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The New York Board of Rabbis Honors Archbishop Elpidophoros at Their Post-Sukkah in the Sky Reception



The New York Board of Rabbis (NYBR) welcomed Archbishop Elpidophoros and honored him at their post-sukkah reception, on October 23, 2019. The sukkot – a week-long festival that takes place five days after Yom Kippur – celebrates God’s protection of the Israelites as they fled bondage in Egypt.

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Recognizing the reciprocity between the Archdiocese and the NYBR, Archbishop Elpidophoros emphasized the notion of hospitality, as taught by Abraham and

Sarah in both the Jewish and Christian traditions (Genesis 18). His Eminence stated, “hospitality is a blessing from God. God is our only shelter, our safe haven. In Greek, the word for hospitality, “φιλοξενία,” which literally translates as “friend of the stranger,” also has a deeper meaning. Hospitality is considered one of the highest virtues because of the great respect and honor traditionally bestowed by hosts on their guests.”

Read the Archbishop’s full remarks below:

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

It is an honor to address the New York Board of Rabbis this morning, and I am sincerely humbled by your invitation as a special guest. In opening, I would like to offer you my best wishes on the joyful feast of Sukkot, which celebrates the authentic hospitality and shelter provided by God for the Israelites in the wilderness as they escaped from slavery in Egypt. The sukkah becomes a sign of hope and blessing as it is a place of life, joy, and togetherness during the time of the celebration. The symbol of God blessing his people during their forty-year journey through the desert exemplifies several aspects of our spiritual journey on earth, from subjection to our passions to the freedom granted by our faith in a just and loving God.

In a different but related way, Orthodox Christianity has always celebrated “hospitality” as a blessing from God. God is our only shelter, our safe haven. In Greek, the word for hospitality, “φιλοξένια,” which literally translates as “friend of the stranger,” also has a deeper meaning. Hospitality is considered one of the highest virtues because of the great respect and honor traditionally bestowed by hosts on their guests. Let us remember the episode in the Book of Genesis chapter 18 when the three men were welcomed by Abraham. But in reality, who welcomed whom? That question recently came to mind as I studied Marc Chagall’s famous painting of the scene, which represents three angels turning their backs on the visitors in such a way that they are the ones welcoming the stranger who was yet to come, with their view opening onto a red desert. God hosts those passing by and covers them with the grace of relationship on their way to freedom.

The Orthodox Church has many historic ties to Judaism and to the Jewish people. During the Second World War, the people of Greece and the Orthodox Church fought for their Jewish brothers and sisters, saving many of them. In the past, for a period spanning several centuries, the Mediterranean region experienced a peaceful cohabitation of Jews, Christians and Muslims. This experience demonstrates that people from different religions can live together, finding the fundamental message for humanity which unites, instead of being a source of division. It shows that religions can serve as bridges between people, and as instruments of peace, of mutual comprehension, of tolerance between human beings and of inter-religious dialogue.

Since 1977, representatives of the Orthodox Church and of Judaism have met regularly in international meetings marking the desire for rapprochement and better mutual understanding. The Orthodox Church calls for fidelity to our common roots, for the necessary openness to the deepening of dialogue, which is essential for the life of our communities, as well as for the protection of religious freedom.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

Last May, H.A.H. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, in Poland. In the history of humanity, very few places have inspired so much terror, abomination and horror. Auschwitz-Birkenau encapsulates what humankind, moved by pure hatred, can do to dehumanize and desacralize the image of God in each and every person. He stated in particular that, “Unfortunately, the ongoing outburst of religious fundamentalism and terrible acts of violence in the name of religion, give to the modern critiques of religious faith arguments against faith, and support

the identification of religion with its negative aspects. The truth is that violence is the negation of the fundamental religious beliefs and doctrine. True faith does not release humans from being responsible for the world, for respecting human dignity and for struggling for justice and peace. On the contrary, it strengthens the commitment of human action, it enlarges our witness for freedom and human core values.”

Also, let us reflect on the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “Darkness cannot drive away the darkness. Only the light can do that. Hate cannot extinguish hate. Only love can do that.” To fight Anti-Semitism, hatred, and discrimination of all kinds, we all must be involved. The role of education and family is very important indeed, but religious communities also have a key role to play as partners in dialogue. Allow me to quote here what the *Encyclical* of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, convened in Crete in June 2016, says about interreligious relations: “Honest interfaith dialogue contributes to the development of mutual trust and to the promotion of peace and reconciliation. The Church strives to make ‘the peace from on high’ more tangibly felt on earth. True peace is not achieved by force of arms, but only through love that ‘does not seek its own’ (1 Cor 13.5). The oil of faith must be used to soothe and heal the wounds of others, not to rekindle new fires of hatred.” (par.17)

For all these reasons, I am happy to be here with you today and to share in the joy of today’s feast as a sign of God’s protection and love for us as represented by this beautiful *sukkah*, but also as a sign of our shared brotherhood in humanity. I am deeply grateful to the New York Board of Rabbis for its kind invitation.

Thank you for your kind attention, your generous hospitality, and Happy Sukkot!, *Chag Sameach!* [which means: Happy Holidays]

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- Source: goarch.org