



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the congress of the Central Council of Jews in Germany  
in Berlin  
on 19 December 2019**

I now know the Hebrew word *likrat*. It means "to move towards one another". I learned it from young Jewish people whom I just met with the President of the Central Council before the start of the event. These young people visit schools, where they meet non-Jewish pupils and explain their faith, answer questions and describe what being Jewish means to them. The documentary filmmaker and Grimme Prize laureate Britta Wauer reported on this project last year in one of her wonderful films.

A great deal of warmth, enthusiasm, dedication and realism can be felt in this film. I also experience a similarly welcoming atmosphere here with you at the annual gathering of the Jewish community. Josef Schuster, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for inviting me! I am delighted to be here with you today! And I am here in the firm conviction that it is the right time to be here!

You all know the word *likrat*, to move towards one another. You will be familiar with this project and I imagine that you have also seen the film. I think it is a wonderful idea. It is both a beautiful and a simple way to put a face to one's own faith, to move towards people of different faiths, to start a dialogue and to discover common ground.

I think many people in our country, Jews and non-Jews alike, wish for *likrat*! But the path on which we move towards one another has become more arduous in recent years. Those who fear they will be attacked, insulted or spat at in broad daylight or are forced to experience that their children are taunted in the schoolyard will hardly be able to feel a sufficient sense of trust to approach other people, to open up and to feel at home.

One needs trust in order to approach others. Many, a great many of you, travelled a long way 30 years ago. You left a country, relatives and familiar surroundings in order to live and find a home here. You

put your trust in this country – trust that is anything but a matter of course after the Shoah.

Furthermore, all of you from the Jewish community in Germany, regardless of how long you have lived here, have entrusted your children, your families and your future to our country.

I am also here to tell you that I know your trust has become fragile. Antisemitic attacks are on the rise in our country. The path towards one another, which you take, is not made easier for you. Instead, obstacles are increasingly being placed in your way. Many reports from the Jewish community's daily life and, my dear Mr Schuster, the great political concerns that the leaders of the Jewish community are expressing publicly and with ever-greater urgency, show how difficult this path is.

"At home in Germany", the motto of your gathering, is an avowal. But I certainly hear that this avowal also currently entails a question. As President of this country, I can and want to answer this question by reiterating what I have said very earnestly on other occasions, namely that Germany can only be true to itself if Jews are completely safe here. Taking up your motto, this country is only a home for all of us if Jews also feel at home here.

After the dreadful attack in Halle, after many – far too many – antisemitic assaults and hate speech, it is incumbent upon me as Federal President to state that this country is certainly not true to itself if Jews are attacked in this way. Its very heart is under fire. Let me put it even more clearly by saying that the majority, too, must finally understand that this country will not remain the same if minorities' rights and dignity are attacked and threatened.

Every attack against you is an attack against our society, this state and how we see ourselves. Why? Because antisemitism calls the foundations of our community into question. Article 1 of the Basic Law states that "Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority."

It is no coincidence that the Basic Law puts the protection of human dignity above everything else. Most of its authors had experienced what it means and where it leads when human dignity and people themselves no longer count for anything. We are aware of this past. We know about the destruction of democracy, the abolition of civil liberties and all the certainties of the rule of law, racial hatred, persecution, torture, the murder of millions of people. Not only was the experience of the Shoah included in Article 1 of the Basic Law. It forms its core.

I was both stunned and enraged by the attack in Halle – enraged because a mere synagogue door had to withstand the attack on the

congregation; because a door was the only thing protecting a Jewish congregation from unleashed hatred, violence and poisonous ideology.

After this deadly attack, which cost two people their lives, I no longer want to have to talk about whether it is necessary to provide police protection to Jewish institutions on high holidays.

It is necessary. That is sad enough in itself. But the state must meet this necessity unconditionally.

However, it is not enough – in fact, it is nowhere near enough – to leave it at that.

We are dealing with an ideological poison, an evil that constantly dons new garments, so to speak, and enters into new coalitions. It always went hand in hand with nationalism and racism, but it can also tie in with other ideologies and trends – misogyny, homophobia, both Islamophobia and Islamism, parts of the rap scene and right-wing rock music. It is not enough to merely turn away in disgust.

