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Introduction

Hagit Lavsky

The history of universities in the modern era comprises a major part in the history of science and high learning as well as in the history of nations. The national awakening in Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries was very much involved with universities. The young intelligentsia developed national consciousness and was the bearer of the yearning for national freedom which led national movements. In the established nation states the university functioned as the hotbed for the development of national cultures.

The history of the Hebrew University is a fascinating case of this linkage between university and nationalism. The proponents of the idea to create a Jewish university were inspired by the great variety of European institutions of high learning. The idea of the Hebrew University was born within the European Jewish community towards the end of the 19th century as part and parcel of the newly shaped collective identity and the consolidation of Zionism, and as a consequence of the unfortunate encounter between the Jews and European universities. The history of the Hebrew University is therefore not only a chapter in the history of intellectual human endeavor but the story of the Jewish national awakening, a mirror of the emerging modern Jewish culture, and a pillar of the developing Israeli society.

First Steps

The idea of establishing a Jewish university gained foothold among Jewish nationalists toward the end of the 19th century and was represented by Prof. Zvi Hermann Schapira at the First Zionist Congress of 1897 who raised the idea to establish such a university in Eretz Israel, together

with his initiative to establish the Keren Kayement Le'Israel (KKL). A first step in developing the idea was taken in 1901 by the founders of the Democratic Fraction, a Zionist faction among Jewish youth student groups that acted in the spirit of Ahad Ha'Am towards cultivating the Hebrew national culture, in opposition to Herzl's political Zionism. The leaders of the Fraction – Chaim Weizmann, Martin Buber and Berthold Feiwel – opened the Office for the Establishment of a Jewish Institution of Higher Learning in Geneva in 1902, and published their program in a booklet entitled “Eine Jüdische Hochschule.”

More than a decade elapsed until the World Zionist Organization dealt with the topic systematically in the 11th Zionist Congress (1913) and founded the University Committee headed by Dr. Weizmann. The committee started to get in touch with Jewish scholars around the world and to draw plans, while the Jewish National Fund began to purchase a plot on Mount Scopus destined for the future university. The process was interrupted with the outbreak of World War I, but resumed immediately after the entrance of the British military into Jerusalem and the dispatching of the Zionist Commission to Palestine in April 1918, headed by Weizmann. Then the purchasing of the ground plot on Mt. Scopus was completed, and the foundation stones were laid in July 1918 in a grand ceremony.

Seven more years elapsed until the formal opening of the Hebrew University. During that time the World Zionist Organization, together with engaged non-Zionist Jewish leaders laid the intellectual, administrative and material basis for the university. The opening ceremony took place in April 1, 1925, on Mount Scopus in the newly built (and still under construction) open theater, with the presence of the former British Foreign Minister Lord Arthur James Balfour, the author of the famous letter known as the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, that laid the basis for the international recognition of the Jewish National Home in Palestine under the British Mandate. Many international scholars and prominent Jewish spiritual leaders participated beside representatives of the Yishuv (the organized Palestine Jewish community) and the Zionist movement. By then three institutes already operated, for Chemistry, Microbiology, and Jewish Studies, the nucleus of the National and University Library was about to move from the town to the mountain,

and Dr. J.L. Magnes was nominated Chancellor by the newly founded international Board of Governors.

The Struggle over Academic Independence

Until the 1950s, the Hebrew University was the only Jewish university in the world. Therefore it was a focus of Jewish interest well beyond Zionist circles and was torn with tension over problems how to combine its universal aspirations and its Jewish character; how to attract prominent Jewish scholars to the then remote and under-developed corner in the Middle East; and how to pursue academic excellence and at the same time to function as a Zionist extension in the building up of the national home. These issues were naturally linked with problems of financial mobilization. Having no governmental or Zionist established financial support, the Hebrew University relied heavily on mobilizing Associations of Friends and financial support throughout the Jewish Diaspora. Thus, a major issue was to resolve the relationship between the university and its donors. Global and local political and economic affairs, such as the world economic crisis that started in 1929, the rise of Nazism, the 1930s immigration wave to Palestine known as the Fifth Aliyah, the Arab Revolt of 1936–1939, and World War II – had crucial impact on the Palestine Yishuv and on the Hebrew University, its status and directions of development.

