

Lecture by

**Her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia**

Delivered to Students and Faculty of Haifa University

“Liberia: The Quest for Unity and Transformation”

**Haifa, Israel
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Mr. President;
Mr. Chairman of the Board of Governors;
The Rector – Haifa University;
Chairman of the Executive Committee;
Faculty;
Fellow Honorary Doctors;
Students;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

President Shapira, I thank you for the honor bestowed on me earlier today and for the opportunity now to speak to the students and faculty of Haifa University.

We understand that Haifa is a dynamic institution with a world-renowned reputation in many different fields of research, and is the leading University in Israel in the fields of the Humanities, Social Sciences, Law, Health Sciences, Natural Sciences, Education and Management. To your credit, the University of Haifa was selected by the Council for Higher Education to lead the field of Marine Research as well as the field of Education in a Networked Society. Uniquely, Haifa offers twenty international academic programs in the English language, which attract many excellent students from Israel and abroad.

The scenic picturesque of Haifa University location - atop Mount Carmel, where Haifa's southern boundary verges on the Carmel National Park epitomizes one of the most beautiful places in Israel, and the presence of over 18,000 students studying here for their undergraduate, graduate and doctoral Degrees.

Your faculty and student population is unique in composition and coloration. In Haifa's service to country - you have the largest number of military and security personnel who acquire their education at this University alongside Jewish, Haredi and secular students, new immigrants, Arabs and Druze. The University of Haifa is the most pluralistic institution of higher learning in Israel and is a shining example of how excellent research and teaching can be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect and inclusion, a contribution to the State of Israel and its continued strength.

We therefore applaud the University's distinctive mission –fostering academic excellence in an atmosphere of tolerance and multiculturalism.

I indicated that I would speak to you on Liberia's quest for unity and transformation.

Israel and Liberia share some important social and political histories. Like the modern state of Israel, Liberia was founded by immigrants, freed American slaves who returned to Africa.

Unlike the Jewish scientists, business leaders and mostly educated immigrants who created Israel, the slaves who founded Liberia had little education if any. But through determination and the profound belief in their mission to create a safe haven for all freed slaves, they managed to create a new nation.

Liberia is well endowed with natural resources, but the lack of patronage, guidance and support in the early years of nationhood resulted in a national capacity unable to manage the evolving processes of development and nation building thus engendering recurring bailout from financial crisis and many years of recurring remedial effort. As a result, the fundamentals for structural changes to ensure growth and development sustainability were never established. In response, the nation veered from one political or financial crisis to the other with the proclivity to turn to politics as the panacea.

Despite the recurring crisis, Liberia progressed with economic growth averaging seven percent, over the period of the 50s and 60s largely driven by the two traditional exports, rubber and iron ore. In fact growth was reported second only to Japan. However, as noted by Northwestern University, this was growth without development. The progress was shattered by the political instability in the 1970s and 1980s which included a coup d'état and two decades of violent and destructive civil conflict.

The Accra Peace Talks of 2003 held under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) ushered in the required period of peace and the holding of elections in 2005. In 2006, after a successful electoral victory in which I became the first democratically elected woman president in Africa, the nation had the opportunity to rebuild again, to tackle a collapsed economy, destroyed infrastructure and dysfunctional institutions.

By 2013, the nation was once again progressing toward the goal of sustained development. An external debt of US\$4.7 billion was cancelled through the HIPC process. Bilateral and multilateral relations were restored, infrastructure in the process of reconstruction, schools and hospitals were opened and functioning. Growth soared from a negative in the year 2000 to a peak of 9.5 percent and averaging 7.5 percent for the period 2006-2013. A conducive environment for business led to a US\$5 billion in private sector investment for operations in mining and tree crops over a twenty-five year-period.

The development theme Liberia Rising seemed appropriate as the nation seemed on the way to achieve the vision of a middle income country by the year 2030. A five-year Agenda for Transformation was formulated as the immediate driving force.

The pace of progress wavered in 2013 when the nation experienced the first shock – a sharp decline in global prices of our two main exports, rubber and iron ore. Growth fell to 5.9 percent and investment operations slowed or came to a halt, putting on hold plans for value addition activities and for employment.

Then in 2014, the Ebola virus, a disease unknown to Liberia, hit with devastating effect. The nation panicked, terrified by an enemy we did not know, could not see or could not hear. People cried, ran and prayed. Doctors, nurses and health care workers were among the 5000 plus persons who died, some from diseases other than Ebola because of the fear to go to medical facilities.

The nation, once again in a situation of despair, rose to the challenge of overcoming this new adversity. We rejected the international prediction of a million deaths and mobilized the nation. Communities took charge as first respondents. I reached out to our key partners and the international community pointing out that the disease was more a global than a Liberian or West African threat.

