I am thrilled to be here with you today—thrilled because of the gripping context that Edmund de Waal has created for us, thrilled because it gives us an opportunity to think together as a group about books and libraries, words and art. I wish to speak with you about dangerous words, words that people would like to gag and erase, words that people would like to burn. About violence against words.

Half an hour’s walk from here is St. Mark’s Square, where people burned thousands of volumes of the Talmud and Jewish sacred writings one autumn day in 1568. Many of those books, I assume, were delivered from the ghetto in carts and boats. They were torched by order of Pope Julius III, after someone denounced the Talmud as full of blasphemy against Jesus. That was a lie, of course: fake news, a libel. It happened at the peak of a great efflorescence of Hebrew printing in northern Italy. At that time, 150 print shops in Venice alone were putting out Hebrew books, not long after printing had been invented in Germany. The People of the Book seized the opportunity to disseminate books by means of the new invention. There were enough consumers of Hebrew books to make the business of printing and distributing them profitable. All of this success, however, was a double-edged sword; the whole enterprise toppled because of a commercial conflict between two print shops. This was the source of the denunciation to the Pope. The book-burning fest in Venice was just the start—after Venice, thousands of additional volumes of Jewish scriptures were burned in Rome, Bologna, Ancona, Ferrara, Ravenna, and Mantua, and then on the islands of Crete and Corfu. There was nothing novel about this; Jewish holy writings had been set afire elsewhere long before printing was invented.

When hundreds of books printed on paper go up in flames, they make a big fire. When manuscripts on parchment are burned—and there were some of them in the heap: Torah scrolls, for example—it is another story. The historian Simon Schama, in his book *The Story of the Jews,* describes the incineration of thousands of Jewish manuscripts in a public square in Paris:

It takes a while to reduce parchment, vellum and ink to ash. […] Animal skins resist their destruction, smouldering as they curl and shrivel, surrendering to the incineration only after releasing beads of vestigial oil locked within the dermis. […] At night they took on an amber glow, thickening the Paris air with a sweetish animal stink. […] Hebrew letters, their edges lit with curls of fire, would do an aerial dance over the crowd before descending on the heads of canting friars like slots of soot.

Let us bear something in mind: the Jews treat holy scriptures in Hebrew with the awed reverence that they would devote to people’s bodies. When such books wear out, they are buried in a formal rite. Burning a book written in Hebrew is like burning a living body on the pyre. The connection between book-burning and people-burning also accompanies us at this conference and is etched into the walls of the artistic oeuvre that Edmund de Waal has created for us here—to which we will return presently.

Now, picture the Franz-Josef-Platz in Berlin on the night of May 10, 1933. Imagine torches and flames. You hear the beating of drums. You hear the roaring of thousands of students, foaming at the mouth, as their professors lead them and urge them on. Crazed with hate, they hurl 20,000 books, written by Jewish, pacifist, religious, classical liberal, anarchist, socialist, immigrant and communist authors into the flames. Two thirds of them were Jewish. Many of them went into exile and are part of de Waal’s Library of Exile.

Imagine Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, attending that same revolting, stupid occasion, orating and telling the students:

The era of extreme Jewish intellectualism is now at an end. The future German man will not just be a man of books, but a man of character. And thus you do well in this midnight hour to commit to the flames the evil spirit of the past. Here the intellectual foundation of the November Republic is sinking to the ground, but from this wreckage the phoenix of a new spirit will triumphantly rise. Remember the Phoenix.

They threw to the flames books by Bebel, Rathenau, Einstein, Freud, Brecht, Brod, Döblin, Kaiser, the Mann brothers, Zweig, Remarque, Schnitzler, Hoffmannsthal, Kästner, Kraus, Lasker-Schüler, Werfel, Tucholsky and many others.

A curtain of black smoke descended on Western civilization. For the Jews, it was truly the beginning of the end.

When you visit that square today (under its new name, the Bebelplatz), you see from a distance a white light erupting from a window torn into the floor of the square. If you approach, you will always see someone crouching and staring downward. It is not a pleasant, beckoning, homey light but an eternal light of cold neon, like in a hospital morgue. Below, an abyss gapes. Only the slab of glass on which one stands keeps one from plunging into it. It is a work of art, created by the Israeli sculptor Micha Ullman in 1995. Ullman’s parents, like many others, fled from Germany immediately after the book-burning of May 1933 and started over as immigrants in Israel. Micha Ullman was already born in Tel Aviv, the second generation of the exiles. The work, called “Bibliothek,” won a contest that the City of Berlin held for a memorial to the book-burning event in May 1933. Ullman likes to call it a “miniment.” It is not an imposing statue. It does not stand out and make itself visible from afar. On the contrary: it is concealed, mute.

