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## **POWER AND PIETY – RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE UNIVERSITY**

5<sup>th</sup> of November 2024, Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities

### **Welcome Address**

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When we planned this event about half a year ago, dear Ambassador Ron Prosor, dear Nili Cohen, dear Menahem Ben Sasson, dear Gudrun Krämer and dear Eric Zimmermann, it was simply intended to be a contribution to Berlin Science Week. It was intended as a sign of the close cooperation between Israeli and German scientists, a sign of the close cooperation between the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the Berlin universities and the universities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Eric Zimmerman, Director of the German Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research & Development, initiated the event, we conceived it together and the Embassy and the Ambassador kindly supported it.

Everything has been very different since the beginning of October this year, when Hamas terrorists invaded the homes of innocent people, committed unimaginable atrocities, slaughtered people and took hostages to the Gaza Strip. As deep friendships have grown between us here in Berlin and our colleagues in Israel, in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Haifa and Beer Sheba, based on our cooperation, we know that in the small country of Israel almost everyone is affected, every family either has to mourn victims itself or in any case of relatives, friends, neighbours, not to mention the consequences, rocket alarms, military service, restrictions on life. The firm hope of so many generations and people that the Jewish people will have a safe home from the terrible persecution in the State of Israel has been damaged and needs all our support. But I also don't want to hide how deeply shocked I am by the lack of support for Israel here in Germany, by the callousness of entire professions, by concerns characterized by a terrible ignorance of the situation or even antisemitic prejudices, by "yes, but" in the media or in universities.

As a German, you should not, first of all talk about the untenable conditions on Hermannplatz and on Sonnenallee, you have to start by talking about your own people and your own country: I would never have thought how deeply rooted reservations about Jews, antisemitic prejudices and criticism of Israel's right to exist are in our country. It is unacceptable that Stars of David are once again being painted onto places where Jews live and that people are not allowed to wear kippahs in public. All the more important are all the small and large signs, the human chains in front of the synagogues, the public signs – and accordingly an Israeli flag with the Star of David currently flies on the Academy's façade, as a visible sign of our support without ifs and buts and our determination to set clear signs here in Berlin too.

Although we planned this panel at a time when everything that has now become apparent was still far too unclear to us, we did not have to change the topic. The horrific events of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of October are, of course, also about religion and politics: Hamas has an Islamic theocracy as its political goal and wants to establish it not only in the Gaza Strip. Thus, it is illustrating the ugly face of religion, which of course has also existed in Christianity in its history – we have now learned to listen to the voices that consider the civilization and taming of religion to be a basis for the orderly coexistence of people, especially in a democratic constitutional state. We all teach together at universities or – like the GIF – promote research at universities. In this respect, it was and is obvious to ask how religion must be taught and

should be present at universities if this taming and civilization is to be successful here in Europe and Germany and there in the Middle East, in Israel and among its Arab neighbours.

The starting point for our reflections on today's panel was the insight that in Israel and Germany, very different attempts are being made to anchor religion in a civilized and tamed way at universities. I will never forget how I once asked a colleague at the Hebrew University years ago why this university did not have its own gowns. As you know, you can already see in the photos and films of the founding ceremony on Mount Scopus that the professors only wear other people's gowns, such as those of Oxford, but not their own. And that has not changed. The answer to my cheeky question was that the founding fathers of the Hebrew University did not want to dress in monks' robes in Jerusalem, where religion is so visible. And accordingly, there was no theological faculty among the founding faculties, be it Jewish or Christian. When I was a professor in Heidelberg and a member of the senate of Center for Jewish Studies Heidelberg (Jüdische Hochschule), my colleagues there vigorously opposed the idea of opening a theological faculty to train rabbis and cantors at the Center. "We are an academic institution after all". Practicing religion at a university is therefore not as easy as it might seem in this country, where there are many theological faculties, both Christian and Islamic, as well as a Jewish one.

However, you did not come to listen to the moderator and president of this Academy talking about the topic, but to hear what our guests Nili Cohen, Gudrun Krämer and Menahem Ben-Sasson have to say. Before I introduce them to you, His Excellency the Ambassador will speak. I would like to extend a very warm welcome to him, our panellists and all of you here this evening. We are delighted to be able to gather in these times as a sign of active solidarity!