

Laudation in honor of David Harris

It is both easy and difficult to deliver a laudation in honor of a person like Mr. David Harris.

Such a task seems very easy, because he is a man of great achievements. He is told to be the most decorated American Jewish organizational leader in U.S. history, thanks to numerous honors he received from foreign governments for his international work. As a lifelong Jewish activist David Harris since 1990 led American Jewish Committee, which has been described by the New York Times as the “dean of American Jewish organizations”. He was referred to by the late Israeli President Shimon Peres as the “foreign minister of the Jewish people”. There is no problem then to find some striking examples of his activity that successfully helped in changing the world we live in for better.

But in such a situation it's also difficult to choose criteria according to which we select proper achievements, *tikkun olam* of the laureate, to be mentioned. My task however is easier, because the honorary title „Figure of Reconciliation” includes very clear criteria.

The Polish Council of Christians and Jews granted this title for the first time in 1992, precisely 30 years ago. And the criteria haven't changed since then: there should be two dimensions: interfaith relations and connection to Poland. The recipients of this award are individuals from abroad who have significantly contributed to Christian-Jewish dialogue and better mutual understanding of Christians and Jews, especially in Poland. In this year members of our Council unanimously decided that our modest honorary Oscar goes to David Harris.

We stand with Ukraine

Why didn't we have any doubts? Let me start not from the past, but from the present day. As you all know, it is marked by brutal unjustified Russian aggression against independent neighboring Ukraine. This invasion is completely against moral principles of Judaism and Christianity.

Tragedy of Ukrainians is deep in our hearts as Jews and Christians. It also touches the essence of religious feasts we have been celebrating in these days.

Today is the second day of Christian Easter celebrations according to Orthodox and Greek-Catholic rites. On this day in some regions of Ukraine it is popular to leave Easter eggs and blessed bread on the graves of relatives. This custom has now an obvious special meaning during the senseless war of which so many innocent people are victims.

But let us go deeper into what Easter means for Christians, and Pesach for Jews (Pesach began to be celebrated a week ago, and simultaneously Roman Catholics and Protestants celebrated Easter). Pesach is about liberation and freedom. Easter is about hope even after death that seemed to be meaningless. I think that hope and freedom is what Ukrainians now struggle for. But in their struggle they do not only strive for it; they are already achieving it. We should all learn from Ukrainians how to hope despite the difficulties.

But they also need much help. And David Harris is among those who rushed to practically answer to the needs of displaced refugees. As chief executive officer of the American Jewish Committee Harris went to Ukraine and Poland, to Ukrainian/Polish border, to refugee reception centres, to Polish cities that organize help for Ukrainians who had to leave their homes and their homeland.

Already two months before Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, David Harris had announced that Ukraine has the right to protect its own fate, to protect its own sovereignty, its own territorial integrity, and to determine in which direction it looks. He stressed that while many others downplayed Russian threat for years, Poland spoke out loudly about it.

When the war broke out, David Harris led an AJC group on a three-day visit to demonstrate solidarity with Ukrainians and bring concrete help to them. Six weeks ago AJC announced that its #StandWithUkraine fund raised more than \$800,000. Today, I guess, it's much more... Harris saluted also many Polish volunteers, who opened their hearts and homes to Ukrainian refugees.

When I read the story about David Harris' engagement in activities facing this biggest humanitarian crisis in Europe after II World War, I had no doubts that today's decision by the Polish Council of Christians and Jews responds very well to the present needs of humanity. And this is also a concrete answer to the question of what God wants us to do in face of such tragedies.

Rabbis in Polish Roman Catholic theological seminaries

In Harris's case, this attitude is a consequence of his whole life. By leading the American Jewish Committee, he was very active in the field of international relations, attending diplomatic meetings around the world. AJC's primary goals are: to act in the interest of Jews, to defend human rights and to seek reconciliation between nations and religions.

David Harris is a promoter of religious freedom and democracy. As he put it, „Religious freedom is not selective, we have an equal obligation to protect the rights of all believers and people of no belief – only then will we be completely free”. “Democracy is not as solid and stable as people might think,” warned David Harris. “It needs to be vigorously defended each and every day.” True...

For many years Harris was a leader in efforts to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate. After 1989 he became interested in Eastern Europe. It is then when he got to know my friend Stanisław Krajewski, a Polish Polish Jew (it's not a mistake that I said „double Polish”, this is the way how Stanisław defines himself).

Krajewski served in years 1992-2009 as the Polish consultant and also

representative of the American Jewish Committee, being all the time a Jewish co-chairman of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews.

In those years David Harris visited Poland many times, usually with the AJC delegation. His visits were combined with political meetings at the highest level. He supported and often started important interfaith initiatives as, for example, visits of Jewish lecturers to Polish Roman Catholic theological seminaries training future priests (therefore the title of the Figure of Reconciliation was awarded in 1996 to organizer of these visits Rabbi James Rudin of the AJC).

