

REMARKS OF H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM AT THE KNESSET-EVENT TO ENCOURAGE TOLERANCE AND HARMONY BETWEEN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN ISRAEL

His Beatitude Theophilos III
Patriarch of Jerusalem

27 November 2017

Your Excellency Mr Speaker,

Your Excellency Mr Azoulay,

Beloved Fellow Heads of the Churches and Leaders of the other Faith Communities, Distinguished Ministers

Respected Members of the Knesset,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we look to the upcoming season of light and renewal to all our communities of faith in the Holy Land, especially the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, we are very glad to be here for this event that is focused on encouraging tolerance and harmony between religious communities in Israel.

We believe very strongly that we have in our history a long experience of peaceful co-existence and a great deal of practice in mutual understanding and respect between the great religious traditions of this region. We have lived side by

side for generations in this land that has a unique identity, for it has become the place of the human-divine encounter, and we are keenly aware of the rhythm of each other's lives.

We are celebrating the 10th anniversary of our Council of Religious Communities, itself a testimony to our commitment to this aspect of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious multi-cultural landscape in which we have all lived for millennia.

This is a tremendous strength in the face of the difficult times that currently affect the Middle East, and our region of course, and that threaten even more severely this longstanding tradition, The very nature of the Old City of Jerusalem as a living symbol of our diverse tapestry of life, and spiritual beacon for the whole world, is at stake.

Our Council must find new and creative ways to ensure that our age-old frameworks and relationships that have safeguarded the well-being of our communities in the Holy Land for so long are respected and supported, for we are the children of Abraham. We share a common humanity and a common human destiny, and it is for this reason that we have all been put in this common home, by Divine Providence, to be a sign of hope for the world.

There is no doubt that we need to build a closer relationship between ourselves as religious leaders. We need to commit ourselves to more frequent meetings and to the kind of practical co-operation that ensures the proper witness of our traditions in the face of religious radicalism that is on the rise. Without courageous action on our part, we stand to lose the integrity of the Holy Land and of the Holy City of Jerusalem.

In this work, however, we must also count on the support of the civil authorities. The special balance of life in Jerusalem and the Holy Land has long been guaranteed by those who have exercised civil authority in our region, and the

Status Quo rules are a crucial element in this structure of support. The religious communities know how to create an environment of peaceful co-existence, but we need the clear commitments of governments at home and abroad if this delicate harmony is not simply to be maintained, but sustained and celebrated.

Therefore we wish to take this opportunity to say to the members of the Knesset that you also have a role to play in deepening tolerance and harmony between the religious communities of our region. Indeed without your firm encouragement of the integrity and vitality of all, the task before us is nearly impossible.

In our turn we urge you, for example, to enact and enforce legislation to deal with the phenomena of prejudice that find expression in the "Price Tag Hate Crimes" and other radical activities, so often directed against religious communities and holy sites, and which our common civilized society would never condone. We also call upon you to uphold the freedom of religion and the autonomy of religious organizations in the management of their affairs, adhering to the rules of the Status Quo. And we hope that you will do all in your power to restrain radical groups who, under the pretext of religion, undermine the unique character of Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

If we are to resist those radical groups who seek to make Jerusalem and the Holy Land exclusive, we must be re-committed, as this Council is, to the understanding that it is in the strength of our multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural life together which makes our City and our Land the inclusive society that It has been for generations and to which we all aspire.

We have every confidence, Mr Speaker, that the highest law-making body in this country shares our belief, and that it can and will embody the true meaning of the foundation of the State of Israel and the values of the constitution, to ensure

that all the religious traditions, and our rights and privileges sanctioned by the sacred history, which is our common history, are respected and protected under the law In order to keep the harmony we all seek. This demands mercy as well as justice. We say this because we are witnesses of certain actions, often warped by the distortions of media coverage. We are confident that you will look beyond these distortions that may well have led some members of this esteemed body to precipitate action. And we firmly believe that the proposed "Bill on Church Land" will be rejected.

As we read in the Psalms, mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other (85:10).

By acting in these ways and by keeping all this in mind, you will make the most effective contribution to the work of this Council in deepening tolerance and harmony between the religious communities of Israel.

On behalf Of our Council, we wish to express our appreciation to you for gathering this Council for the first time in this esteemed hall of government, and for the commitment that you are showing to us and to the world that the Government of Israel remains committed to the freedom and integrity of all the religious communities that make up the diverse tapestry of this country.

Thank you.

