

Lion of Judah Conference
September 14, 1998
DC

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PRESERVATION

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Remarks at the United Jewish Appeal Lion of Judah Conference
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Thank you so much. Some of you may know that I had the privilege of speaking to this conference four years ago. I am personally delighted and very honored to be back to speak again this year. I want to thank Betty Kane, Rebecca Newman, Ray Garfinkle and Berry Sweet; Neil Rice, Carol Solomon, and Richard Wexler and all of you who have not only planned this conference but who are deeply involved in the work of this organization throughout the year.

I feel especially privileged to be gathering with leaders from the four corners of the earth. And before I get into my speech, I want to congratulate one of those leaders, Betty Kane, for her birthday today. I know that sometimes one of us would just assume that it not be mentioned, but I didn't want the day to go by without joining her friends and family in telling her, as I tell all my friends, how grateful I am that another year in their lives has come, and how pleased I am to be part of their lives. Anne Frank once said that no one need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world. And I believe that with all my heart, and I believe that all of you do as well.

There is so much that each of us can do in our own ways, and in our own corners of the earth to make a difference. I am very honored that you would have me here because I know that the women's campaign never waits; Lion of Judah members never wait; the UJA never waits; and you never wait. There are older citizens in the former Soviet Union who now have food. And there are victims of family violence from Baltimore to Israel that now have a new start. There are people all over Eastern Europe whose families are reunited and whose lives have been improved. I want to thank you for the work you do every single day.

But when I read the theme for today's luncheon, "A Vision for Women in the Twenty-First Century," I thought how fitting it was for us to have this small conversation -- the 1200 or so that are gathered today -- to think through together what we imagine about women's lives in the next century, and what we can do together on behalf of ourselves, our daughters, our granddaughters and women everywhere.

I am also pleased that for the first time ever the chair of the UJA is a woman, Carol Solomon. I am well aware of how you have been talking about issues over the days of this conference -- ones that can no longer be pigeon holed as women's issues -- for which I am personally very happy. I don't think health care, or child care, or domestic violence, or education are women's issues. They are issues that should concern every person with good faith and a vision for the future. And you are helping to lead the way for all of us to do that.

Early in my husband's administration, I remember how upset some people became when I talked about what I thought of as a faith based belief in what each of us can do to make that conversation to improve the world around us. There were some who did not want or expect

anyone in the public arena to be talking about matters of faith and the fact that we have obligations because of the blessings we were given to help others to find the blessings in their own lives.

But in the last four years since that has occurred, I have seen a change as more and more people are willing to step into the public arena, in the not-for-profit arena, and bring with them their strong conviction that we do have obligation to one another -- that we are interdependent; that we have to work harder together to create the kind of world we envision. Because, certainly, if we just talk about what we envision for women in the 21st Century, we have no context in which we put that vision. We have to imagine what kind of world the woman we see in the 21st century will live in; will marry in; will be educated in; will raise children in; will make her own contributions in. So, we can't just be narrowly focused. We have to have a broader range of thought in order to begin the discussion about the vision we share for women in the next century.

I think it is particularly appropriate that this group and all of us together do that as you prepare for the high holidays and as we all prepare for the new century. It is time for us to reflect on who we are and where we are going.

My husband and I have launched a Millennium project at the White House, which is really an attempt on our part to get Americans to think about where we have been as a people, where we are today, and where we wish to go. We've adopted a theme for that kind of conversation we would like to occur in our country; the theme is "honor the past-imagine the future."

Well, I think that is an appropriate theme for us here today. Because by honoring the past, in both a personal and a public way -- as this organization does -- you have helped create the present and build a foundation for the future. But we cannot have the kind of future we envision for humankind or for women in particular if we cannot imagine together what it could look like.

I have been privileged in the past years to travel around the world. I have been privileged in many places to visit Jewish communities which are coming back into their own after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From Warsaw to Bukhara I have seen how the Jewish community has kept it's hopes and traditions alive -- how it honored the past despite the evils, the oppression, the troubles that were visited upon them.

