

**Ehud Barak speech, Nov 28, 2016, at the book launch of
"At Crucial Junctures" by Shlomo Gazit**

"At Crucial Junctures" is a particularly unique book. It is Shlomo Gazit's life story, from his time in the Palmach to this very day—75 years of fruitful and devoted activity on behalf of Israel and its security, presented in clear thinking and writing.

At the center of the book is the fight for the revival of the State of Israel. The enemy is the Arab world, and Shlomo describes the developments, the threats, and the opportunities. Through his experiences we meet the Palestinians over and over again—as rivals, as permanent neighbors, as future partners for dialogue, and as humans.

The lessons that can be learned from reading this book are numerous, but most importantly: Security above all else. "The Iron Wall" is a necessary precondition to our existence. We must never compromise on it. But while security is a necessary condition to our life here, it is not a sufficient one.

Within the primacy of security, we must act: with courage, integrity, sincerity, and realistic optimism. This means seizing opportunities that arise—for the sake of Israel's security and its future.

This requires the ability to understand complexity. Not superficially, not black-and-white dualism, no burning of bridges, and not paralysis. Rather, complexity and nuanced approach, without losing the ability to make decisions and take action. This is the story of Moshe Dayan and Shlomo Gazit in the past. But it is just as relevant today—both on the micro and the macro level.

The struggle is between populism, over-simplification, and black-and-white dualism on one hand, and the “bearers of wisdom” on the other hand. The “bearers of wisdom” can see the full and complex picture that always presents alongside the threats also opportunities—this struggle will determine our future.

Take, for example, the fires that had plagued our country last week: The firefighters who demonstrated such courage, putting their lives at risk in order to rescue others, and the touching and inspiring solidarity shown by the citizenry. A beautiful moment of “Israeli spirit” amidst a difficult and painful hour for so many. Fortunately, it ended without the loss of lives.

Objectively, extreme dryness and high winds set fires that spread fast. Following that, inciters and arsonists joined in and intensified the spate of fires. The firefighting forces and squadron were spread too thin, while towns and neighborhoods had to be evacuated.

Firefighting aircraft and crews from across the world joined the fight, including from Jordan, Egypt and even the Palestinian Authority. In the end—the fires were put out, and the damages caused are heavy.

According to the police, six or seven of the fires in Haifa—and 17 of the 110 fires in central Israel—were the result of arson. Several of the arsonists—some Palestinians, some Israeli Arabs—were found and caught. As were those spreading incitement on social media.

There are a lot of lessons yet to learn. Serious damage was caused to property, but there remains great pride in the accomplishment; happiness at not having to bury anyone.

Gilad Erdan's leadership inspired respect. Moshe Kahlon is now personally working to ensure quick compensation. The rehabilitation work is underway, and will take time.

It is clear to all and agreed across the board—to the entire public and to its leaders from across the political spectrum—that the arsonists and those who incited to arson should be handled with an iron fist. We did not surrender in the face of plane hijackings, bus bombings, blood-soaked dance clubs and restaurants, knife attacks or shootings at checkpoints and on our streets, and we will not surrender to the arsonists or their copycats in the future.

But at this point, when looking at the political leadership, one sees a division: shallow populists who see everything in black and white—mostly black—who can see one thing and one thing only: "The Fire Intifada" and the pogroms of 2016-2017, which are likened to the Kishinev pogrom in 1903 and the 1929 Massacres in Hebron.

Very soon, a new "existential threat" will be fabricated right before our eyes: "The people of Israel are being burned inside their own homes"—in the heart of Israel, which, we all know, is the strongest country in the Middle East. Or perhaps a "war for survival" metaphorically declared against the citizens from among whom the arsonists emerged.

And on the other side of the divide, those who live by the "Book of Wisdom" will call of course for an all-out war against arsonists and those who incite to arson. Yes, of course.

But is this picture just described really the full picture? Is this truly our fate? To be put into flames and have to put down the flames, burning and being burned, over and over again? To forever live by the fire extinguisher or the Supertanker? No!

When looking at this from a broad and balanced historical perspective, there are more important aspects of this situation that we must consider. Namely, the fact that Jordanian and Egyptian firefighting aircraft and their crews came to help battle the flames; that firefighters from the Palestinian Authority

faced the blazes shoulder-to-shoulder with their Israeli counterparts; that Israeli Arabs opened their homes to Jewish families who were evacuated from their homes; that Arab municipality leaders came, one by one—according to Haifa Mayor Yona Yahav—to offer their assistance. We must focus our efforts on bolstering these aspects.

We justifiably rejected the claims that those who set fire to mosques, burned Palestinian teen Mohammed Abu Khdeir alive, and murdered the Dawabsheh family in Duma by setting fire to their home, are "the people of Israel" or represent it. They are criminals and distorted characters and—relatively—few. We must punish them to the full extent of the law. We also must also punish last week's arsonists and inciters to the full extent of the law. And they don't represent Israeli Arabs or the Palestinian people either.

