



World Jewish Congress Theodor Herzl Award Virtual Gala Remarks as prepared for delivery November 9, 2020

Opening Remarks by Ronald S. Lauder, President of World Jewish Congress

Good evening. I'm Ronald Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress. On behalf of my co-chairs, David de Rothschild and Chella Safra, welcome and thank you for joining us for the annual Theodor Herzl Award gala dinner.

If you think one man can't change the world, think again. Theodor Herzl started the movement that created the Jewish State of Israel. In doing this, he transformed the Jewish people from ghetto Jews to proud, heroic Jews. This is the man whom we name our award after.

Unlike previous Herzl dinners, we are not gathered together in New York tonight. Because of the pandemic, we've created a unique gathering of Jewish people around the globe – from the United States to Australia, from Buenos Aires to Bucharest, from Johannesburg to Jerusalem. We may not be together, but we are still connected. And that goes to the heart of what the World Jewish Congress is all about.

This one organization represents Jewish communities in more than 100 countries around the world. It's the umbrella organization for every Jewish person everywhere. It began in 1936 when a tiny group of Jewish leaders gathered in Geneva to warn the world about the growing danger coming out of Nazi Germany. They failed because they did not have the power or the influence to stop Hitler. But there was another reason: their warnings fell on deaf ears because of the world's complete indifference to the plight of the Jews.

Today, things have changed. The World Jewish Congress has the influence and we have the power to make sure world leaders understand that when the Jews in their countries are safe and free, everyone benefits. But, we cannot do this alone. I cannot do this alone. If you care about the future of the Jewish people, please stand with me and make your mark, just as Herzl did.

I will tell you that being the president of the World Jewish Congress has been the greatest honor of my life. Tonight, in the spirit of the great statesmen who have been our past honorees, people who shaped the world and stood by the Jewish people, the 2020 Herzl Award recipient is His Excellency, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres.

And this year's Teddy Kollek Award for the Advancement of Jewish Culture goes to the musical genius Maestro Zubin Mehta, music director emeritus of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

Their work in different ways has inspired the entire world. And like Herzl and Kollek, tonight's honorees have led lives that are impactful, even inspirational.

Keynote Remarks by Ronald S. Lauder, President of World Jewish Congress

It is no accident that we hold the Herzl Award dinner on November 9, the anniversary of Kristallnacht. But the most important lesson we should all remember from Kristallnacht is not the 1,200 synagogues set on fire or the shattered windows, or even the law-abiding Jewish citizens who were beaten in the streets.

The real lesson of Kristallnacht was the world's reaction. There was none. The real lesson of Kristallnacht was the world's complete indifference to the Jewish people. In a meeting five days after Kristallnacht, Hitler said: "we can do whatever we want with the Jews, because the world doesn't care." And that's exactly what he did. The Holocaust began on November 9, 1938. It began on Kristallnacht. 82 years later, we still face indifference.

But today, it's a very different form of indifference. It breaks my heart to say this, but it is Jewish indifference. Indifference toward other Jews. Indifference toward Israel. Indifference to the growing antisemitism from the right and the left that many Jews pretend is not happening. And this indifference is causing many young Jews to walk away from their religion, their traditions, and their people.

Perhaps it is our tremendous success that has made us complacent. We came out of the horrors of the Holocaust, and in just 75 years, Jews created the miracle of a strong, prosperous and brilliant Jewish state, and around the world, we have attained financial and political power that past generations could only dream about. But, 75 years later, we are so divided. Secular against religious. Religious against secular. Diaspora Jews who don't support Israel. Israelis who ignore the diaspora.

We in the World Jewish Congress are fighting this indifference and the divisions on every level. We work closely with religious and non-religious communities. We defend Jews in the diaspora and we will always defend Israel.

As President of the World Jewish Congress, I have personally traveled around the world to meet with the leaders of 40 countries. Wherever there is antisemitism, the World Jewish Congress confronts it head-on.

We are creating a cadre of proud young Jewish activists around the world who will be tomorrow's leaders. You have seen some of them tonight. We call them the World Jewish Congress Diplomatic Corps. There are now 325 JDs from 50 different countries. We are training them to be the next generation of articulate, energetic and passionate Jewish leaders in the spirit of Theodor Herzl. Believe me, they are an impressive group.

We are also monitoring anti-Israel and anti-Jewish extremism on college campuses. This is a real and growing threat, and it seriously impacts the lives of our children and grandchildren.

Too many colleges across America and worldwide have allowed a small band of anti-Israel activists and a growing number of anti-Israel professors to sway their narrative against Israel. And because too many Jews are indifferent to this or don't see it, universities too often look the other way as well.

Let me state this emphatically: You can disagree with Israel's policies, but when a professor lies about Israel, its past and its present, and when a professor says that Israel doesn't have the right to exist, that isn't anti-Zionism. That is antisemitism.

One of my greatest plans that will ensure a Jewish future for the next generation is the creation of 100 new Jewish schools across America and Europe and wherever there is a Jewish community that needs one. I want every Jewish child that wants a Jewish education to have access to one, and we have to make this affordable. This is vital because too many young Jews are walking away from Judaism, and they don't know what they are missing. They have to be taught this, and we have to give them the tools to learn it.

