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Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the state dinner held in her honour by H.E. Mr. Moshe Katsav, President of the State of Israel, Jerusalem, 20 February 2006

Your Excellency Mr. President,

Madame Katsav,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen, I am deeply moved and greatly honoured to be here in Israel on this state visit to your country. I extend my most sincere thanks to you, President Katsav, and to the government and people of Israel for the very warm reception that I, personally, as well as my husband, Professor Imants Freibergs, and the entire Latvian delegation have received here in your impressive and outstandingly beautiful country. This important visit to the Holy Land means a great deal to each and every one of us. I would like to begin by reaffirming the deep sense of kinship felt by the people of Latvia towards the State of Israel. The great Jewish philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who was born in Latvia's capital city of Riga, once lamented that the Jews "have enjoyed rather too much history and too little geography." Today the Jews can be proud of their democratic, modern and affluent nation-state. I congratulate the people of Israel for their many accomplishments, and I am proud that a large number of Jews from Latvia have taken part both in the establishment and in the strengthening of the State of Israel. I also am proud that when Latvia's independence was at stake in 1918, many Jews joined the ranks of Latvia's newly formed army and helped Latvia to win its War of Liberation against German and Russian occupying forces. The Jews and the Latvians have shared similar fates and parallels in their history, and have had to fight hard to obtain their freedom and independence. Mr. President, Your historic visit to Latvia in September of last year was a significant event in the relations between our two countries, and was a testimony of the mutual desire by Latvia and Israel to strengthen their growing ties of friendship. This Latvian state visit to Israel is a logical continuation of the work that our two countries have undertaken together to become even closer partners. The considerable size of my delegation, with representatives from various prominent Latvian state institutions and nearly 60 different enterprises, I think, speaks for itself. Mr. President, Last year when you were in Riga, we both paid an emotional, commemorative visit to the Rumbula memorial, at the site where approximately 25 000 Jews from Latvia and elsewhere in Europe were brutally murdered during the Nazi German occupation of my country. To our eternal shame and sorrow, the Shoah will forever remain one of the most tragic chapters in Latvia's and in Europe's history. Regrettably, there were people in Latvia who took part in the Nazi campaign to annihilate the Jewish population in Europe. But there were also a number of brave souls, of whom about 500 have been officially documented in Latvia, who risked their own lives and the lives of their loved ones to hide and protect their Jewish friends, neighbours, and acquaintances, as well as complete strangers. I take this opportunity to solemnly commemorate the innocent Jews who were killed in my country and elsewhere in Europe during the Shoah, which without a doubt was one of the most tragic events to have taken place in the 20th century. We must never forget the immense suffering and loss of the victims, we must condemn those who perpetuated these crimes, and we must pay tribute to those who had the courage to act as

saviours. Latvia is committed to the continued research and remembrance of the Shoah and other crimes against humanity that have been committed on Latvian soil. A number of Latvian government and non-governmental organizations are working together with Latvia's Jewish community to ensure that the events of the Shoah in Latvia are thoroughly researched and that the victims are not forgotten. They are working in cooperation with various international organizations, as well as with the State of Israel, the United States and several European countries. The Historian's Commission of Latvia has established a successful partnership with the Yad Vashem memorial, and the Latvian Prosecutor-General's Office is continuing its investigations into the crimes of that period. The events of the Shoah are part of the school curriculum in Latvian history and ethics courses. Students at Riga's Nordic Countries' High School, for example, have been voluntarily researching the history of the Riga ghetto and tending Jewish gravesites for the past several years. This year Latvia will host a number of significant events. One of them is an international conference devoted to Holocaust research and education, as well as to the fight against anti-Semitism. This conference will begin on July the 4th, which has been designated in my country as Holocaust Memorial Day, and will be followed in September by another conference entitled *Jews in a Changing World*. We would be pleased to welcome representatives from Israel at both of these events. Mr. President, Latvia unequivocally condemns any and all manifestations of anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance. My country made its position clear from the very moment that Latvia regained its independence in 1991, with a declaration *On the Impermissibility of Genocide and Anti-Semitism in Latvia*. I will add that hateful exhortations by heads of state calling for the elimination of other nations have no place in normal international relations and must be condemned in the strongest terms. Recently we have had a flare-up of intolerance and emotions concerning the publication in Europe of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, which are perceived by many as offensive to the Muslim faith. While free speech is one of the fundamental values of Western civilization, so is the respect for other persons and what they hold sacred. The privilege of free speech, therefore, carries with it an obligation of responsibility. This includes sensitivity to the beliefs and values of others, as well as responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. It is regrettable that millions of Muslims have felt deeply insulted as a result of these caricatures. Mockery of what others hold sacred is a form of condescension that is an expression of prejudice as well as bad taste. But reactionary exhortations to indiscriminate violence and hatred against entire nations and continents attack the very basis of civilisation – any civilisation, as the opposite of savagery. The chasm between the Muslim and the Western world, alas, has kept deepening and widening in an alarming way. Now more than ever, new efforts and initiatives are badly needed to break the vicious circles of hatred and mistrust and start building bridges of mutual understanding, tolerance, and a genuine dialogue of civilizations. Now, more than ever, there is a need for the political and religious leaders of all persuasions to denounce extremism and violence, and to promote moderation, patience and constructive action. The situation in the Middle East, which has been chronically tense for decades, has now encountered a new challenge following the recent election of Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Having received the endorsement of the Palestinian people to assume the reins of government, Hamas must now accept and recognize that democracy and terror do not go together, and that political power entails serious responsibilities. Hamas is now faced with a choice of historical importance. It must renounce violence, recognize the right of Israel to exist, and abide by previous commitments undertaken by the Palestinian Authority – including the Road Map for peace – or face the ostracism of the international community. The choice they make should be first and foremost based on the long-term interests of the Palestinian people. A renunciation of the path of peace and coexistence with Israel will only result in the worsening of living conditions for many Palestinians, and in a continuation of the endless cycle of violence that has already destroyed and devastated so many Palestinian and Israeli lives. A courageous decision to continue the Road Map for peace, on the other hand, would lay the basis for further progress and renew hope for peace and stability in the

