



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the Hebrew University
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יחד גם אחים שבת נעים ומה טוב מה הנה

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”

This psalm describes what I feel when I survey this auditorium. For me, visiting the Hebrew University is about returning to a familiar and beloved place. It was here that I had the privilege of spending one of my happiest days as German Foreign Minister.

I shall never forget 31 May 2015! I was visiting your university together with my wife and daughter, one family among many. We were attending the degree ceremony together with three hundred of your fellow students and their parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, not here in a lecture hall, but in the amphitheatre, basking in the afternoon sun.

The honorary doctorate that I received then was actually honour enough in itself, and yet I felt that I was being honoured twice over. For I was sitting on the stage together with a man who had so profoundly shaped Israel’s path over the course of so many decades. It was Shimon Peres, that statesman and tireless advocate of peace, that – as a German newspaper once called him – “realistic visionary”. A man whose political work I had followed with great respect and, the more often I met him, ever more personal affection, and with whose personal story I was familiar – a story that connected him with the history of my country in a terrible way. Shimon Peres loved his grandfather, Rabbi Meltzer of the shtetl of Vishnyeva, in what was then Poland. Little Shimon often snuggled under his grandfather’s prayer shawl to keep warm in the cold winter nights. In 1941 – Shimon, now a young man, fortunately already lived here, in the Alumot kibbutz – the German soldiers overran the shtetl. They herded all of the Jews into the synagogue, Shimon’s grandfather’s synagogue. Rabbi Meltzer

was at the vanguard of his community, clad in that very same prayer shawl. The Nazis sealed the doors behind them and set the synagogue ablaze. Only soot and ashes remained of Vishnyeva's Jewish community.

And yet it was the same Shimon Peres, who – like many Israelis – had lost his family and his home as a result of murder and expulsion, who helped our two countries to embark on the path towards rapprochement as an Israeli statesman in later life. He helped to lead us from the dark abyss of the Shoah into a new dawn of reconciliation. And so we met here on Mount Scopus two years ago and, precisely 70 years after the end of the war and 70 years after the liberation of the Auschwitz extermination camp, celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of German-Israeli relations. After persecution and annihilation, reconciliation was made possible because the country of the victims held out its hand to the perpetrators. Initial circumspect, tentative, and also painful contacts between our countries turned into a friendship. This is and remains nothing short of a miracle!

Now this is something that is quite easily said, as a political statement, perhaps even too easily sometimes. But on that day at your university two years ago, this miracle was tangible in the amphitheatre for us all, not just politically, but also most personally, deep down inside us. At tomorrow's reception at the Convent of the Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo, I will, as I have often done in the past, meet some of the many hundreds of young Germans who are spending a year here and who have become friends with many Jewish and Arab Israelis. And, two years ago, I met young Israelis among the graduates of your university who waxed lyrical about their study trips to Germany – or, if they were honest, about the beer gardens in Munich and techno clubs in Berlin. And their proud grandparents were also in the audience. Many of them had experienced the horrors of the Shoah first hand, and yet, on this day of celebration for their grandchildren, they welcomed this visitor from Germany with open arms. Yes, the miracle that is the German-Israeli friendship was palpable here on Mount Scopus that day.

Esteemed students, let us work to preserve this miracle – in politics, of course, but also in the hearts of the people, in journeys, projects and friendships that – particularly among your generation – have become so wonderfully abundant.

Unfortunately, 31 May 2015 was also when I saw Shimon Peres for the last time. My wife Elke and I visited his grave this morning with sadness and gratitude. Esteemed Peres family, you greatly miss – how could it be otherwise? – the man who was Shimon Peres. But we in Germany, too, miss his wisdom and friendship – and also his humour. We shall never forget his work in the name of peace and understanding – not only in the Middle East, but around the world. Each of the

conversations I was privileged to have with Shimon Peres enriched me, and our last meeting here at your university in particular was one that I shall never forget – the inimitable way in which he held young people spellbound with the strength of his personality and the sum of his life experience.