I will never forget being in the Gilad Synagogue in Ukraine last November. Some of you may know the history of that synagogue. The Nazis turned that holy place into a horse stable and left a signature of bullet holes in the ceiling. The Soviets had used it as a warehouse. But because of the courage and the determination and the faith of the Jewish community that was left and migrated back, all of a sudden it became again a holy gathering place for a vibrant Jewish community.

The synagogue has been restored, but more than that, the faith and spirit of the people has been restored as well. Once again, Jews can worship freely. Freedom of religion has been reborn. The rabbi -- a young rabbi and his very energetic wife from New York, who are there serving that community -- explained to me how much it meant to open a Jewish school there. After so

many years of unspeakable hardship, the community -- through its children -- would have a future that could be imagined.

What that rabbi understood, what that community understood, and what I have heard throughout the world from people who have found the strength and determination to go on, is that through whatever difficulties one goes, there is always the hope, the imagination, and the vision to guide us if we have the energy and the commitment to formulate it.

Now that is what organization has done, and that is what you individually in so many instances have done. I know because I know some of you personally of your personal concern and commitment to the hurt, the sick, the hungry, the left out and left behind. I know how hard you have worked to pass on your commitment to peace and justice, and how many of you -- some of whom traveled with the President and me, some of whom were at the White House on various occasions in the past -- have worked so hard after the Oslo Accords, to pray and do all that you can to make sure there is a lasting peace.

You have passed on the values of the past. The concerns that have driven you to feel as Anne Frank would have asked us, that each of us can do something everyday to improve the world. I know that there are individuals in this room who have poignant stories and whose very lives honor the past. I could probably call out and ask so many to stand, and that conversation, that intimate group we have here could come alive with stories of women who have gone forward despite the greatest of troubles.

I was told of one woman, Mrs. Clerman, from Miami, Cecil. Her story is especially poignant because, as Israel celebrates its fiftieth birthday, it is because of work like hers that that birthday could come with such celebration. She spent the war years in Romania and with the exception of a brother and a sister, lost her entire family in the Holocaust. Instead of giving up to sorrow, she went back to Romania and worked in the underground to teach children Hebrew and to get them safely to Israel. Instead of giving up, she worked with her late husband to create a state for the Jewish people and helped turn the dream of Israel into a reality. Instead of giving up, she has generously dedicated her time and money to further the vital missions of the UJA.

Now I have met countless women like her and like you. And what I am constantly struck by, whether it is meeting with the small Jewish community in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, whether a Jewish community in Warsaw Poland, or a group of African women villagers in Uganda, or women who are trying to create their own small businesses in Santiago, Chile -- no matter where I am -- I hear the voices of women, no matter what language they speak, crying out for the opportunity to be able to live lives of meaning and purpose.

And the women I meet have all overcome terrible odds just to be where they are. The pride on an African woman's face as she shows me the rabbit hutches she now keeps so she can improve her family's income is just as real to me as the pride on the face of a friend of mine who gets a big promotion in a corporation.

Each of them has done what she could do best to see a light and seize the opportunity to imagine

a better future. So what does that mean to those of us living in the United States at this particular point in history as we end this century?

I think there are several lessons that we have to take to heart. Many of the women whose lives we admire -- Mrs. Clerman and so many others we could mention -- we admire because they persevered, didn't they? They endured in the face of very difficult challenges. We wonder if we would be as brave. We wonder if we would be as generous. Whether we would spend as much time and energy as they did helping others. We haven't - most of us - been challenged like they have. But, we have our own challenges, don't we? And one of our challenges is how do we build a life of meaning and purpose in a land of so much plenty and so many blessings? How do we use the gifts that God has given to us to make a difference in our lives and the lives of those we touch?

Now, very simplistically, there are many answers to that. You are demonstrating answers to that by your being here. There is work to be done in every single community anywhere on the globe. And there is particular work to be done in the process of peace and reconciliation among those of different racial, religious, ethnic or tribal backgrounds.

