



“The Mount Scopus Speech”

Address by Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin upon receiving the Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Mount Scopus, Jerusalem June 28, 1967

Introduction

Following the IDF’s brilliant victory in the Six-Day War, The Hebrew University decided to award the chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Yitzhak Rabin, an honorary doctorate of philosophy. The award announcement stated that the university’s senate wished to express its appreciation to the chief of staff and those under his command “for risking their lives and for their dedication in saving the State of Israel from the dangers posed by its attackers (...) and gratitude for restoring all of Jerusalem to the State of Israel’s border and returning Mount Scopus to The Hebrew University.”

Rabin was reluctant at first, but on second thought decided to accept the honorary degree “with the intention of using this occasion to speak about the IDF’s uniqueness.”

According to Rabin’s account, he worked for about two weeks on the speech, assisted by his bureau chief, Rafi Efrat, and others, including the chief education officer, Mordechai Bar-On. Rabin instructed his aides to focus on the moral aspects of the war and to portray it as a triumph of the human spirit rather than the material. The speech, marked by humility and a lack of hubris, came to symbolize the proper qualities of an army and its fighters. It expresses the soldiers’ acts of heroism, fortitude and comradeship, and emphasizes the justice of the cause, along with the heavy price of victory and the price the enemy paid.

Rabin’s remarks were broadcast on the radio and stirred great emotion.

David Ben-Gurion wrote to Yitzhak Rabin immediately after the speech: “I was proud of your speech. It is no coincidence that they applauded you more than all of the other ‘degree’ recipients ... It was more than a successful speech. You were privileged to be the chief of staff during the greatest days of our glorious army - and you are truly worthy of this”

Haim Gouri wrote after the speech: “The speech will be recorded in our history books and textbooks as one of the most brilliant speeches [...] Anyone who reads it will fully understand why and how the IDF won in the recent war”

Indeed, the speech is considered one of the most important speeches in Israeli history, and as a fundamental moral, political and military charter.



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Your Excellency, President of the State; Mr. Prime Minister; President of The Hebrew University; governors; teachers; ladies and gentlemen.

I stand in awe before you, leaders of our generation, here in this venerable and magnificent place, overlooking Israel's eternal capital and the birthplace of our people's ancient history. Together with other distinguished people, who are no doubt worthy of this honor, you have chosen to do me great honor by conferring upon me the title of Doctor of Philosophy. Permit me to express to you here what is in my heart: I regard myself at this time as the representative of thousands of commanders and tens of thousands of soldiers who brought the State of Israel its victory in the Six-Day War, as a representative of the entire IDF. [Israel Defense Forces].

It may be asked why the university saw fit to grant the title of Honorary Doctor of Philosophy to a soldier in recognition of his martial activities. What is there in common between military activity and the academic world which represents civilization and culture? What is there in common between those whose profession is violence, and spiritual values? I, however, am honored that through me you are expressing such deep appreciation to my comrades-in-arms and to the uniqueness of the Israel Defense Forces, which is essentially an extension of the unique spirit of the entire Jewish people.

The world has recognized the fact that the Israel Defense Forces differs from other armies. Although its first task is the military task of ensuring security, the Israel Defense Forces undertakes numerous tasks of peace, tasks not of destruction but of construction and of the strengthening of the nation's cultural and moral resources.

Our educational work has been praised widely and was given national recognition when, in 1966, it was granted the Israel Prize for Education. Nahal, which combines military training and agricultural settlement; teachers in border towns and villages contributing to social and cultural enrichment – these are but a few examples of the Israel Defense Forces' uniqueness in this sphere.

Today, however, the university has conferred this honorary title upon us in recognition of the IDF's superiority of spirit and morals, as was revealed in the heat of war, for we are standing in this place by virtue of a heavy battle which, though forced upon us, was forged into a victory that is already called miraculous.

War is intrinsically harsh and cruel, bloody and tearstained, but this war in particular, which we have just undergone, brought forth rare and magnificent instances of heroism and courage,

together with humane expressions of brotherhood, comradeship, and spiritual greatness.

Whoever has not seen a tank crew continue their attack with their commander killed and their vehicle badly damaged; whoever has not seen soldiers endangering their lives to extricate wounded comrades from a minefield; whoever has not seen the anxiety and the effort of the entire Air Force devoted to rescuing a pilot who has fallen in enemy territory, cannot know the meaning of devotion among comrades-in-arms.

