

B'NAI B'RITH AND ISRAEL: THE UNBROKEN COVENANT

SHELLY KLEIMAN



Wilhelm Ze'ev Hertzberg



Eliezer Ben-Yehuda

The story of B'nai B'rith in Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) and the rise of Jewish nationalism are one and the same. B'nai B'rith was first established in Jerusalem in 1888. It was a period ripe for change. Stagnation, vulnerability, poverty—it was these dismal conditions that led a small, idealistic group of young men to establish the first B'nai B'rith lodge in Eretz Yisrael. A pioneering movement, B'nai B'rith promoted the revival of Hebrew as the living vernacular of the growing Jewish community, bridged gaps between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, aided immigrants and impoverished Jews, encouraged settlement of the land, and fought the powerful influence of the many Christian missionary movements in Palestine. Laying foundations for the cultural, economic, and social rebirth of the Jewish nation, B'nai B'rith, in a very real sense, set the stage upon which the Jewish state was to evolve.

THE EARLY YEARS

The rebirth of a Jewish nation began toward the end of the 19th century almost simultaneously in Palestine and in Eastern Europe. Ruled by the incompetent, corrupt, and faltering Ottoman regime in Constantinople, the Jews living in Eretz Yisrael at the time, who were known as the “Old Yishuv,” were mostly devoutly religious and heavily dependent upon Halukah funds, charitable support sent by co-religionists abroad. Initially intended to support Talmud scholars—guardians of all that is sacred in the Holy Land—and the needy, there was mounting criticism that *halukah* distribution was dishonest, often distributed to those who were neither engaged in study nor poor. Despite attempts during the 19th century by Sir Moses Montefiore and Baron Edmond de

Rothschild to teach trades and encourage settlement of the land, the Old Yishuv remained, for the most part, a paralyzed, dependent community, incapable of sustaining itself.

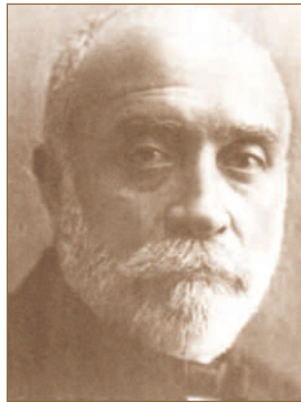
Toward the end of the 19th century, small groups of rebels, mostly traditionalists living in Jerusalem, decided to break out of the stifling confines of the *halukah* system and build a society based on its own labor. At the same time, waves of antisemitism were breaking throughout Europe, and tens of thousands of Jews took flight, immigrating to the United States, Great Britain, and elsewhere; others took part in the revolutionary movements in their native countries. A much smaller group of European Jews, preferring to reaffirm their Jewish identity in a secular and nationalist form, found themselves attracted to the emerging Zionist study circles and clubs. Members of these groups, known as Hovevei Zion, “Lovers of Zion,” “believed” that there is no salvation for the people of Israel unless they establish a government of their own in the Land of Israel.”

The Jewish population in Eretz Yisrael, numbering a scant 17,000 by the mid-19th century and 24,000 by 1882, had more than doubled by the turn of the century. Fully 25,000 Jews entered Palestine during the 1880s and 1890s. The “First aliyah,” as this wave of immigration later became known, changed the cultural and religious landscape of the country, thus ending a period of impending atrophy and paving the way for a Jewish national renaissance. These settlers, mostly arriving from Russia and Poland, were young, educated, and idealistic. Doctors and philosophers, teachers and tradesmen, they arrived in the Promised Land to begin their lives anew.

To further the cultural and national interests of the Yishuv, there was a desire among many of these enlightened Jewish men to organize under one organization. That organization was B'nai B'rith. In the spring of 1888, nearly 10 years before Theodor Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress

in Basle, “a quorum of ten men who envisioned the redemption from the depths and from the neglect”—as described by Jesaias Press, an early member—established B’nai B’rith’s first lodge in Palestine, Lodge no. 379, named simply “Yerushalayim.” The founders—among them Wilhelm Ze’ev Hertzberg, a German-born philosopher, author, and principal of the first orphanage that offered secular education; Eliezer Ben Yehuda, “the father of modern Hebrew”; David Yellin, Hebraist, founder of the Hebrew Teachers Seminary, and community representative; Ephraim Cohen, local representative of the “Ezra” educational fund; Avraham Moshe Luncz, founder and first director of the School for the Blind and leading geographer of Eretz Yisrael; Yosef Mejohas, President of the Council of Jerusalem Jews and a scion of the Sephardi community—and those who joined B’nai B’rith shortly afterwards—including Shimon Rokach, head of the Ashkenazi community in Jaffa and a member of the Yishuv’s political council; Yehiel Michael Pines, secretary general of the Hovevei Zion executive; and Meir Dizengoff, one of the founders of Tel Aviv and its first mayor—were among the political and cultural leaders of the developing Yishuv. Zigmund Semmel, a leader of B’nai B’rith in Germany, planted the idea of establishing a B’nai Brith lodge with Hertzberg during a visit to Jerusalem in 1887 after attending the inauguration of the Ben Maimon Lodge in Cairo. Oskar Strauss, a long-serving American consul in Constantinople, who was on a visit to Jerusalem in 1888, provided the immediate catalyst.

