



Statement by the Forum for Cultural Diplomacy

Passover Seder at UN Headquarters — April 18, 2016

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Dr Gregory Lafitte

Under-Secretary-General Gallach, Minister Nemeček, Rabbi Abadie, Ambassador Danon, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

The Passover Seder is all about a story, about remembering, retelling this story. Rabbi Abadie will tell you this story. I will tell you another story.

It also takes place in Egypt, the protagonists are also the Jewish people. Nearly 500 years ago (1524), twelve prominent members of the Egyptian Jewish community in Cairo who had been seized by the Ottoman viceroy of Cairo were released after he was assassinated by his own vizier, at the bathhouse. The assassinated viceroy had been in rebellion against the Sultan Suleiman of Constantinople over coinage and other issues, and had seized the Jews and ransacked their quarter to fund his rebellion through ransom money. The day of their liberation, the 28th of *Adar*, was proclaimed a special Jewish holiday in certain communities. I was born on that special day. I'm afraid, it's not globally recognized as a holiday.

This story, many similar stories and almost every Jewish holiday can be summarized by the following words: they tried to kill us, they failed, let's eat. The Passover Haggadah also states: *“For not just one alone has risen against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise against us to destroy us; and the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand.”*

This story about the Jewish community in Cairo 500 years ago is related to another one. A story that took place more than 2000 years ago, 2372 years ago exactly this week, more precisely at the end of this week, at

the time of Passover. Once again the Jewish people were threatened to be annihilated. This time in Persia. By a turn of events, a young Jewish orphan girl had become the new Queen of Persia. One of the King's ministers, who had just been promoted to the position of Prime Minister resolved to kill all the Jews and approached the King who issued a decree "*to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, in a single day.*" This decree was issued two days before Passover. Queen Esther called for a fast on the following three days, the eve and the first two days of Passover, these coming Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Passover is not an appropriate time to fast but they fasted on Passover because Esther reasoned it would be better to fast on one *Pesach*, Passover, lest they all be destroyed and thus never be able to observe the holiday in the future. The decree was finally revoked, overturned and the Jews of Persia were saved.

I will not ask you to fast today, even if, unfortunately, there would be good reasons to call for a fast, or at least to be worried/alarmed by the resurgence of various forms of antisemitism that we are currently witnessing, but I would like for us to reflect, to remember, to retell, to relive the story of the Exodus. The story of the Exodus from Egypt, through which the Jewish people made the most important contribution to humanity — according to President Shimon Peres — a contribution in the form of a document, 172 words, which constitute the precondition for civilization, the 10 commandments.

Je ne vais pas vous demander de jeûner aujourd'hui, même s'il y aurait, malheureusement, des raisons de le faire, ou du moins d'être préoccupé par la résurgence actuelle de formes diverses d'antisémitisme. Mais je souhaite que nous puissions réfléchir, nous souvenir, redire, revivre ce récit de l'exode hors d'Égypte. Le récit de l'exode hors d'Égypte à travers lequel le peuple juif a fait, selon l'ancien Président de l'État d'Israël Shimon Peres, sa plus importante contribution à l'humanité, une contribution sous la forme d'un document, 172 mots qui constituent la précondition de la civilisation, les Dix Commandements.

The book of Exodus says: “*Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt.*”

Why do we, the Forum for Cultural Diplomacy together with the Permanent Mission of Israel, devote an entire lunch at UNHQ to telling the story in addition to remembering?

There is a great difference between remembering and telling the story.

We will eat the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs, the bread reminding us of the simple life of a slave. We will be eating the very food that was consumed before and during the Exodus itself. The herbs leave a bitter taste in our mouth, giving us a taste of slavery. The wine serves to sweeten the harshness of the slavery and gives us a taste of freedom.

By partaking in the Seder, we are acting out the Exodus. Much more than that, we actually act as though we ourselves are coming out of Egypt, as though we ourselves are experiencing *Pesach*. A detached relating of the events will not suffice; it will remain a past event, a chapter of history.

This is not just something that happened to another people thousands of years ago. No, this is relevant to our lives, to our nations, today.

Everyday of the year, we have to remember that we came out of Egypt, that we came out of slavery.

But once a year, we have actually to come out of Egypt ourselves. We have to go through the process of slavery and redemption. We have to free ourselves from those internal and external forces that enslave us. That is the essence of *Pesach* and of the *Seder*, to see ourselves as though we personally came out of Egypt.

Thank you.