



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the ceremony 50 Years of German-Israeli
Diplomatic Relations
on 12 May 2015
in Berlin**

I would like to dedicate the beginning of this speech to Ari Rath, the great Israeli journalist who did such outstanding service to reconciliation between Israelis and Germans after the war and the Shoah – as did so many German-speaking Jews who fled to Palestine during the period of National Socialism. In 1960, as a reporter for the Jerusalem Post, Rath had the good fortune of witnessing a historic event: he was there when Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer met for the first time in New York.

Ari Rath recorded this moment for us in his memoirs, the meeting he experienced as the only journalist in Adenauer's suite in the Waldorf Astoria hotel. He writes:

"Adenauer came to meet Ben-Gurion in the vestibule. Two statesmen, 74 and 84 years old, one small, with a wild shock of white hair, the other tall and thin – an unforgettable image. I was amazed at how heartfelt their greeting was, as if they had known each other for years and as if the painful history they shared was of no importance."

The reporter brings history to life for us here; for the first time since the Shoah, it seemed possible for there to be reconciliation between Germany on the one hand and Israel and the Jewish community on the other hand. When, five years later, Ludwig Erhard and Levi Eschkol agreed to exchange ambassadors, they paved the way for a development which few had been able to hope for: what began as diplomatic relations grew into a close partnership, initially between Israel and the Federal Republic and then, after the Wall fell, between Israel and a united Germany. In turn this partnership gave rise to a close friendship.

Yes, what our two countries have achieved over the past 50 years is indeed a miracle. It is a miracle that could only come to

fruition because Israelis offered to trust the Germans again. That is something which, in joy and gratitude, we're paying tribute to tonight.

However, we don't just want to look back, we want to celebrate the many characteristics which make our friendship what it is today. Members of our parliaments, the Knesset and the Bundestag, work closely together. German companies and the Israeli start-up scene develop new products together. Researchers from our two countries share lecture halls and laboratories. German painters take inspiration in Tel Aviv and Israeli musicians and DJs get people dancing in Berlin. No matter where you look, the integration of our communities is deepening and flourishing in many different spheres of life. How wonderful!

This is in large part due to many Germans' fascination with Israel, and the attraction that many Israelis feel to Germany. Young people from both of our countries have been taking part in exchange programmes for over 50 years. City partnerships are so sought after that some Israeli cities have several German partners. Countless Germans have travelled to Israel in recent years, often more than once. By the same token, many Israelis visit our country and thousands now live here in Berlin, enriching the city.

There are many young men and women here this evening who are committed to Israeli-German relations. When I visited the youth congress with President Rivlin yesterday and the future forum today, I was impressed by what our young people have managed to achieve together. I thank them and everyone who works on the friendship between our two countries from the bottom of my heart.

However, I neither can nor want to make a secret of my concerns this evening. Whilst the vast majority of Jewish Israelis now have positive feelings towards Germany, nearly half of the Germans have a negative opinion of Israel. This is what the results of a recent study by the Bertelsmann Foundation show. They should serve to both warn us and spur us on, for they show that we cannot sit back and trust that things will simply continue in as positive a direction as they have done over the past 50 years. We have to ask ourselves what we can do to further strengthen the Israeli-German friendship and to ensure it takes root in our societies.

I thus hope to see yet more encounters, yet more impetus, yet more interest and yet more empathy. It is good that we were able to launch the new German-Israeli volunteer programme during this anniversary year. It offers young people the chance to engage in social, environmental and cultural projects in the partner country, thus enabling future generations of Israelis and Germans to get to know and understand one another.

Israel and Germany will always remain linked by the memory of the Shoah. We will not allow Germany's sense of special historical responsibility to fade. Yet it's also true that we've long been connected by far more than just our painful history: we stand for the same values, for freedom, democracy and universal human rights. This serves as a solid platform upon which we can meet each other as equals and learn about our differences. And we can build our future together.

The Berlin Philharmonic is about to play a spirited piece for us – Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's Italian symphony. When we leave tonight, let's take with us the momentum and the power of music to bring peoples together. Let's jointly carry the Israeli-German friendship to the future. I'm pleased that we're able to celebrate together this evening – half a century of co-existence as well as the State of Israel's Independence Day, on which I would like to belatedly offer all citizens my congratulations as well as those of my compatriots. Congratulations!