

**Speech by Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland,**

**22 May 2014**

His Grace, Lord High Commissioner, and Her Grace, the Countess of Wessex, Moderator of the General Assembly, Commissioners, Delegates, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

At the outset, I would like to thank you for the kind invitation extended to me to address the General Assembly in this my first year as Chief Rabbi. In accepting this honour, I join this august gathering in a spirit of goodwill and friendship.

Your Graces, I would like to thank you for the outstanding example you set for the nation in so many different areas of dedicated service. Your selfless devotion to the issues you care passionately about is a shining example to us all. I wish you continued success in all your worthy endeavours.

When we were living in Ireland, my wife Valerie and I sent all of our five children to Montessori playschools – we loved their system of education and I recall one day coming to collect one of our sons – he was just under three years old at the time – from school, and the teacher told me with much pride that that day she had taught the class all about the continents. She said, “Why don’t you ask your son? He knows the names of the continents.” Well I was deeply impressed, and at home later that day I said to him “So you know the names of the continents?” Oh, beaming with pride, “Yes” he said. I said, “You know what, I’ll start you off and you finish.” “Fine!”

I said “Afri”, he said “ca”;

I said “Ai”, he said “sia”;

I said “Eur”, he said “rope”,

I said “Austra”, he said “lia”;

and then I said “Ameri”, and he said “Christmas”!

As Jews and Christians, we learn a lot from each other, and it’s much more than just an awareness of Christmas. And then I recall an occasion when, as Chief Rabbi of Ireland, I received a call from the office of the Taoiseach telling me that two senior American Congressmen were coming to Dublin, and would I like to meet them. And the reason why I was asked was because they were Jewish, and I happened to meet them then on, I recall it was a Monday, and they told me that on the previous day, the Sunday, they had been in Munich. And being in Munich, on a Sunday, they decided to do the politically correct thing, and that is to go to church. So they made enquiries, they were told that the most prominent church in the city was the Lutheran Church. They gave prior notice that they were to be coming, they arrived, they were greeted on the steps, brought inside, brought right to the front, seated in the second pew from the front. The church had filled, the service was just about to start, when they suddenly realised they were in trouble – they didn’t understand a single word of German. They noticed in the pew in front there was one solitary figure, and they said, “You know what, let’s do whatever he does.” It worked beautifully. He stood up, they stood up. He sat down, they sat down. Towards the end of the service he stood up, they stood up, and the entire congregation burst out in uncontrollable laughter. At the end of the service the Pastor came over, he introduced himself, and he said, “I hope you don’t mind if I explain to you what actually happened at that point. You see,” he said, “that part of the service was the announcements,” and he said, “I announced to the congregation that a baby boy had been born, and then I said will the father please stand.” So the Congressmen went on to say that from that experience they learned a very valuable political lesson, and that is: you should always be aware of the facts before you make a stand.

Today I would like to make a stand, and the facts are clear. I would like to speak about friendship, co-operation, mutual respect, harmony, and peace.

With regard to the Jewish community of Scotland, the facts are here to be seen. Our community has thrived within a free and open society. We are proud of the contribution that the community in general, and many of its members, in particular, have made to Scottish society. Over the years, we have enjoyed a close and harmonious relationship with the Church of Scotland, much to the benefit of our two great faiths.

I have been delighted to meet and work with the outgoing Moderator, the Very Rev Lorna Hood, and I extend my congratulations to her successor, the Rt. Rev. John Chalmers and look forward to working with him. The Moderator and I are privileged to be amongst the Joint Presidents of the Council of Christians and Jews.

There is, I believe, an urgent need for more meaningful and productive dialogue and cooperation between faiths in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom. It is essential that Faith Leaders should prioritise dialogue and encourage this from the grassroots up, at all levels of our faith communities.

Jews and Christians have common roots and share a spiritual bond. Our Judeo-Christian heritage is a source of light and inspiration for all of mankind. While we acknowledge genuine differences between our faiths, there is much scope for us, with warmth, sensitivity, and honesty, to build on our shared hopes and values.