During the first decade of its existence, Magnes led the Hebrew University in a centralistic fashion. He was in charge of implementing the decisions of the Board of Governors, on recruiting administrative and academic staff and on mobilizing financial support abroad. His system leaned on the “Magnes Group” – namely the prominent north-Manhattan non-Zionists Felix Warburg, Jacob Schiff, and Louis Marshall – who were the chief financial supporters of the university. The economic crisis however hit the basis of this group and many other “Friends Associations” emerged in other parts of the world. The system of mobilizing Jewish support became a central function of the Hebrew University and gained vitality as a focus of Jewish identification that grew around the university enterprise.

This system made clear the clash over dominance among five interest groups: the World Zionist Organization and its President, Dr. Chaim Weizman, who also served as the President of the university (until 1935) and the Chair of the Board of Governors (until 1948); the Yishuv, whose speaker was the Labor intellectual leader, Berl Katznelson; Jewish scholars and scientists around the world, whose renowned speaker was Prof. Albert Einstein; and the Associations of Friends of the Hebrew University, who were represented by the Chancellor Dr. J. L. Magnes. However, over time the academic staff of the university gained more strength, and joined hands with Einstein's criticism over Magnes and his administration, and brought about the nomination of a committee headed by Sir Phillip Hartog (the Hartog Committee) in 1933. The recommendations of this committee, implemented in 1935, signified a sharp turn in structure of authority and academic direction of the university, signifying the taking over by the academic staff. A new post of academic management was established with the nomination of Prof. Shmuel Hugo Bergman as the first Rector, and Magnes was nominated President (replacing Weizmann) whose exclusive role was to direct the university public relations, to represent the university outwardly towards the Yishuv, the government and the Jewish world, and to mobilize finances. A new body, the University Senate was inaugurated, its membership comprised of the university full professors, and its role was to academically lead the university. Thus, the Hartog Committee shaped the university as an academic independent institution, free from external dictates.

The restructuring of the Hebrew University did not really help in overcoming the objective difficulties in recruiting first grade scholars to join in and to compete in the international academic market, even in regards to typical "Jewish" areas, as we shall see.

Between Academic and Jewish-Cultural Goals

The initiators of the Hebrew University envisioned the pursuance of two goals: to establish a cornerstone for national cultural renaissance and to create conditions which would enable the Jewish intellectual potentials

to materialize for the benefit of universal human progress. However, principal arguments and practical obstacles ensued in struggles over competing scales of priorities.

The development of Jewish studies at the Hebrew University mirrors in a nutshell the major dilemmas with which the Hebrew University had to navigate between competing goals. Already at the 11th Zionist Congress in 1913, Magnes insisted on Jewish Studies as the central component of the national university that should become the focus of the Jewish renaissance. However, with the operational steps for establishing the university in the early 1920s Weizmann, the Zionist president, and Bergman, who served as the chair of the WZO Education Department in charge of the project, argued that the nascent institution was not ripe yet for taking this major vocation upon itself. Weizmann feared a *Kulturkampf* with the Jewish orthodoxy and Bergmann insisted on building the Hebrew language research infrastructure as a necessary condition. They both were also convinced that establishing a high level research institution should come before expanding on teaching and pursuing public-national cultural goals. In spite of their concerns though, and upon Magnes's initiative, the Institute of Jewish Studies was established as one of the first institutes and opened its gates for teaching immediately upon its establishment in 1924.

The Institute of Jewish Studies had to face crucial dilemmas involved in the very essence of the Hebrew University: between Jewish studies as an integral part of humanities and their goal in cultivating the new national culture; between Jewish studies as an academic discipline and their imminent linkage with rabbinical Judaism.

