

REMARKS BY
DONALD M. ROBINSON
ZOA DINNER

SUNDAY OCTOBER 22, 1995

SIDNEY PLEASE ACCEPT MY HEARTFELT THANKS FOR THIS PRESENTATION AND AWARD. ALL OF US HAVE ADMIRING YOU AND YOUR WIFE, SYLVIA'S, COMMITMENT TO OUR COMMUNITY AND TO OUR JEWISH HERITAGE. I AM GRATEFUL THAT YOU MADE THIS PRESENTATION BECAUSE OUR BACKGROUNDS ARE SO SIMILAR. FROM WORLD WAR II TO THE PRESENT, OUR LIVES HAVE SHARED MANY MUTUAL INTERESTS.

I'M GRATEFUL THAT MY WIFE, SYLVIA, SHARES THIS HONOR WITH ME. IT HAS TRULY BEEN A GREAT PARTNERSHIP OVER 48 YEARS. OUR PROFOUND THANKS TO THE LEADERSHIP OF ZOA FOR ARRANGING THIS AFFAIR, FOR THE KIND WORDS SPOKEN HERE AS WELL AS THE VERY CORDIAL LETTERS WE RECEIVED FROM THOSE WHO WERE NOT ABLE TO BE HERE THIS EVENING. I VERY MUCH APPRECIATE THE BRANDEIS AWARD. IT IS A GREAT HONOR TO BE IN THE COMPANY OF EMINENT LAY LEADERS AND GOVERNMENT FIGURES, THE FORMER RECIPIENTS OF THIS DISTINCTION.

HOWEVER, FOR ME, BY FAR THE BIGGEST PRIZE WAS THE FACT THAT I WAS GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE OUR PEOPLE AND TO HELP OUR BRETHREN IN MANY DIFFERENT ASSIGNMENTS, IN DIFFERENT CAPACITIES AND IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. THESE HAVE BEEN WONDERFUL YEARS.

SYLVIA AND I HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE, DURING A MOST IMPORTANT TIME IN THE HISTORY OF OUR PEOPLE, TO WORK IN A PERIOD FULL OF CHALLENGES, WITH MANY HISTORIC, DRAMATIC, AND DEEPLY MOVING MOMENTS.

THIS IS A TIME IN THE HISTORY OF OUR PEOPLE WHEN MORE GREAT CHANGES OCCURRED IN A RELATIVELY SHORT PERIOD THAN IN THE PREVIOUS THOUSAND YEARS -- WAR, HOLOCAUST, CREATION OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL, THE GREAT VICTORY OF THE SIX DAY WAR, THE REAWAKENING OF SOVIET JEWRY, AND THE GREATEST MIGRATION MOVEMENT IN THE HISTORY OF OUR PEOPLE, MUCH BIGGER THAN THE BIBLICAL EXODUS FROM EGYPT.

OVER FOUR MILLION JEWS LEFT THE COUNTRIES WHERE THEY HAD LIVED FOR MANY CENTURIES, IN SOME PLACES SINCE THE PERIOD OF THE EXILE. WE WITNESSED THE LIQUIDATION OR NEAR LIQUIDATION OF THE HISTORIC CENTERS OF THE DIASPORA -- IN THE ARAB WORLD, NORTH AFRICA, EASTERN EUROPE, THE BALKANS, THE BALTIC STATES AND ETHIOPIA. SYLVIA AND I WITNESSED THESE LIQUIDATIONS FIRST HAND IN MY WORK WITH THE AMERICAN JEWISH JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE.

AND NOW, I WOULD LIKE TO DEAL WITH THE FUTURE AS I SEE IT. WHAT I SAY HERE IS MY HUMBLE, PURELY PERSONAL OPINION BASED ON MY TRAVELS AND EXPERIENCES

I SEE TWO GREAT DANGERS ON THE HORIZON FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR PEOPLE IN THE DIASPORA. FIRST IS THE DANGER OF A SECOND HOLOCAUST, THIS TIME NOT OF A PHYSICAL NATURE BUT OF A SPIRITUAL ONE. WE MAY AND ARE LOSING MANY OF OUR JEWISH BRETHREN THROUGH ASSIMILATION, ALIENATION, AND LACK OF BASIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT JUDAISM.

