

Hodassah's 85th Natl. Convention
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Hadassah's 85th National Convention
Presentation of Henrietta Szold Humanitarian Award
Acceptance Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Washington, D.C.
July 27, 1999

Let me thank you for this incredible honor, and for the work that Hadassah and all of you do every day. I want to say a special word of thanks to Marlene Post. We have just heard her once again, as I'm sure many of you have on many occasions before, speak passionately about Hadassah and the difference it makes in the lives of men, women, and children around the world. But she often leaves out a very important point. And that is that for the last four years, she has been at the center of representing Hadassah—from Israel to the White House and throughout the United States. And I am very grateful for her extraordinary leadership and commitment.

I will never forget the tour she gave to Sara Netanyahu and I last December. She introduced us to the dedicated doctors and nurses, and to parents who were grateful that their children were receiving the best possible care in the Middle East. We went in and out of hospital rooms. We shook the hands of mothers and fathers sitting worried by a child's bedside. We gathered with the children that you saw in the video in one of the common rooms, and we could see and we could hear what a difference Hadassah has made. Those parents, those doctors, and those nurses were all asking the same questions that Hadassah has always asked those in need: "What is wrong and how can we help?"

As an aside, I must say that after seeing the wonderful video tribute to Marlene and seeing the wonderful video footage that was collected about me—some of it 20 or 25 years old—I know that among the many bonds that I have with Marlene is that she and I have had more hairstyles than probably any two women currently alive in the world. But she's been a great supporter of the causes that Hadassah believes in and represents.

And I can think of no better person to carry on that torch of leadership than Bonnie Lipton, whose courage and dedication are an inspiration to us all. I was, as I'm sure you were, moved by her very personal remarks this evening, and by having her family here and knowing of her love for her husband. And I want to join all of you in congratulating her on her inauguration tonight as president.

And what can one say about those two extraordinary and brave young people we just heard from? Their stories are powerful examples of the theme you've chosen for the last conference of this century: "And I set my rainbow in the clouds." We all learn as children that the rainbow was the sign of hope God showed Noah after the flood. For Liz and Ziv, their rainbow was Hadassah—believing in them, supporting them, lifting them up when they had fallen, when they had sacrificed on behalf of the future.

For almost 90 years now, Hadassah volunteers have been rainbows—"women of valor" for refugees escaping the worst forms of evil, for children too often left behind, for women whose human rights have been violated. You have embodied the Jewish values

kept alive for 3,500 years through Pogroms, the Holocaust, through famine and exile—values of freedom, of justice, and community; values that have built and sustained Judaism, to be sure, but have also built and sustained Israel and the United States.

This award is especially meaningful to me because of the great admiration and respect I have for the work of Hadassah—and for your founder. Now, when I found out that the first Henrietta Szold award had been given to Eleanor Roosevelt, I have to say I was not surprised. Because wherever I go as First Lady, I am often reminded that Eleanor Roosevelt has already been there. I have been to farms in Iowa, and factories in Michigan, and child welfare offices in New York, and small villages all over the world where Mrs. Roosevelt came before.

So I certainly didn't think I could give a speech tonight without talking it over with Mrs. Roosevelt—and Mrs. Szold. I tried SkyPage, but you know how they are; they were always too busy. You know, when I first told people a few years ago that I sometimes had imaginary conversations with Mrs. Roosevelt, there were some who thought they finally had irrefutable evidence that I had gone off the deep end. But talking to Mrs. Roosevelt, just like imagining conversations with one's parents or grandparents, has proven to be a source of great strength and inspiration. You can imagine some of the situations I have found myself in over the past seven years, and I then think, "What on earth would Mrs. Roosevelt say?"

Usually I imagine her rattling off some of her wisest sayings like, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do." Or one of my favorites: "Women are like tea bags—they don't know how strong they are until they get into hot water."

But I quickly realized that everything I needed to know was right in front of me—in the pictures of Henrietta Szold's life. I saw pictures of her at age 80, not retiring in Baltimore, but going back to rescue thousands of Jewish children from the Nazis. I saw her dancing the Hora in a circle of more than 40 young people; leaning across the table to promise a frightened brother and sister that she would never separate them; and striding confidently to meet presidential candidates, Kibbutz members, or anyone who could help her cause.

