Opening speech Special 10th Anniversary Conference

“**Tradition and Modernity in Jewish Culture and History”**

By Prof. Vivian Liska, director

Rector Alain Verschooren, Dean of our faculty Bruno Tritsmans, Her Excellence the Ambassador of Israel Tamar Samash, Bischop of Antwerp Monsignor Bonny, president of the Israelitisch Consistorie van Belgie Baron Julien Klener, honorable guests, participants, Colleagues and Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a special pleasure to welcome you to the opening of the 10th Anniversary Conference of the Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp. Anniversaries are moments of celebration, and it is worth reflecting for a moment not only on what it is that one celebrates, but also on what “celebration” means on occasions such as these. Marking a date is a means of introducing a pause in the regular flow of time to remind ourselves that we should not take the course of events for granted. The successful ten-year existence of the Institute of Jewish Studies is by no means self-evident. Given the dire times the humanities face today and the increasing transformation of institutions of higher learning into profit-oriented enterprises evaluated according to criteria of measurable usefulness, an Institute like the IJS is a rare jewel in which the free pursuit of academic research, teaching, and intellectual exchange can expand and flourish. We are, today, fully aware of what a valuable resource we have, and it is my hope that we will continue to work together so that we can cherish it in the future.

The Institute of Jewish Studies was opened officially on 11 October 2001 with a lecture by Prof. Herman van Goethem who spoke of the Flemish establishment’s participation in the deportation of the Antwerp Jews. In the decade since that inaugural event, the Institute has organized over 250 lectures by international guest speakers from the most diverse fields – Philosophy, History, Literature, the Arts, Law, Politics - and nearly 40 international conferences and workshops on a great variety of topics in Jewish Studies. Altogether, over 400 speakers from 16 countries have contributed to various academic activities of the Institute since its inception. The Institute has, moreover, cooperated with many departments of this and other Flemish universities, most recently for the first time with CEMIS, the center of Migration and Intercultural Studies at this University. Over the years, we have also worked hand in hand with the Universitair Centrum Sint Ignatius (UCSIA), the Museum of Modern Art (MUHKA) and the Plantijn Moretus Museum. At present, the Institute is offering 20 evening lectures open to the general public, courses in Yiddish and Hebrew, and, annually, a course on Philosophy and Judaism, an Introduction to Jewish History and Culture, a Course on Poetry after Auschwitz, on Modern French-Jewish literature and a Studium Generale. Because of its various events and programs, the Institute has attracted the most diverse public and has become a unique forum for research and academic activities in the heart of Europe.

I would like to start by thanking all those who contributed to the development of the Institute and to its growing importance over the past decade. In the first place, we thank the ministry of the Flemish Community, department of education, which fully finances our institution. We would particularly like to express our appreciation to Professor Julien Baron Klener who was the first to approach me with the possibility of establishing such an Institute, and Marc Luwel, a major figure in the government’s decision to found the Institute. We are most grateful to the rector Alain Verschooren and vice rector Johan Meeusen who have, for many years, provided staunch support for our endeavor, as well as to the former General Secretary of this university Ernest van Buynder and our present heads of the research department Jean Pierre Timmermans and Eric Spruyt. We wish to express our gratitude to the honorary president of the Diamond High Council and vice president of the Diamond Bourse, Jacqui Roth, for his generous support of our activities. Our special gratitude for the generous support of today’s event as well as the participation in this conference of Professor Ortwin de Graef from the KULeuven.

A warm thank you as well to my colleagues who now form the Executive and the Advisory Board of the Institute, to those teaching Hebrew – Aron Malinsky and Yiddish – Paul Geybels and Dominique Dossche and to others who teach courses in the context of the Institute. Other individuals who have earned our appreciation include Institute’s former and current doctoral fellows, Veerle van den Daele, Lisbeth Haagdorens, Nathan Van Camp and Karolien Vermeulen, and our former administrative coordinator Luc Acke who participated considerably in shaping the face of the Institute. And I would like to thank Dr. Katrien Vloeberghs for her dedication to the Institute all these years. She has been an outstanding post-doctoral fellow and a major pillar of the Institute since its beginnings. The list of contributing individuals must include Dr. Karin Hofmeester and Dr. Veerle Van den Daelen for initiating and planning what has been, today, a most inspiring and rewarding workshop - the fourth of our annual Contact days about Jewish Studies in the Low countries. I wish to thank all the participants of this workshop who accorded us invaluable insight into their research activities. Finally, I would like to express my thanks to Christophe Collard, our administrative coordinator who has been running the general headquarters of the Institute since last fall; his commitment, talent, and efficiency have been instrumental in the success of our activities.

