

# PRESS BULLETIN

EMBARGO TILL 16.00 hours. 14.4.64

Jerusalem, April 14, 1964

EULOGY FOR THE LATE PRESIDENT IZHAK BEN-ZVI  
DELIVERED ON THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH  
BY MR. LEVI ESHKOL, THE PRIME MINISTER

Mr. President, our dear friend Mrs. Rahel Yana'it Ben-Zvi, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Our Independence Day rejoicing last year was overclouded by the great loss we had suffered in the passing of Izhak Ben-Zvi, the second President of the State of Israel. It might have been expected that now, a year later, we would be able to contemplate our loss, as it were, from a distance, and, on a plane transcending time, weigh up what Izhak Ben-Zvi meant to us - as a person, as a president, and as a man of spirit and action, evaluating the legacy he bequeathed us and the great gap left in our midst now that he is no more. But try as we may, the time for that has not yet come.

And no wonder - for the life of the late Izhak Ben-Zvi embraces our entire present-day history. The scope of his deeds and his researches cover the annals of Israel's resurgence in its homeland.

The early history of the Jewish labour movement in this country cannot be told without Ben-Zvi. We cannot speak of the beginnings of an independent Jewish force in the Land of Israel without Ben-Zvi, founder of Bar Giora and Hashomer. We cannot speak of the first political struggles of the Yishuv without mentioning his name. We cannot recall the Jewish Battalions in World War I without paying tribute to Izhak Ben-Zvi's prominent role in this important achievement. His activities during the Mandatory period, in the Va'ad Leumi and the other organs of the Yishuv, are still fresh in our memories.

The choice of Izhak Ben-Zvi as the personification and living symbol of the State, after the passing of Dr. Chaim Weizmann, our first President, was accepted by all as natural and logical. He endowed the institution of the presidency with a new, rich significance, combining dignity and modesty at one and the same time. He was a People's President, for he came from the people, and dedicated himself to the people he loved so well.

If one were to be asked to epitomize his personality in a single phrase, one would say: He loved Israel. This love of Israel, and of its land, are everywhere to be found in his writings and researches.

It would seem at first sight that Izhak Ben-Zvi devoted a great deal of his attention to the peripheral episodes of Israel's history: the Samaritans, the Karaites, the remnants of the Sabbateans, and others. But if truth be told, it was the inner core he dealt with, and not the periphery. He sensed and comprehended the significance of the ingathering and integration of the exiles in our generation. He left us with a new and fuller realization that the revival of our culture calls for the assembly of the heritage of all our communities, for each and every tribe of Israel has a share in the world of our new freedom.

We are not creating a national culture and identity out of nothing. We are finding our way to their essential nature along two paths: by a revelation of the ancient substratum common to the whole nation, and by a synthesis of its fragmented creativity over two thousand years of exile. The late Izhak Ben-Zvi's research into the history of the Jewish people follows both these paths at one time, so that in his spiritual labours, as in his own life, he personified the unity of our people.

To one degree or another, each one of us is a product of the particular branch of Jewish culture from which he springs. There is nothing easier than the error of shutting oneself up in one's own particular corner, thinking that it alone constitutes Judaism - that it alone holds the key to Jewish identity. Ben-Zvi taught and demonstrated that this is not the way; this will not bring about the integration of the exiles. And what is more: this is not the way to lasting independence for Israel. The condition for our independence is that we should be one nation.

There were some who tried to graft onto our own specific reality a concept evolved in other lands of immigration: the melting-pot. But the comparison does not apply to our case. In other countries, such as America or Australia, it was a question of small groups of immigrants, of different ethnic origins, being absorbed into one basic stratum which was more or less homogeneous. There the demand was for assimilation to the existing language and culture, with a certain indirect contribution to their further development.

From the very start we did not adopt this course, and the late Izhak Ben-Zvi was an outstanding contributor and a distinguished mentor in the unique path that we followed. We are not simply a land of immigration, but the tangible embodiment of all Jewry's vision of redemption. Our first principle was the equal value of all that the Jewish people has created in every age and in every centre.

From this point of view there was a deep symbolic and substantial significance in the decision taken by our movement of revival. to renew the covenant with the Hebrew language. The two aims of our way of life and of the work of Izhak Ben-Zvi, which I have already touched upon, were embodied in this decision: on the one hand, the emphasis on our ancient past, and, on the other, the fostering of that unifying national creativity which went on in all the years of exile, in the Hebrew language, throughout the Jewish Diaspora. Every Jew who comes to his homeland regards himself - and rightly so - as a partner equal in value, in rights, and in responsibility for the great task of integration. A partnership of this kind cannot exist without profound mutual knowledge, based on respect and humility.

It was the great achievement of the late Izhak Ben-Zvi, and the great good fortune of his people, that his own personal life mirrored his philosophy. He was a President who loved his people and was loved by them. He, and his wife Rahel at his side, turned their home into a meeting-place for all Israel, to guide us to a glorious redemption along the path of integration of the exiles.

On this occasion I should like to address a few words to our dear friend Rahel Yana'it Ben-Zvi. The fabric of her life and her manifold activities in this country go hand in hand with the distinguished deeds of her great husband. She was his partner as he guided the Jewish labour movement and the people along the paths of labour, defence and independence. She stood at his side as he created the new concept of the presidency in Israel. In our hearts we shall always cherish a feeling of fellowship and gratitude to her, just as the memory of Izhak Ben-Zvi will ever be with us.

Generations of ingathering and integration still lie ahead. As long as we are engaged in this great undertaking we shall remember, as a standard, as a symbol, and as a living and glorious chapter in our history, Izhak Ben-Zvi, who gathered together the scattered ones of his people Israel.

\* \* \* \* \*