We must repeatedly spell out loud and clear that people do not have a civic right to make antisemitic remarks. And describing antisemitic or antizionist comments as criticism of Israeli policies does not come under the right to freedom of expression. Antisemitism is not an opinion. It is a resentment, regardless of what form it takes and from which quarter it comes. Phrases such as “bird shit”, “drawing a line under the past” and “cult of guilt” belong just as much to this category as the recurring scurrilous myth of a Jewish world conspiracy. None of it must be allowed to go unchallenged in this country! Everyone must rebut this hatred and resentment. And that includes in particular those of us who are not the target of this hatred, who must refute it loudly and clearly, because if we stay silent and do not prevent the atmosphere in our country from being poisoned further, anyone and everyone can become the next target. History teaches us that.

It is shameful that 699 antisemitic crimes, including 22 violent crimes, were reported this year between January and June alone. But it would be even more shameful if these statistics did not lead to consequences.

The number of people who oppose antisemitism loudly and clearly, who fight against it in the media, in the chamber of the German Bundestag, in schoolyards and in classrooms can increase. Indeed, the number of those who challenge antisemitism must increase!

Those who want a country with the rule of law and to enjoy the protection it affords must be willing to defend all those whose dignity is threatened, and to do so anytime and anywhere we witness such attacks. People must repudiate antisemitic and racist statements, refute insults and stand up against prejudice.

However, those who want to shift the boundaries of the law and to make hatred acceptable must meet with staunch resistance, as these are our boundaries and this is our common home. Most people in this country want to live here in peace. They want to live as they choose and to have their own beliefs. Tolerance, pluralism and democracy are exactly what we want and need to protect in our country!

Jewish communities have lived at the Danube and the Rhine for over 1700 years. Judaism belongs in Germany. It has always left its mark on German history, before and after the Shoah. The fact that the Jewish community has grown again because of migration from the countries of the former Soviet Union is a gift for this country.

Here at the gathering of the Jewish community, one has a chance to experience perhaps more vividly than anywhere else how life in this country has been so enriched as a result. All of us benefit from the fact that your community is growing. I am happy about the communities. I am happy about their contribution to integration and about your commitment to a community life in which we all share. A few weeks ago, at Mitzvah Day, over 3000 of you all over Germany did charity work.

What we celebrate as a Jewish renaissance in Germany is in large part thanks to the Jewish communities. And all generations benefit from services ranging from kindergartens to care for the elderly. You ensure that religious and cultural educational services are available to everyone, but in particular that the Jewish community is open to all. The appointment of a Jewish military chaplain in the Bundeswehr is also one of these signs. The success of such work is not only reflected in a growing community, but by a community that establishes itself, plays a part in cultural, business and social life in Germany, and is part of German society and culture once again. That is the greatest possible achievement for community work.

I know that one often encounters obstacles on this path, but I am of the same opinion as Wladimir Kaminer, who remarked many years ago that he could spend hours complaining about German bureaucracy. However, he said, those who have read the German constitution – and he has the text at home in German and Russian – know that this country is governed by good laws to which every person of sound mind would subscribe.

I am certainly not going to contradict him! We are grateful to Wladimir Kaminer for his wonderful contributions to an increasingly scarce resource – humour. Russian-Jewish humour or is it Jewish-Russian humour? It is probably a bit of both. And he is just one of many examples. Our booksellers now thrive on the novels and stories by Katja Petrowskaja, Lena Gorelik, Alina Bronsky, Olga Grjasnowa,

Dmitrij Kapitelman, Friedrich Gorenstein and Oleg Yuriev, while readers become part of the lives and worlds these authors create.

With this polyphonic choir in mind, it is my wish that the number of Jewish voices in German politics would also increase. We need you! We need your experience! You are an asset to German politics! You enrich open society!

All of us are called on to nurture your trust and our community.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am happy to have you here at home in Germany!

Thank you very much.