After his death, I wondered how we, as Germans, could preserve and pass on his optimistic and insightful view of the future to posterity. This idea was taken up by the German Federal Foreign Office, and so I am delighted to announce today that we are establishing a prize that is to be named in memory of Shimon Peres. With the Shimon Peres memorial prize, we will honour young Israelis and Germans who work on issues equally relevant to Israel and Germany, from ideas on peacekeeping and questions deriving from demographic change to the impact of climate change or digitisation. The message here – very much in the spirit of Shimon Peres himself – is that we want a joint future, so let us work together to that end! We will award the prize for the first time in the autumn. Dear Tsvia Peres, it is wonderful that we are able to pay tribute to his name in this way. And I am sure that no one would have been more delighted than him to know that young Germans and Israelis are taking the future into their own hands together in his name. You will hopefully all be a part of this!

Esteemed students,

Recalling a day at your university in May two years ago is not the only reason why I chose to start my speech with Shimon Peres. I want to talk to you today about the future of democracy, which was also *his* topic. In one of his countless publications, I came across a sentence that gave me pause for thought:

“Democracy,” he writes, “is the harmony of opposites. For democracy is not only the right of every citizen to be equal, but also the equal right of every citizen to be different.”

No German political scientist could have put it so succinctly, but perhaps Peres had, precisely with this laconic formulation, got to the heart of many current concerns in Western societies. Today, many people in my country and in yours are asking themselves this: which equality actually holds our society together? And, perhaps even more urgently: how much diversity can our society cope with?

The harmony that Peres mentions is, in reality, a difficult balancing act. Democracy is certainly not a natural state. It does not grow on trees anywhere – not in Israel, and certainly not in Germany.

I spoke about the miracle of German-Israeli rapprochement, about how little this friendship, when held up against the mirror of history, can be taken for granted, even though it sometimes seems to us to be almost a matter of course today. There is something else that cannot be taken for granted, and which we can rightfully call a miracle.

And that is the miracle that is a successful democracy. I consider our two countries to be examples of successful democracies and I hope that they continue to be so in the future. And yet a brief look at our history reminds us how little we can take the emergence and success of democracies for granted.

Israel pretty much wrested its democracy from a hostile environment. Israel is marking a number of milestones in 2017:

The first Zionist Congress met in Basel in 1897 – 120 years ago. Theodor Herzl's political vision encountered enormous resistance – even a tremendous amount of scorn. History was to prove him right, however. It was *his* larger-than-life portrait in front of which David Ben Gurion later proclaimed the State of Israel.

One hundred years ago, in 1917, the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour – who also, incidentally, attended the opening ceremony of your university – declared that his government would “favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”.

This formulation became an important basis for the resolution with which the United Nations General Assembly adopted the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state in 1947 – 70 years ago.

Half a century ago, in 1967, the Six-Day War marked the beginning of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. This was, without doubt, a caesura in the history of Israel that to this day continues, after many failed attempts to find a solution, to have a major impact on the political landscape in Israel and on the coexistence of Israelis.

These are important junctures in the Israeli democracy, and perhaps in this commemorative year one might take a new look at them.

And Germany? The “long path westward” that it has trodden in the course of its more recent history was marked by detours and aberrations along the way. My country became a democracy in the end. But it only got there on the third attempt.

The liberal revolutionaries of 1848 wanted democracy, freedom and national unity.

Although they failed, they laid the foundations on which the Weimar democracy was built in 1918. But it too was fragile, came under attack from day one and, after just 14 years, led directly into the darkest abyss of German history.

Part of Germany, at least, became a democracy in 1949 with the foundation of the Federal Republic, while freedom continued to be absent from the eastern part of the country even after the end of the

National Socialist dictatorship. The whole of Germany finally became a democracy in 1990 – to our great fortune.

However, this good fortune did not just come out of nowhere. We Germans are aware of the fact that our democracy was not so much something that we *achieved* after the war, but rather something that was *made possible* for us. We became part of the West because our former enemies took us into their fold. And we were only really able to gain a foothold in this community of nations – despite our historic guilt – because there were courageous people in Israel who did not want to forget, but rather overcome the past, and who accepted us Germans as partners. Germany would not be the country it is today without the hand that was extended to us by our Israeli friends at that time.

