

Sonja Lahnstein-Kandel:

Keynote:

**The Future of the Past:
Germany and Israel and the Values of Enlightenment**

On the occasion of the Doctor of Philosophy Honoris Causa of the University of Haifa for Sonja Lahnstein-Kandel

Haifa, June 6, 2017

Dear Prof. Fred Tauber, Chairman of the Board of Governors,
Dear Prof. Ron Robin, President of the University of Haifa,
Dear Students, dear friends,

First let me thank you all once more by telling you how happy and touched I am to receive the Honorary Doctorate from MY university. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart.

I say MY university because I really feel at home at this beautiful campus here on the top of Mount Carmel with its Jewish, Muslim Christian, Druze and Bedouin students – its multitude of cultures, ethnicities and factions that mirror what is the Israeli mosaic. MY university with its inspiring staff, academia and above all the students – you all.

For two decades I have been coming here and it always left me cheerful and motivated. Especially on occasions like this one when I meet you: our many deserving scholarship recipients. I could not think of a more beautiful place to receive such an honour then here where values for which I try to fight – indeed the good, old values of enlightenment – are actually held high and practiced every day.

Dear friends, these are difficult and probing times for our free societies. We all need to take a stand if we want to keep them. Friends of Israel around the world are particularly challenged in many ways.

Germany's relationship with Israel is of course a matter especially close to my heart. It is just a year and a half ago that we been celebrating a number of important anniversaries such as 70 years since the end of World War II and 50 years of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel.

Such milestones must naturally be used to remember. The Spanish poet Santayana once said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". This is correct. The enormous responsibility of future generations in Germany for the Shoah must never cease. By the same token it is also Germany's responsibility to Israel and to the world to make sure that our own society at home remains democratic, tolerant and respectful to all who live in it irrespective of race, gender or ethnicity.

I am also convinced that, as time has passed, Germany has become quite a role model in terms of remembrance and soul-searching. However, the challenge remains and will get even more visible. How can we embark on new paths of remembrance to reach the hearts of young people to whom all of this is mostly theoretical and a thing of the past century? Therefore milestones like those I mentioned should also be used effectively to look forward: to take the future as a chance and most of all to create a clear point of view as well as an objective differentiation of issues.

What does dedication to Israel mean under such circumstances? And most of all: How do we connect with each other – apart from remembrance? In this respect the situation has changed substantially. Solidarity with Israel only because of a guilty conscience for the crimes of the past does not suffice anymore.

Israel is not a developing country anymore – quite to the contrary. Israel is perceived as and indeed is a cutting-edge country. One of the highest life expectancies globally, the highest patent rate per capita, the strongest currency, the highest density of students, books and museums and leading in IT, biomedicine and security technology.

Israel's cooperation with Germany has become a win-win situation in the fields of research, technology and culture. But how far is the distance, how strong are possibly new boundaries between our two countries? Will these boundaries in future be harder to overcome as for example media and opinion leaders suggest? And what then do we have in common other than the matter-of-factly issues I mentioned before – now that remembrance fades?

What is therefore the Future of the Past?

Politically over at home Israel is heavily criticized – primarily for the settlement policy of Israeli government and its lack of initiatives for a sustainable peace with Palestinians. This is the focus of attention in Germany. Of course objective criticism of Israeli politics is legitimate – even in Germany – and I must also say: it is desirable. But the fact that we have to point out this legitimacy over and over again in itself suggests prejudice. Generalized and one-sided or vague bashing or singling the country out cannot be objective even when it likes to wrap itself in the cloak of a well-meaning friend.

There are major and basic issues that are often forgotten and that in fact are at the bottom of what our countries have in common, justifying and securing the strong bonds between Germany and Israel also on a moral, value-based level.

Such values which today we summarize under universal human rights indeed go back to the Age of Enlightenment when humankind started to be perceived in its aspects of responsible, self-determined beings and individuals based on reason and all the good that we associate with it: tolerance, freedom, respectful co-existence in states that practice the rule of law, have strong civic societies and are vibrant democracies.

