

26 January 2008

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim,
President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly,
at Park East Synagogue in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust**

Rabbi Schneier,
Excellencies,
Members of Park East Synagogue,
Dear Friends,

I am very grateful to Rabbi Schneier for inviting me to the Park East Synagogue – a historic architectural treasure in the heart of Manhattan.

I am sure that you are all very proud of Rabbi Schneier for his commitment and spiritual leadership that has brought this synagogue international recognition.

It was only five years ago that I had my first opportunity to attend and participate in a Jewish ceremony, here at the Park East Synagogue. The experience inspired me to write a poem entitled 'Temple'. I would like to share a short extract with you today. I hope you will appreciate it;

Nowhere in the world is it possible
To find such a grandiose temple
That would keep for ages
The layers of human sin
And all our shame.

I've always believed
There's nothing greater in a temple
Than the final sounds melting
In the concluding Amin
Until I heard the word
Of a great friend of mine
Who walked in the steps of Moses
And is called a Rabbin.

Park East Beit Knesset,

I wish there would not have been such an occasion for me to address you today. However, as we all know the Holocaust happened. It is definitely one of the darkest pages in the history of mankind.

Unfortunately, we are still facing some lonely, desperate attempts to blur the horrifying dimensions of the Holocaust.

We gather here today to remember and pay homage to those who lost their lives in the Holocaust; the atrocities that they were subjected to can never be forgotten. The perpetrators of the Holocaust fed man's ego with delusions of supremacy and tried to erase the bonds that all human beings share.

The liberation of the Nazi concentration camps over 60 years ago revealed one of the most evil crimes against humanity. The consequences still reverberate in the present.

Elie Wiesel - Nobel Laureate, a Holocaust survivor and champion of moral responsibility – has best put this into perspective:

“Let us remember, let us remember the heroes of Warsaw, the martyrs of Treblinka, the children of Auschwitz. They fought alone, they suffered alone, they lived alone, but they did not die alone, for something in all of us died with them.”

We must also remember to pay tribute to those who survived and bravely carried on with their lives – and in doing so inspired others. I would like to salute the strength and perseverance of all Holocaust survivors and their families.

I know that some of you are with us today.

Not only have you survived, but you have rebuilt communities all over the world, become stronger, and enabled future generations to thrive. You just have to look around at all the people gathered here today to recognize this fact.

The recognition of this day of Holocaust remembrance by the international community heralded a change of tide at the United Nations; and, a step forward in the collective memory and conscience of our world.

Dear Friends,

Remembrance of the Holocaust is more than the recognition of a tragic past - or the darker side of human nature.

Remembering is an ethical act; it has ethical value in itself.

Remembrance is also a means through which we can understand ourselves: an engine for change that should enable us to create and sustain a better, more just future.

I am reminded of my father and his family. During the Second World War he bravely helped to save and protect the family of Isaac Sion - his school friend - amidst the terror of occupation.

At the age of twenty my father and Isac subsequently joined the National Liberation Movement of Macedonia to fight for freedom, against the Nazi dictatorship, alongside the Allies.

Isac Sion subsequently went on to become Vice-governor of the Central Bank of the Former Yugoslavia and following this was appointed as Yugoslavia's trade representative to the United Kingdom.

My father and many others like him served the Jewish people in their hour of need. Their actions epitomize the practical meaning of something profound that the famous Irish politician and philosopher Edmund Burke once said, and I quote;

"All that is needed for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

When I had my first opportunity, in some small way, to redress the atrocities committed during the Holocaust – as foreign Minister of Macedonia - in 2000, I appointed Elie Wiesel as our first Special Envoy and Goodwill Ambassador. He then became the United Nations Messenger of Peace for Human Rights and the Holocaust.

And, in honour of the Jewish community, my country will soon complete the construction of a Holocaust Memorial Centre. This is a symbolic gesture to bring back the memory of the victims from Treblinka to Skopje.

Looking back at the turbulent history of the Balkan region there are some bitter lessons that we must learn: war begins when the perception of the pain of others ends. We can also turn this around to say that when the perception of the pain of others begins there is no room for war.

We must remember that every religion and culture must be tolerant of the legitimate right for others to assert their difference in freedom.

Furthermore, intolerance of other religions or cultures is often a sign of the degree of intolerance within a particular religion or culture.

Dear Friends and members of Park East Beit Knesset,

The United Nations was founded on the ashes of the Holocaust, when the world was in need of hope for a better future.

It was created to embody that hope as a promise to humanity. However, most disturbingly, since the Holocaust there have been genocides and serious crimes against humanity in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Yugoslavia.

That these atrocities occurred is not necessarily the failure of the United Nations as an organization; but rather, represents the lack of collective will of its Member States to take the decision to act or intervene.

Even while we gather here, there are places - like Darfur - where people suffer from the very crimes, which, time and time again, we have vowed would never again happen.

For the dignity of all humanity, we must strengthen our ability – our collective resolve - to prevent such atrocities, whenever and wherever they might occur.

Indeed, terrorism, violence, rape, murder, poverty and discrimination on the grounds of race or religion continue to be part of the everyday lives of many people. This fact alone should jar us with indignation.

Despite the tragic failures of the international community to prevent crimes against humanity since the founding of the United Nations, there is hope – failure is not an option.

In 2005, the General Assembly passed a resolution that included the ‘Responsibility to Protect’. In doing so, all nations signaled their commitment to take action – to hold themselves accountable - to recognize that with sovereign rights come responsibilities to their peoples.

In fact all of us here today can add our voice, with the United Nations, to ensure that this new paradigm within international relations comes to life.

Rabbi Schneier offers us an example of what we can do. He has been a great advocate for human rights, and the promotion of religious and ethnic tolerance. He has worked tirelessly to strengthen ties with communities from different faiths and backgrounds through his good works and publications.

In 2003 we jointly organized the first ever South East European regional conference on ‘Dialogue among Civilizations’, at Lake Ohrid in Macedonia.

In this spirit, and as we have just celebrated the life of the great Martin Luther King Jr., I think it is fitting that I should recount something he once said. It captures the same call to action that needs to be instilled in the world today if we are to prevent a repeat of the Holocaust;

“injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere..... Whatever affects one directly, affects all directly.”

Dear Friends,

On the occasion of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, as well as of the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, let us embrace our diversity, and honor our interdependence, as the only path to peace and justice.

Together, it is our common challenge to eliminate all distorted notions that deepen barriers and widen divides: for they all originate in the discriminatory practices of the mind.

We can achieve this by promoting intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace as a means to replace misunderstanding with mutual respect and acceptance.

But we must also move from words to action, from principled intentions to deeds that promote human security, human rights, the responsibility to protect and sustainable development. For herein lies the hope of a new culture of international relations with the United Nations as its centerpiece.

Members of Park East Beit Knesset,
And, all those gathered here today,

Let me wish all of you and the wider community peace, health and prosperity.

Let all our thoughts honour the victims of the Holocaust, and let us spare no effort to ensure that we never again witness such evil. We may not be able to change the past, but we must have the courage and vision to change the future.

In order to do so, it is not enough to reiterate solemn gestures; we must do everything possible to transform our attitudes to have full regard for the dignity of all individuals, communities and nations.

Thank you. Shalom.