“Bibliothek” is an empty underground library in the shape of a square white room set into the floor of the plaza. Inside this library there is nothing but empty shelves which will forever remain bare. They evoke the void created by the burning of the books, all of which, 20,000, might have fit on its vacant shelves.

Ullman’s memorial creates a thought-provoking connection between the physical space and the void left by the books and the people who had been murdered or exiled. It is a library of nihility. Ullman wished to express the spiritual silence that this nihility brought upon Germany in 1933: an empty white tomb dug into the soil of Berlin.

Thomas Mann left Germany when the Nazis rose to power, at around the same time as Micha Ullman’s parents, and became a German author in exile. His first book, the monumental *Buddenbrooks: Verfall einer Familie* (Buddenbrooks: the decline of a family) (incidentally, written mostly during a several-years-long stay in Venice), was hurled into the flames at the Franz-Josef-Platz that same May 10 in order to punish Mann for having publicly expressed his disgust with National Socialism. Afterwards, in one of his talks on American radio during World War II, he recounted having received a parcel in the mail in the summer of 1933 and, opening it, released a stream of black ashes and sooty bits of paper. They were residues of his book that the sender had gathered up from the floor of the Franz-Josef-Platz on the morning of May 11, 1933. To salvage vestiges of books from this auto-da-fé, a rescue instinct worthy of bibliophiles and keepers of memory is needed. Such pages, gleaned from that Berlin conflagration, are found in the collection of the Israel National Library. The clouds reflected in the window of Ullman’s empty library sometimes look like smoke, and Ullman remembered Mann’s story when he installed smoke-like impressions that are commentaries, as it were, on his work.

When Heinrich Heine wrote, in his play *Almansor,* “Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings,” he knew what he was talking about. Edmund de Waal affixed Heine’s words to the walls of his Library of Exile, our inspiration for this session, in porcelain letters. He certainly knew what he was talking about because this sentence proved to be a ghastly prophecy.

Today, Heine’s aphorism is engraved like a gray motto on a sign at the square that abuts Ullman’s work. It is meant to remind us that, a few years after the book-burning, Nazi Germany began, with great enthusiasm, to exterminate people. After they finished off the books, they incinerated European Jewry and its culture in what was the greatest, most absolute incineration operation of them all: the Holocaust.

When one stands on the glass that covers the sculpture, it serves as both a window and a mirror. The viewers see themselves within the sculpture. They behold the empty bookshelves, but the shelves also evoke the sleeping bunks of prisoners in Nazi death camps. The memory of the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, as they appear from the executioner’s point of view on the roof of the building, accompanied Ullman as he conceived his work. The surface of the slab of glass adsorbs, like a photographic film, a testimony, or a trace of memory, pictures of who we are, who we were, who is behind us and who is in front of us, the sky over us and the abyss below. The white room is not only a library, not only a gas chamber, but also a camera obscura. Even the emptiest library, one that has been emptied of culture as though by a mighty vacuum cleaner, is packed with documentation of a cultural condition, such as that typified by the burning of books and of people, by their exclusion from reality, by their nullification. What remains is the viewer. In effect, the viewer is the monument. In 1949, the philosopher Theodor Adorno commented that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” (He rephrased that later on….) Ullman’s work proves that silence is powerful artistic material: With silence, one can say a great deal. Rabbi Menahem of Kotsk put it this way: “When someone has something to shout about and wishes to cry out but cannot, it is the greatest outcry.”

But Ullman’s library, constructed from a vacuum, vehemently reminds us that attempts to incinerate the spirit failed because the spirit is fireproof. Ideas are stronger than flame; memory is stronger than flame. Copies of books continued to be preserved in libraries. They are remembered; the authors who wrote them continued to live and produce even in exile, and to enrich humankind in spite of the arsonists. That is the message of the phoenix.

