



Speech of the President of the Max Planck Society

Professor Dr. Patrick Cramer

On the occasion of a meeting with the Presidents of Israel's leading academic institutions  
and the Directors of the Minerva Centers

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This year should have been a time of celebration and joyful events. The State of Israel marks its 75th anniversary. For many survivors of the Shoah, Israel became a new home. The promise Israel offered was that Jewish life should never again be threatened in its existence. Israel has since experienced many threats and attacks, but on October the 7th it has been wounded more deeply than ever before. Now nothing is as it was.

Dear colleagues,

We have come to Jerusalem today to assure you that you are not alone in these dark times! We share in your grief for those who have fallen victim to the cruel terror of Hamas, and we fear for those who are still being held hostage after 52 days. On behalf of the Max Planck Society and the Minerva Foundation, I would like to extend our deepest sympathy to their families, and especially to those at Israeli universities and the Weizmann Institute who have been so severely affected.

Just like the State of Israel, the Max Planck Society was founded 75 years ago. However, its inception represented an entirely different kind of new beginning. Researchers in our predecessor organization, the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, had been complicit in Nazi crimes. This legacy remains a heavy burden and an enduring obligation for us.

Our own history provided an additional reason why I was so deeply moved by our visit to Yad Vashem today. We laid a memorial wreath for the Jewish members of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society who were murdered: Fritz Epstein and Fritz Duschinsky, and Marie Wreschner, who committed suicide. We also commemorated the more than one hundred people in our predecessor organization who were forced to flee Germany, including world-famous scientists like Lise Meitner and Albert Einstein.



In face of the crushing guilt that Germans had brought upon themselves, the idea that Israel and Germany could one day establish friendly relations seemed entirely inconceivable back in 1948.

But the unimaginable happened. A black and white photograph from 1959 reminds us of the beginning of a new era. It shows five people standing in front of an airplane, holding their luggage in their hands. This historical picture captures the first official German delegation travelling to Israel after the Shoah: four persons from the Max Planck Society, including its first President, Otto Hahn, and Josef Cohn, the representative of the Weizmann Institute in Europe, who, being a Jew, had to flee Germany in 1933.

Dear friends,

We will never forget that Israeli scientists reached out to us for reconciliation. It was the Weizmann Institute that invited German colleagues of the Max Planck Society, paving the way to overcoming borders between our two countries. What a wonderful, deeply human gesture! And what a powerful testimony to the idea that science has the extraordinary ability to build bridges.

And today? Today we are here again, in Israel, with our colleagues. And again, we travel in very difficult times. It was a matter close to my heart to come and meet you. As you know, we originally wanted to celebrate the success of the Minerva Scholarship Program. We wanted to celebrate that over the last 50 years more than 2000 young fellows participated in this exchange program.

But October the 7th changed everything. Your institutes stand empty. Many laboratories are deserted. Most of the international staff have returned to their home countries. And: Israeli students are at war, just as many young academics and members of your universities and institutes. Many of you, dear colleagues, are also affected as parents.

In view of such dramatic changes, some of the current debates in the international scientific community must be distressing to you, to say the least. Many of you are deeply disappointed by the lack of reactions from the Western world. And we are all aware of the anti-Israel demonstrations that take place – also in Europe, also in Germany. Lines have become dangerously blurred.

For this reason, I would like to make one thing entirely clear: Criticism of government politics is allowed. It is part of our democratic societies and indeed it is often required. But: We do not tolerate anti-Semitism – and will never do!

From the emails I have received, I know that people at our Institutes are deeply shaken by the situation in Israel and in Gaza. We are all horrified to see the victims of terror in Israel and to see the vic-



tims of the war in Gaza. We hope for an immediate return of all hostages. We hope that the guns will soon be silenced. We hope for swift delivery of humanitarian aid to all civilians in Gaza.

Dear Yoseph Mekori, together with David Harel and Daniel Zajfman you wrote a letter to the academic world, in which you called for a commitment to justice, equality, and peace, and for respecting the dignity of all human life. You emphasized that mutual trust between Jewish and non-Jewish people is a crucial element for Israel's future.

Dear colleagues,

I agree to these wise and far-sighted words. And, more generally, I firmly believe that science and education are of utmost importance for the world to stay on the path of humanity. Indeed, as pointed out by our colleague Alon Chen to the senate of the Max Planck Society last Friday, our scientific institutions must be lighthouses that uphold the values of enlightenment.

And we can expect even more from academia. We should never forget that science brings together people of different cultural backgrounds. The van-Leer-Institute follows this mission. Thanks to Director Shai Lavi for hosting us today! And in the Max Planck Society, we are proud to host people from 127 countries. Recently, I urged all of them in a video message to strive towards a deeper understanding of one another. And I emphasized once again that everybody is welcome within our community, especially also Israeli and Arab, Jewish and Muslim coworkers. We want all of them to feel at home at our institutes.

Dear Mouna Maroun, in an open letter you were able to find just the right words for this need for a mutual understanding, which is why I want to quote you directly. You wrote: "Showing empathy for one side in a conflict does not negate the capacity to have empathy for the other. Rather, it shows that you're human." Your letter is profoundly moving. To me, it is an inspiration, as it shows what it means to be irrefutably guided by humanity. Dear Mouna, dear colleagues, I admire your leadership.

Of course, we were wondering what we could do to help. We are committed to supporting Israeli science through these difficult times. We wish to provide researchers who had to leave Israel with the opportunity to continue their projects at one of our institutes, remaining under the supervision by their Israeli mentors, and then returning to Israel and continuing their work here. To strengthen our cooperation, we will also soon open an office in Israel. Now is the time! We have reserved special funds for these measures. In addition, project funding within the Minerva Foundation will be increased by the German government.



Dear friends,

How can we go on after October the 7th? The Israeli writer David Grossmann has been posing this question more clearly: "Who will we be and what kind of human beings will we be after seeing what we've seen? (...) Where will we start after the destruction and loss of so many things we believed in and trusted?"

I do not know the answer to these fundamental questions. But one thing I know for sure: You are not alone. If our visit today can assure you of this, I would be very grateful. We all would be very grateful.