

Charlemagne Prize Forum on Europe
Dinner Keynote Speech on Combating Antisemitism
Aachen, 8 May 2024

Vice Chancellor Habeck, [TBC]

Prime Minister Rama [from Albania, TBC],

Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt [Pdt of the Conference of European Rabbis]

Authorities, Laureates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by warmly **thanking** Dr Linden and Mayoress Schmeer for inviting me to address the 65th edition of the Charlemagne Prize, here in Aachen.

It is a great **honour** to be part of this celebration, charged with lessons from history, and rich in messages for our common future.

Charlemagne Prize

Aachen is the city of a great European: Charles the Great, **Charlemagne**. In medieval ages, Charlemagne's efforts to forge unity across his realm were ahead of his time. Twelve centuries since his death, the contribution of Charlemagne to a sense of a common European identity remains more than relevant.

Since nearly 75 years now, the Charlemagne Prize seeks to honour public figures distinguished by their exceptional work performed in the service of European **cooperation**. It is a **citizens'** prize, created by the people, for the people.

These two defining elements - its purpose and its nature - make of it one of the most important awards in Europe, if not the most relevant one.

I can still remember the emotion I felt **as a 16-year-old**, as all Greeks, when the news broke that Konstantinos Karamanlis was awarded the Prize back in 1978, in the middle of Greece's accession negotiations to join the EEC.

My late father's words still resonate: 'If our Prime Minister is awarded the Charlemagne Prize, then Greece will certainly join the European Community.' And it happened.

Together, the **laureates** of this award reflect a rich variety of individuals and institutions [some of them with us tonight]. A particularly distinguished cohort that shares an unwavering determination for peace and mutual understanding in Europe.

This year's recipient is no exception.

2024 Laureate

I have the great honour of **congratulating** Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmid and all the Jews of Europe for having been awarded this year's Charlemagne Prize.

The **timing** of the ceremony, on the 9th of May, is of great importance too. As you all know, it marks **Europe Day**, when we celebrate the Schuman Declaration that represents the founding call for the construction of the European Union. One that is linked to Jews and their fate in European history.

74 years ago, in August 1942, a **French deputy** escaped from Nazi Germany. When he reached the French Free Zone, he testified to members of the resistance that Jewish men, women and children were being systematically transported to concentration and extermination camps. This horrified French deputy was Robert Schuman.

So, dedicating the Charlemagne Prize to the Jewish people of Europe, on Schuman Day, is not a coincidence, it is a highly **symbolic** moment long overdue. It is a way about Europe facing our history.

Allow me to share a few words about **Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt**, whom I have the pleasure to know for many years now.

Last December, we visited together the newly established headquarters of the **Conference** of European Rabbis in Munich. Another symbolic move. Munich as a host, as a hub of welcome, as a city epitomizing the European Way of Life. Not the dark epicentre of hate from where evil originally stemmed.

Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt stands as a crucial partner for the Commission in combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life. He serves as an outstanding **role model** for his commitment to peace, pluralism, and tolerance; for his tireless efforts to foster interfaith dialogue, especially between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. A historically and religiously complex quest, which is more imperative than ever.

With their decision to award him with the 2024 Charlemagne Prize, the Board of Directors honours not just him, but **also the Jewish people in Europe**. Citizens who have played an integral part to unify Europe and contributed to our flourishing continent throughout the centuries.

I wish to highlight one fundamentally decisive point that Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt makes very clear in countless statements and interventions: **European values** are not negotiable and the European way of life, characterised by democracy, freedom, and the rule of law, is not negotiable either.

Because the contrary, would mean repression, dictatorship, persecution. And Europeans, and the Jewish people in particular, know the horrors this can bring.

As **Vice-President** responsible for promoting our European way of life, this is a message that I and the European Commission stand firmly behind.

An arduous task in today's tumultuous geopolitical situation.

Geopolitical context and 7 October attacks

Indeed, it is in the reality around us that **ghosts** of the past are attempting to resurface again, in Europe. The past few months have, once again, demonstrated how religion and culture can also be misused and how sources of hope and peace can be forged into instruments of hatred and violence.

