

An Open Letter About the UN General Assembly Special Session  
Commemorating the Liberation of Auschwitz

*“To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world not to have faith ... but to go on ... to go on carrying on the dialogue...” (Elie Wiesel, 1974)*

As a human rights activist who has spent decades struggling to get the UN to be more effective in the fight against genocide, torture, and intolerance, I have no illusions about the UN. As an advocate who has pressed hard –with minimal success—to get a mere reference to “antisemitism” into UN resolutions on intolerance and to encourage UN independent investigators to pay attention to abuses against Jews, I know it would be easy to give up on the UN. I was a representative at Durban. Persuading UN diplomats or even NGOs to stand up against the bullying of those who demonize Israel at every opportunity was all but impossible.

On Monday, January 24, 2005, for the first time in its history, the United Nations General Assembly (“UNGA”) convened a Special Session to commemorate the liberation of the Nazi death camps. Listening to the strains of Hatikvah echo throughout the UN visitor’s lobby that evening, I reflected on the events of this day. Was this a “turning point” as Israeli diplomats claim? Or was it insignificant?

In the General Assembly hall, where Israel has been so commonly vilified, leaders came to say to Israelis and Jews everywhere-- and before all the nations of the world-- that they understand the uniqueness of the Jewish experience, that antisemitism led to the worst crime in modern history, and that their predecessors’ indifference or complicity led to these unspeakable horrors. Annan and others affirmed that Israel—like the UN itself—is a much needed and legitimate outcome of that experience. They cited contemporary manifestations of anti-Semitism and professed that the lessons of the Holocaust are universal.

Elie Wiesel was the first Holocaust survivor to be invited to address the UN General Assembly and share his experiences. His remarks did justice to Jewish victims of the Holocaust, who with their dying breaths pleaded: “Remember me!”

Secretary General Kofi Annan was the first of a handful of speakers to talk about Israel. The absence of any reference to the Palestinians made his address to member states noteworthy ... even courageous. Annan had signaled that the UN could depart from its standard mantra of moral equivalence.

For this, Annan has been harshly criticized in the Arab press. A column in the pro-government Egyptian paper *Al Akhram* complained that “most Arab listeners would (have) cringe(d) at the diplomatic omission of the 57-year old tragedy caused by Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine and its disastrous consequence.” *Al-Hayat* decried “using the UN and the memory of the holocaust to clean up the bloody record of the ‘State of Israel’.”

In the past, fear of such criticism reduced member states to silence about Jews and the Holocaust. Ritualized condemnation of Israel was adopted along with so-called “balanced” statements about both Israel and Palestine.

Having thus stood up to the Arab world, Annan nonetheless has been accused of pandering by a few members of the Jewish community. Still, on that day, most speakers including Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and Congressman Tom Lantos (the only Holocaust survivor to serve in the US Congress) commended Annan’s moral leadership and “pure” motives in lobbying vigorously for states to approve the 28<sup>th</sup> UNGA Special Session.

The Foreign Minister of Israel, who was rightly accorded the honor of speaking ahead of all other UN members, described the Jewish state as the fulfillment of the prophetic vision of dry bones that came to life. His evocation of Ezekiel’s poignant imagery reminded the assembly of nations that the Jewish people’s claim to the land of Israel goes back to the Bible, and he reiterated Annan’s statement that “Israel, like the UN itself, rose from the ashes of the Holocaust.” Foreign Minister Shalom told the convocation that Israel was a protective national citadel for Jews everywhere. From the platform of the General Assembly Special Session, Shalom recommitted Israel to the “noble principles” of the UN Charter whose mission was shaped by the lessons of the Holocaust. He asked member states to take actions that include: (1) rejecting moral equivalence and calling evil by its name, (2) preventing antisemitic attacks against Jews everywhere and (3) condemning violence perpetrated by suicide bombers.

No one walked out. No one denounced the Jews and their “sponsors.” No one demanded the ouster of the Israelis, or denial of their credentials. No one argued that the Jews were exaggerating. No one declared them to be “perpetrators” or “racists” or “colonists” as we have heard too often in the past.

On the contrary, many nations reaffirmed Shalom’s points.

The entire constituency of the world body added their voices to the commemoration, directly or indirectly. Representatives of each of the five regional UN groups – Africa (Guinea); Latin America (Honduras); Asia (Afghanistan); Eastern Europe (Bulgaria) and Western Europe (Portugal) spoke on behalf of all their member states, demonstrating universal respect for the victims, survivors, and liberators.

Notably, Germany’s Foreign Minister publicly affirmed security assurances to Israel. He promised that: “the State of Israel’s right to exist and security of its citizens will forever remain non-negotiable fixtures of German foreign policy. On this, Israel can always rely.” Poland’s Foreign Minister promised ongoing remembrance activities and preservation of the camps. The French Foreign Minister reminded everyone that a key drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Rene Cassin, was Jewish and that “by decision of this Assembly and through the courage and strength of the pioneers,” the Jewish people were able “to establish its refuge, its State, in the land of Israel.”

The Speaker of the Italian Senate equated demonization of Israel with contemporary forms of anti-Semitism. “It crops up,” Marcello Pera warned member states, “when the struggle for life led by the Israelis is labeled ‘state terrorism’.” Culture, politics, and false myths paved the way to the Holocaust, he reminded everyone, but today, “if we give in to blackmail or fear, then we have no more instruments to counter the anti-Jewish racism which continues to poison us.”

