

**Edi Rama, Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania**

*Speech at the award ceremony of the International Charlemagne Prize in Aachen to Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt and the Jewish communities in Europe on May 9, 2024, in the Coronation Hall of Aachen City Hall.*

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“Tolerance, my dear Engineer, is a subject too wide for you to tackle”. This is what the humanist Settembrini says to Hans Castorp, the main protagonist of Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain*. Castorp is a practitioner, less philosophically inclined than Settembrini, and more oriented to solving real world problems. He has provoked the Italian’s anger by questioning his solution to the problem of intolerance: a cosmopolitan federation of freedom loving governments who can administer justice impartially. How can this solution to overcome deep disagreements between people, including religious ones, ever work, he thinks. Thomas Mann started *The Magic Mountain* just before World War I broke out and he completed it when it had come to an end, after the greatest human slaughter history had ever witnessed. The novel is set in Davos familiar to us now not because of the sanatorium in which Mann’s dialogues take place but because of the world economic forum (though there is usually a lot of talk of illness and European malaise in contemporary Davos too).

The conflict of ideas between the progressive humanist Settembrini and the reactionary authoritarian Naphta that occupies a central place in Mann’s novel has returned to haunt Europe, the Europe in which we live. Enlightenment versus authority, reason versus passion, belief in criticism versus blind submission to dogma are now again, not simply philosophical tensions but issues with which we must all grapple politically. It is a conflict not merely confined to the world of books but playing out on the streets, in educational institutions, in parliaments, between governments.

I believe we must resist the temptation to think it is a topic too complex for us to tackle. But what form can tolerance take in an age of increased intolerance like the one in which we live? Toleration, Settembrini insisted in *The Magic Mountain*, can be a crime when applied to evil.

And here we seem to encounter in a dilemma: tolerating evil risks allowing it to reproduce itself. Yet fearing evil too much risks reproducing intolerance. What form of tolerance should we envisage that prevents evil both in the world and within ourselves? How can one stare at the devil without beginning to resemble it? For much of Europe’s history tolerance

has been grounded in an attitude of civilisational superiority that we have done well to abandon. It was a tolerance backed up by the use of force.

Charlemagne, after whom this prize is named, played a key role in shaping the history of Europe. He was not only a skilled military strategist and a wise statesman, but also a proponent of cultural exchange and intellectual enlightenment. He is associated with the final defeat of barbarianism and the restoration of the humanist values of the Roman Empire in the West. Despite his success in military campaigns, the Carolingian Renaissance, in the arts, in poetry and in biblical exegesis was rooted in the belief that the most powerful weapon available to us is education, and that diversity should be welcomed rather than feared. Yet Charlemagne, the father of modern Europe, was also someone who united the interests of the Church with the interests of the state, imposing the forcible conversion of conquered peoples, like Slavs and Saxons. Under his reign heresy became a public crime, a *lese majeste*. In the end his attitude of tolerance was coupled with his firm belief in the superiority of one and only one worldview.

Over the course of history Europe has learned to become much more self-critical than congratulatory about its own civilisation. That is not a bad thing. We no longer speak of barbarian versus civilised people though the temptation for some to return to those categories becomes stronger by the day. A destructive spirit has taken hold of people's minds. Expressed hostility to different points of view, the urge to censor, the desire to burn rather than build are all too recognisable. In our world, impressing those who already think the same polarizes debate to the point of destruction. An attitude of "either you or me but, never together" becomes the only way to engage.

I am fortunate enough to come here from a country that prides itself of its old spirit of societal tolerance, of the mutual coexistence of different religions: Muslim, Orthodox, Catholics, even atheists which those who wrote about toleration often found the hardest to include. Albania, a country of a majority of Muslims, was the only state in Europe to have had more Jews at the end of the second world war than before it started. Several of my fellow citizens and Albania itself are recognised as righteous among nations at a time where humanity was everywhere being destroyed. Tolerance for Albanians was not merely the passive acknowledgement and grudging acceptance of someone's diversity.

Among the many incredible stories of my country's active tolerance during the Jewish Salvation, I want to share a notable tale involving two deported individuals to Nazi Germany from Albania, where there is no record of a

single Jew captured or handed to the Nazis. Despite perishing as Jews amidst millions of Jews, these two individuals were actually Muslims.

When the Nazis arrived at his door in search of the two Jews hidden in his home, instead of risking a thorough search by denying their presence, the Albanian calmly asked the Nazis to wait while he brought the two individuals out. Fulfilling his promise to protect the Jews with his honor, the old man ultimately handed over his own sons to the Nazis, deceiving them into believing that these young men were the individuals they sought. Both brothers maintained their guise and met the fate of the Jews in the Bergen Belsen camp, by never revealing their true identities.

To merely tolerate, as a German poet born not far from here, Goethe wrote, "is to insult". What he meant is that tolerance must be rooted in respect. It must lead to mutual recognition or else it remains disingenuous and superficial. It is an active attitude, it requires fighting for recognition, as the Albanians did when the time came. It works by example like the example of tolerance we celebrate today, Rabbi...- let me thank for such an honour whomever had the idea to invite me. And it is not JUST tolerance for the sake of peaceful coexistence but actively appreciating each other, understanding that the grounds for disagreement do not have to lead to destruction but can become a window for knowing the other better.

That form of tolerance, the tolerance that Muslim and Christian Albanians expressed towards the Jews by putting their lives in line against Evil and that I hope will one day spread to the world, requires its own partisan spirit. It requires engaging with that which is different from us, accommodating disagreements with respect, continuing to build bridges so that we can continue to debate and challenge. But it also requires that we continue to challenge ourselves, by reflecting on the possibility of our own biases and prejudices, by reflecting on the arbitrariness and unilaterality that we attribute to others, by constantly interrogating our own double moral standards.

Tolerance demands that we go beyond our comfort zones and not merely "tolerate" but tolerate respectfully, actively, graciously, by not simply accepting other views but constantly engaging with the complexity of our own histories. It is the tolerance that never gives up fighting with the weapons of both criticism and self-criticism, to avoid recurring to the real weapons that would destroy us all. As the citizens of Europe are called to decide on their future lives, not ideological trenches but powerful examples of tolerance like the one embodied by Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt can serve as a guide. Only a form of tolerance that never abandons dialogue

between faiths can protect the most important good beyond our particular disagreements: confidence in a shared humanity.

At the end of *The Magic Mountain* both the humanist Naphta and the conservative Settembrini face each other in a duel but neither manages to persuade the engineer Castorp of the rightness of their position. The author, Thomas Mann, suggests that both the abstract denial of the forces of darkness and intoxication with it are mistaken positions. Castorp, the main character, refuses to choose between them. He leaves the battle of ideas in the mountain to return to real war in the flatland, a war that within a few decades will create the conditions for the Holocaust while tolerance still remains too complex a subject. “Out of this universal feast of death, out of this extremity of fever”, Thomas Mann asks in the book’s final sentence, “may it be that Love one day shall mount?”

Thank you.