I am pleased that we were able to defeat the virus with the strength and resilience of the Liberian people and the communities which responded to my call for them to take charge of their lives, livelihood and future. This was made possible by the robust response of the United States and countries throughout the world including several African nations which sent their own doctors, health care workers and citizens to join UN in the battle. I thank the State of Israel for their response to us in our time of need.

Today, Liberia is a nation at peace, after many decades of war and destruction, which, in essence was the result of bad governance and class stratification. Indeed, as they built the new nation and somehow integrated a certain part of the native population, the newcomers held on to political and economic power at the expense of the great majority of the people. For a long time, there was a political, economic and cultural gap between the two classes of people and there were some difficult times. That schism was the major reason for the many years of war and instability.

As we speak to you today, we can say that Liberia has managed to overcome its differences and is a new nation, living in peace. Transcending our differences to reach a national state of peace was not easy, but the survival of our nation depended on it. From a

country ruled by a one-party system, we now have not less than 22 political parties, as many newspapers, radio stations that all cut across religious and ethnic divide.

What we have learned from the war is that our diversity can be a strength that will cement our social fabric rather than divide us.

By embracing diversity as a unifying force, Liberians are now set on a new course and I am very proud to be part of that process of change.

Our mixture of culture, religion and politics are important dividends for peace and development and we intend to nurture them to strengthen our national identity.

The former slaves who returned to create Liberia brought Christianity with them. On the ground, they found Islam and African traditional religious practices. The fact that these religious beliefs managed to co-exist pacifically is now an important factor for our post war peacebuilding process. Rather than divide us, religion has played an important role in our search for peace and social harmony. At the height of the war, and putting the interest of the nation above all other considerations, our interfaith religious leaders put forward a peace plan that chartered the path to peace. Rather than divide us, religion brought us closer.

Peace and freedom from fear are attainable even in situations that may seem desolate. For decades, our people lived in fear, their personal security under constant threat and everything they worked for at risk. In the end, it was through dialogue that we resolved our differences. Had we started by talking to each other and finding common grounds, thousands of lives may have been spared.

But far from looking at the past conflict as a damnation, we used it as a springboard, to propel our nation further, never forgetting the lessons of the past, and forging ahead with a national commitment to peace and stability. The policies we have put in place, along with the new institutions we have created are geared towards ensuring that never again, will we roll back into war.

Today, I stand proud to be the first women president of our African Continent, a continent that has embraced the process of change and transformation. I am proud that Liberia today has the opportunity to be back on track to join a few others as a post conflict success story. This could only be possible in a polarized nation by adherence to the processes of tolerance, compromises and respect for the fundamental rights and dignity of others.

When President Barrack Obama address the Ghanaian Parliament in 2009, he reminded the people of Africa that it would no longer be the great men of the past who would transform the continent. “The future of all of our countries is in the hands of the young people – people like you, brimming with talent and energy and hope, who can claim the future that so many in previous generations never realized.”

History is speeding up. Soon you will leave the relative security, predictability and certainty of these walls of Haifa University for a world full of accelerated uncertainties. Across the globe, entire societies are being transformed, new identities forged, and national stories retold. People, your age, across the world are becoming increasingly vocal about how they are governed and by whom. Old templates of control have been overturned as states struggle internally with issues about national character and destiny. People who, heretofore, had no say in those conversations are asserting themselves and taking a place at the table, with or without an invitation. Ten years ago, information about the tragic events came to us mainly through traditional media: radio, television, and... cnn.com. There was no Facebook, no YouTube, no Twitter and all the other social networking sites that my grandchildren now take for granted.

Young people like yourselves now use technology to improve the overall quality of life and created wealth. In those decades, the world has become smaller and more connected. Ten years ago, the complex financial instruments of the day would seem quaint to the hedge funds and investment banks of today. In those ten years, our markets and economies have become more swiftly connected and rapidly adjusted.

Ralph Ellison, speaking at the 1974 Commencement, told the graduates and alumnae: “Let us not be dismayed, let us not lose faith simply because the correctives we have set in motion, and you have set in motion, took a long time.” Ellison believed that despite the challenge, the chance for national regeneration was there.

In the more recent past, Bill Gates, a famous Harvard attendee, has made our world smaller still by having all of us speak the same dialect, by connecting us electronically and opening doors that just one generation ago seemed to belong to the realm of science fiction.

Today, because of him, we are closer to living in a global village. With the election of Barack Obama to the Presidency of the United States, the face of American politics has been altered for good. His Presidency brings America another step closer to the fulfillment

of the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of an America where a person's true worth is not by the color of skin, but the content of character.

As you move onto the future, may you be guided by the commitment of your University to academic excellence, tolerance and multiculturalism. These principles will lead you to respect the undying quest of all mankind for the fundamental rights of freedom, equity and justice. Liberia's own quest continues in the same spirit.