

Miriam Peretz – Israel Prize Acceptance Speech, Independence Day, 2018

"Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. Speaker of the Knesset, Her Honor the President of the Supreme Court, Mr. Minister of Education, Mr. Mayor of Jerusalem, fellow Israel Prize winners, and honored audience:

Here I stand, poor in deeds, touched to speak here today in the name of the prizewinners. I pray that nothing impedes my words, that my simple speech accurately conveys our profound gratitude to the State of Israel, which found us worthy of the prize, and to our families and close friends, who have supported and encouraged us every step of the way.

Several dear and beloved ones are missing from the audience assembled here today: they did not have a chance to watch us accept this honor. Two such people are my parents, Yaakov and Ito Ohayon, who were born in Morocco, in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. They did not know how to read or write. They did not speak the Hebrew language. If they would be sitting here today, they would understand only a few of my words, words that were code words for them: Yerushalayim, shalom, Torah, todah.

Each night, my father would tell me about a city he did not know, that he never saw in pictures, whose description passed from father to son: Yerushalayim. It has trees that dripped honey and milk, in whose shade lions lied down with lambs. Each time he pronounced the word Yerushalayim, my father would press two fingers to his lips and murmur its name with a sense of sanctity, while kissing each letter. Then, one night in the summer of 1963, my father told me that moshi'ah, the long-awaited messiah, was coming that very night. When I asked how I would recognize him, he replied, "He will be wearing an unbuttoned shirt, shorts, and sandals."

I met the messiah! He was the emissary of the Jewish Agency who took us out of the mellah in Casablanca, where I had lived until the age of 10 and brought us to Yerushalayim – the Hatzerim transit camp in Be'er Sheva, where I lived until 1969. We had no gas and no refrigerator, beds made of iron and the hardships of acculturation and learning a new language. But we were very happy that we were privileged to reach the land of Israel.

I learned to love the land through its songs because we had no books. Thanks to a radio that my father got through his work as a street sweeper, I was exposed to his land. Each Wednesday, I stood at the door of our shack, a notepad and pencil in hand, trembling in anticipation of learning the words to the songs that Effie Netzer taught on his radio program. I got to know Mount Hermon from the song "Kingdom of Hermon," Bethlehem from "See, Rachel, see," and the Jezreel Valley from "Song of the Valley."

But one song was seared in my memory: Nathan Alterman's "Morning Song." It begins with the words, "In the mountains the sun already blazes..." One line from the song's refrain reverberated incessantly in my head: "What we have not yet given, we will give."

Even then, as a young girl, I felt that I had not done anything for my country. I came to a ready-made land, and I did not know that one day I would give up what was more precious to me than anything for my land – my sons, Uriel and Eliraz. Still, a homeland is not built from pain and tears alone. It also needs hard work and giving over the course of many years.

I am proud to be part of a group that chose to engage in education, out of the conviction that this is the way to breach the walls of ignorance and poverty, and out of the understanding that education creates opportunities for self-actualization and personal development, as it did for me.

I brought with me to the practice of education the values I had absorbed in my parents' home. These are the foundations on which I, together with my beloved husband, Eliezer, of blessed memory, raised our six children: Uriel, Eliraz, Hadas, Avihai, Eliasaf, and Bat-El.

Esteemed friends, I stand here before you today, bewildered, next to my colleagues, giants who have created, written, studied and invented. Men and women of vision and action. People of faith. I am unworthy, I have created nothing. There is no discovery I can claim or formula I have solved.

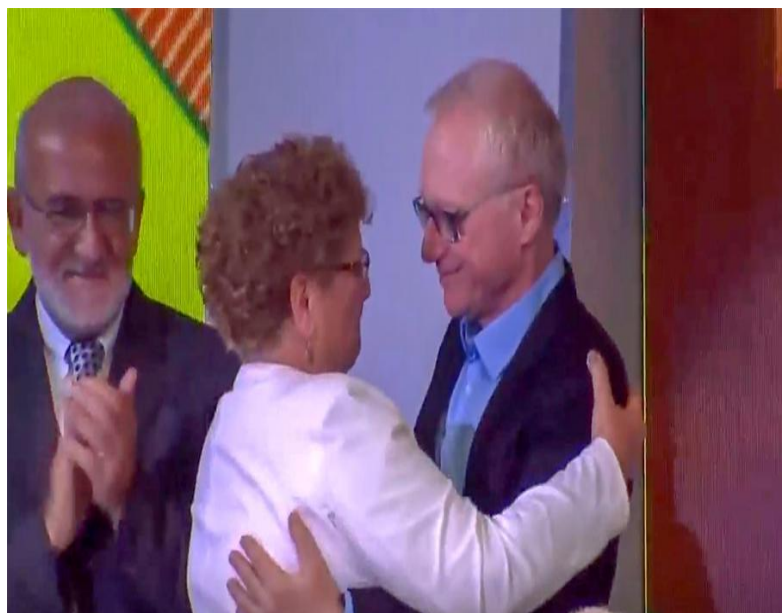
What I have is a heart that had been broken three times by terrible news: my son, Uriel, fell in battle in Lebanon, my husband Eliezer died of a broken heart, and my second son, Eliraz, fell in battle in Gaza.

