Award Ceremony of the
Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize
UNESCO, 6 July 1994

Address by Mr Yitzhak Rabin
Prime Minister of the State of Israel
1993 Prizewinner

Mr Director-General,
Heads of State,
Heads of government,
our partner for the Prize, Chairman Arafat,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have come today, from the ends of the earth, the members of many nations, to honor a legendary man: Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Of all the wise words he gave us, in a life rich with deeds and accomplishment I have chosen a single saying:

"Let us proceed slowly, for we are in a hurry."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is summer here in Paris, and we, on a small patch of land in the Middle East, are entering one of the more decisive stages on the way to reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. This is the stage where we end our dreaming. The time has come now to roll up our sleeves.

"Let us proceed slowly", said our friend Houphouët-Boigny, who is sorely missed here today and whose statesmanly wisdom we so thoroughly miss.

And we, indeed, have been proceeding along slowly. For over a hundred years, we have fought over the same strip of land: the country in which we, the sons of Abraham, have been fated to live together. Both peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, have known suffering, pain, and bereavement.
Now the fanfares and festivals are over. Now the vapors of euphoria are slowly settling into grains of dust, and the echoes of celebration are being scattered by the hot southern wind. Now that the flags have been folded, the trumpets silenced, the stages dismantled — now, the more difficult, more dangerous part has come. And both sides must calculate their steps slowly, with prudence and care. For a century of hatred does not dissolve suddenly, with a handshake in Washington. All the bloodshed can’t be covered by the beating of drums. Peace will be built slowly, day by day, through modest deeds, and countless spontaneous details. It will be built, step by step, by people.

From now on, the making of peace is not a matter for spotlights, for elegant halls, and ball gowns. From now on, the baking sun in Jericho and Na'Arna, in Khan Yunis and Netzer Hazani, will replace the spotlights in Washington, Cairo and Paris. The handshakes on the lawn in Washington, the stage in Cairo, and here in Paris must be repeated by the residents of Gaza and Ashkelon, of Jericho and Ma'ale Adumim. What we have acknowledged here in this beautiful setting in Paris, must be transferred to the markets in Gaza, where Israelis will buy fruit from Palestinian vendors.

Peace will be tasted in the Palestinian coffee poured into the cups of Israeli friends. It will be heard in the applause of Israeli audiences for the performance of a Palestinian theatre troupe, and in the jeers of the rival soccer fans when Khan Yunis plays against Tel Aviv.

Peace will be seen when an Israeli driver yields the right of way to his Palestinian counterpart - and vice versa; when a Palestinian policeman gives a ticket to an Israeli driver – and the other way around. Peace lies in the grin of an Israeli doctor delivering a Palestinian newborn, and in the smile of a Palestinian lifeguard toward Israeli bathers on the beach. That, ladies and gentlemen, is peace.

We are going along slowly and cautiously, one step at a time, because the enemies of peace are even more numerous than we imagined. Because extremists on both sides are lying in wait for us, and we – Israelis and Palestinians, alike – must not fail. At every step, we must think, consider, weigh, check, and beware.

We are in a hurry because we have waited over a hundred years for this day, in Gaza and Jerusalem, in Jericho and Netanya, in Rafiah and Rosh Pinah.

We are in a hurry to spare another Israeli mother weeping tears of pain and another Palestinian mother from shedding bitter sobs.

We are in a hurry in order to see a light in the eyes of neighbors who, until now, have never seen a single day of freedom and joy, we are hastening in order to hike, drive, tour and enjoy life in every corner of this land.

We are in a hurry, because we have to rebuild our people returning from a hundred countries of exile to Jerusalem, the eternal capital of Israel and heart of the Jewish people.

We are in a hurry so that children can be born into a new world – a world where ‘hostility’ and ‘war’ are just dead words, found only in the dictionary.

We are in a hurry, ladies and gentlemen – and therefore we are proceeding slowly. We are moving very carefully. For not all of us will have another chance.
We know very well, as we stand on this stage - my colleague Shimon Peres and I – that you are not recognizing just us, but the entire State of Israel, and its citizens who dream of peace. And we thank you for extending us this great honor.

We thank you, the people of UNESCO, for deciding, after so many years, to examine the truth in our hearts, and grant us this moment of affection.

Our thanks go to the Jury and to an old friend and man of peace, Professor Henry Kissinger.

Our gratitude goes to the guests who honor us by being here today: the President of the Côte d'Ivoire, the President of Portugal, the Prime Minister of Senegal, the Prime Minister of Turkey, and we wish to thank all of you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming here today to pay tribute to peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, peace is an abstract concept. Prime Ministers tend to see the essential things – the ‘big picture’ – and it's said that they don't have time for details. I translate peace into people: men and women, flesh and blood, with names and addresses. Sometimes, when I have to make a decision, there are certain people I think of, and I contemplate their fate.

There was a family in Israel that symbolizes, in our eyes, the bond of generations to the land of Israel, Jewish moral and cultural values, a return to the soil after two thousand years of exile, security and the dream of peace.

The mother of the family, Rachel Kaplan, was the daughter of the chief Rabbi of Jerusalem – the offspring of a family deeply rooted, for generations, between the Western Wall – the walls of the old city – and the new city of Jerusalem, the city of peace.

The father, Yisrael, came to the land that had been promised to the Patriarch Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, from exile in Poland. Hundreds of thousands came like him, and after him, from seventy countries of dispersion, and set down roots in their ancient home.

Avner was the eldest son of Rachel and Yisrael Kaplan. He chose to settle the land and to work the soil as a way of life as another expression of the Jewish ties to the land of Israel. Avner Kaplan died in a fire in his house, on Kibbutz Tel Katzir, facing the Golan heights.

Yossi was the Kaplan's second son. He chose defence as a way of life and served as an outstanding officer in the paratroops. Yossi was killed while in pursuit of terrorists in the Jordan Valley. He entered a cave where a woman was sitting with her baby. A moral man, a humanist whom circumstances had made him into a tough soldier, Yossi believed her when she said that she was alone. But when he turned to leave, he was shot by the man hiding there. That's how Yossi Kaplan died.

Yoni was their third son. He chose university studies and army service. Although he was entitled to be exempt from combat, because of the death of his brothers, he did not waive his right to serve on the front line, the vanguard of attack. Yoni Kaplan was killed in the bitter fighting against the Egyptian army in the Yom Kippur War.

The mother of this wonderful family, Rachel, was struck down by cancer.
The father Yisrael, died of a broken heart over the loss of his sons, one after the other.

There remains the fourth, last son: Amiran Kaplan.

For your sake, Amiram – for you, for our children and their children, we are moving toward peace.

We are proceeding slowly, and we shall hurry to bring it to you. That is our vow to you.

Thank you.

Shalom.