



# **The International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen**

**For the Unity of Europe**

**Citation by the Board of Directors of the Society  
for the Conferring of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen  
to the President of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER),  
Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt,  
and the Jewish people in Europe**

In recognition of his outstanding efforts to promote peace, the right of all peoples to self-determination, European values, tolerance, pluralism and understanding, and in acknowledgement of his significant commitment to interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the Board of Directors of the Society for the Conferring of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen has elected, with its 2024 award, to honour the President of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, and the Jewish people in Europe.

With this accolade, the Charlemagne Prize Board of Directors wishes to broadcast the message that Jewish life is a natural part of Europe, and that there is no place for antisemitism in Europe. Jewish life is an essential part of Europe's past, its present and its future.

"Any attack on a Jew is an attack on everything that Europe prides itself in. The way we treat Jews and other minorities is like a litmus test for the state of health of our open European society." This statement, by the former Vice-President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, makes an important point: every form of antisemitism – every attack, every denigration and, above all, every act of violence – is an attack on us all. An attack on our liberal, democratic and pluralistic order, on our coexistence in a Europe that strives to attain its unity precisely by embracing, respecting and, as a matter of course, practising its diversity. A Europe that – wherever minorities are under threat – must visibly demonstrate its attitude, its responsibility and its solidarity.

We live in a pluralistic, and increasingly secularised, society. But our united Europe is not value-neutral. It is only where the dignity and the diversity of individuals are respected that peaceful coexistence – one characterised by tolerance, understanding and humanity – is possible.

As Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt emphasises: "The Bible, the root of our common Jewish-Christian heritage repeatedly speaks of the importance of welcoming 'the stranger'. This is also part of our European identity. If we acknowledge a common identity, then we should also strive to share it with others. If we espouse pluralism, we should not strive to deny it, but instead should rigorously promote it everywhere. [...] If we want to convey the idea of pluralism and a 'live and let live' mentality to emigrants from totalitarian societies where any alternative religious practice [...] is prohibited, Europe must – particularly in this respect – show the way towards religious pluralism by exemplifying tolerance."

And while the past weeks and months have, once again, brutally demonstrated how religion and culture can also be misused, how sources of hope and peace can be forged into instruments of hatred and violence, Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt makes three fundamentally decisive points very clear: that people of the most diverse religious and cultural backgrounds must find their place in Europe; that intercultural dialogue – the ability to meet and exchange views without prejudice – is now, more than ever, one of the great challenges of our time; but that, when entering into such dialogue, European values are not negotiable and the European way of life, characterised by democracy, freedom and the rule of law, is not up for discussion.

Pinchas Goldschmidt was born on 21 July 1963 to a Jewish-Orthodox family in Zurich. He left Switzerland at an early age for Israel, where, from 1979 on, he pursued rabbinic studies in Bnei Berak, subsequently also in Chicago, Baltimore and Jerusalem. In 1987, he was granted *Semikhah* (formal ordination as a rabbi). In addition to his ordination, he also holds a master's degree in Talmudical Jurisprudence and – after absolving secular studies at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore – a Master of Science degree. Goldschmidt is married and the father of seven children.

After being granted *Semikhah*, he began working in Nazareth-Ilit, today's Nof HaGalil, before complying, in 1989, with the request – expressed by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the World Jewish Congress and an assembly of Jewish organizations and activists who supported the Jewish underground in the USSR – for him "to leave the West and go to the Soviet Union to revive Jewish life in a communist country". He moved to the former Soviet Union in order to restructure Jewish life there.

In 1991, after the failed coup and the founding of the new Russian Federation, Goldschmidt was instrumental in establishing and developing communal and political structures of the newly freed Jewish community – starting with soup kitchens, kindergartens, and schools and progressing through to the establishment of the Congress of the Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations in Russia. In 1993, he was appointed Chief Rabbi of Moscow.

The difficulties he faced over the following years in representing the interests of the Jewish community became evident when, in 2005, after a sojourn in Israel, he was (initially) refused re-entry into Russia. It was only three months later – after international protests – that he was allowed to return to his community.

In March 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he ultimately left Moscow after having resisted pressure on Jewish community leaders to support the war. According to Israeli media, he commented on the news that, a year later, he had been officially branded as a "foreign agent" by the Russian Ministry of Justice, saying that he was, "proud to be on the right side of history and to join the list of people opposing this terrible war that has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands".

Back in July 2011, Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt had been elected President of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER) – as only the fourth president in the almost 70-year history of the CER, which, with over 700 rabbis, is a leading voice of Judaism in Europe, and which recently moved its headquarters from London to Munich.