With this heart I went out to my people, and with simple words, in the language of a broken heart, I spoke of this land and its heritage, of choosing goodness, of joy, of clinging to life, and of social involvement and responsibility. With this heart, which beats with faith in this land and this people, from the depths of pain, the wellsprings of love burst forth.

And when the heart is full of faith, it can withstand great challenges and create works of greatness. This is what I've created. It is implanted in hearts. I transformed my sorry into a new melody.

The same is true of each and every person sitting on this esteemed stage. Each with the stirrings of their heart, each molded by their native landscape and education, each with their own Yerushalayim, each with their own wellsprings of creativity.

Among the prizewinners are those who have experienced loss but whose spirits nevertheless remained unbroken. They continue to work within society, each in their own way, to make it better. All the others act not only for their own sake, but for the sake of the State of Israel, developing it and strengthening it on the practical plane and through its manifold expressions of humanity.



I have been privileged to encounter the diversity of Israeli society in face-to-face meetings that broadened hearts and made it possible for new ideas and understandings to emerge. It would bring me joy to see all of us going out and encountering that variety, encountering "others." And if we are separated by deep chasms, we can build bridges over them.

If only we would recognize that what we have in common is greater than what divides us. This is home to all of us, and no one has a monopoly on love for the people and for the homeland. We all want to be able to watch our grandchildren building their homes here, safely hiking the trails of this land, enjoying its landscapes. We all pine for a model society, embodied by the spirit of the prophets of Israel. By virtue of this, we all bear responsibility for the character, values, and future of this home.

We cannot turn away. We cannot stand against. There is room for all of us, for every color in the rainbow, in this puzzle that we call the State of Israel. If one piece is missing, the picture that emerges is not complete. So I am not willing to give up on any part of my people. No matter how long it takes for us to piece the puzzle together, I will not give up hope.

To successfully, assemble this mosaic, we must have respect for everyone in our discourse. We must create a discourse of restraint and tolerance that allows for the expression of opinions without fear or threat, a discourse that leaves room for forgiving and forbearance, a discourse that reinforces our commitment to the love of humanity, "for man is created in the image of God." We need discourse that respects our heritage, that maximized the good, the light, and hope, and does not focus on darkness.

In the words of a singer of Israel: "Whoever desires life ... guard you tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies; turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." This is the Torah of life!

Let us all choose the path that increases the goodness and the light within us, just as I chose to carry the values of my sons, Uriel and Eliraz, and their friends – the values of brotherhood and companionship. They have guided my footsteps. Just as they called everyone "ahi," "my bro", so too I call out: We are all brothers. Through thick and thin.

As my son Uriel wrote: With all the thorns and weeds that stuck to my body, I could plant a little garden. But these are not just thorns; they're the thorns of the Land of Israel. Give me the thorns of my land over all the flowers in the world.

Esteemed friends, we have been privileged to witness the establishment of the state and its accomplishments. Now, as the state completes its 70th year, our task is to discover the light that is latent in the powerful unity of all the tribes of Israel. As Bialik wrote in his poem, "To the Volunteers":

Discover the light! Reveal the light! If mountains of darkness have been heaped upon us, the sparks have not all died out and disappeared; We will yet mine flames from the mountains of darkness. Let us reveal the manifold layers of light! O, sons of Maccabees! Stand your people upright! Raise a generation! Reveal light! Reveal light!"

<https://shilohmusings.blogspot.co.il/2018/04/miriam-peretz-israel-prize-yom.html?m=1>

Lesson Plan

Written by Ahuva Dotan

Pre Reading:

- Complete the sentence: "When I think of Miriam Peretz, I think of..... "
- What is Miriam Peretz associated with?
- What does she do besides being the bereaved mother of two fallen sons?
- What did she win the Israel Prize for?
- What makes her an outstanding unique person?

Note: Students can be asked to search the Internet and find information about Miriam Peretz

While Reading:

- According to Miriam, what did she acquire from her parents?
- What kind of people were they?
- Who was the "messiah" Miriam's father waited for?
- Miriam says the emissary of the Jewish Agency brought them to "Yerushalayim – the Hatzerim transit camp in Be'er Sheva". Why does she call the camp "Yerushalayim"?
- What conditions did they live in at the Hatzerim transit camp?
- How did they feel there?
- How did Miriam learn Hebrew?
- What has guided Miriam in her work as an educator?
- What decision has she made out of her "broken heart"?
- Who does Miriam address when she says, "Among the prizewinners are those who have experienced loss but whose spirits nevertheless remained unbroken. They continue to work within society, each in their own way, to make it better"?
- What is the "puzzle" Miriam is talking about?
- What are the parts of this "puzzle"?
- What does she hope for?

Post Reading:

- What is Miriam Peretz's main message?
- In what way is she a role model?
- Why, in your opinion, was Miriam Peretz chosen to deliver the speech as representative of all the prize winners?

Homework:

- Look for information about the other Israel Prize winners. Choose one winner you identify with, read about him / her and present his story in class.