And that is a lesson that we as Americans must share with the rest of the world. I wish all of you could have been with me, as Betty mentioned, when I was in Belfast. I have worked with women in Northern Ireland for a couple of years. Just think for a minute about what life has been like for Catholic and Protestant women in that part of the world for the last thirty years. Think about what it must have felt like not knowing if your husband would get home safely from work, or if your children would return safely from school, or if you would be a victim of a bombing like those twenty nine people who died in Omagh, for reasons that make very little sense and are driven by history and forces that want to use hatred to drive people apart instead of bringing them together.

But throughout those thirty years of troubles, there were women who had a vision of what the future could be like. I met some of those women when I first went to Northern Ireland several years ago. I walked into a small fish and chips restaurant where I was going to be meeting Catholic and Protestant women who had braved not only the abuse of their neighbors, but the potential threats on their lives, to come together to sit around tables like the one we sat around, to talk about the vision they had for their futures.

One woman made a particular impression on me. Her name was Joyce McCarten. She was a grassroots activist. She had many people in her extended family killed during the Troubles, including one of her sons. She met me at the door, and stuck out her hand, and with a big grin said she had been looking forward to meeting me because she was a family feminist too.

Now, I had never heard the phrase before. But boy, do I like the phrase. I like it because I believe that any woman who cares about the future, families and children, cares about giving opportunities to every little boy and girl, knows how important it is that we have peace and reconciliation so that every boy and girl can live up to his or her God-given potential.

And there is woman who walked across barbed wire streets to get to that restaurant to meet with me, and I told her I would be proud to be considered a family feminist alongside her.

But I met many women that day, who are finally finding their voices. And that is what all of us must do. It is more difficult certainly to find one's voice among violence and troubles than perhaps it is-- even though we think not-- in times like this, when it is easy for our voices to get lost in a cacophony of noise.

I see women finding their voices in South Africa, where in the aftermath of apartheid they decided they would build their own futures. I have visited them on dusty patches of what appears to be barren ground outside of Capetown, where they are building homes for themselves and their children.

I have met such women in China, where I was told about a panel of women in Beijing that they either would say nothing, or they would only parrot the government line. How wrong that was. I have never had a livelier conversation anywhere in the world with women who were anxious to spill their voices out so that we could know what issues they were concerned about, and I could begin to piece together the vision that they had for women in the future.

And you know what? The vision, whether it is Northern Ireland, or South Africa, or in China, sounds very much the same to me. Women who want the tools of opportunity, who want to be educated to the fullest of their abilities, who want to be able to make the right choices for their own lives, who want to be respected for the choices they do make, who want to participate in the lives of their communities and their countries. There may be different cultural and linguistic and racial tinges to these dreams they have, but at bottom I hear the same voice coming from women everywhere.

We know that women cannot realize this vision -- a vision that was set forth eloquently at the United Nation's Conference of Women in Beijing since we have last met. I know they cannot realize that if they don't have the tools they need. And what are those tools? They are tools that you are helping to provide. We know that they cannot make progress if they are underfed or undervalued or underpaid. We know that women will never even be able to envision a different future if when they are born they are devalued because they are girls instead of boys, or denied schooling or health care commensurate with their abilities.

We know that women cannot build that vision of the future if they do not have access to tools of opportunity such as credit to start businesses, child care so that their children are well tended while they are working. We know that the progress of nations depends on the progress of women. And it is time that all of us understood what our contributions must be in order to make that possible. We know that women cannot have a vision of themselves or a better future if they fear violence at the hands of their loved ones or strangers, or if they are used as tools and tactics of war in ethnic conflicts.

We know they cannot have that vision if they are not at the tables where decisions are made about their lives and their families. We know they cannot have that vision if they do not have

control over their bodies or the access to the health care they need as they go through their entire lives. We know that by providing these tools, we empower women throughout the world to make the decisions they believe are right for themselves.

You know sometimes when I talk about what women need or even when I say that women's rights are human rights, I am looked at quizzically, not only elsewhere in the world, but sometimes here at home. I remember being on a Voice of America radio show, and I was getting calls from all over the world, and a gentleman from the Middle East called in and said, "I have heard you say that women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights, but what does that mean?" And I said, "well, shut your eyes and imagine all the rights that men have, and those are all the rights that women should have as well. And they are no different-- no better or worse."