THE SECOND DANGER IS OF A SPLIT BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE DIASPORA. AFTER WORLD WAR II, LIVING IN SHOCK UNDER THE IMPACT OF THE HOLOCAUST AND LATER IN THE EUPHORIA OF THE CREATION OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL AND THE VICTORIES OF THE SIX DAY WAR, THE CENTRALITY OF ISRAEL IN JEWISH LIFE WAS GENERALLY ACCEPTED.

TODAY, MORE AND MORE LEADERS OF THE COMMUNITIES OF THE WORLD ARE QUESTIONING SUCH AN APPROACH. THEY SPEAK OF TWO EQUAL CENTERS "DIASPORA" AND "ISRAEL", AN APPROACH THAT MAY WELL BRING ABOUT A SPLIT. SUCH A DANGER IS NOT NEW NOR IS IT MY INVENTION.

70 YEARS AGO, A GREAT PHILOSOPHER AND ZIONIST, JACOB KLATZKIN, PUBLISHED HIS THEORY. IF SOME ACTION WERE NOT TAKEN SOON, HE SAID, "OUR NATION WILL SPLIT INTO TWO COMMUNITIES, A HEBREW COMMUNITY IN PALESTINE AND A YIDDISH COMMUNITY IN THE DIASPORA. IN A FEW GENERATIONS IT WILL DEVELOP INTO TWO NATIONS WITH DIFFERENT CHARACTERISTICS." I BELIEVE THAT WE ARE ABLE TO FIGHT BOTH DANGERS. IF WE REALLY WANT TO FIGHT AGAINST ALIENATION AND ASSIMILATION, WE HAVE TO PUT A STRONGER ACCENT ON YIDDISHKEIT, TO GIVE THE YOUNG GENERATION A SOLID JEWISH EDUCATION, A KNOWLEDGE OF HEBREW, A LOVE OF ISRAEL, A KNOWLEDGE OF JEWISH TRADITIONS, HISTORY, CULTURE AND LITERATURE.

THE NEW EMPHASIS SHOULD BE ON THE SURVIVAL OF OUR PEOPLE IN COUNTRIES WHERE THEY LIVE IN RELATIVE SAFETY, BUT IN CONSTANT DANGER OF DISAPPEARANCE THROUGH ASSIMILATION.

LET ME SITE ONE EXAMPLE -- I RECENTLY RETURNED FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION AND WAS OVERWHELMED BY MY EXPERIENCE AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE. SOVIET JEWS ARE REDISCOVERING JEWISH TRADITIONS. WE VISITED JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS, LIBRARIES, AND FLOURISHING SYNAGOGUES IN THE UKRAINE, GEORGIA AND RUSSIA. JEWISH HOLIDAYS ARE CELEBRATED. THE HEBREW LANGUAGE IS BEING TAUGHT.

ALL OF THESE EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES CONTINUE TO BE BASED ON THE CENTRALITY OF ISRAEL IN OUR LIFE, COMBINED WITH VISITS TO ISRAEL, ESPECIALLY BY THE YOUNG, AND WITH THE TEACHING OF MODERN HEBREW AND THE HISTORY OF ZIONISM.

LET US NOT DESPAIR. A JOINT MOBILIZATION OF ISRAELI AND DIASPORA RESOURCES IN JEWISH EDUCATION, IN YIDDISHKIET, BASED ON THE CENTRALITY OF ISRAEL IN THE LIFE OF OUR PEOPLE CAN SECURE OUR FUTURE. THEN WE WILL BE ABLE TO REPEAT WITH CONVICTION THE BIBLICAL PROMISE, "THE ETERNITY OF ISRAEL. SHE'LL NEVER FAIL."

FINALLY, WE SHOULD COMMIT OURSELVES TO CHERISH THE FREEDOM OF ALL PEOPLES AND TO STRIVE PEACEFULLY FOR ITS REALIZATION. LET US STRIVE TO MAKE COMMON CAUSE WITH DECENT PEOPLE OF ALL FAITHS AND ALL NATIONS. LET US STRIVE TO PRESERVE THE VALUES OF OUR DEMOCRACY AND TO BROADEN THE AREAS OF ITS BLESSINGS. OUR RELIGION SEEKS TO HELP ALL PEOPLE LEARN TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER AND WITH GOD.

MAY THE COMING YEAR BRING US CLOSER TO THE JUST AND LASTING PEACE FOR WHICH WE HAVE YEARNED AND PRAYED SO LONG AND TO BRING TO EACH OF YOU NEW STRENGTH OF FAITH AND PURPOSE.