

Speech: Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster speech to Celebrating Israel at 70 event

Thank you Louise and Rob for that very kind introduction.

Your Royal Highness, Chief Rabbi, Your Excellencies, lords, ladies and gentlemen, good evening, Erev Tov.

It's a privilege to be here in the Royal Albert Hall with you this evening and an honour to be addressing you as together we celebrate one of the most remarkable stories that men and women have ever told.

It's the story of a people resolute in their struggle for a better future, but with a dream of peace one day in their land.

It is the story of Israel.

And at the heart of this story lies a simple idea, one which every person in this hall – no matter your faith, colour or creed – can believe in...

And that is the dream of a place to call home...

...a place where communities are born, memories are created, and dreams can flourish.

Israel's story has that truth at its core.

The beginning of the story

David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, once remarked that "to be a realist you must believe in miracles".

And it is fair to say that the story of Israel is one which has the belief in miracles at its heart.

Some two thousand years ago, the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans. Much of the Jewish community was enslaved or expelled from their land.

But the dream of a land to call home persisted through centuries of exile, and all too often, of persecution.

And then, a hundred years ago, the Balfour Declaration offered a hope that that dream might one day become a reality.

But barely two decades later however, the dream was almost extinguished by one of the greatest crimes in human history.

The evil of the Holocaust was something I learned about when I was still a

boy – and not just from the history books or TV documentaries.

Two boys in my class at school had fathers who had, by some miracle, survived Auschwitz.

I still remember vividly how being invited to tea at one friend's house, and how, during the conversation, his dad suddenly rolled up his shirt sleeve to show the death camp tattoo still scarred on his wrist.

The Holocaust, the Shoah, that darkest chapter in human history, serves as a reminder that all of us, wherever we are from, must stamp out hate and racial prejudice wherever we find it.

But despite all odds, the spirit of solidarity and endurance which sustained the Jewish people through centuries of exile...

...also made possible the rise, out of the horror of the Holocaust, of the nation state of Israel.

The story today

And today, as our Prime Minister, Theresa May, has said, the United Kingdom is proud to stand side by side with Israel as an ally with mutual interests, and as a friend with shared values.

For Israel has grown into a thriving democracy and a prosperous economy...

...where the values of freedom, tolerance and the rule of law lie at its heart...

...where sexual, religious and racial equality is enshrined in law...

...and where argument, disagreement and dissent are hard-wired into the Israeli character.

I'm sure you all know the story of the Jew marooned on a desert island, who showed his rescuers the two synagogues he had built.

"That's my synagogue", he said pointing, "and that's the synagogue I don't go to".

More seriously, whenever I've visited Israel, and whoever has been the Israeli Prime Minister and whatever parties have been in government, I've found their fiercest, their most ardent and relentless critics are there amongst Israelis themselves.

But this is not Israel's only strength...

...Israel is a global leader in upholding the rights of women and members of the LGBT community...

...a leading innovator in science and technology...

...home to some of the world's finest emergency relief teams...

...the proud producer of no fewer than twelve Nobel Peace Prize winners...

...and, as hard as it is for someone coming from a country used to 'nul points', the triumphant winner of Eurovision an incredible four times!

And these strengths directly benefit the United Kingdom too.

We are Israel's second largest trading partner...

...and we are Israel's number one destination for investment in Europe – with more than 300 Israeli companies operating here.

But our relationship is not simply one between governments – it is about those bonds between our peoples too.

Britain's Jewish population here in Britain is one of the most dynamic and vibrant communities that make up the diverse mix that is our modern United Kingdom.

From business to arts; to health, education, industry and literature – your contribution benefits us all...

Indeed, that is a message I am sure His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge will take to Israel when he visits in the very near future.

It is more than seventy years now since the horror of the genocide was revealed and we understood where antisemitic prejudice could lead.

It is shaming that our country is having to relearn that lesson today.

So let me be absolutely clear: antisemitism, in whatever form, has no place in our society and we will never, ever tolerate it.

It's why the design for our National Memorial to the Holocaust has now been chosen, and why that Memorial will stand next to our Parliament together with an accompanying education centre...

...a reminder that the human tragedies of the past must never be lost from the present, and that we have a duty to teach each new generation the lessons of history.

It's why Theresa May was the first leader to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's modern definition of antisemitism...

...and it's why, whatever the political disagreements between Israel and the United Kingdom have, antisemitism must never be allowed to survive by cloaking itself behind criticism of the policy of a particular Israeli government.

So as these challenges continue, be assured that we are proud to stand side by side with the British Jewish community every step of the way.

The story's future

But it is the future of Israel's story to which we must now focus – and on the next chapter which is to be written.

For if Israel is to truly fulfil that dream that Balfour set out a century ago, and build that home to which it is rightly entitled...

...then it is best placed to do so in a state of peace, both with itself, and with its neighbours – for they are entitled to the dream of a home too.

We long and we pray for that future where, in the vision of the Prophet Isaiah, "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up swords against nations, neither shall they learn war anymore".

The United Kingdom will always support Israel's right and obligation to defend itself and her citizens.

But we believe too that lasting security will come through peace, mutual respect and reconciliation between Israel and all her neighbours.

And it isn't just politicians who want to see a confident and secure Israel able to prosper, and able to live in peace and security alongside an independent, peaceful Palestine state...

...it is young Palestinians from Ramallah and Hebron and Gaza...

...and young Israelis from Sderot and Jerusalem and Tel Aviv...

...they all want the same things as each other...

...to go to school and university together...

...to meet; talk; laugh; debate; learn from each other...

...and ultimately love another.

Like all good friends, the United Kingdom will not shy away from asking difficult questions...

But that is fundamentally why this vision for peace – this dream of a better future – cannot be written by the international community alone.

...it can only be written by the people of Israel and by the people of Israel's neighbours as well.

So as you all do so...

...as you work towards fulfilling that dream born all those years ago...

...as you work towards that universal cause of a place and a community to call home...

...and as you work towards a stronger, safer, more prosperous country that is at peace...

...be assured of this: the United Kingdom will be standing by your side as you write the next chapter not just of your story – but of history itself.

For as Theodor Herzl once said...“if you will it, it is no dream; and if you do not will it, a dream it is and a dream it will stay.”

Thank you very much...

...have a wonderful evening...

...and Yom Huledet Sameach, Le Yisrael.