whole region. The people of Israel will also be going to the ballot boxes in March of this year. They too face political choices that will have far-reaching consequences. Latvia hopes that Israel's next parliament and government will remain just as committed to the peace process as the current administration, thus continuing on a path that – painful as it can be at times – promises hope for a better and more stable future. Mr. President, You can be assured that Latvia will support all constructive endeavours to establish a lasting peace in the Middle East, as well as in other parts of the world where conflicts have arisen. Latvian and Israeli institutions and experts have already established close, cooperative links in the field of security and in the fight against terrorism. I express the hope that this cooperation will grow closer in the years to come. Latvia and Israel are also cooperating closely as friends and as partners within the framework of the United Nations and other international organizations. Last year Latvia and the other member states of the European Union placed their full support behind an Israeli draft resolution to the UN General Assembly on Holocaust remembrance. I will add that Latvia is proud of its strong and vibrant Jewish community, which has provided an immeasurable contribution to Latvia's political, economic and cultural life. The Council of Latvian Jewish Communities and Congregations, which enjoys special societal benefit status, unites over 20 Jewish groups from all over Latvia. I also wish to thank the Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel for its work in strengthening the ties of friendship between our two countries. You can be sure that Latvia's Embassy in Israel will always be ready to assist its former sons and daughters in Israel should the need arise. The dynamism and vitality of Latvia's Jewish community has been evident in many ways. Plans are in progress for the construction of a new Jewish School in Riga, which promises to be one of the most modern in Europe, and which will bear the name of the great Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, who lived in Latvia until his death at the hands of the Nazis in 1941. Last year the Riga Synagogue celebrated its 100th anniversary. It is now undergoing renovations, and once these are completed, the building next to it, which belongs to the Latvian Ministry of Culture, will be refurbished to house the new quarters of the Jewish and Holocaust Museum of Latvia. Mr. Mārgers Vestermanis, a Holocaust survivor, is the museum's director and he is also here together with us this evening. The restoration of a synagogue in Daugavpils has been successfully completed, thanks to the support of the family of world famous artist Mark Rothko, who was born in that city. This synagogue's re-consecration is scheduled to take place later this year. I would also like to mention the monumental work of the late Natan Barkans, who became the Chief Rabbi of Riga and Latvia already in 1990, before Latvia had regained its independence. Rabbi Barkans oversaw a significant research project entitled *Latvia. Synagogues and Rabbis. 1918-1940*. As part of this project, I will be unveiling tomorrow – together with you, Mr. President – an exhibition of drawings of Latvia's old synagogues that have been portrayed by Latvia's children. This will present a wonderful opportunity to gather an insight of Latvia and its history through the eyes of its children. Regarding the field of economic relations between our two countries, it is clear that the co-operation potential between Latvia and Israel has not yet been fully exploited. Nevertheless, the volume of trade between Latvia and Israel has grown rapidly since Latvia joined the European Union and the NATO Alliance almost two years ago. One of the most promising areas for Latvian-Israeli co-operation lies within the IT and electronics sector. Other promising areas include financial services, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, food processing and tourism. I hope that we will soon see the establishment of new, direct flights between Riga and Tel Aviv, which would certainly help to advance tourism and business exchanges between our two countries. At present there are almost 200 Israeli-Latvian joint ventures registered in Latvia and there are great opportunities for many more Israeli companies to do business and to invest in my country. I will add that within the framework of this visit, Latvia and Israel signed a convention for the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion. I have no doubt that this agreement will facilitate further economic exchanges between our two countries. Mr. President, Currently some of the best athletes from Israel and from Latvia are competing at the Turin winter Olympic games. It is the spirit of

brotherhood that one sees at such international events as the Olympics that we must all strive to cultivate. I therefore raise this toast to an increasingly close partnership between Latvia and Israel. To your health, Mr. President, and to the health of Madame Katsav. To the happiness and prosperity of the people of Israel. To universal peace and good will. To the success of us all.