

C-7433 Transcription

Eban, Abba. Lecture at George Washington University.

[Washington D.C.]. 1996.

**F1:** Good afternoon, welcome to the Welling Lectureship. When a pompous presenter says he needs no introduction, that hyperbole is rarely true. By now, however, Abba Eban has become a friendly face and an unmistakable voice at the George Washington University. He joined us in 1993-94 as the first holder of the JB and Morris C. Shapiro professorship in International Affairs. During which his acumen and his wit held spellbound the auditors of several lectures like this one and a sparkling wide ranging dialogue with Walter Cronkite as well as classrooms full of students, some budding diplomats of the Elliot School.

His yearlong residency was so successful that President Trachtenberg invited him to become the first appointee to a [1:00] James Clark Welling professorship, a new chair named for a nineteenth century president of GW that signals our regard by asking visitors to return at least once a year for four years. Not least, last May 14<sup>th</sup>, Ambassador Eban became our alumnus, awarded an honorary doctorate of humanities as recognition of

our respect and affection. But that is all parochial and Abba Eban is the least parochiable man imaginable.

All the world knows he has been the most stunning diplomats of our half century, present to the creation of the State of Israel and its ambassador to the United States and the United Nations from 1948 to 1959. Everyone alive in those and subsequent perilous times for Israel can summon the memory of his calm reasoned cadences, with commitment and courage and astonishing eloquence, standing alone [2:00] in the UN well to defend the existence of the world's newest and most imperiled nation. As foreign minister from 1966-1974, he demonstrated his meddle in policy and negotiations as well as advocacy. Abba Eban is a unique Israeli as well, born in Cape Town, South Africa, graduated from Cambridge with a triple-first, and veteran of World War II, he is scholar as well as statesmen, expert among other things in Arabic literature. His eight books span his many worlds, he has served as president of the Whiteman Institute of Science in Israel and member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. He is gracious and cosmopolitan in his every gesture, truly a citizen of the world. This Welling lecture was planned before we know what conditions in the Middle East would be like today, it makes it all the more poignant for us to be

here today at a time when his wisdom [3:00] has never been more needed. Ambassador Eban will speak to us this afternoon on 'Old divisions and the new Israel: change in Israeli society.'

[audience applause]

**Abba Eban:** I'm very grateful to you, Professor Salamon, for the warmth and sincerity of your welcome. And I'll tell you that I'm deeply moved to find that the, your opinion about me, is almost precisely identical with my own opinion about myself. [audience laughter] Chairman's introductions are a unique experience [4:00] in political literature, the object is to reconcile courtesy with truth, and if possible, with some slight exaggeration on the side of courtesy - in this you have most elegantly accomplished today. I certainly emerge in much better heart and spirit than after many occasions on which I was presented to audiences of the United States, notably the occasion when in New York, the, uh, chairman was the president of one of that country's, your country's, great oil companies. He was a man of few words, which were, however more than adequate to cover the entire range of his thoughts, and he presented me to the audience in the following words: "Abba Eban is well known throughout the entire civilized world [5:00] and also here in New York." [audience laughter]

It's a moving experience to come back to George Washington University, I certainly hope and pray that the weather will permit you next time to have your commencement exercise in the duly appointed season and it is that hope that accompanies me as I try to involve you now in a discussion of Israel's divided society and yet its united destiny, which figures in the title that I've been asked to address. I'd like to begin by plunging straight into the affairs of which preoccupy mankind at the present time and with your permission, I will ask myself some questions. [6:00]

The first question: was it really rational for the Israeli leaders in 1993 to, uh, proclaim and inaugurate a program for peace? Should Israel renounce any effort to bring that to fruition in the light of the desperate situations which have intervened since then? Can terrorism realistically be expected ever to cease? And is the current international initiative now taking place leading to the conclave between thirty countries for the purpose of outlawing and internationally rebuking terrorism, is that a positive development? I should like to explain that the reason why I have the habit of asking myself questions, it is because it is the only certain method [7:00] of obtaining intelligent answers. And let me therefore begin.