Thanks to David Harris AJC strongly supported Poland's accession to NATO (which was not obvious to American politicians, and Harris convinced them at the Capitol). He was also strongly involved in the construction of a commemoration and museum co-created by AJC in the former death camp in Belżec. In 2012-2018, Harris was a member of the International Auschwitz Council.

A miracle at Auschwitz

David Harris did also a pioneering job in interfaith relations understood much broader than Jewish-Christian dialogue. American Jewish Committee has long cultivated close ties between Jews and Muslims, building partnerships in the Arab world, South Asia, Africa and beyond. Muslim World League and American Jewish Committee signed an agreement to “make the 21st century an era of harmony and friendship” that unites both communities against all attempts to divide people by race, faith, nationality or ethnicity.

Based on this experience, David Harris was even able to achieve a kind of miracle. Thanks to his initiative Auschwitz united Muslims and Jews. In 2019, he organized a visit to the former death camp together with a delegation from many Islamic countries led by the secretary general of the World Muslim

League, Mohammad Al-Issa, to mark the 75th anniversary of the Nazi German camp's liberation. The visit marked the most senior Islamic delegation ever to visit Auschwitz, including 62 Muslim leaders from 28 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North America. Both leaders of the visit wrote a common article in „Chicago Tribune” explaining that they came together, believing that the world desperately needs greater interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Coalition of Mutual Respect

This experience brought David Harris to yet another initiative. In 2019 he announced that the Community of Conscience was formed. It is a national initiative in the US, convened by AJC, that brings together leaders from different backgrounds to make statements against divisions in today's society, and discuss proactive ways to address it.

A similar group was established also in Poland in 2021. I have a privilege to be a member of this community. When in the fall of 2020 acting director of the AJC's office in Warsaw, Sebastian Rejak, called me if I may join it, I shouted enthusiastically: „This is what I dreamt of for years”. A couple of times I proposed in my publications that an interreligious Coalition of Mutual Respect should be established in Poland, but I didn't have enough institutional power to make it happen.

Finally my idea was combined with the original one and this is why in Poland this initiative is called "Community of Conscience – Coalition of Mutual Respect". Its members, including both co-chairmen of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews, are present here and I greet all of them cordially. By the way, it's the first time we see one another in person and not only via zoom...

In our mission statement we said that „By creating this Coalition of Mutual Respect, we want to tell all our fellow citizens that democracy needs conscience. People of conscience – able to choose good and distinguish it from evil – are the most important social capital”. I’m sure that David Harris can endorse these words. And they are taken from the teaching of Pope John Paul II, the Pole whose activity was seen as a blessing by many Jewish activists.

Not yet perished...

At the end let me say how David Harris sees similarities between Poles and Jews. He spoke about it in Polish newspapers 5 years ago, in 2017, when AJC’s office for Central Europe was opened in Warsaw.

In „Rzeczpospolita” daily Harris wrote that family tradition in which he was raised was very skeptical of Poland. He himself, however, gradually discovered that there is something in the soul of the Polish nation that is quite familiar to him. In this article and later in „Gazeta Wyborcza” he mentioned a couple of examples of this similarity. I will quote here only three of them.

First, Polish history is full of pride and pain. It is the same with the history of the Jews. Second, histories of our nations are intertwined. One cannot talk about the history of the Jews, ignoring Poland. It is also impossible to talk about the history of Poland, ignoring Jews, and we mean over the course of about 1,000 years. Third, Poles and Jews know what it means to be left to their own fate.

Yet another David Harris’ opinion moved my Polish heart. In 2021 he gave an interview to Paweł Smoleński of „Gazeta Wyborcza” with a reflection on the first words of the Polish national anthem. „Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła, kiedy my żyjemy”... „Poland has not yet perished as long as we live"...

According to Harris, Jews understand these seven Polish words perfectly, „because it is a very Polish and very Jewish idea. No Dane or Brazilian will

understand it as deeply as we, Jews do. Maybe Ukrainians, because their anthem begins similarly. We did not die as long as at least one of us is alive – nothing is more obvious to Jews. It is a conviction shared by you and us that there is some higher purpose in our being in this world, a humanistic will to persist”.

Hope and optimism

At the end of this interview David Harris admits however that he doesn't like one word among these seven. It is: „yet”... I quote: „the fact that we are not yet dead is not enough. I do not like this word ‘yet’ because it can be misunderstood, not as a success, as in the Polish anthem, but as an opportunity for our opponents” who have not yet completed their plan.

Our laureate said in this interview something else that is very close to me personally. He prefers to speak rather about hope than about optimism. That's also my position. In recent years more and more often I speak even about hope without optimism. I'm very happy to discover this spiritual closeness to David Harris.

And I have to confess finally that if I nevertheless happen to be optimistic nowadays, it is only when I meet people like David Harris who tirelessly work days and nights for common good, who do not sleep so that others can sleep well and peacefully. Thank you, Mr. Harris, for your life, for your work and for this honor you did to our Council accepting this modest reward.

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