

Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt

President of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER)

Acceptance Speech to Award of the International

Charlemagne Prize of Aachen to Chief Rabbi Pinchas

Goldschmidt and the Jewish communities in Europe on 9

May 2024 in the Coronation Hall of Aachen City Hall

Dear Mr Vice-Chancellor, Federal Minister Dr Habeck,

dear Prime Minister Rama,

dear Prime Minister Wüst,

dear former Prime Minister

dear Lord Mayor Ms Keupen,

dear Mr Chairman Dr Linden,

distinguished laureates of previous years,

Eminences and Excellencies,

Kwod HaRabbanim,

dear guests, ladies and gentlemen!

I am a European in body and soul!

European in the sense of how Europe has developed and understood itself over the past decades. As a century-long project of peace, freedom and democracy.

Basic values that are written in holy scriptures like the Torah that every human being is created in the image of God, which is the basis for the European basic value that human dignity is inviolable.

These are values for which we have a great responsibility.

These are the values for which I live and work!

The International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen stands for these values like no other award.

I am therefore deeply moved - overwhelmed.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

I would like to thank you for this extraordinary honour - and even more for the important signal you are sending out.

As grateful as I am for the recognition of my work, this award is first and foremost for the entire Jewish community in Europe.

It is a testament to resilience and strength. And it is an encouragement in a difficult time. Thank you for that ray of hope!

I would also like to thank Lord Mayor Keupen for the surrounding cultural programme of the last few weeks in Aachen, which has focused on Jewish life in Europe.

Today is a shining beacon of hope and solidarity.

We reaffirm our common commitment against intolerance, hate speech and hatred - in favour of education and mutual understanding.

That feels good. Thank you very much.

Ladies and gentlemen, today is 9 May. It's Europe Day!

Today is also Ascension Day - and I wish all Christian sisters and brothers a blessed holiday.

But 9 May is also the day after. The first day after the Second World War, after the Shoa.

There could be no 'zero hour' - how could there be?

But there was a new day. And there was new life.

9 May is a day of new beginnings, of hope and reconstruction.

This is also what the Charlemagne Prize stands for. Especially this year.

I am here with a large part of my family. My dear mother, my dear wife Dara, without whom I would not have been able to reach the goals, I set for myself.

Our children Dov, Rabbi Benji and Avital, Estee and Freydie have come from the USA and are here today for the award ceremony. Thank you for being with us.

Let us celebrate together!

Ladies and gentlemen, unlike Stalin, the Western Allies were ready to give Germany the chance to return to civilisation.

A few months after the adoption of the Basic Law by the Parliamentary Council on 8 May 1949, the construction of a

free and democratic Germany began. It formed the basis for the reconstruction of Jewish life in that country.

Analogue in Europe: The Holocaust in Germany's name had reduced the Jewish community to a fraction of what it had been in previous decades - and traumatised it to this day.

And yet it was unwavering, brave, courageous Jewish Europeans like Simone Weil, Emmanuel Levinas, Grand Rabbi Jacob Kaplan of France, Professor Elio Toaff of Rome and many others who helped to put Europe on a foundation of values that would prevent a repetition of the World War and the Holocaust.

Thanks to this foundation, a Jewish community was able to grow again in Western Europe.

My predecessors, the Chief Rabbis of England, France and Holland, founded the Conference of European Rabbis in 1956 to rebuild the communities that had been almost completely destroyed by the Shoah.

What has been achieved here, ladies and gentlemen, is nothing short of a miracle.

I am delighted to take this opportunity to welcome Chief Rabbi Guigu of Brussels, Rabbi Apel of Frankfurt and Rabbi Jedwabny of Aachen, as well as the Presidium of the Foundation Council of the Conference of European Rabbis, Dr Boris Mints, Mrs Joelle Aflalo, Mr Leonid Solovjiev, our long-time supporter Mr Anno August Jagdfeld and my close advisors Gady Gronich, Shorena Mikava and Oliver Rolofs.

But it was no miracle - it is a painful story of survival, a feat of physical and psychological strength, an act of conviction by steadfast Jewish patriots in their European homeland.

Today they are all proud - and deserving - winners of the Charlemagne Prize 2024!

Ladies and gentlemen, the story in Eastern Europe was very different. It is true that the Red Army had liberated the Jews from the extermination camps and from the murderous Nazi persecution.

But they were not set free. They were brutally repressed by Stalin.

