Below is the English translation of President Rivlin’s powerful and timely speech, (thanks to Shmuel Rosner, Senior Fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute).

The Talmud tells us (Baba-Metziah) in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, that "Jerusalem was destroyed only because the judges ruled in accordance with the strict letter of the law". Those who compiled the Talmud, themselves asked the question, how exactly should judgments have been taken in Jerusalem if not according to the letter of the law? How and why did adherence to the laws of the Torah lead to the destruction of Jerusalem. To which the Talmud answers, "They ruled according to the strict letter of the law, as opposed to ruling beyond the letter of the law (i.e. with leniency)”. And so we say, Jerusalem was destroyed because it was ruled solely by the letter of the law, without the inclusion of any degree of goodness or honesty, or of moral or ethical norms.

This Talmudic proclamation must be considered fully. Does the Torah in Deuteronomy (16:20) not say, "Justice, Justice shall you pursue." Did Isaiah (1:27) not prophesize, "Zion shall be redeemed with justice”? Are not law and order foundations upon which the world stands? Yes, the world does stand upon justice and the law, though not upon them alone. The judicial system is vitally important to the building of a just society. It enables contracts and agreements to be made. The law enables cooperation and partnership - even when there is no personal connection, even when there is no
trust. It is the vital contract for the building of society. Yet, society cannot exist without moral and ethical accepted norms, components of mutual trust and unity.

Gestures which are based not only in the law, but also on the leniency of the law. Solidarity, or as the Hebrew word denotes, 'brotherhood', is found in its most natural form in the family unit. Brotherhood or unity is the deep commitment which bonds families together. It is not a prerequisite for written contracts, but just like a family, a society requires solidarity, brotherhood, unity. A society without this – as the Talmud teaches us – is destined for destruction. The notion of family is intrinsic to a healthy society. In a healthy society there exists unity and ethics, leniency on the law alongside the letter of the law, and the letter of the law as its social and substantive base. Or in the words of the Ethics of the Fathers, "Upon three things the world stands: law, truth, and peace. As is stated (Zachariah 8:16), 'Truth, and a judgment of peace, you should administer at your gates'. " We must remember and ensure the existence of unity, of the simple 'love of Israel' within us, within the Jewish people. The communities represented and gathered here, are communities which are brimming with a love for Israel, and with a deep commitment to the future of the Jewish people, and to the character of the State of Israel.

One could disagree with the positions and opinions of members of the Reform or Conservative movements, but one could not deny their dedication, or the clear voice with which they speak in support of the State of Israel, here and around the world. One could debate with the Religious Zionist community, or with the Kibbutz movement, but one could not deny the contribution of these movements to the building of the State of Israel, to its wellbeing and security. We must not forget for a moment, that fierce debates are the sincere and genuine expression of a concern for us all – Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Secularist – for the present day, and for the future of the Jewish people.

There are disputes within our family. These differences relate to the very nature of faith, the status of revelation and religious law, and the implementation of Jewish identity within the in the modern world. The dispute between these positions runs deep. We cannot deny them and we cannot paper over their depth or difficulties. However, I am of the opinion that we should not want to blur these differences in the name of a false unity. We need to learn, not how to agree with each other, but how to disagree with each other. We must disagree with each other with respect, fairness, with firmness, but without foregoing the other person's Jewish identity. We cannot predetermine that one opinion or another has no right to exist within contemporary Jewish discourse. Rabbinic Judaism - which was founded in Yavneh following the destruction of the Temple - witnessed firsthand the horrific danger of sectarianism. Thus the Rabbis understood that social and faith-based conflicts, important as they may be, cannot be decided by a total negation of the other. The greatness of the Torah teachings and learning of Yavneh became a major part in our common Judaism through its ability to turn debate itself into part of the core of Jewish law. The Jewish cultural debate does not erase the words of the minority or the opposing side - but gives it a place within the canon itself.
Within Israeli society the President’s Office stands as an axis of peace, as an ‘ex gratia’ foundation. The President’s Office, as the home of the entire Israeli society, is committed to be the home of us all. This office is not a place for struggles and wars, but rather a home for discourse and a place that enables the diversity of opinions. This is certainly not an easy task - specifically because the grave disagreements between us also concern the question of who is entitled to be represented and where. And yet, this is a mission in which I am determined to succeed, out of the understanding that the pursuit of unity without blurring opinions, of creating solidarity without deleting identities, and of striving to develop a common language even for disagreements - is the task of this office and is my task. This event, which was not easy to build and put together, is being attended by authentic representatives of all factions who have expressed willingness to participate in this important debate. I thank you, Rabbi Azari, Rabbi Benny Lau, and Rabbi Rowen-Baker. As well as Dr. Motti Zeira, who agreed to participate in this study session and speak to us about practical ways of conducting a dialogue out of respect.

I want to end my notes with a personal family story. When my wise grandfather Rabbi Yoshua Rivlin built the first synagogue outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, a question arose as to which version of prayers would be adopted - Spanish, Ashkenazi, or the Eastern version. At the time, the struggle over the versions of prayers tore families and communities apart. Even the Turkish and British authorities were involved at times in the attempt to decide between conflicting traditions. My grandfather, together with his friends, decided that payers in the first synagogue outside the walls would be conducted according to a unified version. His reasoning was: ‘a united prayer version’ in Gematria (assigning numerical value and meaning to a word or phrase) was equal to the phrase ‘rebuilding Jerusalem’. To this Moshe Sharett once said: ‘Jerusalem has Ashkenazim and Sephardim as well as the Rivlins’. 