The entire nation was exalted, and many wept, upon hearing the news of the capture of the Old City of Jerusalem. Our sabra youth, and most certainly our soldiers, do not tend toward sentimentality; they shy away from revealing it in public. However, the strain of battle, the anxiety which preceded it, and the sense of salvation and of direct participation of every soldier in the forging of the heart of Jewish history, cracked the shell of hardness and shyness and released wellsprings of deeply felt spiritual emotion. The paratroopers who conquered the Western Wall leaned against its stones and wept. As a symbol, this was a rare occasion, almost unparalleled in human history. Such phrases and clichés are not generally used in the IDF, but this sight on the Temple Mount, beyond the power of words, revealed, as though by a flash of lightning, a deep truth.

And more than this, the joy of triumph seized the entire nation. Nevertheless, we find, increasingly, a strange phenomenon among our fighters. Their joy is not total, and more than a little sorrow, and shock, permeates their celebration. There are those who do not celebrate at all. The warriors in the front lines witnessed not only the glory of victory but also its price – their comrades who fell beside them, bleeding. And I know that the terrible price paid by our enemies also touched the hearts of many of our men deeply. It may be that the Jewish people never learned, never accustomed themselves to experience the thrill of conquest and victory, and so we receive it with mixed feelings.

The Six-Day War revealed many instances of heroism far beyond the single daring assault dashing forward unthinkingly. In many places, desperate and lengthy battles raged. In Rafah, in El Arish, in Um Katef, in Jerusalem, and on the Golan Heights, there, and in many other places, the IDF soldier was revealed as heroic in spirit, in courage and in perseverance, which can leave no one who has witnessed this great and exalting human endeavor indifferent.

We speak a great deal about the few against the many. In this war, perhaps for the first time since the Arab invasions of the spring of 1948 and the battles of Negba and Deganya, units of the Israel Defense Forces stood on all fronts, the few against the many. What this means is that relatively small units of our soldiers often entered seemingly endless networks of deeply dug fortifications, surrounded by hundreds and thousands of enemy troops, and faced the task of forcing their way, hour after hour, in this jungle of dangers, even after the momentum and excitement of the first assault had waned and all that remained was the need to have faith in our strength, in the lack of any alternative, in the goal for which we fight, and in the importance of summoning up every spiritual resource in order to continue fighting to the very end.

In this way our Air Force persisted in striking our enemies. In this way our armored forces broke through on all fronts, our paratroopers fought their way into Rafah and Jerusalem, our engineer corps cleared minefields under enemy fire. The units that broke through enemy lines and reached their objectives after hours upon hours of fighting, kept forging ahead while their comrades fell right and left. Still they forged forward, only forward. These soldiers were impelled by spiritual values, by deep spiritual resources, far more than by their weapons or the techniques of warfare.

We have always demanded the very best of our youth for the Israel Defense Forces. When we coined the slogan “*Hatovim la-Tayis*” – the Best to the Air Force, a phrase which became a concept – we had in mind not only courage and technical skills. We meant that if our pilots were to be capable of defeating the air forces of four enemy countries within a few short hours, they must have moral values, human values.

Our pilots who struck the enemy planes with such accuracy that no one in the world understands how it was done and people seek technological explanations in the form of secret weapons; our armored troops who beat the enemy even when our equipment was inferior to theirs; our soldiers in all the branches of the Israel Defense Forces who overcame our enemies everywhere, despite their superior numbers and fortifications; all these revealed not only composure and courage in battle but a fierce faith in their righteousness, an understanding that only their personal stand against the greatest of dangers could bring victory to their country and to their families, and that if victory was not theirs, the alternative was annihilation.

Furthermore, in every sector, IDF commanders of all ranks far outshone those of the enemy. Their resourcefulness, understanding, readiness and will, their ability to improvise, their concern for their soldiers, and above all, their leadership of the troops in battle – these are not matters of materiel or technique. There is no rational explanation, only a deep consciousness of the morality of the war they were fighting.

It all starts and ends with the spirit. Our soldiers prevailed not by their weapons but by their awareness of their supreme mission, by their awareness of the righteousness of their cause, by their deep love for their homeland and by their recognition of the difficult task laid upon them – to ensure the existence of our people in our homeland, to defend, even at the price of their own lives, the right of the Jewish people to live in their own state, free, independent and in peace.

This army, which I had the privilege of commanding during this war, came from the people and returns to the people – to the people who rise in their hour of crisis and overcome all enemies by virtue of their moral stature and spiritual readiness in the hour of need.

As the representative of the Israel Defense Forces, and in the name of every one of its soldiers, I am proud to accept this honor.