Unlike President Vladimir Putin at the Polish commemorations, Russia's Human Rights Commissioner Vladimir Lukin mentioned Jews as victims of the Holocaust – something the Soviet Union steadfastly refused to do for 45 years, and prevented the UN from doing. He admitted that antisemitism still thrives in Russia.

I was astonished by what I was hearing. Could this be happening here? I felt compelled to leave my seat and survey the room. Perhaps the detractors were simply absent? No, there were a group of representatives from Egypt; a diplomat at Libya's seat; others from Jordan; two "observers" taking notes behind the Palestinian Liberation Organization nameplate; an Iranian and an Algerian representative. Others were there too. True, many small island states, and some of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) members were absent – but it was a day after a blizzard in January and their absence did not detract from the extraordinary display of support and solidarity. 150 states --including more than half of the OIC states-- supported convening this commemoration.

Afterwards, invited guests proceeded to the UN Visitors' Lobby where dignitaries opened an exhibit with visual evidence of the process of mass murder at Auschwitz –photos by German SS soldiers of arriving Hungarian Jews, and sketches by a Soviet Ukrainian artist of the horrors he saw at the Majdanek extermination camp.

In summing up the significance of the UNGA Special Session in *Haaretz*, Israeli foreign ministry official Ronny Yaar concluded that: "There is no doubt that this day is exceptional in the history of Israel's relationship with the UN, and serves as an important milestone in bringing the two parties closer..."

Indeed, many exceptional steps created an exceptional set of circumstances: The ground rules preventing a resolution or declaration from being adopted at the Special Session also meant that current events (read: the Mid-East conflict) would not be the focus of amendments, denunciations, challenges from the Arab or Islamic bloc. None of them were permitted to deny the Holocaust, the numbers of victims, or the affirmation of the State of Israel as a respected and legitimate outcome of the very events that led to the founding of the United Nations. While only a few states mentioned Israel, they were key European states: Germany, France, Italy, Norway and, of course, Israel itself. In addition, from the podium of the General Assembly Special Session, both the Secretary General and Elie Wiesel movingly invoked the significance of Israel. What a contrast to the days of Kurt Waldheim!

Surprisingly few people know that Annan's wife is the niece of famed Swede Raoul Wallenberg who saved so many Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. Or that Annan himself has an established track record breaking UN taboos where anti-Semitism and the Holocaust are concerned. In 1998 Annan publicly called the "Zionism is Racism" resolution a "low point" in the UN and acknowledged UN bias against Israel. In June 2004, opening the first UN full day conference on antisemitism, Annan stated he wanted Jews everywhere "to feel that the UN is their home too." At the evening reception following the UNGA Special Session, they seemed to take him at his word. The ceremony began with the memorial prayer *El Maleh Rachamim* and ended with the singing of *Hatikvah* ("The Hope"). This was reportedly the first time in UN history that a national anthem was played at an event within the building—and it was Israel's.

Annan's new chef de cabinet, Mark Malloch Brown, at Annan's direction, overturned 59 years of UN protocol to allow this exception to the UN's usual prohibition on prayers and national anthems. Contrary to what one editorialist claimed, UN officials were well aware that *Hatikvah*

was Israel's national anthem and not "a song for the Holocaust victims." And the exhibit, sponsored by the State of Israel and curated by *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust museum and remembrance authority in Jerusalem, concludes with an important reminder to UN visitors that: "Most of the Holocaust survivors immigrated to the state of Israel after its establishment in 1948 following a resolution of the United Nations."

Should we fear that all this gives the UN an unwarranted public relations boost and is a disingenuous ploy to pacify American Jews? Or that the Jewish state will lose more than it gains? It strikes me that those who chose to emphasize the former miss the point-- and those who emphasize the latter lack confidence in Israel. The Special Session reaffirmed Israel's moral legitimacy in the very body that has repeatedly challenged it. Such moments are often what is needed to move forward. Yitzhak Rabin reminded us "you don't make peace with your friends, but with your enemies." Trust is an essential ingredient in that equation and, especially in the case of UN-Israel relations, it requires a leap of faith.

Will the pattern of UN demonization of Israel persist without skipping a beat? The challenge of reversing the UN's infamously biased resolutions remains. Yet, a few days after the Special Session, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1583, criticizing Lebanon for wrongly insisting that the UN-approved boundaries in the Golan (Shab'a Farms) are not valid-- and for permitting Hizbollah to fire rockets across the Blue Line, leading to recent deaths of Israeli soldiers.

Political changes in the Middle East justify a reexamination of Israel-UN relations. The UN's tribute presents us with a choice: either to remain mired in a litany of recriminations and rejectionism or to embrace the moment and build on it to achieve all that we yearn for at the UN – respect, fairness, peace and security for Israel. In the spirit of *Hatikvah*, I choose to be hopeful: it is the traditional response to adversity that has enabled Jews to thrive in an often times hostile world.

To disparage the UNGA Special Session on the Liberation of Auschwitz, as a few have rushed to do, belies a needless insecurity that Israel and her advocates have been duped. It flies in the face of Holocaust survivor Pierre Sauvage's admonition that "If hope is allowed to seem an unrealistic response to the world, if we do not work toward developing confidence...we will be responsible for producing in due time a world devoid of humanity –literally."

The Holocaust, we were told, began with words. Perhaps the words spoken at the United Nations—and the promises made-- will auger a new and different beginning. It was a day for the victims, survivors, liberators --- and the future. At the 28<sup>th</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly, hope trumped cynicism.

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