I know that you join me in an earnest desire to promote religious and social harmony on the basis of the moral and social teachings common to our faith traditions, and to strive towards the elimination of religious and racial prejudice, hatred, discrimination, and antisemitism.

As friends and as partners in striving to preserve religious commitment within our increasingly secular society, there are also areas for concern between us. Unfortunately, last year's report by the Church & Society Council of the Kirk to the General Assembly put a strain on Jewish-Christian relations in Scotland. We need to confront these issues together and not sweep them under the carpet. We need to ensure we have a better understanding of each other, a deeper appreciation for each other's traditions, leading to greater respect and stronger bonds between our faiths. For a real and meaningful relationship we need to internalise how the other views itself. We need to know the facts before we make a stand. For this sincere and serious dialogue is required. The door of the Jewish Community is always open to you.

Let me share with you, very briefly, just a flavour of the Jewish position on this matter. Hopefully this can help frame some of the ongoing dialogue I hope the Kirk will be having with the Jewish community in Scotland and further afield on this matter.

The inextricable link between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel is clear. According to our tradition, the Jewish People's association with the Land of Israel is as old as time itself. It dates back to the creation of the world.

This link was confirmed by God to Abraham in Genesis Chapter 17, verse 8: "The whole land of Canaan, I give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

We share this sacred text, and such an illustrious gathering will, of course, be familiar, many of you, I expect, in the original Hebrew, with this and many other texts, through which our Bible is infused with the relationship between the Jewish people and the land of Israel.

The Jewish People's connection to the Land of Israel is deep and it is eternal. It goes to the very fibre of our being as a faith community and as a nation. It defines who we are. No events in history can shake this. Let there be no mistaking the fact that to be Jewish is to be a lover of Israel and to appreciate the strong and unshakeable bond between the Jewish People and its Land.

There is no legitimate theological narrative or theological interpretation that can deny this fundamental and essential link.

Through all the 2000 years of our often bitter exile we have yearned for the Holy Land and longed to return to her. Israel for the Jewish People is not an idea or a place of the heart. It is a physical reality, where the Jewish People lives and breathes.

We pray for dignity, safety, and security for all. We pray for peace.

While last year's report was hurtful and harmful to relations between our faith communities, I am confident that we can overcome these challenges and use this as an opportunity to gain better understanding of each other and to work more closely together. Not only on this issue but on the many issues that unite us.

In respect of matters relating to the Middle East, my challenge to you and us, while working together, is: what can we do collectively and separately, that will advance the cause of peace by building confidence, respect, and understanding, while avoiding the spread of suspicion, mistrust, and fear?

This is exactly what I was exploring just last week when I took a delegation of 50 of my Rabbis from the UK to Israel. Our itinerary included a tour of Christian parts of Jerusalem's Old City, and we met with the leaders of the many Christian and Muslim communities, as well as the Druze and Baha'i faiths.

Constructive dialogue with the Church of Scotland, which has included the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and the Council of Christians and Jews has been tremendously helpful. Such meetings between our two communities should give us encouragement and we must ensure that this engagement continues. We would like to see them embrace the wider Christian Community in Scotland. And it is precisely when things become difficult that continuing these conversations becomes all the more critical.

There is much common ground for us to work on collaboratively in the national interest; issues of concern to Christians, Jews, and other faith communities that we can unite around, such as promoting spirituality within a materialistically driven society, and teaching selfless compassion at a time of worrying levels of poverty. We appreciate the centrality of the family, and the power of the community, and we share a passion for caring, giving, and volunteering. The list is a long and noble one.

We celebrate the extent to which Scotland is enriched by its faith communities. We, the Jewish community, are your partners, and we look forward to sharing the path ahead with you. Let us understand, let us empathise, let us learn from each other, and let us hear the still, small voice. Let us listen together, and walk together. Together is good.

I congratulate you on your achievements in enabling this great Church to go from strength to strength, and I salute you on your success in preserving tradition in an untraditional and uncertain age.

May God be with you.