Preserving the miracle that is this friendship is an unshakeable task incumbent on us Germans. It was therefore clear to me that my first trip outside Europe as Federal President would take me here to Israel. The events of the past two weeks, which have been the subject of much discussion, have done nothing to change this – on the contrary: these discussions have strengthened my resolve to talk about democracy here with you in Israel. For democracy has never been a matter of course in either of our two countries, and even today it has neither reached a state of perfection nor is it guaranteed for all time.

It is precisely because Germany and Israel achieved democracy in such different ways that we Germans have such respect for the path of Israeli democracy.

Let us take a look back at the early days. Despite the external threats to which this Jewish state was exposed from the outset, Israeli democracy was vibrant from the very beginning. This is thanks not least to the great Ben Gurion, who was aware of the value of compromise and who knew that Israel must be strong, but that it also needs partners – partners who, firstly, understand Israel's position and its political path and, secondly, lend the country their support.

The situation of the Federal Republic was incomparably different. We did not have to contend with an environment that was hostile to our country; our neighbourhood wanted democracy in Germany. In Germany, it was rather a question of internal affairs in the fledgling Federal Republic in which democracy first had to find its feet. It took time for the networks and modes of thought of dictatorship to disappear and for the unsparing process of coming to terms with the crimes of the Nazi era to get under way. I am old enough to recall the painful questions that we had to ask our parents and grandparents, but which made initial tentative and, later on, more intensive rapprochement with your country possible in the first place.

I have great respect for the achievements of Israeli democracy to this day. Some things have surely been more successful in Israel than in Germany. Take integration, for example. Israel has integrated millions of migrants into its democracy, people who hailed from non-democratic countries, whether from the countries of the former Soviet Union or from Arab and African nations.

I find it inspiring how this young state has managed to convey the principles and values of democracy to its migrants – and also, incidentally, its language. I walked past a number of ulpanim in the streets of Tel Aviv, full of amazement. I saw young and old people from all over the world sitting there and wondered whether I would be capable of doing that at my age. Like learning German, getting to grips with Hebrew is not exactly a piece of cake.

I would like to emphasise one more thing. Israel's democracy has, for many decades, been surrounded by the permanent threat of terrorism. In recent years, Islamist terrorism has struck us in Germany, France and Belgium – at the heart of Europe. The threat level has increased – and is confronting us in Europe with difficult questions, questions with which Israel has long been familiar. For example, what is the right balance between freedom and security? How much surveillance can or must there be while at the same time preserving privacy? Israel has been tested longer and far more severely than we Europeans, but I know from my own conversations that Israel did not allow itself the easy answers either. Again I think of Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin and their approach to terrorism in the 1990s. Today, we Europeans are discovering that there is no clear-cut right or wrong here. But we look to Israel and establish that, despite the threats of war and terrorism, Israeli democracy has remained vibrant and self-confident. Perhaps Europeans have more appreciation for this today than they did a few years ago.

I have been asking myself this: just what is it that makes Israeli democracy so strong and vital? Thinking about my many friendships with Israelis, and about the innumerable sleepless nights spent in heated debate, ultimately I come to the conclusion that the heart of Israeli democracy is its spirit of contradiction, its passion for democratic debate.

At first sight, there are many institutional proofs of this.

- Voter turnout and participation in the democratic process is considerably higher in Israel than, say, in Germany or other European states.
- In its judicial system and Supreme Court, Israel has an indomitable defender of the individual's civil liberties.
- And Israel has an extremely diverse press which rivals that of much larger democracies. A German tourist

arriving in Tel Aviv and taking a taxi into the city centre will rarely hear music on the car radio: it will generally be tuned in to some political programme. And your taxi driver will get you embroiled in a heated political discussion by the time you get onto the motorway, if not before.

When I think about my friends and my encounters in Israel, then I see that this spirit of contradiction, this passion, extends deep into Jewish culture and religion, and as far as the study of the Talmud, with every word being probed from every conceivable angle. I have to think of the story told me by one of my Israeli friends a long time ago about how an Israeli who has been missing for twenty years is rescued from a desert island. The press arrive, amazed and ready to report the story. They are even more amazed to see three huts the man has built out of nothing more than sand, palm branches and coconuts. "What's that?" they ask. The man replies: "That's my house." "And what about that hut there?" "That's the synagogue I go to." "And the third hut?" "That's the synagogue I never set foot in!"

