



# PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE  
BONDI JUNCTION, 22 FEBRUARY 1987

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Mr Ron Newman, President of the Central Synagogue,

Rabbie Dr Nisson Schulman,

Professor Graham de Vahl Davies, President of the Jewish Board of Deputies,

Members of the Jewish Board of Deputies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for your welcome. You have done Hazel and me a great honour by inviting us again to this Synagogue, this time to celebrate with you your 75th anniversary.

We were honoured in 1985, to be present when, Rabbi Schulman, you became Chief Minister of this, the largest congregation in Australia.

More than 2000 people belong to the Synagogue today - a far cry from your early days in Dowling Street, where the Synagogue first held services in 1912, and then in Grosvenor Street, where the Synagogue spent more than three decades from 1922.

In the post-war years the Central Synagogue grew with the waves of immigration from Europe and it includes among its members survivors of the Holocaust.

In the 1950s, it became apparent that the Synagogue might again have to find new premises to cater for its growing numbers. Thanks to the vision and skills of many people, we find ourselves today in this fine building celebrating your 75th anniversary.

The Synagogue has benefited profoundly from the European learning and tradition your members have brought to us, as indeed the whole of Australia has benefited from the contribution made by the Jewish community to our society.

To name a few of the great Australians who have been members of the Jewish community is to appreciate just how substantial that contribution has been: Monash, Head of the Armed Forces; Isaacs, Chief Justice and Governor-General; Cowen, Governor-General; Stone, jurist and teacher.

Yours is a remarkable and vibrant community and a special occasion like the 75th anniversary of the nation's largest congregation is an appropriate and proper time to acknowledge that fact.

Over the last 75 years this Synagogue has seen many developments in this country and in the history of the Jewish people. Not least among these was the formation and development of the State of Israel.

Australians have every reason to be proud of their involvement in the events leading up to the creation of Israel in 1948.

Australian soldiers played a valuable role in the Middle East in two World Wars.

We are proud to have been able to champion the cause of Israel in the UN Special Committee on Palestine in 1947, which led to the UN Partition Resolution and the establishment of the State of Israel.

I am especially proud that it was H.V. Evatt, Foreign Minister in an Australian Labor Party government, who was the General Assembly President when Israel was admitted to the United Nations. In that forum on many occasions since then, Australia has been noted for its support for Israel.

My personal interest in Israel was sparked the first time I set foot there in 1971.

I was impressed by - and indeed envied - the electoral and administrative success of the Israel Labor Party, which had then been in power for over twenty years - especially since at the time the Australian Labor Party had been out of office for about the same number of years.

I was impressed too by the strength of the Trade Union Movement, the Histadrut. And as a social democrat, I could not fail to respect the way in which Israel had incarnated the vision of David Ben Gurion of a working class building its own nation through its own physical and intellectual labour.

What particularly impressed me, however, was the fundamental fact that Israel was a democracy, a remarkable democracy, incessantly engaged in democratic disputation about every aspect of national policy.

The respect which I felt for these aspects of Israeli life has been fortified on every subsequent visit I made there - and most especially on my most recent visit in late January. On that occasion I had the honour, having accepted an invitation from the President of Israel, His Excellency Mr Chaim Herzog, of becoming the first Australian Prime Minister to visit Israel.

I was received with very great generosity by President Herzog, Prime Minister Shamir, Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres and other outstanding personalities such as Abba Eban. I held talks with them and a large number of Ministers and leader of the Labor Party and Trade Union. It was a great pleasure for me to be among old friends.

A personal highlight of the visit to Israel was the gesture of Hebrew University in Jerusalem in honouring me with the award of an Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy. I do not need to remind this gathering of the brilliant intellectual traditions of that great university.

While in Jerusalem I also had the moving experience of meeting with mothers and relatives of refuseniks - people who have been prevented, often over many years, from reuniting with their families who are unable to leave the Soviet Union.

One case struck me as particularly unjust: it involves a woman, Mrs Sofia Landver, who had applied for a visa to enter the Soviet Union to see her mother who was dying of cancer. After our meeting, I took steps to have Mrs Landver's case investigated, and I was delighted to hear that she was granted a visa. Tragically, however the news came too late - her mother died before they could be reunited.

At least it can be acknowledged that the Soviet authorities granted Mrs Landver a visa and I understand that two other relatives of Mrs Landver's mother have since been given exit visas to leave the Soviet Union.

As I said in Parliament on Tuesday, since coming to office the Government has taken every available opportunity to raise its concerns about the plight of the Soviet Jewry. Mr Hayden, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, raised the matter directly with the Soviet authorities in Moscow in 1984. I think it is well known that I have raised it on occasions with the Soviet Ambassador. An Australian parliamentary delegation to the Soviet Union last year again raised the question with high level authorities. This delegation made a new appeal for the release of Jewish activists still imprisoned in the Soviet Union - especially, Dr Iosef Begun who was in detention for having taught Hebrew in the Soviet Union.

I know that all of us here would have been heartened by the news - after some days of confusion - that it has been confirmed that Dr Begun has been released.

I have made it clear that when the Soviet Foreign Minister, Mr Shevardnadze, visits Australia next month, I will be raising with him the question of the treatment of Soviet Jewry.

While I was in the Middle East I spent much of my time discussing with the government leaders the complex issues underlying the Arab-Israeli dispute.

The fundamental theme that emerged from my talks in all the countries I visited - Jordan and Egypt as well as Israel - was the desire of all the governments for peace.

This sincere desire was marked not just by a yearning for the absence of conflict but by a perception that real and lasting peace will permit economic development, and yield improvements in the quality of the everyday life of the peoples of all nations there.

Nobody should pretend that such an outcome is easy or is likely to come soon. Indeed my visit took place at a time when progress towards peace seems to have stalled.

There are no immediate prospects for a breakthrough. At the same time I was encouraged by the fact that the commitment to peace by the nations I visited has not died.

Indeed, I detected a sense of realistic determination to continue, slowly but persistently, the search for progress. Moreover, as I told Parliament this week, I believe there are ideas and concepts which, if pursued, would offer a way ahead.

Australia seeks no mediating or other role in the Middle East peace process. However, as I made clear during my visit, we are willing, if requested, to do all we can to help bring peace to this divided yet fundamentally interrelated region. I believe no Australian Government can or should offer less.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I said at the outset that the 75 years in which this Synagogue has served the community have witnessed some of the most momentous events in the history of the Jewish people. Let us all hope that we witness another, greater, chapter: the attainment of real peace in the Middle East and the consequent improvement in the quality of life for all the peoples of the region.

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