Was it rational, reasonable, in 1993 on that unforgettable day when I was on the White House lawn, preparatory to deliver a letter to the assembled audience, was it rational to believe and to state and to proclaim that, uh, a reconciliation had taken place between the Israeli nation and the neighboring people, the Palestinian people? I believe it was not only rational, but it was in a sense, inevitable. And to understand that conviction, it's necessary to comprehend that many currents of history had to converge in order [8:00] to make the peace process feasible. Many of these events lay outside the range of Israeli judgement and decision, together they created what I believe was an overwhelming case for taking the State of Israel on a new course, both of policy and of action. Undoubtedly, the major element which made the peace process feasible and indeed inevitable, was the downfall of the Soviet system.

All of a sudden, almost overnight, the vast weight and bulk of the Soviet Union and of Eastern Europe was transferred from the negative scale to the positive scale of the international balance. No longer the Soviet Union the spoiler, [9:00] as the saboteur of peace, no longer the Soviet Union organizing and financing the campaign, the campaign of Arab hostility against

Israel. No longer the Soviet Union closing Israeli access to international agencies. No longer the Soviet Union as the generating power behind the far-flung campaign of defamation which attended Israel in its onward journey. It's impossible to exaggerate the effect of the Soviet collapse on Israel's destiny from that time onward.

Today, the Soviet Union is not playing that saboteur role, the Soviet Union is today, theoretically at least, [clears throat] the partner of the United States [10:00] in their sponsorship [clears throat] of the peace process. I must point out that the presence of the Soviet foreign minister on the celebratory occasion had a certain parody effect, because in fact, the Soviet Union has removed itself and removed itself with our blessing and without any nostalgic longings from the center of the Middle Eastern discourse. But there were other elements which converged at that time to make it rational for people to believe that, um, that the Middle East was on the threshold of a new epoch. Not only was the Soviet Union rapidly changing its policies and its posture towards Israel, but events were moving [11:00] also in the Arab world in a similar sense.

Pragmatism had suddenly become one of the major elements in the approach of the Arab world to Israel. It was not in any

sense a matter of virtue or conscience, I think we can willingly liberate our neighbors from any such accusation, it was a fact that, um, men and nations often behave wisely once they have exhausted all the other alternatives. And the Arab world had exhausted all the other alternatives. It had tried everything. It had tried war, it had tried boycotts, it had tried ceasefires, it had tried armistices. It had tried the organizations [12:00] of international condemnations; it had tried five power talks, four power talks, three power talks. It had tried to involve the United States and the Soviet Union and the whole of the European community in a condemnatory and defamatory attitude towards the State of Israel. It had also tried a national rebellion, the intifada, which had certainly straightened the backs on many young Palestinians, but which had dissolved into a total vacuum with no lasting or permanent effects. And having tried everything, it then went to the alternative of examining its own situation, and reaching a different appraisal from that which had governed [inaudible] [13:00] of its hostility until that time. And these currents of opinion, in favor of a realistic approach, not to ask to their own condition began to predominate; it had its effects in Syria. We must remember that Syria has never made war against Israel

except on conditions which no longer exist. The first condition was that Egypt should be making war against Israel at the same time. Say what you like about Hafez al-Assad, he is a realist. He understands the valor of which discretion is the better part, he had tried war against Israel without any feasible result. He knew that in, uh, his diminished status as a virtually third-world country, [14:00] unable to finance the electric light in Damascus, certainly unable to approach strategic equality with Israel, he had few courses except to adjust himself to a totally new reality.