They were not allowed to publicly mourn the six million victims of the Shoah - nor were they allowed to rebuild their community structures.

Jews in the Soviet Union had to hide their identity and suffered state anti-Semitism and discrimination.

The martyrdom continued until the Soviet Union began to crumble at the end of the 1980s. That's when I decided - with my Europe in my heart - to leave the free Western world and move to the Soviet Union.

I wanted to be part of history and rebuild Jewish life.

Let's take a brief journey through time together.

Here in Aachen, I am proud to say that I come from a North Rhine-Westphalian family.

They lived 250 years ago in Herlinghausen near Warburg. I can visit the graves of my ancestors there.

I was born in Switzerland into a traditional Jewish family. I studied and taught in Israel for a number of years.

When I arrived in the collapsing Soviet Union in 1989, I found a Judaism as empty as the shops in Moscow.

The Soviet empire had collapsed - not as a result of war or revolution, but eaten away by its own empty ideological promises.

They had not created a new human being, but a gigantic prison - empty from all the material and moral progress that I knew from the West. Free of all freedom.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, millions of Jews left Russia. Those who stayed pinned their hopes on a democratic future. And at first, things looked pretty good: We established the Jewish community, schools and kindergartens, and all the community structures necessary for Jewish life.

Jewish life in Russia was flourishing again.

It was a favour from G'd! But the joy did not last long.

The Kremlin gradually turned away from democracy - and returned to dictatorship and anti-Western isolation.

At first, we still thought we could maintain our own little, reasonably good world in our capsule.

But on 24 February 2022, we all fell back down to earth.

I refused to support the war, as the Russian government demanded of us. So I had to make the hardest decision of my life:

I left my community - everything we had built up over 33 years.

I became part of history.

And the story is not over, ladies and gentlemen!

The Kremlin is not only at war with Ukraine, whose people and president were awarded the Charlemagne Prize last year.

The Kremlin is at war with its own people. And the Kremlin is at war with the West. Against Europe, against our values, against freedom and democracy.

The history, the future of our continent is in our hands, ladies and gentlemen. Let us remember this every time we think about war and peace!

More than a hundred thousand Jews have left Russia since the beginning of the war.

But there are still dozens of dissidents, many of them of Jewish origin, imprisoned in Russia for opposing the war - like Vladimir Kara Murza, Ilya Yashin and Evan Gershkovich and many others.

Also in Belarus. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the elected president, the present winner of the 2022 Charlemagne Prize,

whose husband is suffering in prison, and the imprisoned 2022 Charlemagne Prize winner Maria Kalesnikava, whose sister is with us today, together with 2022 Charlemagne Prize winner Veronica Tsepkalov.

They all need more support, including from Ukraine, but especially from us in the West.

Let us never forget that this is always about us, about our European values, about democracy, about freedom!

And when I talk about opposition, I also want to talk about Iran. The murderous regime in Tehran is also a threat to the West. A regime that misuses the name of God for its brutal purposes.

Most Iranian citizens do not support the radical Muslim regime.

Women in particular, but also many men and young people who are oppressed, imprisoned, tortured and killed in Iran for their opinions, long for a life in freedom, in democracy.

We in Europe must finally give them much more decisive support. Women - Freedom - Life!

Here in North Rhine-Westphalia there have been attacks and attempted attacks on Jewish institutions such as the Old Synagogue in Essen and the synagogue in Bochum in 2022. The Higher Regional Court in Düsseldorf has blamed the Iranian authorities - and the German security authorities have reason to believe that the Quds units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards are responsible, as they have been in a number of attacks around the world.

This is a real danger!

That's why the EU must list the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organisation - sooner rather than later!

This brings me to the heart of the messages I associate with this prize.

An award is never just a reward for a job well done.

- Well, maybe the Oscar, but Hollywood is a long way away.

The Charlemagne Prize is an honour - and an obligation! It obliges me to continue my work for our values, for reconciliation and dialogue, for freedom and democracy, undiminished and even stronger.

But by honouring the European Jewish community, ladies and gentlemen, you have also made a commitment to yourselves!

For Judaism in Europe - a community that a hundred years ago numbered more than ten million people and today fewer than one and a half million - is once again facing an existential threat.

The citation for the award reads: "With this award, the Charlemagne Prize Board wishes to send a signal that Jewish life is a natural part of Europe and that there must be no place for anti-Semitism in Europe."

It sounds like a fairy tale. Unfortunately, the opposite is true.

