



**Speech of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Liberman at
Event in Honor of Axel Springer
Berlin, May 7, 2012**

Your Excellency Foreign Minister Westerwelle, Mr. Robbe, President of the Germany-Israel Friendship Society, Mr. Döpfner, Chairman of the Springer Corporation, Madame Friede Springer, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is truly an honor to speak here tonight, as we mark the 100th year since Axel Springer's birth. Israel has been blessed with many friends around the world who have been a source of invaluable support throughout the years. Few have raised as courageous, consistent and principled a voice in support of freedom, truth and justice as did Axel Springer.

Springer's legacy is legendary. Growing up in the former Soviet Union, I can speak of my own recollection of his having been deemed 'public enemy number one.'

Carrying the torch of freedom and conscience in places such as the pages of *Kontinent*, Springer's tremendous influence was felt by everyone living under the oppressive Soviet regime.

Springer's bold stance did not however come without a price, for the enemies of truth have never taken kindly to those who speak it. The repeated terrorist attacks against the Springer publication house compounds in Hamburg and Paris, and the attacks on his own home, underscored the very tangible risks that his persistent pursuit of the truth entailed.

A common thread linked Springer's attitude towards Communist totalitarianism and his deep friendship for Israel: an unwavering dedication to truth and unwillingness to tolerate injustice. He understood the intimate connection between the two, intuitively recognizing that the only way to maintain a lie over time is through brute force.

This was true of Soviet Communism, which for decades maintained its oppressive state apparatus by denouncing the West and the freedom it represented. And it is equally true of those Arab regimes, which have maintained a corrupt and despotic system, while blaming Israel for all the ills that they themselves have imposed on their own people.

Springer was instrumental in establishing the foundations for Israel's special relations with Germany, fully aware of the attendant moral dilemmas, the traumatic historical memories and the joint interest of our two nations in constructing a brighter future.

Springer's spirit, which enabled him to stand up to the Soviet superpower, guided him also in supporting the establishment and continued security and well-being of the Jewish state. It was a spirit which he bestowed on all of his endeavors and affiliated publication enterprises. This same spirit gained expression recently following the publication of Günter Grass's anti-Israel poem. In this regard, I would like to commend Mr. Döpfner, Chairman of the Springer Corporation, for his clear and principled response to the unacceptable positions voiced by Mr. Grass.

This is not the first time that unfounded and malicious attitudes towards Israel have been paraded as a courageous breaking of taboos. In Israel, we are regrettably all too familiar with such techniques which aim to delegitimize our basic right to ensure our own security.

I have said before and will say again: the State of Israel has no conflict with the Iranian people. Quite the opposite is true. For many years, Israel and Iran were close allies and a prominent and successful Jewish community thrived in Iran.

Our problem is with the regime of Ayatollahs, which since Hommeini 's revolution, has made hatred of Israel into a central part of its ideology and foreign policy.

However, as always, hatred of Israel has become hatred for everything that is associated with freedom and conscience.

It is no accident that Iran has passed a death sentence against Salman Rushdie, who continues to hide today somewhere between London and Paris.

It is no accident that the Iranian regime is the main supporter of the brutal dictator in Damascus, nor is it an accident that Iran executed a man for converting from Islam to Christianity.

It is no accident that the Iranian regime ignores basic international norms, as reflected in its forcible seizure of the British Embassy in Teheran. Nor is it an accident that scores of journalists are in Iranian prisons for having tried to report the truth, while every year hundreds of Iranians are executed by the regime.

It is unfortunate that a great writer and Nobel laureate has chosen to ignore all of these facts, preferring rather to focus his attack on the State of Israel.

However, recalling the case of Norwegian author Knut Hamsun, one realizes that Grass is not the first Nazi sympathizer to have been awarded a Nobel prize.

Indeed, perhaps this is the degree of honesty and morality which can be expected of someone who recalled only after a sixty year delay that he served in the Waffen SS.

In any case, with regard to the differences of opinion in the international community concerning the way to deal with Iran, it is clear at least to me where Axel Springer would have stood, if he were alive today.

Exemplary of Springer's approach was his intention in 1966 to project news written in light from the publishing house's 19-story high-rise in West Berlin across to the east. The east's predictable response was to impose a minimum 19-story building height on the east to block its people from seeing the truth.

In the end of course, no construction, physical or ideological, could prevent the light of truth and freedom – which are in some sense one and the same – from spreading and from breaking down the walls of falsehood and repression.

I believe that this deep truth applies in equal measure to the Middle East. It is no accident that the same regimes which for decades have spread malicious lies about Israel are the same that have deprived their own people of a free press, a separation of powers, a right to assemble and a right to assume office and be involved in their own governance; in short, of freedom.

Even those regimes which are considered to be pro-western, such as Saudi Arabia, are despotisms which violate human rights, maintaining policies such as allowing family-honor killings, banning the construction of churches and oppressing women, minorities and gays. We do not have the luxury of remaining silent on these issues, which are more concerned with civilized values than with politics. It is our duty to speak loudly and clearly on these issues, just as Axel Springer would have done.

I don't know whether or not the so-called 'Arab Spring' heralds the beginning of a new democratic age in the Arab world. Many of the developments over the course of the last year suggest otherwise.

What I do know, however, is that eventually, truth will prevail over deception, freedom over tyranny and moderation over fanaticism, if we will be courageous enough to live up to the task.

The State of Israel which Axel Springer loved so dearly, having prospered for so many years in such an acutely hostile environment, is living proof of this timeless wisdom. In Springer's words: "My connection with Israel is derived from the way in which I see the concept of freedom. The State of Israel is the symbol of freedom in the Middle East."

Ms. Friede Springer, I would like to thank you for continuing your late husband's legacy in promoting freedom of speech and international dialogue.

Mr. Mathias Döpfner, my thanks for your continuing friendship to Israel at the helm of the Springer Corporation.

Mr. Reinhold Robbe, my thanks for your ongoing commitment to promoting German-Israel relations and for organizing this important event.

And last but not least, to my friend and colleague, Guido Westerwelle, thank you for inviting me and for providing an opportunity to be here today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the State of Israel, I am honored to pay tribute to the memory and life-work of Mr. Axel Springer, a great friend of Israel and an unparalleled champion of truth, justice and freedom.

Thank you.