The goal of academic study in the humanities is not the reaching of consensus but the training of one’s ability to probe other positions, which calls for an imaginative crossing of borders. This step is required less in order to dissolve these borders than to make them lose their self-evidence and, what is more, to become inspired by the possibilities that unexpectedly open up at these crossings. Resolutely interdisciplinary, and committed to the academic study of primarily modern Jewish history, thought and culture, the Institute’s lectures, conferences and workshops focus on what I would call “Judaism in context.” The establishment of a chair in Jewish Christian studies in cooperation with UCSIA Antwerp, marks a case in point. This year this chair was held by Prof. Elisheva Carlebach who spoke about “Jews, Christians and Converts in Early” modern Europe and, in a joint lecture with Prof. Louis Caruana, about Jewish and Christian representations of Time. Other initiatives such as a workshop on Comparative Diaspora’s with Prof. Shlomo Avineri emphasized this comparative dimension. In two weeks from now, on 16 June, another comparative event will take place: the Institute is organizing a panel on contemporary perspectives on the Holocaust with Prof. Dan Diner, Prof. Herman van Goethem and his excellence the Ambassador of the United States Howard W. Gutman. This panel is part of a conference focused on the comparison between European and American approaches to the Holocaust – and you are all wholeheartedly invited.

Another focus of this year’s program was opened up by with the lecture that started our 10th academic year: Prof. Moshe Halbertal, in his discussion of “Forgiveness in Judaism” brought together passages from the Talmud and approaches to this topic in Modern Philosophy. Other lectures throughout the year had a similar emphasis, which culminates in today’s conference, *Tradition and Modernity in Jewish Culture and History*. The title *Tradition and Modernity* has an almost banal ring. However, we witness at the beginning of the 21st century a rather surprising renewal of interest and concern about the interaction between these two forces. Far from having settled once and for all the dispute between *les anciens et les modernes*, modernity proves to be a constantly shifting amalgam of transmitted and newly emerging worldviews, values and visions rather than a stable and static endpoint. Both enrichment and conflict result from the juncture of tradition and modernity: at this stage of our global civilization, their interface defines individual lives, cultural groups as well as intercultural relations within one society or nation and between them, causing clashes as well as the necessity to reconsider established ideas about progress and what once was presumed to be an inexorable march of modernity towards a fully enlightened universe in which tradition is discarded once and for all – or, at best, stored as dusty clutter in the attics of our cultural heritage.

By contrast, the focus announced in the title of this conference directs our attention to what keeps a culture alive: the double movement of, on the one hand, the preservation of the rituals and beliefs, conflicts and achievements - be they intellectual, institutional, textual and artistic – and, on the other, the innovations, transformation, challenges and changes caused by inner developments and influences from outside. This double movement will be addressed in various fields – History, Philosophy, Art History, Literature – in tonight’s and tomorrow’s lectures.

We are pleased and honored to host an illustrious group of scholars from many countries and different disciplines and we wish to thank all of them for having graciously accepted our invitation. A particular welcome to very special guests: Prof. Geoffrey Hartman and Renée Hartman. Tomorrow afternoon’s final session of the conference will be devoted to his work and he will give the conferences’ closing lecture. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Geoffrey Hartman for everything he did for this Institute over the past ten years, starting with a conversation on a terrace in Beer Sheva on 22 May 1996 – almost exactly 15 years ago - where he suggested that it may not be a bad idea to open an Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp.

My final thanks go to the key figure of this evening, Professor David Ruderman. On previous visits he has been guest lecturer, co-organizer of important events such as the Jewish book in the Christian world and last year’s conference” on Jews, Commerce and Culture He has also been a visiting professor holding the chair of Jewish Christian studies. He is also a member of the Institute’s advisory board and, behind the screens, a most appreciated general counselor of the Institute for many years. Ladies and gentlemen, if you are so many here tonight it is undoubtedly because his reputation as a leading figure in Jewish Studies, as outstanding historian of Early Modernity, as major scholar and author of seminal books and articles, and as benighted speaker has resonated across and reached the last corners of the Lower Countries. We are indeed pleased and honored to welcome Prof. Ruderman here again.

David Ruderman is director of the prestigious Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania for the past 17 years. The National Foundation for Jewish Culture honored him with its lifetime achievement award in 2001. Author of many important books, most recently *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, 2010) which won the Jewish book award this year. He will speak to us tonight about Mysticism, Science, and Moral Cosmopolitanism in Enlightenment Jewish Thought.