But in order to function in any society, they should have access to the same rights. And even here at home, I sometimes think that women's issues are marginalized. Talking about tools of opportunity, or domestic violence, or even education and health care is sometimes viewed as a soft issue -- a women's issue -- and I think nothing could be farther from the truth.

These are the issues that determine how we live together. And I am fond of pointing out that during the 1996 election, a number of commentators criticized my husband because he talked about things like child care, education and health care. And some of those commentators said the President is talking about issues in a way that will lead to the feminization of politics. Well, there are those that would not object to that. But that would be missing the point. This is about the humanization of politics. This is about putting on the very top of the agenda the issues that determine how people live, and what kinds of future they are able to imagine for themselves and their children.

Now here at home, we are not immune from looking at ourselves and taking a critical look about what we need to do to envision the kind of woman and the kind of future that woman should have in the next century. We have made an enormous amount of progress together. We know that. But we also have not fulfilled all our obligations either.

We need to stand firm as a nation and have embedded in our foreign policy as Secretary Albright and I have said on several occasions, the idea that women's rights need an interest - need to be taken into account in American foreign policy. So that for example, when we hear about the kind of abuses perpetrated by the Taliban, that is an important matter for our nation to take into account in any dealings we would have with any regime that does what it does to women on a daily basis.

Because in the world as it is today, it is in America's interest to empower women - to give women opportunities to have their voices heard - to be participants in the decision making in their communities and countries. And in those places, such as those under the rule of the Taliban, where women cannot go to work, leave their homes alone, attend school, or get the health care they need, then we have to take a stand against that.

And when we hear about women being enticed from the former Soviet Union with promises of jobs as nannies and hair stylists, but instead are being shipped around the world like drugs and sold into slavery, we have to take a stand against that. And when we hear about children who are aborted or denied food simply because they are girls, we must take a stand against that. And we must do so in a very loud and clear voice.

America must lead, and it must lead on issues that affect women and girls around the world. We should for example, join the rest of the world and ratify the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. It has been sitting for 24 years.

And we must be more vocal in standing up and having our voices heard against those who hold our contributions to the United Nations hostage because they don't believe that women around the world should have access to family planning services, that is just wrong.

So, there are steps we must take as American women. And we must urge our leaders in the Congress and elsewhere, to put down markers about where we stand on the rights and opportunities of women around the world. But ultimately, our power to build the kind of world we want rests not just on laws or diplomatic action, but on our own attitudes and values. How will we convey what we believe women in the twenty first century should be? How will we teach our children how women should be given every opportunity to make the best choices they can make? Will we once and for all end the false debate on women's choices?

Think about the energy it takes for women among themselves to undercut each other for the choices we make. Each of us are individuals. Some women choose to be full time mothers and homemakers, and we should respect and applaud their choice. Some women choose to be full time in the world of work, they may or may not marry, they may or may not have children, but we should respect their choice. And, for most of us in today's world, as we attempt to strike that balance at various points in our lives-- between our obligations to our family and our obligations outside our home to work-- and other obligations such as the one you take on with UJA-- we should do more to help respect and support those choices.

It is time for our country to do what it can do to support the important work that women do inside the home and outside the home. We have to do more to give women the child care and other tools they need to successfully balance work and family. We have to make it absolutely unheard of in the twenty-first century that any woman would have to choose between the job she needs to put food on the table and the child she loves and needs to nurture. We can do a better job by providing more part timework opportunities, more leave opportunities, and more support for women who are in the work force.

Now those are all ways that we can help create an environment where women's choices are truly our own--and in which we can, as we live such longer lives, thankfully-- make different choices depending on where we are in our lives. We have to reach out and support each other, and we need the kind of real life politics that makes it possible not only to envision that future, but to create and build it. We need a real life politics, that does once and for all, put behind divisions in our country, that supports the peace makers, the conciliators, the mediators; that reaches across

racial and religious lines to make sure that every American feels included, supported and respected. We need to stand up for the rights of any oppressed person anywhere in America. We need to stand up against the very destructive images that are fed to our daughters by the media about how it is more important how you look than how you feel or who you are or what you do.

