



Go There to Find Your Identity

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Arthur Balfour delivering the inaugural address at the opening of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1925 (Leopold Pilichowski)

IT WAS, I think, Sigmund Freud – one of the earliest Governors of the Hebrew University – who, in an *obiter dictum*, observed something to the general effect that the ill wind that had blown for the Jews for so many centuries had nevertheless brought them certain advantages. The fact that they have, as a rule, found such obstacles in their path has stimulated them to higher effort and caused them to develop qualities of heart and mind which sometimes lie dormant in the lives of more fortunate peoples; and to this, too, they may owe, in addition to gifts of intellect, feeling and imagination, their tenacity, self-reliance and unquenchable vitality.

This may be so, but some may think that the price that the Jews have had to pay for these qualities has been far too high, a view with which I should be inclined to agree. Yet if there is any lesson that all our sages, from the ancient Prophets to such great dissenters from orthodoxy as Spinoza, Marx, Freud, have taught us, it is the value of self-knowledge and self-understanding: they may have learnt this from the Greeks, but they have made it a profoundly Jewish possession.

The first thing that a man must know, if he is to function freely, and not under the influence of delusions or ignorance – if he is to

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know what he is and what is his place, in his time and social environment (particularly if he wants to change this) – is to know where he comes from, the history of the group to which he belongs, how he and his family and community and people have come to feel and to think and to act as they do.

There is no doubt that the existence of the State of Israel has transformed Jewish existence everywhere, has given the Jews a new image of themselves, and has given other people a new image of the Jews, with which they must surely come to terms if they are to know how to live.

This particularly applies, it seems to me, to those young men and women who do not feel too sure of what they believe, or, indeed, of what they are, and, from my long experience in at least one university, I feel certain that there must be a great many such in our community today. To them I would say: Go to Israel, if only on a short visit – you will not necessarily like all that you see, but it will teach you a very great deal about yourself, your people, your common past. To ignore this past is to shut your eyes to reality, and the price one pays for this is a heavy one – to be a victim of forces one does not understand.

Only barbarians are indifferent to their past: therefore go East. Sheer curiosity should be a sufficient motive to drive you there, but even if it is not, the need for elementary self-knowledge is imperative enough. Ignorance, as Karl Marx once harshly informed an idealistic but ignorant Communist tailor, has never yet helped anyone.¹ And self-delusion is the most disastrous form of ignorance.

But, of course, there is more to it even than that. Unless the state of Israel survives as an equal among equals among the nations of the world, with all that it needs for its material and spiritual progress, the Jews as Jews, the interlinked Jewish communities, may well be done for. Today aliyah is the foremost need of this paradoxically still underpopulated State. Even a very brief visit is not nothing. In the case of students, or those who have time between the end of school and the beginning of higher education, there are the opportunities

¹ P. V. Annenkov, 'Zamechatel'noe desyatiletie' (1880), *Literaturnye vospominaniya* (Moscow, 1960), chapter 31, 304; P. V. Annenkov, *The Extraordinary Decade: Literary Memoirs*, ed. Arthur P. Mendel, trans. Irwin R. Titunik (Ann Arbor, 1968), 170.

provided by the Hebrew University, whose position in the life of Israel is vital and unique.

A mere glance at the roll of its first Governors is evidence of this. Weizmann, Bialik, Einstein, Freud, Ahad Ha'am, Herbert Samuel – these names alone indicate what part this institution from the very **[ii]** beginning played in the life not only of the Yishuv but of the Jews as a whole.

For anyone who is young and not spiritually dead, whatever one's views or temperament or interests, a course at the Hebrew University (for this there is a cloud of witnesses) can be, and most often is, a moving and in some cases transforming experience. A full course (if one is suitably qualified) is best of all: but even a course of one year, indeed one of even shorter duration in, say, the School for Overseas Students, from what I can tell by talking to those who have taken it, is at the very least useful, and always intensely exhilarating.

One of the greatest services rendered by the British Friends of the Hebrew University, who have laboured long and faithfully in this cause, is to make such journeys possible. Of all the tasks to which they address themselves, none is more important than making it possible for academic visitors to go to Israel.

I have spoken of Jews; but this, of course, applies equally to everyone in the academic world in the widest sense. Everyone knows that dark clouds have gathered around Israel at present: it is increasingly isolated and in acute need of friends.

It is my impression that the vast majority of those who visit Israel, whatever opinions or lack of them they start out with, come back with warm and sympathetic feelings. This is not the result of propaganda. Zionist propaganda, with all due respect to the sincerity and devotion and industry of those who issue it, does not seem to me too effective in this country at present: anti-Zionist and pro-Arab agitation seems to me far more skilful and successful (the causes for this are another story).

But it does seem to me that students and lecturers and professors who come back from Israel, even after relatively short visits, are profoundly impressed, particularly by the internal freedom in that country. They are impressed by the fact that it is not, as it is so often represented by its enemies, a monolithic, fanatical, militarised, ferociously nationalistic Sparta, blind and deaf to world opinion, but one of the most liberal and, despite the worries caused by the needs of security, most democratic societies in the world. It is a society

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with a great deal of dissent, endless argument, the free expression of all points of view, intensive discussion of such troubling issues as the status and rights of Arabs in Israel, or the claims of the Palestinian Arabs, or the demands of the religious parties in Israel, as well as the general questions of the spiritual and political future of the state. Nor are these things discussed anywhere more ardently, or with greater liberty of expression, than in the universities of Israel.

The contrast between so unusual a degree of intellectual and political freedom and the suppression of dissent in nearly all of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe – and that in a society that operates virtually under siege conditions – is one of the most astonishing features of Israel, one of its greatest moral assets, and explains much of the good will felt towards it by immigrants and visitors.

The Friends of the Hebrew University, an unpolitical body concerned with helping the University in whatever ways it can, surely serves the cause of truth too, by making it possible for men and women, many of them with sharply critical minds, to take part in the life of this unique university, which, even in its hour of national danger, remains unswerving in the pursuit and dissemination of objective knowledge. It provides the only tested antidote – free enquiry open to all – against those who increasingly distort and conceal the truth about Zionism and much else in this country, whether from self-interest, or deep political bias, or hopeless ideological fanaticism, often allied to sheer stupidity, against which, the poet Schiller tells us, even the gods fight in vain.²

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² 'Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens': *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801), III. vi. 28.