The foundations for this reality, which allows for the "ray of hope" that I have just described, were laid by Moshe Dayan and Shlomo Gazit, and of course by Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat, Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein of Jordan, and again Rabin and Shimon Peres.

We must not allow the shortsighted populists that currently lead us to destroy this achievement, and the promise it brings with it—even if that promise is late to arrive.

The national sentiment that links us together is our shared pride over our identity and legacy, the mutual responsibility we have for one another, the deep emotion we feel when we see our flag and hear our national anthem, and our concern for the life of every soldier and every Jew in danger—whoever and wherever they may be.

It is this national sentiment that makes up the very core of this readiness for sacrifice, the solidarity and the feeling of elation that takes hold of us all when we are being put to the test and makes us strong, time and time again, more determined and triumphant in the face of every risk and challenge.

It is vital that we safeguard and nurture this national sentiment.

It is here that the members of what I consider to be the "real national camp" stand. Those who live by the "Book of Wisdom" and the lessons it teaches; a wisdom that appears as if it was born of the story of Israel's rise from the crematoria's ashes and its growth into an unprecedented success story.

Unfortunately, on the other side of a very painful divide—one which we absolutely must erase from our society—stand the right-wing leaders in the government, headed by Netanyahu—the "ultra-national camp," as I see them.

The bearers of the "Book of Wisdom," who are "the real national camp," define themselves based on our shared values,

our shared heritage, and our shared vision—of “Tikun Olam,” making Israel and the world a better, fairer place to live in. This is our strong, Jewish, Zionist and democratic heritage.

They believe in having an "Exemplary Society" in the spirit of Israel's "founding fathers." They believe in Theodor Herzl's dream and the thinking of Ze'ev Jabotinsky—who wrote about “my banner is the one of purity and integrity” and of “the son of the Arab, the son of Nazareth, and my son.” They believe in the "light unto nations" motif, which is weaved into the actions of David Ben-Gurion.

They are the heirs of Zionism at its best. The Zionism that is expressed in Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall" and Ben-Gurion's musings on Israel's "strength and righteousness," in the Declaration of Independence and the morals of the Prophets—the Widow, the Orphan, and the Stranger, and "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me?" This rather than resuming sacrificial offerings on the Temple Mount.

They understand that for Israel, security is a basic imperative, but they still work to change the security realities vis-à-vis the Palestinians—even if it's done in stages, and over time.

They see the opportunities that lie within the threats: Like the (surprising) cooperation in putting out the fires, or the international conference with the moderate Suni states in the

region to examine the regional security arrangements, and more.

They are unafraid! Our nation, in all its strata, is unafraid. And we all should be able to join in one big "national camp."

But the right wing leaders in the government—and primarily Netanyahu—are afraid. And this fear blinds the eye and seals the heart, all the while feeding an endless notion of victimhood.

These right-wing leaders look around and see not a challenge that would strengthen their resolve, but "existential threats" that foster anxiety, paralysis and victimhood. They see the "human animals" and "beast-like people." They see the Grand Inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada, Cossak Bohdan Khmelnytsky and Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, metamorphosed into the bodies of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas.

They get carried away into an ultra-national sentiment, identifying us, above all, with the uniqueness of the blood flowing through our veins and the land at our feet, favoring the "integrity of the land" over the "integrity of the people."

This metamorphosis of the healthy national sentiment to the increasingly wild ultra-nationalism necessarily leads to a state of mind completely separating between "us" and "them." Both

outside and inside: "existential threats" on the outside and "traitors" at every corner on the inside.

Our nation is strong, devoted and willing to make any sacrifice necessary, but the politicians on the right disregard the lessons of our past every day.

"Accelerating the coming of Messaiah," "challenging the great powers of the time" and "hatred among brothers" all get mixed up in one another, pushing aside the wisdom and lessons of Chazal, the sages of the Mishna and the Talmud.

The ultra-nationalist "dybbuk" plaguing the right-wing leaders, with Netanyahu at their head—that is the central threat we are facing today. It is a threat to the future of Israel, its identity, its unity and its might.

This benighted ultra-nationalism is not our natural identity, and it is most definitely not the dream of past Jewish generations. But it's not an incurable disease either. It hurts when it occurs to honest, well-intending right-wing leaders or activists. At the same time, it serves as a safe haven and a refuge to others—demagogues, populists, insecure politicians who are trying to survive in power by playing to the lowest of our passions and deepest of our fears.

This requires reform, and reforms starts at home. At every home.

I would like to see a mass movement grow within us, which would call for change. Change in the way things are done in this country. A movement of people who would go neighborhood-by-neighborhood, street-by-street, house-by-house, and instead of yelling and inciting, they would create dialogue between Israelis about the kind of country that we could have here. After all, we're all brothers.

Such a movement would have clear values, most important of which is a standard of truth in discussion—about everything. A movement that doesn't try to be "more Bibi than Bibi" and that could instill anew our spirit of unity and hope.

It is up to us. And this would be our test.