First Read: Remarks in Memory of the Victims of The Holocaust

Read

Rabbi Schneier,
President Hochberg,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

1 Shabat Shalom. Salaam. Peace to you all.

2 It is a great honour to be with you once again.

3 Thank you, Rabbi Schneier, for your gracious introduction. I hope every day to live up to your high praise and expectations.

4 On this day when we remember the victims of the Holocaust, let me pay special tribute to the survivors who have joined us.

5 Rabbi Schneier knows fully their pain and suffering, for he too is a survivor.

6 For most of us it is hard to imagine the anguish of knowing that you and your loved ones have been singled out to die because of your faith, your culture or your race.

7 Yet, this is the stark truth.

8 In the Second World War, Jews, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, communists, the mentally ill—anyone who did not conform to Hitler's perverted ideology of Aryan perfection—were systematically persecuted, rounded up and transported to death camps.

9 Some were murdered immediately; others cruelly worked to death.

10 Such an operation takes extensive organization. It takes many people—from leaders to ordinary citizens—to participate, cooperate or simply turn a blind eye.

11 This is perhaps the greatest tragedy of genocide—and the reason why we must be ever vigilant.

12 The language of hatred is corrosive and contagious. Its moral corruption can eat into hearts and minds in even the most progressive or sophisticated societies.
The more often you hear that your neighbour is vile, subhuman, not worthy of the rights that you take for granted, the greater the chance of such beliefs taking root.

That is why I spoke so frankly and forcefully last year in Tehran about Holocaust denial.

It is why Rabbi Schneier and I and so many others are so committed to the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

Neither anti-Semitism nor Islamophobia nor other such forms of bias have a place in the 21st century world we are trying to build.

This is also why I worry about the continued stalemate in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

We now have a whole generation of young people on both sides who risk growing up with a demonized, dehumanized—and utterly false—concept of their neighbours.

They need to be educated to co-exist peacefully with their neighbours.

The only way to build peace is to build bridges and break down walls.

Doing so will take courage, but it must be done.

This year, the United Nations has chosen “the courage to care” as the theme of the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust.

We are honouring those who risked their lives and their families to save Jews and other victims of persecution from almost certain death.

Some, like Raoul Wallenberg, are household names.

But most are unsung heroes—brave men and women from all walks of life, and many nations. Teenagers and parents, parliamentarians and priests, journalists and diplomats—all had the courage to care.

Their example is as relevant today as ever—which is why the United Nations has produced an education kit for teachers to tell their story.

In a world where extremist acts of violence and hatred capture the headlines on an almost daily basis, we need to take inspiration from these ordinary people who took extraordinary steps to defend human dignity.

Ladies and gentlemen,
29 Last year I visited Srebrenica, the site of the worst act of genocide in Europe since the Holocaust.

30 I visited the graves and wept with the mothers of the slain.

31 It is not an easy place for a United Nations Secretary-General to visit.

32 The United Nations—the international community—failed to protect thousands of Bosnian Muslim men and boys from slaughter.

33 The shadow of Srebrenica has joined that of Rwanda, Cambodia, the Holocaust.

34 Each time we hear “never again”.

35 But can we truly say we have learned the lessons of these tragedies?

36 As an international community, do we have the courage to care—and the resolve to act?

37 In 2005 the United Nations General Assembly—at the level of Heads of State and Governments—adopted the responsibility to protect.

38 It is a landmark concept. It puts the obligation firmly on States to protect their populations from genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes or ethnic cleansing.

39 And in the face of these crimes and violations there is a corresponding duty of the international community to act.

40 The responsibility to protect applies everywhere and all the time. It has been implemented with success in a number of places, including in Libya and Côte d’Ivoire.

41 But today it faces a great test in Syria.

42 More than 60,000 people have now died in a conflict whose seeds lie in the peaceful demand of people for greater freedom.

43 We have seen a government brutally and mercilessly oppress dissent and fan the flames of a civil war that threatens to bring instability to a whole region.

44 I have repeatedly called for unity from the Security Council to decisively address this tragedy.

45 So too has the General Assembly—by an overwhelming majority.
46 Each day brings more suffering.

47 I met some of the refugees last month, in camps in Jordan and Turkey.

48 I talked to families who had fled with just what they could carry; children whose future has been thrown into uncertainty.

49 They told me that all they wanted was to go home and live in safety and security.

50 Today’s theme challenges us: do we have the courage to care?

51 I am deeply concerned about the situation in Syria not simply because of the terrible suffering, but because of what may come next.

52 Each day’s delay in resolving the crisis raises the spectre of the violence spreading along religious and ethnic lines.

53 Each day’s delay sees new atrocities by both sides. It is essential that all perpetrators of international crimes understand that they will be held to account.

54 There will be no amnesties for those most responsible.

55 The old era of impunity is ending. In its place, slowly but surely, we are building a new age of accountability.

56 But the important thing is to end the violence in Syria—now—and begin the process of transition.

57 Too much blood has been shed. It is time for reconciliation.

58 There is a proverb that says: if you want revenge you should dig two graves.

59 Syria will need many men and women of courage who will reject revenge and embrace peace.

60 People like Rabbi Schneier.

61 He too visited Srebrenica last year.

62 He spoke in solidarity—as only someone who has shared indescribable suffering can.

63 And this is what he said:

64 “As a survivor I neither turned against man or God. Instead, in memory of my family and the many millions
exterminated like them, I devoted my life to help build bridges between all of God’s children in pursuit of peace and justice.” End of quote.

65 Such forgiveness takes courage—the courage to see what is right and to do it.

66 Whatever one’s faith, this is our duty—as individuals, as communities and as nations.

67 We have a responsibility to protect.

68 We must have the courage to care.

69 Thank you.

Annotations