I strongly believe that both our countries are (maybe I should say “still are”) on the forefront in this respect even though the challenges have become bigger and deeper, even though each one of us has to work and contribute more in order to keep our democracies alive.

And the challenge is: We need to embrace diversity as a chance, as a *sine qua non* of our societies, while at the same time being vigilant and uncompromising about those values of enlightenment and of our free societies when and if they are attacked from within or from outside.

Dear friends, when I try to talk about Israel to the German public and when I try to raise the awareness about it that goes beyond the 1.30 minute flashes delivered by the media – mostly connected to violence – then I talk primarily about two basics which should come naturally but are forgotten only too often back at home:

Firstly: Israel is the only democratic state in the whole of the large Middle East region with all the attributes of democracy as we know it. This includes the simple fact that it is you all – the citizens of Israel – who elect your government. This must be considered in all the scenarios when political pressure in which ever direction is applied from outside. We are not talking about an authoritarian regime. It is primarily your own responsibility what kind of government you get. As it is ours when we vote this coming September in Germany. As it was in Austria, the Netherlands and in France where the people put right wing and nationalist populists in their place.

Secondly: Hardly anyone in Germany knows that Israel has a multi-cultural and multi-religious population structure unlike anywhere else in the world. Hardly anyone in Germany knows that nearly one fourth of the Israeli citizens are Arab (Palestinian) Israelis, that one sixth of the population – the Russians – immigrated only within a short period of a few years to Israel and that complete freedom of religion is guaranteed to all.

It is this multiculturalism that makes Israel unique. In fact the Babylonian diversity that was in the past attributed to the broader Levant now only continues to exist in Israel – nowhere else in the whole of the region.

Formally and legally everybody here in Israel has the same rights: women and men, religious and ethnic groups of all kind, homosexuals and heteros. In reality, I know, discrimination against minorities does occur – as it does in other places – as it does in Germany by the way. Israel needs to fight this if it wants to live up to its own standards still guided by its Declaration of Independence. Since independence, your state's foundation, your *raison d'état* has been based on the ideal of democracy and equal rights for all your citizens. Numerous laws and decisions by your Supreme Court have confirmed and further developed this *raison d'état*.

I am also aware of the many attempts (even recently) by your government to put in question these principles and this delicate balance between the Jewish and the democratic character of Israel. I truly hope that the civic society and the institutions in your country will be strong enough to prevent such attempts also in the future.

As I said at the outset I also do miss courageous initiatives by the Israeli government to work towards ending the occupation of the Palestinians and finding a solution that would bring Israel the necessary and unconditional security and at the same time bring Israel stronger in line with the free world and with its friends in this world. An ongoing occupation is not at all compatible and indeed acceptable with a democratic state.

Speaking of the defence of these equal values and ideas, it is also up to us back in Europe, to work on it – now more than ever! Our canon of values can only be meaningful if each and every one of us fills it with new life beyond mere symbols. These values form the basis of a hopefully invigorated democratic, free and unified Europe. It is our occidental culture and I hope it will continue to include a United Kingdom that embraces the same canon of values even though it is tragically leaving the European Union.

Today's discussion about preventing a default of Greece, about finance regulation, the European failure of a common policy on refugees, the nationalistic tendencies in some of the European countries – all of this does not give enough attention and does not pay tribute to the basics: our unique cultural achievements and our freedom and peace since 70 years. Despite all the differences all of us are children and bearers of this occidental culture. The blessing of enlightenment, the crimes of totalitarianism, the reality of Auschwitz, peace and freedom in Europe – all of this is part of our occident. We cannot undo any of it and we must not forget any of it. But none if it is irrevocable and finite. Democracy too is never complete – always needs to be fought for.