Concerning the frightening and growing antisemitism that we see throughout the world, let me be clear on this as well: antisemitism is racism, and it is coming from the right and the left. It is fueled by the internet where we are seeing some of the oldest antisemitic lies.

The U.S. government recorded 1.7 million antisemitic postings on the internet in 2020, and the year isn't even over. 1.7 million!

Even in the halls of the U.S. Congress, we have heard the most vile antisemitism coming from representatives, and their leaders would not even condemn them. Our political leaders must be held accountable. Jews should stop funding colleges that allow anti-Israel professors to teach their hatred. Not one penny of Jewish money should be going to colleges until they actually stop this.

I promise you, the World Jewish Congress that defends Jewish communities in 100 countries throughout the diaspora will be at the lead of this new Jewish activism.

We are at the forefront of the fight against antisemitism on social media. In a major policy change, after our close work with Facebook, the internet giant is now removing posts with antisemitic stereotypes and Holocaust denial.

For me, our protection of the smaller Jewish communities around the world is so important. These small communities were once thriving Jewish centers with great rabbis and yeshivas. Now they are just a shadow of what they once were. But, I have seen firsthand their desire to not just survive, but to thrive, and many of them are growing. This is vital for all of us because Israel needs the support of a strong Jewish diaspora, just as we in the diaspora need the support of a strong Israel.

I have a vision for the future of the Jewish people, and I am absolutely confident that we can achieve it, if we come together as one united Jewish family.

The World Jewish Congress will devote all of its resources to this. Anywhere there is a Jew that needs our help, we will be there. This is our mission, and it's been our mission since that group of Jewish leaders came together in Switzerland in 1936.

If I have one legacy, this is my aim for as long as God allows me to do this. But I cannot do this alone. Give me your hand, and give me your help. Please join me in this vital work by joining the World Jewish Congress. If we do this all together, we will not fail!!

Thank you, toda rabah.

Presentation of Teddy Kollek Award for the Advancement of Jewish Culture by Ronald S. Lauder, President of World Jewish Congress

I want to share two stories with you. In 1986, my wife, Jo Carole, and I were living in Vienna, where I was serving as the U.S. Ambassador to Austria. The Museum of Modern Art had loaned some treasured paintings to the Belvedere Museum for a special show. At the dinner for the opening, Zubin Mehta, who was in Vienna with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, sat with Jo Carole. Here was one of the international maestros born in Bombay, and he started speaking to Jo Carole in Yiddish. She thought he was an Indian Jew, so she invited Zubin Mehta to our home for Passover shortly after. Although he wasn't actually Jewish, we clearly saw that Zubin Mehta had a Jewish soul. And we have cherished his friendship ever since.

Here is one more story, and it is important. In 1991, during the first Gulf War when Scud missiles were raining down over Israel, Zubin Mehta cancelled long-term commitments around the world to fly into the war zone to show his support for the Jewish state. When it was suggested that no one should fly to Israel, he flew into the war zone. When Zubin Mehta was asked why he did this, he replied that he couldn't imagine not doing it. This is the measure of the man who receives this year's Teddy Kollek Award for the Advancement of Jewish Culture.

The Israel Philharmonic has thrilled and moved audiences around the world. It's been one of Israel's greatest ambassadors. And having Zubin Mehta, born in India, as the point-man for the Philharmonic has sent an important message to people everywhere. Zubin, we can never thank you enough.

Presentation of WJC Theodor Herzl Award by Ronald S. Lauder, President of World Jewish Congress

Mr. Secretary-General, as I bestow upon you the World Jewish Congress' highest honor, our Theodor Herzl Award, I regret I am unable to present this to you personally at this moment. But when you receive it, please know that it comes with our deepest appreciation to you for being the voice of fairness and equity that the state of Israel and the Jewish people have been hoping for at the United Nations for a long, long time.

For too many decades, the UN has had a bizarre fixation on the Jewish state. This was not just dangerous for Israel but it demeaned the United Nations as well. That fixation on Israel made the UN a less serious organization. I want to express our gratitude to you for calling out antisemitism and anti-Zionism and refusing to bow to the pressure of those who seek to isolate, demonize and delegitimize the only Jewish state in the world – Israel.

We can think of no one who more aptly epitomizes and embodies Theodor Herzl's vision for a safer, more tolerant world for the Jewish people. Mr. Secretary-General thank you on behalf of the Jewish people.

Through your words and deeds over many years, you have shown that you are a true and devoted friend of the Jewish people and of the State of Israel.

**Closing Remarks from
Ronald S. Lauder, President of World Jewish Congress**

To everyone watching tonight's gala around the world, thank you for sharing this unique evening with us and for your generous support of WJC's continuing work.

Thank you to António Guterres and Zubin Mehta for allowing us to honor you.

I wish everyone good health and hope that we will see each other again in person at next year's annual Theodor Herzl Award gala dinner.