Summary

- Egyptian President Anwar Sadat traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 and gave a speech in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset.
- In it, he offered Israel peace. He was the first Arab leader to take this step.
- In 1979, the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was signed.
- This was preceded by negotiations mediated by US President Jimmy Carter. They resulted in the Camp David Accords in 1978.
- Sadat and Begin were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this in the same year.
- But Anwar Sadat paid for his courageous initiative with his life: On October 6, 1981, he was murdered in his own country by radical Islamist assassins.
- FokusIsrael.ch, with the help of AI, interviewed Anwar Sadat about his historic trip to Jerusalem, his political convictions and his views on the current situation in the Middle East.

President Sadat, you traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel. What motivated you to do so?

Anwar Sadat: After much thought, I became convinced that my responsibility to God and to my people required me to go to the ends of the earth – even to Jerusalem. I wanted to tell the members of the Knesset, the representatives of the Israeli people, everything that was boiling inside me. I had to act to save my Egyptian and the entire Arab people from the horrors of new, destructive wars. I came to shape a new life and bring peace.

How much overcoming did this journey to Jerusalem require?

Sadat: The psychological barrier was huge: four wars in 30 years, widows, orphans,

grief. But responsibility before God and future generations demanded this step beyond all fanaticism and old theories of superiority.

No one would ever have thought that the president of the largest Arab state, which bears the heaviest burden of war and peace, would be willing to travel to the country of the enemy while we were still at war. It was a huge risk. Even one of my closest aides asked me anxiously after my announcement in parliament, “What do we do if Israel really invites you?” I replied: “I’ll accept immediately.”

Was there any resistance in your government in Egypt to your visit to Israel?

Sadat: Yes, even in my inner circle. I had not coordinated the decision with my colleagues, the Arab heads of state. Many of them later rejected it. My move also shocked many in Egypt itself, because the mistrust was so deep. Some of my ministers and advisors were skeptical. But I knew that I had the Egyptian people behind me, who wanted peace after four wars.

What was your most important message in the Knesset?

Sadat: My most important message was: “There shall be no more war, no more bloodshed between Arabs and Israelis.” I said: “Today I declare to you and to the whole world that we are ready to live with you in a lasting peace based on justice.” I called for Israel’s complete withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories, including Arab Jerusalem. And I emphasized that without a just solution for the Palestinian people, there can be no peace.

I did not come to plead, but to state the facts and to say: let us stretch out our hands in faith and sincerity to destroy this barrier of mistrust. Peace for all of us on Arab soil and in Israel.

Your Israeli counterpart was Prime Minister Menachem Begin, a hardliner. How did you two get on at the time?

Sadat: Begin and I were very different. He was a tough negotiator with deep convictions about Israel’s borders and security. I negotiated as President of Egypt with responsibility for my occupied country. The talks were often difficult and tense. But we both had the courage to take the historic step. Later, during the negotiations at Camp David, we made progress with the mediation of American President Jimmy Carter and were able to reach an agreement. I respected Begin’s courage, and he

respected mine. In the end, it was not personal sympathy that counted, but the will to achieve peace.

What was the most important insight you took away from Jerusalem?

Sadat: The most important realization was that peace is possible if both sides have the courage to look beyond the past and seek new horizons. I saw that the Israelis – like us – are people who have suffered from the wars. The trip showed that direct, open talks achieve more than years of indirect negotiations in Geneva. It broke through the psychological barrier.

How important was the 1973 Yom Kippur War for your decision to travel to Jerusalem?

Sadat: The October 1973 war was decisive. Only after Egypt had restored its honor and dignity and the legend of Israel’s invincibility had been destroyed could Israel accept us as an equal partner. “Paradoxically, I went to war to make peace,” I later wrote. Without this military and psychological breakthrough, no one in Israel would have believed that we could negotiate from a position of strength. The war enabled us to seek peace.

In 1979, two years after your historic trip to Jerusalem, Egypt made peace with Israel. What were the biggest obstacles?

Sadat: The biggest obstacles were the deep mistrust on both sides, the question of complete withdrawal from Sinai and the other occupied territories and the Palestinian cause, which remained the core issue for me. Many Arabs accused me of making a separate peace. But I was convinced: peace is more precious than a piece of land. We negotiated hard – about Sinai, about security, about Jerusalem. In the end, common sense prevailed.

You and Menachem Begin were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the peace agreement. Did this bring you anything?

Sadat: The Nobel Prize was a great honor – not for me personally, but for the cause of peace and for the Egyptian people, who paid the price of reconciliation. It was a confirmation that the world recognized our efforts. But more important than any award was the end of the war and the chance of a better life for our children.

To date, many Arab countries have not yet made peace with Israel: Saudi Arabia,

Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Qatar, Oman. What is your advice to these countries and what is your advice to Israel?

Sadat: I advise everyone: Let the past rest and look to the future. Peace is the highest duty before God and mankind. No war brings victory – only suffering. I say to these Arab states: Recognize the realities and negotiate directly. And to Israel I say: give back the occupied territories and recognize the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. This is the only way to achieve genuine, lasting peace based on justice.

There is still no Palestinian state, even though Israel has repeatedly made valid proposals for one. What is your advice to the Palestinians?

Sadat: I advise them: Renounce violence and terror. Sit down at the negotiating table. Only through negotiations and not through war can they achieve their state. I have always said: there is no peace without the Palestinians. But they must also choose the path of peace.

How important was the Palestinian issue for you?

Sadat: It was and remains central. I said clearly in the Knesset: a just solution to the Palestinian question is the core of the problem. Nevertheless, Egypt could not wait forever while our own country remained occupied. Peace with Israel was a step that should also pave the way for the Palestinians.

You had to deal with Islamic fundamentalists yourself: the Muslim Brotherhood. What advice do you have for the West when dealing with radical Islamists?

Sadat: Radical fanaticism destroys everything – it destroys the soul of a people. I initially tried to integrate the Muslim Brotherhood. But when they threatened Egypt’s peace and progress, I had to crack down. My advice to the West is to promote education, economic development and dialog with moderate forces. But don’t let yourselves be blackmailed by extremists. Peace and love must be stronger than hate and destruction. I was a tireless advocate of love – because love builds, hate destroys.

Your peace initiative with Israel cost you your life: You were murdered by assassins from the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Would you act in the same way again if you had known this?

Sadat: Yes, I would do it again. A person can and must do everything in his power for peace. Nothing in this world is higher than peace. I gave my life for the future of my children and all the children in the region. Peace was worth it. God alone determines our fate, and I acted to the best of my knowledge and conscience. I regret nothing that I have done.

(Here you can find the Knesset speech by President Anwar Sadat from November 20, 1977 in the original Sadat Knesset Speech (With English Subtitles) and as an English transcript Sadat before the Knesset)

Note: This interview was conducted with the help of the AI assistant Grok. It is largely based on Anwar Sadat’s own words and reports about him and reflects his beliefs. In the coming weeks, we will be conducting AI-assisted conversations with other personalities from different walks of life – politics, religion, science, culture – who have been significant for Judaism and Israel, to bring their ideas closer to today’s audience. The The first interview was with Theodor Herzl the founder of modern Zionism, the second interview was with Chaim WeizmannIsrael’s first president and the third with David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israeland the fourth with Israel’s only female prime minister to date Prime Minister, Golda Meir.