Dear friends, I want to be clear: I explicitly include Israel in this canon of values and in this fight. It would be so wonderful to see Israel and Europe get closer again also in this very basic respect.

For the past few minutes I have been talking more about Europe than about Germany itself. This is because democratic Germany without its full commitment to Europe, its embedding in Europe and its commitment to the European partners is just not imaginable anymore.

Yes, Germany is the most populated country in Europe, yes, it is the largest market, the strongest economy and may I say it has the highest level of stability but its *raison d'être* is to be an integral and irrevocable part of Europe. While safeguarding our own security and the aforementioned stability we also have to fend off the rise of nationalistic tendencies and reoccurring xenophobia.

Just as the impression of Israel that we get from our media might be incomplete and one-sided it might be that the image you get over here of Germany might also be only one part of the story.

On this note I think that the diversity of Germany is generally highly underestimated. About 20 percent of people living in Germany have a migrant background. Germany has been an immigration country ever since the 60ties when the economy started picking-up rapidly. Germany experienced immigration waves of Turks, Italians, of people from the Balkans (like me and my family from former Yugoslavia) and later

from Russia and Eastern Europe and of course from all over the European Union where we have complete and unlimited freedom of movement for everybody.

Migration and cultural diversity have been among the key challenges that contemporary German society had to face. While it is widely recognized that Germany needs the continuous influx of migrants to address our looming demographic crisis there is still some resistance against a modern style immigration law.

In addition, the integration of newcomers into German society does not happen without problems of course manifested for example in the still persistent underachievement of many migrants in the educational sector and in the labour market. Lately we experienced flares of radicalisation and religious fundamentalism among a (very) small minority of Muslim immigrants questioning the validity of the principles of our Basic Law. This of course cannot be tolerated and the best way how to deal with this problem has been a matter of very heated political debates which will continue throughout the electoral campaign until September and beyond. But: debate is part of the democratic culture and takes the wind out of crude populist agendas.

Last but definitely not the least: The latest influx of refugees into Germany that you have all read and heard about was probably the most important challenge our country experienced since reunification. Only last year – in 2016 – we had over half a million official asylum-seekers and a few hundred thousand more of unregistered refugees, a great deal of them unaccompanied minors and young men. It would take at least another full-fledged speech to just give you a small taste of this huge issue, its problems, its many dramatic turns and twists and its consequences.

Here I just want to mention one final point: Germany took in about one million of refugees so far – 10, 20, 30 times more than most of the other European countries. To help these refugees we had about six million volunteers – every where from North to South, from East to West, in cities and in the provinces, day and night, in all fields and it continues until today. The institutions and the system in Germany would have never been able to deal with this gigantic effort without the empathy and the hands-on help from the civic society.

As someone who has much to criticize at home I must say that this was a true German miracle – a triumph of humanism and of the canon of values so often quoted by me today. Those same values that you all cherish too and demonstrate in all the wonderful projects we do together.

This brings me back here to the University of Haifa. Here we really can see the Future of the Past.

Dear friends, I think this campus of our university is the world's largest meeting point of Jews and Arabs. I could not think of another one where it actually happens in such a concentrated fashion. We come here to study and discuss for a better future – our own and that of our societies. Students here do not always do things together but they practically always work side by side in peace.

We – the German Friends of the University of Haifa – are proud to be long-term partners and to contribute to meaningful academic programs at the university which also reflect and foster our common values. We are proud of our Jewish and Arab Community Leaders who actually do really work together. We are proud of our Arab Israeli Women Graduates who by now branch out into all sectors of academia, business and public service. We are proud of our multicultural Model United Nations teams that travel around the globe, winning awards and being the ambassadors of what is best at this university and the best of Israel.

Peace can only come about if young people like you become committed leaders, accepting each others' cultures and reducing prejudices.

As I said at the outset: despite all the problems we are facing nowadays – you are leaving me again very cheerful and motivated! Thank you for that

Sonja Lahnstein-Kandel
Haifa, June 6, 2017