

Israel Jacobson Award
of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany 2003

Recipient: Rabbi Uri Regev
Executive Director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism

Laudatory Speech by Rabbi Dr. Walter Homolka
Executive Director of the Abraham Geiger College

Berlin, 11th July 2003

Dear Uri,
Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen!

For me as the preceding recipient of the Israel Jacobson Award it is a real pleasure to congratulate you most cordially to this highest honour which the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany can bestow upon a person who has strived for Liberal Judaism to grow and to blossom.

The Award is given every two years in commemoration of Israel Jacobson, one of the earliest and most courageous founding fathers of Progressive Judaism in the early 19th century. Using the new legal and political circumstances in Germany which arose from Napoleon's victorious conquest of wide parts of the German states Jacobson fostered the establishment of an enlightened Judaism in the Kingdom of Westphalia and later also in Berlin – against much opposition from the Orthodox establishment which called for the King's intervention against any reform tendencies within the Jewish congregation. Israel Jacobson combined secular with religious learning, good organisational talents and a strong vision how Judaism can survive in the future.

All these aspects fit your biography perfectly. A lawyer and rabbi by training, you, Uri, have so fantastically combined religious dedication with your legal mind to strive for equality of all Jews wherever they live.

Foremost of all I want to mention your work at the Israel Religious Action Centre. It is the public and legal advocacy arm of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism. The Center's mission is to advance religious freedom and pluralism, tolerance, social justice and civil liberties in Israel, based on the belief that these values are intrinsic to and stem from a liberal understanding of Judaism.

Since its establishment in 1987, the Center has been a leader in the struggle for freedom of religion and conscience in Israel. The Israel Religious Action Center has been a source of inspiration and pride for me in my own work over the years. The Center is a source of inspiration for a serious systematic and determined battle for religious pluralism in Israel. It is also a source of pride for any individual who believes that Judaism is much more than ritual and ceremonies in the synagogue.

With your gifted work in Israel you, Uri, have proved that our communities are in need of a Jewish progressive world organisation that is built on three virtues: religious sincerity and spiritual growth, the ability to argue legally against all injustice and inequality, and the diplomatic talent to embrace and relate to the political adversary.

These three gifts, tested so well in Israel, have finally brought you to the executive leadership of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. And they have brought you to Germany where all three of your gifts: diplomacy, advocacy, and religious inspiration, have recently brought our struggle for equality to fruition. Over the last year you have helped us to formulate and to communicate well our demand to be treated as a valid and authoritative arm of the Jewish world population.

You have expressed this in your essay in the German weekly DIE ZEIT last autumn, you have interpreted our position to German ambassadors all over the world and to the members of our federal government. When the German government, in January 2003, signed the contract for financial support of the Jewish community via the Central Council of Jews in Germany you didn't stop but helped lobbying the members of our federal parliament to influence the ratification process of this document.

As a consequence, each and every party faction in parliament has meanwhile acknowledged that the contract includes also funding for the progressive Jewish congregations and institutions in Germany and that the realization of this eligibility is reviewed by government within twelve months. The impressive list of guests being with us last night, among them representatives from all important walks of life, shows that we have returned to Germany as a legitimate denominational arm of Judaism, at last.

So today, the same day when the ratification of this contract with the Central Council of Jews in Germany has been completed by a final vote of Germany's Upper House, Bundesrat, the House of States, - in the very same building where the World Union for Progressive Judaism held its 1928 Berlin convention - we are happy to know that it reads differently from what Paul Spiegel thought it might mean.

Your strong arm has amended it and has written in a right for us to receive federal funding in realization of the constitutional principle of equal treatment for all denominations and all faiths.

We know and you know that we have a long path still to go.

We know and you know that having a right is different from getting what is right.

We know that you know: Germany is only one part of a global family of Progressive Judaism.

Acknowledging your manifold good works and deeds for and on behalf of the World Union for Progressive Judaism is our way to thank you that Germany, the cradle of progressive Judaism, is so high on your agenda to advance the values of human equality, social justice and religious tolerance in the world.

Thank you!