In 1928 the Faculty of Humanities was established and opened for undergraduate studies. Jewish studies were included but the decision of what belongs to Jewish Studies and what was universal had to be tackled time and again. For example, until 1935 the one history department, headed by Prof. Yitzhak F. Baer and Prof. Ben Zion Dinur was included in Jewish Studies. In 1935 General History was separated from Jewish History and independent of the Institute of Jewish Studies. At the same time a special department for Jewish philosophy was founded with the arrival of Prof. Julius Guttman. The dilemma between universal-

scientific and Jewish-national thus found its solution in separating between “General” and “Jewish” studies.

This however did not resolve the wish to free academic Jewish studies from the dominance of the rabbinic approach. Therefore a major department for biblical studies was established as late as 1940 with the arrival of Prof. M. D. Cassuto, and even thereafter all the professors were ordained rabbis. Research and teaching of biblical criticism therefore was conducted independently in other university departments. Another discipline – the Hebrew language – fell also victim to the ambiguity of double goals. Despite its central role in planning the university as a Hebrew institution, a department for Hebrew came into being as late as 1933. While there was no doubt as to the crucial need for such a department, the heads of the university were anxious to guarantee its academic philological approach, a goal that was achieved with the nomination of the Semitic philologist Prof. Naphtali H. Torczyner (Tur-Sinai).

National aspirations also took over academic-scientific considerations with the establishment of the department for Eretz Israel Studies, whose founder was the scholar Rabbi Prof. Shmuel Klein, as a major component in Jewish Studies, despite its vague academic definition. In the course of time, following the death of Klein in 1940, this department was dissolved and its research subjects were distributed among various disciplinary departments, such as archaeology, Bible, Jewish history, botany, zoology, etc. National goals were also decisive in attaching geographical research to Eretz Israel Studies and preventing the foundation of geographic studies as a scientific unit that includes global physical, regional, social and historical aspects, up until the 1950s.

Nevertheless, Jewish studies – philosophy and kabbalah, Hebrew literature and language, biblical studies, Palestine archaeology, Jewish history and sociology – flourished beyond and above struggles over academic definitions and affiliations or scales of priorities. The Institute of Jewish Studies became the jewel in the crown of the Hebrew University and the world capital of Jewish studies. The scholars of the institute developed the “Jerusalem School”, claiming Eretz Israel as the indispensable location for pursuing Jewish studies and interpreting Jewish culture and history through the lens of Jewish nationalism.

In the Service of the National Home

One of the chief goals of the Hebrew University was set already in 1920, namely to create a scientific institution that would develop the highest scientific research for the benefit and modernization of the land and the people. This was the rationale for founding the science institutions that would eventually lay the basis for a medical school. Different from humanities in general and Jewish studies in particular was the course taken by natural and exact sciences, that were less preoccupied with national cultural debates and integrated more easily applied sciences in their pursuance of pure scientific goals.

Beginning with the first professor of the Hebrew University, the chemist Prof. Andor Fodor, and with two modest research institutions in chemistry and microbiology, the research in natural sciences developed dramatically due to acute incentives and demands. They benefited from the cooperation with Hadassah Hospital and the government activity for improving general living conditions. Microbiological research developed and diversified in response to health problems conditioned by the poor infrastructure and climate in Palestine. One of the most outstanding achievements in this direction was the successful struggle with malaria that hampered the Jewish settlement enterprise and the whole country. It was led by Prof. Israel Kligler and exemplifies the cooperation between the Hebrew University scientific skills and the governmental and national non-university institutions for the benefit of the country.

Chemical research at the university developed primarily following the Hartog Committee recommendations, and under the leadership of Prof. Ladislaus Farkas, head of the newly founded Department for Physical Chemistry. The department initiated cooperation with the Zionist Executive for developing chemical and similar industries. This cooperation contributed decisively to advance the two main export industries – the Dead Sea Potash and the citrus grove productions.

World War II advanced cooperation with the government by increasing government demands and financing of research, particularly in regards to war industries. As of 1939 the university made available its entire scientific staff and laboratories for the benefit of the war effort. When the war approached the Middle East, the university established a