In Jewish culture, my friend has told me, the people you like to argue with most and most passionately are your friends and relatives. And it is in precisely that capacity – as friends – that we Germans want to take part in the debate. And we hope you regard us as being worth arguing with.

After all, there are plenty of debatable issues facing our democracies. Today we are seeing challenges to democracy not only in Germany and Israel, but in many countries in the European Union, and certainly in our important partner country on the other side of the ocean. Now, once again, fundamental principles are at stake; it is a matter of safeguarding the fundamental standards on which the West is based. As you probably know, there is a very intense debate about this going on within the European Union, too.

Because we Germans know and admire the diversity of democracy in Israel, we want to continue to discuss the difficult questions with as many different groups in your country as possible, so as to get to know as many different viewpoints as possible, just as we have done for decades in a spirit of mutual confidence.

A word of advice to us all: let us talk to each other about the challenges to democracy honestly and without taboos. My experience at any rate is this: taboos do not help you to understand, and they do not create understanding.

After all, in the end we are all in the same boat. We *are* democrats, and as democrats we want to prove that the others – the autocrats, the totalitarians, the self-styled "strong men" who decry the efforts and endeavours of democracy and are unaware of the value of

compromise, and who parade their very simple answers of brute force – quite simply do not have the better answers.

Why do I believe that? Because democracy is able to take a critical look at itself, and to correct itself. Autocrats are not. Democracy is the only form of government which integrates the largest possible spectrum of society, which scrutinises those in power, which – frequently enough – recognises wrong turns as wrong turns and makes it possible to embark on new paths.

There are a few issues which are troubling me as Federal President which I would like to discuss with you.

Economic and social inequality, for example. How can we arrive at ethical standards which hold the top and bottom of a society together? How can we prevent people from feeling detached from the body politic and saying “democracy only seems to help the people at the top”?

Or another issue: the loss of political rationality we are seeing, particularly in social media. If differentiating between facts and lies takes second place behind “perceived truths”, if equal value attaches to lies and truth in the public discourse, to hatred and prejudice alongside objectivity and curiosity, then the very functioning of democracy is under threat. And at that point the way is open for those who seek to push their own power by discrediting the critical spirit of the universities, the media and civil society. This has been our bitter experience on more than one occasion in Germany: wherever the freedom of science and academia is restricted, it is not long before other freedoms are restricted too.

Thirdly, we also need to talk about the polarisation in our societies. An Israeli friend recently said to me: where left and right used to engage in passionate debate, nowadays friend and foe stand irreconcilable. I see this same development in European democracies as well. Polarisation is increasing in our societies to a worrying degree. Some of the reasons for this may be similar in our two countries, but, looking at the overall situation here in the Middle East and at the repercussions of a constantly tense security situation here in Israel, many of them are completely different. Of course, the legacy of occupation I mentioned earlier, the standstill in the peace process and not least the illegal settlement activities have an effect on the tensions – not just tensions vis-à-vis the Palestinians, but also within your own Israeli society. You know Germany’s position on this, which is also the common position of all political groups represented in the Government. I would just like to add one thing: it is precisely because we also have an eye on democracy that we Germans advocate a two-state solution. Thinking a few years ahead, then I am convinced that only a two-state solution will give Israel a future as both a Jewish and

a democratic state. And for our part we want to continue to support this path.

I am thankful that Germans and Israelis can discuss questions like this with each other today, painful questions – not only those about our painful past, but also the difficult questions facing us in the here and now.

Now, perhaps you feel like asking me: what is *your* answer to these questions?

And you are quite right. We in Germany, too, need to ask ourselves painful questions. I have brought some of them with me today, too. Do we have to put up with populists reheating nationalistic, racist ideas from fateful times in their speeches? Do we have to get used to the fact that synagogues in our country still need to be guarded by the police? Do we have to accept it when people coming to Germany from the Muslim world import their hostile stereotypes too? Or do we have to put up with a profession crucial to the survival of democracy being branded the “lying media”? My answer to all these questions is this: no, we absolutely do not! Neither must we allow ourselves to get used to all this, to regard it as “normal”, nor must we accept it.

