



2021 WJC Theodor Herzl Award Gala Speech by WJC President Ronald S. Lauder

Good evening and welcome to the World Jewish Congress annual Theodor Herzl dinner. To those watching on-line, we hope you can join us in person next year. And for all of you here in this room tonight, I am so happy to finally see your faces again. Many thanks to my Co-Chairs, Chella Safra and David de Rothschild and to Dr. Albert Bourla and Itzhak Perlman. Thank you for allowing us to honor you. Welcome all.

85 years ago, in the summer of 1936, a small group of Jews gathered together in Switzerland to warn the world of the growing danger coming out of Nazi Germany.

It's interesting, the Nazis never tried to hide their hatred of the Jews or their plans. They couldn't have been more clear. But those Jewish leaders, who tried to sound the alarm, ran into a problem that was as destructive as the Nazi hatred: The entire world's complete indifference to the fate of the Jews. There was also a great deal of latent antisemitism. There was also a great deal of latent antisemitism throughout Western Europe and even here in the United States.

By the summer of 1938, German and Austrian Jews were begging the world for some place – any place – to go. In July of that year, President Franklin Roosevelt sponsored the Evian conference in France to find ways to help German, Austrian Jews. Thirty-two countries sent delegates to make virtuous speeches. At that point, Hitler would have let all the Jews just leave.

Think about that for a moment, they could have all been saved if they just had a place to go. But pollsters warned Roosevelt that Americans, were afraid of losing their jobs and didn't want German and Austrian Jews coming in.

In the end, Roosevelt, the politician that he was, put his re-election above Jewish lives. Under his direct order, the U.S. absolutely refused to change its very strict Jewish quotas and every other country who came there to open us their doors to the Jews said, "If the Americans aren't doing it, we're not doing it."

It always struck me as ironic that Jewish voters were Roosevelt's strongest supporters. But because of his decision, Jews were not allowed into the United States – or anywhere else.

Imagine if Roosevelt had done the decent thing and changed the U.S. immigration policy. Every other country would have followed. Tens-of-thousands, hundreds-of-thousands, millions of Jewish lives might have been saved. It was only fate that saved Albert Bourla's parents in Greece. It was fate and timing that saved Itzhak Perlman's parents and that is why they are both here tonight. If my grandparents had not emigrated from Hungary 40 years earlier, I would have been one of the 1.3 million Jewish children who were murdered. I'm sure many of you in this audience can relate to this, from where your grandparents or parents came from.

Evian had one more devastating impact, and it was huge: Hitler saw the world's reaction at Evian, and just three months later, he heard the world's deafening silence after Kristallnacht. At a meeting just four days after

Kristallnacht, Hitler said we can do whatever we want with the Jews, the world doesn't care either. This is the legacy of world's indifference to our people and we must never ever forget it.

And still, in spite of that indifference. In spite of Auschwitz and Treblinka, in spite of the cattle cars and the gas chambers, the Jewish people picked themselves up from the ashes of the Holocaust.

Those that survived helped build a thriving Jewish state from the desert. Where there was almost nothing, there is now a modern, strong democracy. The Jewish people continue to share our gifts of science and literature and the arts – which we celebrate tonight with our distinguished honorees – but unbelievably, the hatred of the Jewish people hasn't gone away and it's growing.

Since the creation of Theodor Herzl's dream in 1948, the Jewish State of Israel, its enemies, could not defeat Israel militarily. They could not defeat Israel economically. But now, they are trying to end the State of Israel politically and we see their influence growing everywhere.

Last spring, when over 4,000 rockets were fired at Israeli cities by an international terrorist organization, the U.N., much of the media, and the internet lit up blaming Israel for crimes against humanity. What do you think would happen if the United States had been attacked by terrorists in a neighboring country with over 4,000 rockets directed against Los Angeles or Houston or Washington and New York.

You already know the answer. So why is it that Israel the only condemned for defending its citizens? Why does Israel have to constantly prove it has a right to exist?

This is not happening by chance, over the last 25 years, Middle Eastern countries have quietly donated large sums of money to our best universities, under the guise of creating Middle East Studies Departments.

They brought in anti-Israel professors and this has had a huge impact. While few were paying attention, these departments have successfully turned colleges – which were once honest in their teaching – into anti-Israel propaganda arenas. Young people have turned against Israel. The media has turned against Israel. You can see it all over the internet.

And now, it has even filtered down to voters, who have elected representatives in the United States Congress, that have raised some of the most disgusting blood libels, antisemitic canards and pro-BDS support, without any shame whatsoever. Even worse, their party leaders refuse or are too afraid to condemn them. There are 37 Jewish members of Congress, where are they? Don't you think we should hear more from them?

A recent poll shows more than a third of all Democrats – 37 percent – don't believe Israel has a right to exist. 37 percent! In the party of Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy. The Democratic party was always Israel's greatest champion.

