

**Speech by Ambassador Lars Faaborg-Andersen
Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the State of Israel
Europe Day Reception, 9 May 2016**

"Erev tov vetoda she batem"

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen - it's an honor and pleasure to welcome you to this evening's Europe Day event in Israel.

Every year we Europeans celebrate peace and unity in Europe on the 9th of May. A date that marks the anniversary of the historic "Schuman Declaration" in 1950 when the then French foreign Minister set out his idea for a new form of political cooperation which would make war between Europe's nations unthinkable.

Schuman's vision was powerful and has proven effective in keeping the previously war-ravaged European continent free of armed conflict – at least among the Member States of the European Union - for almost three quarters of a century.

Peace is not something that we should take for granted – and I know it is not taken for granted here, in Israel. In fact, the achievements of the European Union in ending the conflicts, which had caused unparalleled bloodshed, bring to my mind your words, Mr President, about a different conflict: "We are not doomed to live together, but rather it is our destiny to live together." Just as Europe achieves its potential when working together, Israelis and Palestinians will achieve their full potential when the conflict here is solved and both can live in peace and security. Europe will continue to be a committed partner for Israel in achieving such a vision.

But the European Union is of course much more than peace among nations.

As the Jewish philosopher, Spinoza, wrote back in the 17th century – and I quote "Peace is not the mere absence of war – it is a virtue, it is a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence and justice" – unquote. Indeed there can only be peace if people are confident. Confident that they are safe. At peace with their political system. Reassured that their rights are respected.

The EU as a political project incarnates the particular state of mind Spinoza was referring to. It embodies, as a community of values, this vision of freedom, justice and respect for human rights.

The mutual commitment to pursue these values also constitutes the very core of the EU-Israel relationship - together with the strong cultural and historical ties that bind the Jewish people and Europe together. Let me at this point make very clear, as we just marked Yom HaShoah last week: anti-Semitism has no place in Europe. We will not accept that Jewish communities in Europe are attacked and do not feel safe. Attacks against Jews are attacks against all Europeans and against our European values. We are determined to fight anti-Semitism on every front – whether on the extreme right or the extreme left or when it is instigated by extreme Islamists.

EU-Israel relations have flourished over the years, now spanning trade, open skies, science and technology and political cooperation. Our relationship with Israel is now probably the most developed that the European Union enjoys with any Third country. And we are keen to further deepen and strengthen our mutually beneficial relations.

Nevertheless, our shared commitment to promote respect for human rights, tolerance and principles of democracy will remain the very foundation of strong EU-Israel relations.

This is well to remember at a time when our commitment to these values is increasingly being tested both in Europe and in Israel.

In Europe, we have over the past 18 months experienced an unprecedented wave of migrants and refugees, many of them fleeing war, terror and oppression in the Middle East. The numbers seem staggering – and to many they are frightening.

Of course, Europe cannot house all the misery in the world, we need to protect our borders and address the root causes of the crisis.

That being said, we as Europeans should never forget that Europe is a continent where nearly everybody at one time or the other has been a refugee, displaced by religious or political prosecution, war or dictatorship. We have to treat the refugees to whom Europe represents a beacon of hope and stability, with compassion, human dignity and respect their fundamental rights, including seeking asylum. Pushing boats back from piers, setting fire to refugee camps or turning a blind eye to poor and helpless people: that's not Europe

This message resonates also with many people I have met throughout Israel who remember the stories of their ancestors only last century being turned away when seeking refuge from tyranny in Europe. Or remembering, as we did just recently, the story of Pessach: "You shall not wrong or oppress a foreigner, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." And although on a smaller scale than in Europe, Israel also faces its own refugee challenge and is also struggling to ensure that the rights of asylum seekers are respected.

During the past year, terror has struck in Europe on several occasions perpetrated by fanatical individuals who hate our values and way of life. In Israel, you are living daily under the threat of terror - be it from rockets aimed at your cities or knife-wielding youths attacking without warning innocent people walking the streets. This is unacceptable. We strongly condemn terror no matter what form it takes.

And so we are both confronted with the challenge of how to shelter our open societies against the threat of terror, fanaticism and intolerance without sacrificing the very values that we want to protect. What is the right mix of security, political, social and economic measures in fighting this phenomenon? How do we strike the right balance between freedom of speech and legitimate criticism on the one hand and effective action against incitement, prejudice and fanaticism on the other? How do we avoid that groups of people or whole segments of the population are being ostracized and discriminated against because the majority feels that they don't fit in?

These are probing questions.

You, Mr President have made inclusiveness, respect for everybody's rights and a vision of a shared society the hallmark of your Presidency. By rising above the political fray and expediency of the day, by speaking up for those whose voices are weak, you have acted as a moral compass, sometimes at personal risk, in defense of our common values. And we all salute you for that.

Israel and the EU may not agree on everything. But you Mr. President and the example you provide is living evidence that what binds us together is so much stronger than what divides us.

Thank you for coming and celebrating Europe Day with us. We hope to be able to welcome you in Brussels very soon.

Toda raba.