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American Jewish Committee
Remarks at Rededication of Rav Moshe Yeshiva
March 7, 2010

I know that many of you here have been in this synagogue and this Yeshiva in times past and can recall when it was a magnet for Egyptian Jewry and still retained some of its original splendor. However, I first set foot here only five years ago when it was a sad and neglected site. This synagogue was in ruins and its roof opened to the sky.

That was my first visit to Egypt, and with the help of Carmen Weinstein as my guide, I had a rather atypical tour. There was no time to see the Pyramids, but I did visit twelve synagogues. They reflected the diversity and richness of Jewish life in Egypt—a revelation to this American-born Jew of Ashkenazi roots. I know that this small community has struggled to maintain this legacy, and I am in awe of Carmen for what she herself has personally shouldered of this burden. I know too that for many Egyptian Jews who live elsewhere—in Israel, in Europe and in America—the memories are still vivid and the connections are still strong.

Despite the initial difficulties in persuading the Egyptian Government to take note of this heritage and to play a role in its preservation, there were at least some basic principles that must be acknowledged from the beginning. These synagogues have been physically protected, and their sanctity as places of worship acknowledged. This is not automatic. In Poland and Lithuania, for example, the countries from where my grandparents came, most of the synagogues that survived the Holocaust were put to some other use or abandoned altogether, and vandalism is not uncommon.

And now, after our years-long dialogue we hear clearly from Minister of Culture Farouk Hosny and from Supreme Council of Antiquities Head Zahi Hawass that these sites are also part of Egyptian heritage and Egyptian culture and are therefore also their responsibility. And there is no more tangible expression of this than the restored synagogue and yeshiva where we gather today. They are a testament to their verbal commitment and a reflection of the dedicated work of skilled engineers and artisans. I salute them and thank them for what they have done.

I have the honor shortly to affix a mezuzah to the entryway of the Yeshiva—a way of rededicating the building and signaling that it is again open to visitors. I know that there had been a long tradition of people coming to this spot and spending the night to find a cure for their ailments. No less than King Fuad claimed to have been healed here. I confess this always seemed strange and rather ironic. Though Maimonides was renowned as a physician, he was surely a

rationalist. And much of his unparalleled rabbinic scholarship sought to reconcile Judaism to that philosophy. He was not one to believe in miracle cures.

Maimonides even went to some length to admonish those many people who in his time (and even today) believe the mezuzah on the door post is some sort of amulet, offering divine protection. To those who claimed such things work miracles, he wrote, “All these are stories that is not seemly for a perfect man to listen to, much less to believe.” Instead, we should focus on the Biblical passages (Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21) written on the scroll inside that speak of God’s commandments and commitments. In so doing we should note, Maimonides said, “that nothing endures forever, nothing is eternal but knowledge of the Almighty. Upon reminding himself of this fact, a person will return to a proper consciousness and walk in a proper path.”

But let us also recognize that there is still something of a miracle in what takes place here today—albeit an earthly one. As the Egyptian Government has embraced this project as its own, I hope it is a sign that it will embrace the history of Jews in Egypt—from the 12th Century but also the 20th Century—as its own too. Further restoration projects and certainly the development of a proper Museum of Jewish Heritage in Egypt will not only provide a repository to the scrolls and artifacts and communal archives necessary to preserve a legacy when the present-day community has passed. But they can teach and instruct visitors and guests and also a younger generation of Egyptians as well: There was a time when Jews were part of the fabric of life here and all were enriched as a result.

As twenty-one Members of the US Congress have written to the Foreign Minister on the occasion of this celebration, such projects, “ will serve as a tangible reminder of the religious and cultural diversity and harmony that are hallmarks of Egypt’s past and, we foresee, of the entire region’s future as well.”

M. Miguel Angel Moratinos, Minister of Foreign affairs of Spain requested the following be read during the ceremony.

Madam President of the Jewish Community of Cairo;
My dear friend Rabbi Andrew Baker, Director of International Jewish Affairs of the American Jewish Committee;
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Friends,

I deeply regret not being able to share with you this important and moving event celebrating the rededication of the Maimonides Yeshiva and Synagogue, restored by the Egyptian Government.

Nonetheless, please allow me to take this opportunity you offer me, firstly, to convey my warmest wishes to the Jewish Community of Cairo and to all their friends, especially to the Egyptian Jews and to those organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, which are making great efforts towards preserving Egyptian Jewish heritage.

I would also like to highlight and pay a well-deserved tribute to the commitment of the Government of Egypt —especially to its Minister of Culture, Mr. Farouk Hosny, and to the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Dr. Zahi Hawass— in restoring and preserving Jewish heritage in this country, and, in particular, for the work involved in restoring and rebuilding the Maimonides Yeshiva and Synagogue.

In October 2007, I already had the opportunity and the pleasure to address the Jewish Community of Cairo, through its President, on occasion of the commemoration of the Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue centennial.

Casa Sefarad, whose creation I am proud to have promoted, contributed significantly to the programme of events that marked its anniversary. And Casa Sefarad, which I have the honour to preside over, has, once again, contributed to the celebrations that have brought us here today.

These celebrations have, in addition, a very special meaning and significance for the Government and the people of Spain, which all of you can easily understand.

On 13 October 2004, a mere six months after I was sworn in as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, I had the honour to formally open the Rabbinical Congress held in Spain, in Córdoba, to commemorate the 800th anniversary of the death of Maimonides.

In my speech that day, I highlighted the value of his work as part of the world's heritage. And I did so in the city where he was born and where, as stated by Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, Maimonides thought in Greek, wrote in Arabic and prayed in Hebrew, embodying the peaceful coexistence and harmony among cultures which is also embodied here today, with the rededication of his Yeshiva and Synagogue in Cairo.

And, looking back, I am moved to remember how, precisely on the occasion of that tribute to Maimonides on the 800th anniversary of his death, six months after I was sworn in as Minister, I announced some of the Spanish Government's main projects and initiatives, such as establishing an Official Day for Holocaust

Remembrance in Spain, holding an OSCE Conference on anti-Semitism in Córdoba, and creating Casa Sefarad.

Since I thought there was no better occasion to announce such initiatives—all of which materialized— than the commemoration of the anniversary of the death of one of the greatest exponents of the greatness of Jewish Ethics.

I wanted to do so in the city where he was born. And today, in the city where he spent most of his life, I wish to reiterate the Spanish Government's commitment to the transmission of the Holocaust; to combating anti-Semitism; to the recovery and dissemination of Sephardic heritage as an integral and fundamental part of our own culture; to the spirit of Maimonides, one of Córdoba's most universal figures; with his thought, lessons and life, which undoubtedly should guide us in building a more just and peaceful world.

No doubt it is everyone's wish—and I am sure that it will be so—that the efforts to recover and restore Jewish heritage in Egypt will be sustained and enhanced in the future. And that, one day, we will meet again in Cairo to inaugurate the Museum of Egyptian Jewish Heritage, which is so longed for by the Jewish Community of Cairo and by all their friends, from Egypt and from abroad.

I trust that the Government of Spain and Casa Sefarad will always continue to have the honour, as they do today, to be counted among those friends.

Thank you very much.