Fire has always been an important weapon in the war on epidemics. Whenever a dangerous illness spread and threatened to wipe out large population centers, contaminated objects were consigned to public bonfires in order to destroy them together with the bacillus that infected them. The public burning of books is a symbolic gesture and a declaration that the ideas and thoughts promoted by certain books are a scourge that imperils the community. The idea of annihilating certain people, too—Jews, for instance—is born of the same urgency, the same need to make the lethal virus go away once and for all.

Here we see a scene from Luchino Visconti’s film *Death in Venice.* Visconti translated Thomas Mann’s novel *Death in Venice* into cinematic language, and I would like to take a few minutes, as we confront the flame of this hellish scene, to draw a connection among Thomas Mann, Venice, the motif of the epidemic, and antisemitism.

The cholera epidemic that battered the Venetians at the time of the Biennale is the heroine of *Death in Venice,* which I consider the most polished and complete opus of its kind. The plot is the product of Mann’s stay in Venice in May 1911, and the sequence of real events that he experienced here. The Oriental origin of the plague is emphasized in the book. The epidemic is born in the marshes along the Ganges, whence it makes its way slowly through Persia and the Middle East to the West. The story draws a clear parallel between the Oriental disease and Dionysus, savage sexuality, drunkenness, and insensibility. The “foreign god” who, according to the myth, is born in the East, causes hallucinations in and takes over the psyche of the famed author Gustav von Aschenbach, who is vacationing in Venice. In the first chapter, Aschenbach is described as someone who places his emotions and urges under the strict control of his intellect. The plot continues by recounting the decline of this ultimate paradigm of the Western bourgeoisie. Slowly, the hero loses his ability to restrain himself from falling in love with a beautiful boy, losing his sanity, and dying from the illness. The integration of the exotic East with otherness, a world of disorientation and bacchanalian fantasies finds its spatial expression in Venice. In the book, the city metamorphoses from the epitome of exalted beauty and inspiration into an Orientalist hell dominated by disease, falsehood, and death.

Death lives in Venice and lays in ambush for Aschenbach and his beloved: this is the meaning of *Death in Venice.* Its agents have threatening, grotesque, and disturbing features. These characters, who propel the plot, are all different expressions of characters from the mythological repertoire of the kingdom of death. An unexpected element recurs in all of them: their red hair. Here, too, Visconti can serve as an expert witness. The flames grab them by their hair.

In southern and central Europe, red was the color of Satan. Red hair was considered a sign of bestial sexual lust and moral degeneracy, the mark of witches, werewolves, and vampires—and also of Jews, particularly bad and treacherous Jews. Judas Escariot, for example. Art history abounds with accounts of the apostle who betrayed Jesus out of greed, a classic metaphor for the archetypical Jew, as red-headed—the color of fire, blood, and Satan. And lest we forget that we are in Venice—in the first production of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* in 1605, Shylock was played with the red wig and false nose that villainous Jewish characters wore in the medieval mystery plays. There have been many red-haired Shylocks in the history of the dramatization of this work. Take the great British actor Garth Anderson in his highly successful one-man performance of his own work, titled *Shylock,* at the Edinburgh theater festival in 1998*.*

I now wish to take a bold, theoretical leap and claim that the plot of *Death in Venice* draws on antisemiticstereotypes, that the emotional platform on which the plot rests and the description of the characters in the book are built, *inter alia,* on Europeans’ primeval fear of Jews—the combination of foreignness, otherness, and menace that Jews share with their Oriental origin, like the vile plague that threatens Europe.

Since the birth of modern antisemitism, the folk metaphor comparing the Jews to a kind of human virus has persisted—carriers of a dangerous illness, a cancer that eats away at Western identity and essence. Like the plague, they are geographically borderless and rootless and have also often been perceived as carriers of violence and even death.

Linking Mann with antisemitism angered many of his admirers. To his credit, after all, there is much evidence to the contrary: His wife was of Jewish origin. In 1937, he publicly denounced the Nazi regime and its virulent antisemitism and declared his sympathy with the German Jewish writers in exile; in *Joseph and His Brothers,* which he began to write back in 1930, he presents Jewry as an exemplary society. As he worked on this book, he studied Jewish culture in depth and even visited Palestine for that purpose. In his young years, however, Mann was an anti-pacifistic German nationalist. In his early works—*Buddenbrooks, Tristan,* and *Royal Highness—*he crafted his Jewish characters by invoking external and internal markers that reflect and confirm antisemitic prejudices that he harbored, at least in his early career. I accept the conclusion of several Mann researchers who claim that even though Mann “was definitely not a zealous antisemite, nevertheless one cannot truly understand and properly describe some of his stories without the antisemitic background.”