In Jordan, we- the impulses for peace were even deeper. I cannot forget that shortly after the Six Day War, the Israeli government of that time appointed me to begin a negotiation or at least a dialogue with the Jordanian leaders. We met in what was fondly but rather unrealistically believed to be conditions of secrecy. The, uh, procedure was eccentric. The king in London [15:00] as he very often was, would tell his Scotland Yard accompanier that he didn't feel well, he must see a doctor at once. It appears to be a law of history that every Arab king has a Jewish doctor, and uh, to that address he would repair. I would have been there for one hour, we would converse for two hours -



[break in recording from 15:25 to 15:32, restarts at beginning]

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**Abba Eban:** [19:00] I'm very grateful to you, Professor Salamon, for the warmth and sincerity of your welcome. And I'll tell you that I'm deeply moved to find that the, your opinion about me, is almost precisely identical with my own opinion about myself. [audience laughter] Chairman's introductions are a unique experience in political literature, the object is to reconcile courtesy with truth, and if possible, with some slight exaggeration on the side of courtesy - in this you have most elegantly accomplished today. I certainly emerge in much better heart and spirit than after many occasions on which I was presented to audiences of the United States, notably the occasion when in New York, [20:00] the, uh, chairman was the president of one of that country's, your country's, great oil companies. He was a man of few words, which were, however more than adequate to cover th entire range of his thoughts, and he presented me to the audience in the following words: "Abba Eban

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The first question: was it really rational for the Israeli leaders in 1993 to, uh, proclaim and inaugurate a program for peace? Should Israel renounce any effort to bring that to fruition in the light of the desperate situations which have intervened since then? Can terrorism realistically be expected ever to cease? And is the current international initiative now taking place [22:00] leading to the conclave between thirty countries for the purpose of outlawing and internationally rebuking terrorism, is that a positive development? I should like to explain that the reason I have the habit of asking

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saboteur of peace, no longer the Soviet Union organizing and financing the campaign, the campaign of Arab hostility against Israel. No longer the Soviet Union closing Israeli access to international agencies. No longer the Soviet Union as the generating power behind the far-flung campaign of [25:00] defamation which attended Israel in its onward journey. It's impossible to exaggerate the effect of the Soviet collapse on Israel's destiny from that time onward.

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Pragmatism had suddenly become one of the major elements in the approach of the Arab world to Israel. It was not in any sense a matter of virtue or conscience, I think we can willingly liberate our neighbors from any such accusation, it was a fact that, um, men and nations [27:00] often behave wisely once they have exhausted all the other alternatives. And the Arab world had exhausted all the other alternatives. It had tried everything. It had tried war, it had tried boycotts, it had tried ceasefires, it had tried armistices. It had tried the organizations of international condemnations; it had tried five power talks, four power talks, three power talks. It had tried to involve the United States and the Soviet Union and the whole of the European community in a condemnatory and defamatory attitude towards the State of Israel. It had also tried a national rebellion, the intifada, which had certainly straightened the backs on many young Palestinians, [28:00] but which had dissolved into a total vacuum with no lasting or permanent effects.

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favor of a realistic approach, not to ask to their own condition began to predominate; it had its effects in Syria. We must remember that Syria has never made war against Israel except on conditions which no longer exist. The first condition was that Egypt should be making war against Israel [29:00] at the same time. Say what you like about Hafez al-Assad, he is a realist. He understands the valor of which discretion is the better part, he had tried war against Israel without any feasible result. He knew that in, uh, his diminished status as a virtually third-world country, unable to finance the electric light in Damascus, certainly unable to approach strategic equality with Israel, he had few courses except to adjust himself to a totally new reality.

In Jordan, we- the impulses for peace were even deeper. I cannot forget that shortly after the Six Day War, [30:00] the Israeli government of that time appointed me to begin a negotiation or at least a dialogue with the Jordanian leaders. We met in what was fondly but rather unrealistically believed to be conditions of secrecy. The, uh, procedure was eccentric. The king in London as he very often was, would tell his Scotland Yard accompanier that he didn't feel well, he must see a doctor at once. It appears to be a law of history that every Arab king