Almost 80 years after the events that changed the course of history at the II World War, and while Jewish survivors of that genocide are still alive, we find ourselves facing the same danger.

The heinous terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel on the 7th of October 2023 was the **deadliest** day for Jewish people since the Holocaust. And it led to the highest level of antisemitic incidents since the Shoah in Europe and around the globe.

Synagogues and houses of Jews are being targeted, the situation of Jewish students on European campuses is becoming increasingly

difficult, and the cloud of antisemitism has even cast a shadow over Holocaust remembrance events that had to be cancelled.

This is simply **unacceptable**.

Antisemitism is incompatible with what the European Union stands for – it goes **against EU values** of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the – constitutionally protected – rights of minorities.

Every form of antisemitism is an attack on us all and the **model of society** we represent. An assault to our liberal, democratic and pluralistic order. A threat to our ability to coexist in a Europe that strives to attain its unity precisely by embracing, respecting and valuing its diversity.

EU strategy on combating antisemitism

This is why the work of individuals such as Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt is so precious. Why he is awarded the Charlemagne prize. Why at the European Commission we firmly honour and support him. And why we have placed the fight against antisemitism at the core of the priorities of the European Union.

In October 2021, we adopted the **first-ever EU strategy** on combating antisemitism. We knew a determined approach against antisemitism was urgently needed; but who could have told us, that in October, 3 years later, it would be so absolutely crucial.

At the heart of the strategy is the idea to **foster Jewish life**. To see Jewish people, thrive across our continent. Because we are convinced, as the concluding sentence of the strategy states, that “Europe can only prosper if its Jewish communities prosper too.”

Until last October, we were seeing **progress**. More Jewish life in the public sphere, many alliances across communities, and adoption of

national plans against antisemitism. Of course, with the pandemic of COVID-19 and Russian war on Ukraine conspiracy theories increased. Antisemitic tropes spread, but the local alliances held.

Then came the 7 October. And with it, a **tsunami** of antisemitism rolling over the globe.

In the wake of such an overwhelming attack, I made it a priority to **visit Jewish communities** in Strasbourg, Antwerp, my native Thessaloniki but also in Brazil and Australia. My aim was to listen to their concerns and offer my unwavering support.

But the danger of societal **polarisation** became a threatening reality. This is why, last December, the EU took a landmark stance. We launched a firm communication urging all Europeans, particularly civil society organizations, to stand up against **hatred** and advocate for respect for one another.

We have also put a particular focus on the protection of **places** of worship and schools, dedicating additional funding for the security of the Jewish communities in Europe. Because security is a prerequisite for a vibrant Jewish life.

These are just some examples of what we are doing in the EU. But we know that we cannot do everything alone.

Rooting out all forms of discrimination and hatred in Europe is a **shared** duty, and one in which all of us must take part. Every university and school; every political party or sports club; every business or trade union. We should all address antisemitic or other hate incidents. It is our duty not to look away. Now is the time for a whole-society response.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen,

*'It happened, therefore it can happen **again**'*. Everyone in this room has heard these words by Primo Levi recited many, many times.

In these difficult, dark times, the proliferation of antisemitic incidents show that we can never be **vigilant** enough in our common efforts to combat hate. But they are only making us more committed to intensifying our efforts.

This year's Charlemagne award carries a particularly powerful **message**: Jewish life is and always will be part of European societies and our way of life.

We should make sure that the Jewish people of Europe feel **safe** and part of our societies. Societies that overcame the trauma of the Second World War – precisely to build back better.

And we need to keep **remembrance** alive. Teaching our children to uphold our democracies and European values; and reminding them of our history, in order to prevent it from repeating itself.

Today, it might seem like we are traversing a period of darkness. But as after every storm, the sun always shines.

Initiatives, such as those promoted by Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt, are concrete proof that there is another way. A better way. A European way.

Let us raise our glass to the Jewish people in Europe.

Am Yisrael Chai! ["May the people of Israel live"]

La Chaim ["To life"] (*Invite all dinner attendees to raise their glasses*)

Thank you.