

Research, Reason, Responsibility: Lessons for the Future of German-Israeli Scientific Collaboration

Impulse Talk at the GIF's 40th Anniversary Celebration
by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
(DFG, German Research Foundation)

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Schloss Elmau, 17 June 2026

Check against delivery!

Dear Ms. Edri,

Dear Dr. Pleyer,

Dear Ms. Shifferman, dear Daniel,

Dear friends and colleagues,

Boker tov and good morning to all of you!

Thank you very much for the invitation to celebrate with you the 40th anniversary of the German-Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development (GIF). This is a great pleasure and honour for me!

Founded by the Ministries of Science of Germany and Israel, the GIF is a truly bilateral institution and a widely visible flagship project of successful German-Israeli collaboration in research and technology. Over its 40-year existence, the GIF has awarded more than 2,000 grants and supported nearly 4,000 outstanding researchers from both countries. This includes winners of numerous renowned academic prizes, many of whom have gathered here with us today. As many of you know, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) and the GIF have enjoyed close and very friendly relations for many years. It is

therefore a great pleasure for me to offer the warmest congratulations from the DFG, which is the central independent research funding organisation for basic research in Germany.

You could not have chosen a better venue for your anniversary celebrations than Schloss Elmau, which is both a very beautiful and historically meaningful place. Over the years, after a rather ambivalent past in the 1930s and 1940s, it has become a recreational resort and a world-famous location for major cultural and political events, debates and dialogues, especially those involving the Jewish community. Reflecting on the past and present to create the future – this is what Schloss Elmau represents. Given the motto of today's event "Lessons for the Future", this is precisely why we are here today.

German-Israeli scientific relations have a long and intensive history. It is remarkable what German and Israeli researchers achieved when they started collaborating again – just over ten years after the end of the Second World War and the Shoah, and even before the official diplomatic relations between our two countries began, as we heard yesterday. It is fair to say that, consciously or unconsciously, research preceded and paved the way for diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany. This set an early example of science diplomacy and shows that, despite adverse circumstances, researchers took the future of cooperation into their own hands.

It is perhaps this unique combination of historical awareness, mutual scientific respect and personal friendship that defines the special character of our relations. Among so many researchers and research institutions from Germany and Israel, this has fostered a sense of how precious this bilateral scientific relationship is especially during challenging political periods, as well as a sense of general political responsibility – a commitment that endures to this day.

Today, this special bond of our relations is also reflected – and strengthened – by a large number of high-quality collaborations between individuals and institutions, which cover a wide range of scientific disciplines and subject areas. These collaborations are supported by manifold funding activities from organisations such as the BMFTR, the MOST, the Max Planck Society, the DFG and other German and Israeli organisations, including the GIF.

The DFG, for example, not only runs the German-Israeli Project Cooperation (DIP) excellence programme. It has also established a Joint Standing Open Lead Agency Procedure to support integrated bilateral research projects together with the Israel Science Foundation (ISF). The response to this has been overwhelming and is another example of the strength and deep trust that characterise our bilateral relationship.

At an international level, science and the humanities in Israel are facing challenges and are suffering, e.g. from both overt and covert boycotts of cooperation imposed by governments, research institutions and individual researchers in many countries around the world. These boycotts stem from a critical response to the Israeli military campaigns and from anti-Israeli sentiments, as a recent report by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities on the state of the sciences in Israel has stated.

The DFG reaffirms its steadfast commitment to the cooperation with its Israeli partners. However, the conflicts and tensions are also affecting the day-to-day working life at German universities and research organisations. For example, there are security challenges in protecting Jewish students, and debates are taking place on how to adequately address the military operations in the Middle East in an international context.

The DFG is deeply concerned about the long-term consequences of all acts of violence and the extensive destruction of the region's habitat and its research infrastructure. This is evident in Gaza, Iran and Lebanon, and of course, looking for example at the Weizmann Institute, also in Israel. We sincerely hope that these wars will come to an end.

Considering the particular history of our collaborations, therefore, which lessons for the future can we learn? What does it mean for us as researchers and representatives of research institutions, especially in Germany and Israel, but also worldwide, when geopolitical conflicts enter our fields?

As researchers, I believe we should focus on our strengths and on the values that science and the humanities represent. Our work is guided by shared values such as pursuing our academic curiosity and engaging openly with one another. This enables us to collaborate in pursuit of the best possible understanding, learn from one another and grow together. As we seek evidence-based solutions to all kinds of challenges worldwide, our globally shared

understanding and vision give rise to an often-felt shared responsibility. Whenever we encounter results that could provide a potential solution to an actual problem of our time, we strive to introduce them to the public debate.

Linking research, reason and responsibility, researchers therefore often raise their voice and speak out, particularly in times of crisis. Yesterday, for example, we heard an excellent speech from Professor Byung-Chul Han about the alienating aspects of digitalisation. Moreover, the President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Professor David Harel, and other Israeli researchers addressed the humanitarian crisis in Gaza based on medical data and expert reports. These “voices of reason” are widely recognised and contribute to free and liberal discourse, which is so crucial for supporting our democracies in Germany, Israel and elsewhere in the world.

It is the liberal Israel to which we feel a special sense of connection. Our collaborations are founded on the firm belief in the democratic, open and progressive states of Israel and Germany. As researchers in both our countries, we must contribute with all our means to ensuring this, and to making our academic systems and societies more aware and resilient.

At the same time, developing research results and contributions is only possible on the basis of academic freedom. Academic freedom, which is under attack in an increasingly authoritarian world and needs to be actively protected. Also in this respect, Israel and Germany should team up and make even greater effort to guarantee this fundamental value. Research is based on reason, and reason demands that we use our scientific knowledge and understanding to get involved in times of crisis, while being protected in doing so, especially during geopolitical crises.

Furthermore, science and the humanities are particularly well-suited for fostering dialogue across national borders. As problems and challenges extend far beyond such borders, scientific expertise is not confined to just a few countries. Research naturally builds on international collaboration and offers a space for constructive dialogue with both integrative and diplomatic potential. This has been evident numerous times throughout our shared history of German-Israeli research collaboration, and it has a great impact again today.

To this end, it is paramount to maintain open lines of communication between researchers. This is why the DFG continues to offer its “Middle East Collaboration” funding opportunity for trilateral collaboration between researchers from Germany, Israel and the Palestine Territories, or from one of Israel’s neighbouring countries.

We sincerely hope that the peace process in the Middle East will move forward as soon as possible. And we try to support this process at an academic level as much as we can by providing German and Israeli researchers with instruments for regional collaboration, should they wish to do so. Early-career researchers, who, as I learned again yesterday, want to shape their future in a most forward-looking and constructive way, hold the greatest potential for these processes: for the future of our bilateral collaboration – and for science diplomacy. Therefore be – and stay! – curious, and be – and stay! – open.