I can only imagine how proud she would be of all of you, the Hadassah volunteers who followed her example—whether lobbying members of Congress, as you did today, or helping Russian immigrants who have just arrived in Israel, or extending a hand of assistance to American children who need your support. And imagine how happy she would be knowing that, before she could vote, when she started this organization, there would be someday be Hadassah members like Barbara Boxer, Dianne Feinstein, Nita Lowey, and Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

But as proud as she would be of all that has been accomplished, something tells me that if she were here tonight, the first question she'd ask is, "What are you going to do now?"

She used her influence and opportunities on behalf of a Jewish homeland and a world where she wanted us to feel responsible for one another, especially for those too often left behind. Now it is up to all of us—to those of you in Hadassah and to those of us who support your mission—to fulfill her vision.

Remember on that first trip that she made with her mother to Palestine, how troubled she was by the tragic health conditions facing Jews there. And so, at the first Hadassah convention in 1912, she said, “Let us do something real and practical. Let us organize the Jewish women of America to send nurses and doctors to Palestine.”

If we are to fulfill her vision now, then we not only must continue that original mission, but we also must ask ourselves, “What must we do here to keep faith with that vision?” I would hope we would continue to work here in America toward the day when every single American has access to quality, affordable health insurance. I would hope that we would see enacted a patients’ bill of rights so that all Americans would have confidence that their most important medical decisions are being made by their doctor, not by some bureaucrat in an office thousands of miles away. I would hope that it means protecting the privacy of medical records and outlawing genetic discrimination. On the brink of this extraordinary era of research and scientific discovery, genetic tests should be used only to heal, not cost people their jobs or their health insurance.

I would hope that it means getting millions more children without health insurance enrolled in the Children’s Health Insurance Program created by Congress in 1997. And I would hope that it means saving, strengthening, and modernizing Medicare for the future.

We know that women live longer than men and we are more likely to have long-term care needs, and we are more likely to be poor. I’ve talked, as I’m sure many of you have, to older women who could not afford check-ups, a mammography, or drugs. Others who simply worry that there will be no one to care for them when they cannot care for themselves. So we need to make sure that Medicare is there as a lifeline for all people who need it the most. And we need to modernize it with a prescription drug benefit, with preventive tests for osteoporosis and breast cancer. And I believe we should provide an option for people between 55 and 65 to buy into Medicare so that they have health security as well.

I want to thank you for your work on these and other important health issues. You have challenged every citizen to look at the women and children who are losing their health and lives and you have asked, “What can we do? What can we do to pass common sense laws that keep guns out of the hands of criminals and children? What can we do to save our children from the deathgrip of tobacco? And what can we do to move breast cancer from the medical books to the history books? And what can we do to protect a woman’s right to choose and to make abortion safe, legal, and rare?”

We know that Henrietta Szold never stopped asking herself and everyone else that question—“What can we do?” And we know that it was in her beloved Jerusalem

that she chose to build the first Hadassah hospital. And it was that Mount Scopus Hospital that she chose for her own care at the end of her life. Not long after her death, this place of healing was captured, shut down, and left empty for 18 long years. It wasn't until the Six-Day War that its doors were re-opened to all people and Jerusalem was reunited once again. That must never change.

Just as Jerusalem is home to your hospitals where care is accessible for all people, we all look forward to the day when, as Prime Minister Barak said on his recent visit, Jerusalem will be home to the embassy of the United States and all other nations as well.

Marlene talked about the memorable trips to Israel that my husband I have been privileged to take. But it is the first one, I believe, that will always stand out in my mind. It took place over New Year's, as 1981 turned into 1982. We were not in public life at that time. And so this was very much a religious and personal trip. And it was one on which we saw, as private citizens, the miracle of a nation built with the blood of its people, sustained with their hopes, and open to citizens from every corner of the world.

We spent nearly two weeks there. We went to Yad Vashem—with its eternal flame reminding us never to forget. At the Kotel, I wrote a note asking God to protect my baby daughter and other children and placed it between the massive stones of this holiest of places. We went to Masada, not knowing we would return in a very different role 17 years later with Prime Minister and Mrs. Netanyahu, when we found the experience even more profound, thanks to the amazing work of the archeologists there. And as we traveled through the countryside, we wondered if any of the trees that had been planted in honor of our daughter were the ones we were driving by.