Thus far, I have told you a story of Venice, about fire, plague, violence, and exile. Parts of this story, however, offer some chance of a happy ending. This conference of ours, after all, flies on the wings of the metaphor of the phoenix.

The lesson that Micha Ullman invites us to learn from his bookless library, as we have seen, is that the spirit is non-combustible. It cannot be incinerated, no matter how often one tries. And the Jews know so well how to salvage texts. Perhaps they know this better than anything else. In all their exiles, deportations, escapes, and wanderings, they took with them one thing above all: texts. These texts migrated from Tiberias to Aleppo and from Aleppo to London and from London to New York, from Egypt to Singapore and from Singapore to Mexico City and from Mexico City to Toronto. Many of them have gathered over the years in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, pooling like water in the Library’s basements and reading rooms.

One might poetically say that they have been joined by the billions of Hebrew letters that wafted into the air as the great libraries were burnt, and that all of them, together, have been preserved in that great repository of the Jewish spirit, the greatest depository of writings and texts that the Jews have written and read over the generations. Many of these books were rescued from the flames and gathered from the four corners of the world by the National Library's staff over the years. In this sense, the National Library of Israel can be seen as the last haven of the spirit.

The National Library campus, designed by Hertzog and de Meuron of Basel, is now under construction in Jerusalem and will be dedicated three years from now. Stationed at its entrance will be a symbolic response to the spine-chilling emptiness, absence, and void of Micha Ullman's Bibliotheque Berlin; to the constant, cold, artificial, man-made light emanating as a perpetual memorial light from the common grave in Bebel Platz.

Naturally Micha Ullman was called to the task and he is working now on a large work called “Letters of Light”—an environmental sculptural work based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew script carved out of stone, with both aboveground and subterranean elements.

The letters are formed from the spaces between the stones. These spaces allow light to pass through, appearing as letters amidst the stones' shadows. The letters open and close, lengthening and shortening throughout the day in accordance with the shifting angle and height of the sun.

The letters carved out of stone in Ullman’s work allow for physical passage through them. Their shadows intermingle with the shadow of the observer walking among them. The visitor is transformed into an active element of the work itself, just as in the traditional library space readers wander among the printed letters of the books on the shelves. The scholar George Steiner likes to say that “the Jew inhabits the text.” Ullman’s work will be a living and symbolic expression of this thought, enabling the observe to experience the script and the combination of letters as a real place, as a home.

The stones are evocative of the pages of a book. The shade moves throughout the day from west to east, like the turning of a page. Ullman’s circle of stones is a living experience of eternal page-turning, like the books in the Library itself, the pages of which are continually turned by a myriad of readers, transforming it into a beating heart of culture.

At the center of the circle appears the letter “A” in three languages: the Hebrew “*aleph*,” the Arabic “*alif*” and the Latin “A”. In “Letters of Light,” these three horizontal letters made of glass offer open windows to the subterranean space below. Sunlight penetrating these windows creates a light-show comprised of the three letters, the forms of which change based on the location of the sun from morning until evening and according to the changing of the seasons. The language is born each day anew.

These letters, composed of sounds, consonants, vowels, and symbols, provide a universal foundation for every saying, message, contract, and covenant; every creation; every conceptualization; all wisdom and information; every testimony and every memory. After all, only that which can be defined in letters and words can be known, understood, and truly exist for us.

The uses of that finite number of written symbols, these twenty-two Hebrew letters, are infinite and eternal. The millions of works preserved on the National Library’s shelves and available in its reading rooms and online are woven out of those same ancient letters of the Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin alphabets represented in Ullman’s work. When you come to think of it, it is a real wonder.

Just as the Library’s readers become enveloped in the written word, this eternal cycle of the creation and birth of language must be seen as the triumphant response from Jerusalem to the silence of nothingness and emptiness embodied in Ullman’s “Library” in Berlin. It will be a response to the burning of millions of books over the centuries, and tangible proof of the notion I have repeatedly emphasized in the last half hour: the spirit cannot be destroyed by fire.