

PM Netanyahu's Remarks at a Thessaloniki Synagogue

(Communicated by the Prime Minister's Media Adviser)

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife Sara, today (Thursday, 15 June 2017), visited a Thessaloniki synagogue together with Jewish community president David Shaltiel, Thessaloniki Rabbi Yisrael Aharon, Mayor Yiannis Boutaris and Jewish community leaders.

Prime Minister Netanyahu:

"My wife and I are delighted to be here, along with our ministers of the Israeli government and our entire delegation. We bring you greetings from Jerusalem.

Shalom m'Yerushalayim.

This is very moving to be here in this architectural gem, but more than being a beautiful building, it's evocative of the great history and the great tragedy that befell the Jews of Greece.

I have to say that I'm a historian's son, so I know a little about the history of the Jews of Greece, and when you think about it, the history of the Greek-Jewish community, and specifically that history anchored in Thessaloniki, withstood three of the greatest tragedies that befell our people. First, the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. This community absorbed Jews who left Judea. And second, the Great Expulsion from Spain. This community absorbed Jews who were expelled from Spain. And third, and the greatest destruction of all, is of course the Nazi Holocaust.

The fire in 1917 destroyed buildings and burned buildings; the Nazi fire burned people, and 97% were destroyed. Three percent survived. These survivors, many of them, are in Israel, and I have to say that they have a love and a remembrance of Thessaloniki that is unmatched. They speak about it, they write about it, they – in many ways they remember it as a great center of culture, but also as a personal memory that is exemplified by one of the survivors who – Moshe Ha-Elion – who raised the torch of remembrance in our Day of Remembrance for the Nazi Holocaust. We light three torches of remembrance, and he was one of these six, and movingly spoke about how he survived. His entire family was wiped out.

So, I met him right after the ceremony. My wife and I met him, and we said, 'Please come with us to Thessaloniki so that you can close this circle in your life and the life of our people.' And he fell ill a day before we left for Greece. He asked the doctor, he begged the doctor, 'Please let me come.' And the doctor said, 'No, you cannot come.' And so I asked his daughter, who is here with us, Rachel, and his son – stand up, stand up. Rachel and Eliyahu. They are the children of Moshe Ha-Elion and they continue the line of Thessaloniki Jews in Israel, but they are back here in Thessaloniki.

I think this is a testament to the rebirth of our people, which is exemplified in Israel and is a consequence also in many places in the Diaspora.

We have rebuilt our people from ashes, and we built a modern state. We came back to our ancestral homeland. We built a country. We built an army – a good one. We built an economy – a very good one. And we rebuilt and took our place among the nations. Among the nations, Israel and Greece have re-forged an alliance. It's a natural alliance of democracies. Israel, Greece, Cyprus are the three real democracies in the Eastern Mediterranean. And we have forged this friendship anew and we see all the benefits that accrue to it.

I'm very grateful to Prime Minister Tsipras for hosting this trilateral meeting.

We are strengthening our ties every day. But I think the most interesting thing is the rebirth of the Jewish people and the way that Israel has become a global force – a global force in technology, a global force in fighting the terrorism that threatens all of us, a global force in medicine, in agriculture, in energy, a global force for the future.

It's a tremendous pleasure to come here and to rekindle that spirit and to say one simple thing, and I think I can say this in this synagogue as best as I can say it in any place on Earth – and that statement is this, three simple words: *Am Israel Chai*.

Am Israel Chai.

Thank you, *todah rabah*.

Thank you all."