I am very much looking forward to going back to Israel soon and spending more time with the Baraks, with whom we had a wonderful evening at Camp David a few weeks ago. Now that was an evening that was memorable not only for our time together and our good conversation, but also because in the Prime Minister, my husband may have finally found someone who can stay up later than he can. Now, as you know, that is a very important trait in any kind of peace negotiations.

On the Sunday night of their visit, Bill and I were honored to host Marlene, Bonnie and many other friends of Israel at a White House dinner in the Baraks' honor. You could see people wiping away their tears as they listened to the Prime Minister speak eloquently about how his intimate understanding of war had fueled his determination to make peace. He said, "My hardest moments were at the door of a fallen soldier's family on the day he was lost. It is the memory of those moments which I carry with me here this evening."

And looking around the tent, I could see the hopeful faces of so many who had struggled so long and sacrificed so much for Israel, who had never given up the dream of a safe and secure Israel—a Jewish homeland finally at peace with its neighbors, free from violence and terror. This was, above all, the dream to which Henrietta Szold devoted her life.

On that first trip to Israel, we went with Bill's pastor—whom he has spoken about before—a loyal friend of Israel, who had been going to the Holy Land since the 1930s. My husband has often talked about how his pastor told him he must never let Israel down, that God would never forgive that. Like Bill, I have always remembered those words and tried to live up to them. And so, as Israel continues to take risks for peace, I believe the United States must stand beside her as any good friend does.

We must do everything in our power to facilitate—not dictate—the peace process. If there is to be peace in the Middle East, it must come with a guarantee of Israel's security. If there is to be peace, it must come with the parties' commitment to fight terrorism whenever and wherever it strikes.

The people of Israel have lived far too long with bombs. They have lived with the awful fear that their children will not come home from school alive. We heard that eloquently again this evening from Ziv. But they have also lived with hope, as that young man does today. Back in December, Bill and I went with Leah Rabin to her husband's gravesite. The President took a stone from Wye River, bent down and placed it there. And as he did, we promised never to give up on the peace process.

The great legacy of Prime Minister Rabin, the warrior leader, was to recognize that all the children of the Middle East are people—with deep yearnings and real gifts to give, if their swords can be turned to plowshares, their hearts opened to peace and friendship. That is the peace of the brave men he gave his life for, the peace that will make the children of Israel more secure and the Middle East more humane.

So if there is to be peace, we must honor the Oslo process and oppose any unilateral actions that circumvent the negotiating table. And if there is to be peace, Congress must make good on the promises the President made at Wye River and continue our nation's commitment to the foreign aid that is necessary for Israeli security.

I, like you, wish we could do more to encourage Americans to support our aid programs not only in the Middle East, but also throughout the world. I have seen so many families and communities transformed because of a small amount of assistance. I've met homeless squatters in South Africa who, with tiny loans, turned a dusty plot of land into a community with more than 100 homes. I've met with women in Senegal who, after learning about their rights, voted to ban female circumcision in their village and inspired others to do the same until finally the country passed a law against it.

At a time when we are more interconnected and interdependent than ever, we should not cut back on foreign assistance or our obligations as the world's indispensable nation. It is also high time we pay our debts to the United Nations without conditions.

When my husband and I traveled to Morocco this weekend to join the people of that country in paying respects to a great leader, peacemaker, and friend—King Hassan II—we saw the fruits of peace and tolerance. As our plane touched down in Rabat, I thought of the trip I'd taken to Morocco just a few months earlier in March. Among the

wonderful experiences I had there was visiting a Jewish cemetery in Marrakech where the former leader of that city's Jewish community was buried. As I walked up to his burial site with his son, the son told me about what King Hassan's continuing legacy of religious tolerance had meant to his family. He explained that when the King's father, King Mohammed V, was told by the Vichy government to turn over the lists of Jews, he had refused, saying, "We are not Jews or Arabs, but all Moroccans." As I walked through that beautiful cemetery, he also told me that in more than 400 years, it had never been desecrated, it had never had any sign of disrespect.

Now imagine if that same spirit filled the hearts of all people throughout the world—in the Middle East or Northern Ireland, Africa or the Balkans. None of us will or could forget those haunting, familiar images of children crowded onto trains in Kosovo, separated from their families, their childhoods, their innocence.

