrael Chai! The People of Israel live!

May the memories of the heroes of the resistance and liberty, and all the victims of the terrible Holocaust, be preserved and bound in our nation's hearts, and in the hearts of all mankind, from generation to generation, forevermore.