In dialogue with representatives of European institutions, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and national governments, in countless speeches, statements and commentaries, Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt regularly provides reports on the state of the Jewish community, discusses the threats of antisemitism and campaigns against the restriction of religious life in Europe. As a representative of one of the oldest religious minorities in Europe, he has made it his goal to "help put an end to this burgeoning antagonism and conflict, which, in the years to come, could prove to be the greatest threat ever to the unity and security of Europe. I believe we have a duty to create an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect between the modern secular state and the current religious movements to make sure that this experiment called the 'European Union' does not fail."

Goldschmidt's commitment to interreligious dialogue, in particular, has also received much attention and is held in high esteem. In 2015, he co-founded the European Muslim-Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC), which includes high-ranking Jewish and Muslim dignitaries and aims to preserve religious freedom and religious peace, to intensify dialogue and improve mutual understanding between Europe's approximately 1.5 million Jews and over 40 million Muslims. The Council, which is chaired by Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt together with the Grand Mufti of Slovenia, Nedžad Grabus, is a very unusual

constellation – not only for Europe. As a rule, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders only come together at interfaith conferences – triologue events of the three major Abrahamic religions – or public political meetings. "We work with imams on combating threats to religious freedom," Goldschmidt stresses. "Even on national levels, we support these talks even though it isn't always easy. But we believe it's extremely important. Because Jews are not only in danger from the far-right, but also from radical religious Muslims. So that makes dialogue with Muslim leaders really important."

Accordingly – above and beyond simplifications like 'Islam', or 'the' Muslims, – in Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt's view, "The Muslims who want to live, study and work in Europe and with whom we have no problems [...] are our allies." – also, and in particular, allies against radical Islamism.

The Jewish-Christian dialogue has also been given significant impetus from the CER and Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt: The document "Between Jerusalem and Rome" – the first official declaration by rabbinical organisations on Christianity – has been available since 2016 and is, so to speak, a Jewish response to the "Nostra Aetate" declaration adopted by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, a milestone in Jewish-Christian relations. "We are presently experiencing a fruitful moment of dialogue," declared Pope Francis when he welcomed a delegation of European, American and Israeli rabbis at the Vatican in August 2017 who had arrived to present him with their declaration. And Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt, head of the delegation, also spoke afterwards of a historic moment and expressed his hope "that we can use this as a catalyst for increased cooperation in the future".

"Today more than ever," he believes, "dialogue is necessary to ensure that this century does not culminate in bloodshed and war, in despair and hatred, as the last one did. Considering that today, with the arrival of new immigrant societies and groups, the character of Europe is changing, I think that we, the Jews, who not only survived after losing their land and homeland, but lived and prospered as a minority for centuries and millennia, want to share our experience and expertise with others to make Europe and the world a better place, a safe place – for our own benefit and that of future generations."

On the occasion of his latest meeting with Pope Francis, in November 2023, Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt once again adopted a strong position on the current situation in the Middle East: "We [the CER] are for peace. We believe in the right of all peoples to self-determination. [...] We hope that the civilian population suffers as little as possible from this war. We pray for them and we hope that peace will return to the Middle East, to the Holy Land and to Europe." His hope: "Gaza will become a free democratic country that does not pose a threat to Israel, but guarantees security and a life in peace for its citizens. Or Gaza must be administered by a Palestinian leader who is supported by a community of Arab states."

For the Charlemagne Prize Board of Directors, it is of paramount importance to emphasise that all people have the right to live within secure borders and in a free, peaceful and democratic society.

With regard to Europe, Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt expresses serious concern because: "Antisemitism has once again become politically correct."

"Does Judaism have a future in Europe?" the newspaper *Jüdische Allgemeine* recently asked the President of the CER provocatively. "If we look at Russia," Goldschmidt replied, "I have my doubts. The more authoritarian that country becomes, the fewer Jews will remain there. As far as Ukraine is concerned, if there is a Marshall Plan to rebuild everything after the end of the war, I definitely see a chance that Jewish life will flourish there again. And as far as the EU countries are concerned, a lot depends on whether extreme parties come to power and whether Europe will remain an area that can guarantee freedom, security and diversity for Jews, too."

In the person of the President of the Conference of European Rabbis, Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt – alongside the Jewish people in Europe – the Board of Directors of the Society for the Conferring of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen in 2024 honours an outstanding representative of European Judaism and Jewish life in Europe, which has enriched our continent for centuries and for which there will and must always be a place here.