has a Jewish doctor, and uh, to that address he would repair. I would have been there for one hour, we would converse for two hours after which he would depart, I would depart an hour later, and [31:00] we would deceive ourselves into believing that neither our British hosts nor anybody else knew about our encounter. It was, in fact, widely known throughout the Arab world that these encounters were taking place, but in the Middle East and perhaps in other parts of the international system, whatever is not published is deemed not to exist. I remember, for example, the um, the presser of the Shah of Iran, who at a time when Israel's mission in Tehran was the largest of all Israeli missions, apart from that in the United States, was exalted by the ambassador of the Saudi Arabian government, who said to him in a tone of virtuous rebuke, "you have this Jewish, this Israeli air force, coming into [32:00] airline, coming into Tehran." The Shah said, "nothing of the sort happens," whereupon the Saudi ambassador says, "yes, but I've been to the airport and it said, 'El Al international airlines,' [clears throat] arrivals, departures, [inaudible] delays, how could you possibly deny this?" To which the Shah responded, "your excellency did not see it." Now this dichotomy between what is reported and what is said is a very familiar part of the diplomatic

enterprise with special relationship to the Middle East. But the negotiations that we conducted, although they did not lead immediately to a peace agreement, were not without effect. I believe that the foundations of a Jordanian-Israeli [33:00] understanding that were laid in those days, it became evident that less than any other Arab country, could Jordan - which had then lost the West Bank - possibly believe in the feasibility of victory over the [inaudible] the Jordan, the embattled power of the state of Israel. Therefore, when the time came for Jordan to adjust itself to the new reality, it was no surprise to anybody that they responded with an ardor and enthusiasm which now characterizes the Jordanian-Israeli treaty of peace. The, um, truth is that although Jordan is by no means the major Arab country, [clears throat] and has no such pretensions, no such claims, the truth is that there are more opportunities for Jordanian-Israeli [34:00] regional cooperation than is the case with any other Israeli neighbors. Is it not ridiculous [clears throat] that there should be two ports, one at Elat and one at Aqaba? Within about five miles from each other, why should there not be a joint port authority, enabling both countries to exploit their access to the countries of East Africa and the prosperous Pacific rim. Is it not illogical [clears throat] that

the Dead Sea should be completely dead, that is to say, that Israel should be able to prevent its exploitation by Jordan? And Jordan, to prevent its exploitation by Israel? Why not a Dead Sea authority that would enable both countries to exploit what is still, today, one of the major concentrations of [35:00] pharmaceutical raw materials. Is it logical that there should not be pilgrimage and movement and tourism in a great wave across the Middle East? Let us suppose that someone interested in the roots of Western civilization could go from Israel's [inaudible] of Jerusalem across the river to Petra, amidst the relics of the great Nabataean civilization? And from there, southward to the pharaonic [inaudible] of previous ages? Now all these things are now realities. There is a Dead Sea authority, there is a joint port authority for Israel and Jordan, and the impulses that have led to all of this were apparent during our original dialogue.

Iraq [36:00] had collapsed into the status of the hunted pariah country, no longer able to, um, offer Israel that virulent hostility which it has, which it did before, and has since displayed. The Gulf War had created a violent upheaval in the Middle Eastern balance of power. It was a congenial war for the West, in a sense, because it was clearly in the logistics,

in the logistic and legal sense, an act of aggression. Kuwait was a member of the United Nations in good standing, and therefore the collapse of Iraq had transformed Israel's strategic situation beyond any previous memory. [37:00]

Moreover, the leader of Iraq had the virtue, from the viewpoint of his assailants, of a, a character so totally disagreeable that it was quite possible for him to furnish the hatred without war seems to be feasible. In fact, a, uh, historian wrote about him as follows: "If there was any vice from which he was exempt, it is only because nature does not permit perfection. Even in evil." And, uh, he as the [inaudible] and the uh, receptacle of international condemnation had not passed into a position where he was not able, as a result of international intrusion, to carry out his plans for the creation of large deposits of, of uh, non-conventional weapons. But above all, the major change [38:00] was in the Palestinian community itself. There is no reason to be surprised of the mutation that has taken place in the attitude of the PLO, it presented itself long before 1993 as a lost cause, a totally impotent country in any military terms, scattered, dispersed, nothing but the memories - sometimes the valiant memories - of its previous ordeals. But nevertheless, in no condition whatever to come to terms of encounter and conflict