Jewish life is not a matter of course and there is plenty of room for anti-Semitism in Europe.

I'm too old to believe in fairytales. But I'm too young to give up.

I am not resigned, I have hope, I have courage and I have confidence, ladies and gentlemen, as long as I know that we are fighting together!

You, who have committed yourselves - and I thank you for that!

Ladies and gentlemen, anti-Semitism was never dead, but it has been unleashed since the Islamist pogrom against Israel on 7 October.

The security and freedom of Jewish life - especially in Europe - are under serious threat.

The German government and other European governments are doing a lot to combat anti-Semitism.

They are trying to give the Jewish people security.

I am deeply grateful for this.

But I am sorry to have to say it: What is being done is not enough!

- Anti-Semitic incidents and criminal offences - including assault and murder - are on the rise.
- Jewish life can only take place under the strictest security precautions.
- Hatred of Jews runs riot on the streets - at demonstrations.

- But also at universities. Highly educated anti-Semites are depriving their Jewish fellow students of the air they breathe. What we are seeing at US universities - here too - is not a peace movement and has nothing to do with freedom of expression. It is about obsession, ideological hatred and violence.

Jewish people do not dare to be recognised as Jewish; they take down the mezuzah from the door frame; they change their names with Uber, with the parcel and delivery service - for fear of violence.

This is no life in freedom!

The Charlemagne Prize winners of 2024 live in fear in Europe!

They fear for their future in Europe - for themselves, their children and their grandchildren. I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to do something about it!

The Jewish community cannot do it. And it's not their job either.

It is the task of their home countries and societies to defend themselves against the enemies of European values!

To this end, it is important to recognise, name and combat anti-Semitism in all its forms, on the fringes and in the centre of society.

It comes in the old guise of ethnic racism.

And it continues to disguise itself. It calls itself 'anti-Zionism', 'criticism of Israel', 'boycott, divestment, sanctions' (BDS). It seeps into disciplines such as postcolonial studies. It dresses itself in a moral cloak - against imperialism, capitalism, globalisation.

It is the lowest common denominator: hatred of Jews.

Or even: hatred of Israel - paradoxically, the only democracy in the Middle East fighting for its existence and at the forefront of Western values.

The usual perpetrator-victim reversal is sometimes so perfidious that it is increasingly difficult to find an explanation other than anti-Semitism.

I would like to see more solidarity with the Jewish state and Jewish communities around the world!

Yes, I too have problems with the current Israeli government and its far-right ministers.

But it is clear: Hamas started the war - and could end it immediately, free the hostages, lay down its arms and give its own people a good life.

I appeal to the free world to stand with the people of Israel and join in the one demand to Hamas that could end the dying today - four words: Bring them home now!

And now that I have started the Jewish wish list, I will finish it:

- The protective equipment of many communities needs to be upgraded with government support.
- Efforts to identify and condemn the perpetrators of anti-Jewish crimes must be significantly intensified.
- Relevant offences committed by non-EU nationals must result in deportation and entry bans.
- International action against terrorists such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthi, Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters must be pursued with much more vigour - proactively!
- With regard to social media, much more pressure must be brought to bear on operators to curb the epidemic of anti-Semitism.
- There are - I say this without irony - strong analyses, tools and plans in Europe to combat anti-Semitism.

Please implement them!

Consistently, nationally, internationally, everywhere, always -
to promote and protect Jewish life!

Now is the time to take action!

Ladies and gentlemen, anti-Semitism is not the problem of the
Jews.

It is the problem of the societies in which it prevails.

It is a seismograph of their condition. Extremism on the right
and left, and especially radical political Islam - the perversion
of a religion - threaten more than just Jewish Europe.

They threaten the security, freedom and indeed the future of
Europe as a whole. We freedom-loving democrats must finally
be able to defend ourselves - both internally and externally.

Against all enemies of our constitution and our free and
democratic constitution.

When should we say 'never again' - if not now!

Let's not close our eyes to reality. That has never worked.

Let us face the many challenges.

And let us draw courage and strength and inspiration from the legacy of Charlemagne and the resilience of the Jewish community.

Together, we can honour the values of unity, freedom, democracy and humanity - by representing and defending them.

They have shaped our shared history. Let's lead it into a brighter future!

The European elections are exactly one month away - and the next opportunity is already here.

Today, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for this great honour and for the strong signal you have sent, together with my sincerest wishes:

Let us remain united in the face of the enormous challenges ahead!

Thank you very much!