

Welcoming the Prime Minister of Israel

Mr Benjamin Netanyahu Thessaloniki, 15/6/2017

Address by the President of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece and of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki Mr. David Salitel

It is a great pleasure and an honor for me to welcome today in Thessaloniki, on behalf of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece and the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, the Honorable Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu who is officially visiting Greece and his spouse Sara Netanyahu.

Your Excellency,

Thessaloniki inspires Israeli leaders and has been at heart of truly inspired and charismatic Israeli leaders: David Ben Gurion, and Shimon Peres have visited Thessaloniki and it is not by chance or fate that you are here today! You are here to perpetuate and forge this tradition!

Your visit in Greece is of great meaning for our small community and comes in an important time for the Greek-Israeli relations. Now -more than any other period in the history of Greek Israeli relations- we are experiencing the benefits that both countries enjoy by the reinforcement of ties and the multilevel cooperation. Greece, Cyprus and Israel share a democratic tradition that is so important today that we face the rise of anti-democratic forces all around the world and especially in the Middle East. They also share a tradition against fascism and Nazism, again so important in our days, in order to combat the rise of a very dangerous new Anti-Semitism in Europe. Finally, they share a common Mediterranean History.

Please allow me to make a short reference to the history of the Synagogue we stand in, and to the history of the Greek Jews.

The Monastiriotes Synagogue is a landmark that links the past and present of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki. It was built in the early 20th century thanks to donations from Jewish families from Monastir that settled in Thessaloniki after the Balkan Wars and the First World War. It was inaugurated in 1927 and at the time it was one of the 19 Synagogue and 30 oratories that functioned in pre-War Thessaloniki. The Monastiriotes Synagogue survived Nazi Occupation only because it was used by the Red Cross as a warehouse. It was renovated last year and we are honoured by your meaningful presence here in this building, a presence that testifies a thriving continuity.

The historic roots of Jewish presence on Greek soil date back to the 3rd century before Common Era.

The small Jewish community of Greece is the heir to a long history shaped by the development of Hellenism, influences of Rome and of Byzantium, the impact of the expulsions of Jews from Spain and Portugal and of a continuous tie with the Jews of the Land of Israel. When the Christian Saint Paul visited Greece during the first century Common Era, he found well-established Jewish communities in Thessaloniki, Veroia, Athens, Corinth and other towns of Greece. These communities of Romaniots, also known as the "Greek Jews", developed throughout the Byzantine period. Aside from the

Romaniots, the Greek lands hosted a large population of Sephardi Jews that arrived in Ottoman Thessaloniki after the 1492 Edict of Expulsion of the Jews of Spain. Thessaloniki, the city that hosts us today, became a historical center of Sephardic life; therefore, it was also called the "Mother of Israel" (Madre d' Israel).

Jews have left their imprint in Greece in many cities and towns over the 2,000 years of the community's history. Prior to World War II, over 70,000 Jews lived in Greece. The 50,000-strong community of Thessaloniki, which fell under German administration, was almost totally destroyed in the first few months of the occupation. By the end of 1945, 96.5% of the Jewish Community of the city you are visiting now had been murdered in Nazi death camps in German-occupied Poland. Today, the Jews in Greece are organized in eight active Jewish Communities. The current largest centers of Greek Jewry are Athens (3,000) and Thessaloniki (1,500). Jews are also present in Corfu, Chalkis, Ioannina, Larissa, Rhodes, Trikala and Volos.

All eight Jewish communities of Greece, as well as the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, are trying hard to remain highly active. There are regularly functioning synagogues in Athens, Thessaloniki, Larissa and Chalkida. There are synagogues in a number of other localities as well, including Chania, Rhodes, Volos and Ioannina, which are used only on holidays or occasional shabbatot. But there are also synagogues and Jewish monuments in danger of collapse and we are trying to save them and to launch several restoration projects. There are also two Jewish Museums, one in Athens which preserves the heritage of the Greek Jewry and one in Thessaloniki preserving the history of the local Community.

We hope that the Holocaust Memorial Museum of Greece, that will be inaugurated in Thessaloniki, will become a world monument against racism and will change the skyline of the city's western entrance and the map of Europe Holocaust memorials and museums.

The Holocaust Museum is a project funded by Germany. The project is also co-funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and is endorsed by the Municipality of Thessaloniki, by Mayor Yiannis Boutaris and of course by the Jewish community. We are all proud of this initiative.

Dear Prime Minister,

In times like these, cooperation with Israel is multifariously important and productive. Apart from the cooperation on energy, agriculture, defense, let me single out and particularly stress the cooperation on education and remembrance, which was made official last January with the signing of an agreement between Yad Vashem the Greek Ministry of Education and the Jewish Museum of Greece.

Cooperation at all levels is necessary for the prevalence of the values of peace and for the progress in many areas of common interest. On behalf of the Greek Jewry I wish you the best of success in your high level contacts in Thessaloniki, as well as in your work for Israel, for Peace and for the Jewish people.

BAROUCH ABA and Thank you.