with the State of Israel. And it is then [clears throat] the Palestinian community divided between those who still wanted to conserve [39:00] the concepts of hostility, belligerence, fundamentalistic thinking about religion which now characterizes the attitudes of the Hamas movement and it was then, however, that the central mainstream of the Palestinian organizations [clears throat] took a different course, a course which led them to the memorable handshake and meeting of September 1993. [clears throat] In other words, the realism and pragmatism had seized hold of the mainstream of the Palestinian movement. But there were other such movements also, across the Arab world. Morocco, Tunisia, some of the Gulf states [40:00], Qatar, Oman, [inaudible] Bahrain, Kuwait had all seen Israel as a market of consequence and as a possible collaborator [clears throat] in the development of the regional resources. The, um [clears throat], in other words, an Arab consensus in favor of recognizing Israel was no longer beyond imagination or feasibility. At the same time, [clears throat] Israel was becoming more and more the kind of military power that was usually associated with the great imperial and continental countries. [41:00] The United States was the author and is the author of Israel's military might and the word 'might' is not an

exaggeration: Israel is deemed by the Arab countries to possess every technological resource for self-preservation, self-defense, and if need be, for reprisal. And the concept of joining Israel in a kind of a regional harmony was no longer beyond the thoughts and the imagination of Arab leaders, including King Hussein himself, his crown prince [**inaudible**], also King Hassan of Morocco, and, um, many of the heads of the Gulf states. Now what should Israel have done about all this? Ignore it? Pretend that nothing had happened? [42:00] Not reach out to meet and to encounter these new currents of Arab realism? Israel even today admits the horrors of suicide bombings has no regret the path that it took. And that path, although it did not lead yet to a stable relationship with the Palestinians, it did certainly revolutionize our position in the world community. Israel now has relations with 148 countries and not the league of forty that we knew of before. Israel, instead of being the most isolated country in the Middle East has become perhaps the least isolated country in the Middle East. The possibilities of a regional order [43:00] in which trade and commerce and people would flow across the boundaries has not been achieved, but it has never become unfeasible. Realistic people could believe in it. But what, what's fertilized all of these currents of policy

and action? What's the change in Israel? When in June 1993, the Israeli electorate intervened to establish a government based on the concepts of originality, innovation, and regional harmony. Now, none of the other currents of opinion and thought which I've given expression could have happened without that change. If the Israeli position had continued to be as it was in the days, for example, of the Shamir administration, [44:00] everything- everything belongs to us. Nothing belongs to anybody else. The Arab world has no- nothing to do in the area except to subject itself to Israeli domination and occupation. So long as that doctrine prevailed, even if it was based on certain streams of piety in ancient Jewish thought, nothing could be achieved. But when a secular realism in Israel converged with new currents of pragmatism of the Arab world, impossible things suddenly became possible and that was the basis of the spectacle which has been celebrated so ardently on so many occasions in Washington and in Cairo and elsewhere across our region. [45:00] The, um, misconvergence has created the agreements, the declaration of reconciliation of September nineteen hundred and ninety three, the Cairo agreement, and the other agreements including the peace treaty with Jordan, Israeli diplomatic relations with Morocco and Tunisia, Israeli commercial contacts

of great importance in the oil-bearing Arab states, Qatar and Oman and Kuwait and Bahrain, all of these possibilities flourished in this new atmosphere and, uh, created what I will not call the illusion because I still believe it is going to prevail, created the feasibility of Arab-Israeli peace, which I still think is the dominant theme of Middle Eastern life.

[46:00] But of course, the question is whether all of this can survive against the virulent fundamentalist fury and rage shown by the Hamas movement? And whether there is any chance this can be withstood. First of all, there is an Israeli decision to withstand it, there is no other course. What there is not in Israel, and it is important that everybody here and that all Americans should understand it, - [recording cuts off]

END OF AUDIO FILE [46:40]