In a democracy our maxim should really be this: tolerate diversity. But there are limits. Democracy means the rule of the majority, but also protection of minorities. In some Western democracies, including, unfortunately, my country, there are populist forces who claim to be the “true” voice of the “true” people and denounce all others as liars or interlopers or traitors. I firmly believe that anyone who rejects plurality in society, and who denies others their legitimate place, is marginalising himself.

Democracy means “government by the people”. But “the people” can only be a plural noun. The people has many voices; a plurality of voices is democracy’s oxygen. And that is why I believe that anyone who uses his voice, who expresses criticism, but at the same time respects the voice of others, is not a “traitor of the people”, but is in fact a preserver of the people.

For that reason, I believe that civil-society organisations which are part of the social debate deserve our respect as democrats – even, and the same is true in Germany, when they take a critical view of a government.

You will all be aware that the German and Israeli Governments have taken different views in recent days on the question of who are legitimate interlocutors. I have thought long and hard about what this means for my visit to Israel today. Quite a lot of people tried to tell me this was the wrong time for a trip to Israel. Some thought it would be more appropriate to cancel, or at least postpone the trip.

Perhaps that might even have been the easier solution for me. But I decided otherwise. Not because I find your Prime Minister's decision to cancel his meeting with Germany's Foreign Minister correct. But because I believe that it would not be in keeping with my responsibilities if I were to let relations between our two countries move deeper into a cul-de-sac at the end of which all sides would have lost a great deal. Our two countries are bound by a terrible past. Previous generations – not only politicians – worked to overcome the divides torn open by the past and to build up new political, cultural, economic and personal ties between our peoples. Relations between Germany and Israel will always be special. This is something we must not forget, particularly when things are difficult and a harsher wind is blowing. Particularly at times like that, we remain called upon to preserve this precious heritage. Particularly at times like that, we must not allow this friendship, a friendship built on the ruins of the past, to become less important or a matter of indifference to us. Whatever happens, there must never be silence between Germany and Israel! This is my responsibility as Federal President, and this is also what my heart tells me. That is why I am here.

Besides, I would not have found it very courageous to stay at home. To my mind, it is never courageous in a conflict to hide sulking in a corner or to keep the other side at a distance. That is my experience from many years of foreign policy, but I believe the principle applies far beyond that. Sometimes it may well be harder to talk to each other directly than not to talk at all. But only if dialogue is maintained is it possible to soothe irritations, clarify misunderstandings and build new trust. That is why I am convinced that it is better to try to talk than to refuse to talk.

How Israeli society handles the "right to be different" Shimon Peres spoke of is something on which I as Federal President cannot advise other democracies. I can only say that I admire the Israeli democracy for how it has defied external threats for decades by taking pride in its diversity. And that is why I am confident that it will preserve this proud diversity internally, too.

Ultimately, our own actions will also influence the even bigger questions of our age. The world out there is changing at a terrific pace, sometimes faster than we can see. New powers are emerging, and there is a struggle to shape the future global order. Liberal democracy is being challenged by new authoritarian and fanatical forces. And this reordering of the world is causing more discord, more violence and more conflict than I have ever known in my own life and work.

I understand all young people, all of you, wondering how to find orientation in this complex world.

In turn, let me ask you this: don't we all have moments when we simply sense where we belong? Like that moment when the anchor

takes hold after a blustery day on the high seas. I personally experienced just such a moment this morning. I was in Yad Vashem – not for the first time, but for the first time as German head of state. When the cantor sang of the suffering of the Jews, I experienced just such a moment of anchoring. And that anchor is this: “Never again!” The anchor is Germany’s responsibility for Israel’s security. And the anchor is resistance against all forms of anti-Semitism and racism.

I can only hope that you, too, can find some orientation in the history of our two countries. So, if you should sometimes doubt whether democracy and human rights and peaceful coexistence have any future at all in this world, then look to the history of Israel and Germany.

I admit that miracles are rare in politics. And where they do exist, they are not a gift from the heavens, but have been made by courageous people. So do not wait for miracles – work to make them come true! Shimon Peres would have had every confidence that you can do so, and so do I.