And if we begin to envision this future and act on it, I am enough of an optimist to believe that we will go a long way to creating it. You know, sometimes I look around our country and I am amazed at all the progress we have made. Now certainly, we have fallen short of where we would like to be. We have a lot of work to do. But we have over the years continually pushed progress forward.

When I was at Seneca Falls, as Betty mentioned, I was so impressed with the words I read of those women who gathered in 1848 to envision a world that was hard for them to imagine. This was a world in which if you married you owned nothing; your husband owned the clothes on your back, had every right to the children-- you had no rights whatsoever. You couldn't vote. You had no stake in the leadership of your community. And these women sat at that small table together and they dreamed, and they looked at each other and they said we can do better, there is more to life than we have been given. As women we should have more possibilities to be whomever we want to be.

Woodrow Wilson was incensed at these pushy women who were chaining themselves to the gate of the White House demanding the right to vote. But if they hadn't imagined it first, no action would have occurred. They wouldn't have invited the abuse, but it was a necessary part of change and transformation. And then look at what they have given us.

So we can envision a future that gives every woman and every man, every girl and every boy the tools they need to make whomever their dreams and work will make them be. But do you know what my biggest concern is? My biggest concern is that we will grow complacent in America, and we will grow satisfied, and we will believe that we are entitled to all the goodness that has come our way, and all those who don't share in the blessings of America are just not good enough, or smart enough, or work hard enough. And we will begin to go the way of most civilizations where a large group of people are left behind. And then the vision we have for women will only apply to women like us, instead of opening doors to all women.

I fear that in these times of plenty and blessings and record stock markets where it looks like we are defying history-- which is always a dangerous thing to think-- that some of us will begin to believe our own P.R. about how lucky and fortunate and blessed we are, and how therefore, we don't owe much to anyone else.

And that is one of the reasons why I wanted to come here today, because I know that you do not believe that, and that you were constantly urging yourselves forward to think about all the challenges that face us, and you were doing concrete tasks to build the kind of future that would give every person the opportunity we are so blessed to have for ourselves.

When I told a friend of mine how excited I was to come back to the Lion of Judah -- in fact I talk

a lot about Lion of Judah-- I talked about it yesterday in New York where I was with my husband at an affair for the Democratic party. I was sitting at a table, and one of the women there knew I was coming and was actually flying back to be with me and I thank her out there in the audience. We started talking about the Lion of Judah and two women didn't know anything about it-- and so I think I got you two more members.

So I told this friend of mine that I was coming here today, and she shared with me a passage from this week's Torah reading, many of you know what I am going to talk about. The Ancient Hebrews are preparing to go into Israel together and on this last day of his life, Moses gathers them together, men and women of all statures and ages, and initiates them into a new covenant where they will be responsible not only to God, but for one another. And he asks them to choose life and the good, over death and evil.

That is really a question for all of us in every time in every place. What choices will we make? How will we use our voices, our resources, our blessings on behalf of those near and dear to us, but also on behalf of those with no voice? How will we in our own way respect the dignity of each person, pass on the values of caring and concern and inter-connectedness to our children?

As you approach the high holidays, and as each of us takes stock of where we are and who we are and what is important in our lives, I hope we ask ourselves these questions; because no vision of anything in the next century will be worth much or stand the test of time, as most of this question did, unless it is rooted in a strong belief that we are obligated to one another.

And if we carry out those obligations, then I believe we will create a future in which women and men will be able to live more peacefully together and in respect and dignity and have the opportunity each of us want to live lives of meaning and purpose.

I hope that you will continue the work that you are doing. I hope that the conversation about the next century will continue. I hope each of us will, in our own way create that vision of the twenty-first century. And I hope we will continue to raise our voices and work together.

I wish you a happy new year. I wish that all of you may have the fulfillment that comes from knowing that you have been of service to others. May you all be written in to the Book of Life.

Thank you.