When I was in Macedonia at one of the refugee camps, I met a woman who told me she did not know where two of her children were. She had lost them at a crowded train station as they were being herded onto those cars, and their little hands slipped out of hers. I have thought often of that image. Sometimes all of the stories and statistics of suffering and pain make our eyes glaze over as a way to keep the pain away. And yet every one of us has held the hand of a child. And every one of us has had that little hand pull away in excitement or enthusiasm, or running off to see someone. And so I was haunted by what that woman told me.

Yet at that same camp, I saw that an Israeli NGO that created a children's recreation center right in the middle so that those Albanian children could paint and play like all children should. In just a few seconds, I saw and heard the best and the worst of humanity. I also heard about what Hadassah was doing to provide health care and hope to many of these refugees, just as you've always done through wars, bombings, and even genocide.

Last spring, Elie Wiesel came to the White House to deliver a lecture for our Millennium Series. He spoke about the "perils of indifference" in the face of evil and inhumanity. He said something I will long remember. He said that in the concentration camps, there were three kinds of people—the victims, the perpetrators, and the bystanders.

With NATO's victory in Kosovo, led by the United States, we told oppressors like Milosevic that in this century, at the end of this tumultuous, violent century, we will not be bystanders to evil. We will not stand by when so-called leaders hijack sacred religions, not to lift people closer to God, but to divide them from each other and push them down. And we will make it clear that what separates us—gender, tribe, race, or religion—will never be stronger than the common humanity that unites us all.

We all have a chance to take a stand every day—in the choices we make to challenge a racial or religious slur; in the lessons we teach our children as we tuck them into bed at night. Every American—not just American Jews, but every American—

should be outraged by the fires set to the synagogues in Sacramento. We have seen too many acts of hatred recently in California, Wyoming, Texas, Illinois, and Alabama. And now we must see to it that the Hate Crimes Prevention Act becomes the law of the land.

We must also continue to speak and work against racial and religious hatred and discrimination abroad. I am deeply concerned about the recent surge in anti-Semitic acts and statements in Russia, especially the bomb attack against the synagogue this past weekend in Moscow, which the United States has strongly condemned. It is important that the Russian government bring to justice those responsible for this cowardly act.

Yet even as we speak out and act against hatred, discrimination, bias, and bigotry, we have to also reach out with a helping hand to those who are alone and afraid.

When Jews began to leave Europe, Henrietta Szold and her father would greet them at the port in Baltimore. They would help them find homes and jobs. She even started a night school to teach them English. And she didn't just fill the role of teacher, she was superintendent and janitor as well. Because she believed that education was the key to success in America.

And in her graduation speech she said something which I wish we could emblazon on the wall of every school in America—"Public education truly is the cause of all the prosperity and harmony of our nation." If we really want to fulfill her vision of public education, then we will work to ensure that politics never takes up needed seats in our classrooms. And that mandatory prayer has no place in our public schools.

We will also work to fulfill her vision that education is at the center of our democracy by giving our children the smaller classes that they need; repairing their crumbling schools; building ones that will give them access to the Internet; providing childcare, summer school, and after-school programs as well. And we will do so by demanding that children and their teachers meet the highest possible standards. And we will work together to stop the violence that has for too long now plagued our schools. We must teach our children how to express their problems with words, not with weapons.

And we also must teach them the values that are at the root of who we are as Americans. And what Henrietta Szold and what Hadassah have done for so many years is to pass on Jewish values and American values together. From Cairo to Warsaw, I have seen what Americans have done all over the world to help Jewish communities keep their synagogues open and their heritage alive.

I was privileged to visit a project that Ambassador Lauter has supported in Warsaw, and to see that community coming back to life. I will never forget being in Ukraine at the Gilad Synagogue in Lviv. The Nazis had turned it into a horse stable and left a signature of bullet holes in the ceiling. And the Soviets used it as a warehouse. But because of the determination of so many people, mostly here in the United States, it is once again a gathering and worshipping place for a vibrant Jewish community. And I

That is how Henrietta Szold lived. And that is how Hadassah and you have worked—seeing that every precious moment is an opportunity to touch a life.

I thank you for your work. And I ask you to continue it here and in Israel so that it can spread from one end of our world to the other, like a giant rainbow bringing hope to all.

Thank you very much.