What has changed in our country is the impact of those college professors, which has energized young people to join the anti-Israel campaign on the internet and in the media. This is hitting every aspect of our society and this is what the World Jewish Congress is fighting every single day in new and very creative ways. This takes nonstop work because, just like Dr. Bourla understood fighting COVID, antisemitism is a constantly mutating virus. And, frankly, not enough Jewish organizations are on top of this. But the World Jewish Congress is.

Besides defending the Jewish communities in over 100 countries, where I have personally met with world leaders in over 40, this is how we are fighting this new wave of antisemitism;

- First, we are constantly monitoring the internet and hitting back with instant responses.
- Second, we have found and are supporting courageous young Jewish students who are fearless in their pro-Israel positions on campuses.
- Third, our Jewish Diplomatic Corps, some of whom are here tonight, around the world are working in their countries to teach students the truth about Israel.
- Fourth, we will start a campaign against antisemitic professors and we will also tell people who give money to these universities to stop giving money to them.
- Fifth, we are working with security companies to protect Jewish communities around the world.
- Six, and perhaps this is the most important – Jewish education. We are building up a large scholarship fund so that any child that wants a Jewish education, will be able to get one. Money should not hold our next generation back from learning about their precious heritage.

No other organization is standing up to our political enemies on so many different fronts. But the World Jewish Congress is. We will not stop, because I cannot emphasize just how important this fight is right now. I will tell you that this is as bad as I have ever seen it.

If you had told me 40 years ago that this is what I would devote my life to, I wouldn't have believed you. I would have told you to take two aspirin and lie down.

Like Herzl, I was probably one of the most assimilated Jews in New York City. But something happened to me as Ambassador to Austria in 1986 that changed the direction of my life just like Herzl's life was changed outside the Dreyfuss trial in Paris.

Kurt Waldheim, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, had lied about his Nazi past. He said he was in law school in Vienna during the war. In truth, he was part of a Nazi unit that did some terrible things in Greece and Yugoslavia. But instead of disappearing in shame, he ran for president of Austria. He told voters he was no different from their father, their uncles, their cousins. On that score, he was correct. And the Austrians elected him! This happened just as I arrived in Vienna as the U.S. Ambassador.

When I voiced my concern, the Austrian media stopped referring to me as the U.S. Ambassador. From that moment on, I was the "Jewish" American Ambassador. When Herzl walked out of the Dreyfus trial, he was awakened by the chants of "Death to the Jews" not "death to Dreyfus." I am not Herzl. But like him it was the first time in my life that I experienced antisemitism and it made me furious.

There was something else that happened to me in Vienna. Jo Carole and I met the local Chabad rabbi and his wife, who had started a small, one-room kindergarten for the children of Soviet refugees who were coming through Vienna on their way to Israel.

I went there. Seeing that classroom and those children who had been denied the right to learn about their Judaism in Russia, had a profound impact on me as well. I can't describe it, but those children have always stayed with me. It made me wonder about my past and my Jewish background that I took for granted until that moment.

That was when I started building schools throughout Central and Eastern Europe. 35 years later, those schools – there are now 30 of them – have graduated over 40,000 children who never would have been Jewish. This, in turn, has revived Jewish communities that everyone thought were dead.

Take my word on this, today's antisemitism is all too real. The hatred of Jews is no less dangerous today than it was in the past. But here is something that is different: Unlike those Jewish leaders who were powerless to save their fellow Jews in 1936, today we have power, we have influence, we have a strong Jewish State, and we have a World Jewish Congress that is energized like it never was before. Eighty-five years ago, we learned a hard lesson: No one else will do this for us. It is up to us.

Here is my promise: I will continue this fight with every ounce of strength in me for as long as I can. But I cannot do this alone: I need your help. The only way we can possibly defeat this enemy is by doing this together, as one united people.

That means, this may be in possible, liberal Jews and conservative Jews work together, religious Jews and secular Jews work together, young Jews, old Jews, and every Jew in between.

Our people have been on this earth for a long time and we will continue our incredible journey. But that won't happen if we just sit back and think someone else will do this for us.

Let me end with one last story, the daughter of close friends of ours, who are here in this room, their daughter was at a dinner party here in New York. When the topic of the Middle East came up, she first was question should she say something. Finally, she said, "I am a Zionist and I believe Israel has a right to be listened to" And what did they do? They asked her to leave.

Do you think this isn't happening? Our sons and our daughters are facing a low-grade war every single day at social functions, dinner parties, in classrooms, and on the street.

How do we respond to this? There is only one way. We must stand taller and prouder and never ever be afraid to stand up to anyone that hates us. Because when we do, they back down. And always remember we are not doing this for yourselves. We are doing this for our children, and our grandchildren and the generations not yet born.

I thank you.

And may God continue to bless the Jewish people. Am Yisroel Chai.