The creation of the Jerusalem Lodge was not B’nai B’rith’s first connection with the Holy Land. In 1865 a severe outbreak of cholera had struck all of Palestine. The disease seems to have spread from Egypt to Beirut and Izmir, then to Jaffa and other parts of Palestine, including Jerusalem, Hebron, and Nablus. The Board of Deputies of British Jews appealed to B’nai B’rith for assistance, and the organization’s first short-term overseas philanthropic project resulted in raising \$4,522 in response to



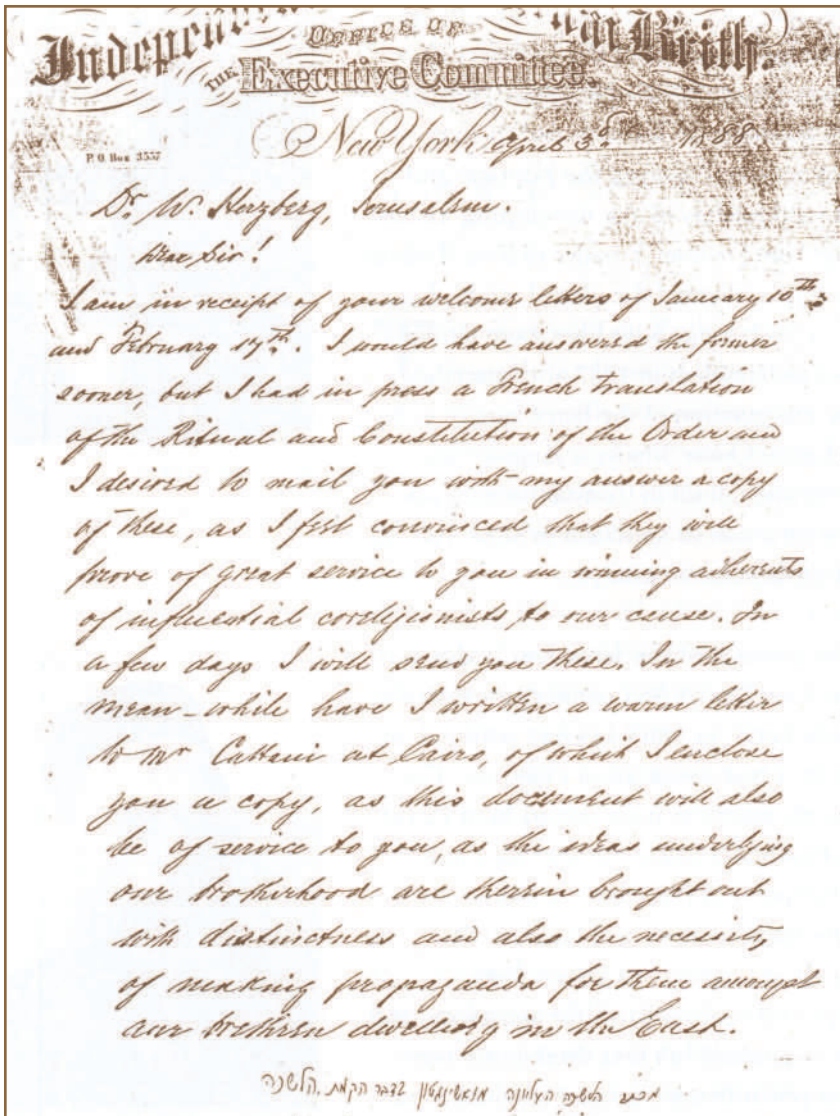
David Yellin-1920



Yehiel Michael Pines



Presidents of Jerusalem Lodge, David Yellin (center) - 1930s.



Letter from Executive Committee of B'nai B'rith in New York to Ze'ev Hertzberg-1888.



Zichron Ya'acov-1910

this request.

When B'nai B'rith was founded in 1843 by 12 German-Jewish immigrants at Sinsheimer's Cafe in New York City, its founders sought to forge an organization that would attract the entire spectrum of American Jewry and prevent this minority population from splintering into disconnected fragments. The situation in Eretz Yisrael was entirely different. There was no fear of assimilation, no need for ethnic solidarity. What was needed was a way to reconcile the sometimes fragile, often poor relations between Ashkenazi and Sephardi, old-timers and new settlers, religious and secular. At the lodge's first meeting, Hertzberg, who was elected the body's first president, spoke of uniting the Jews in Israel under the B'nai B'rith mantle. Uniting the people to improve the state of the Yishuv, while acting as a bridge between Eretz Yisrael and B'nai B'rith lodges throughout the world, became the young lodge's *raison d'être*.

In 1889 the Jerusalem Lodge received formal recognition from the B'nai B'rith Order in New York, which called upon it "to establish other lodges in the Holy Land." Under the aegis of the Jerusalem Lodge, the Sha'ar Zion Lodge was established in Jaffa in 1890, to be followed by the Galilee Lodge in Safed in 1891 and the Adolf Kraus Lodge in Zichron Ya'acov in 1911.

THE REVIVAL OF HEBREW

Ben-Yehuda, who became the Jerusalem Lodge's first secretary, called it "a center of visions." And, indeed, it fast became the unofficial cultural center of the new Yishuv. Believing that a Jewish national renaissance was conceivable only if it was consciously rooted in the Hebrew language and culture, the Jerusalem Lodge became the first public body in Palestine in which Hebrew was the official language. Its minutes were written in Hebrew and it was declared the preferred spoken tongue, although "everyone had the right to speak in the language of his choice."

B'nai B'rith's impact on the revival of Hebrew went well beyond lodge meetings. In 1889 a number of young lodge members



Jerusalem Lodge-1930s.

established Safah Berurah, the first organization aimed at “spreading the Hebrew language and speech among people in all walks of life.” The Jerusalem Lodge pledged “to strive its utmost to revive the language and support the organization at all times according to our ability.” A year later the group founded and elected the Va’ad Ha-Lashon Ha-Ivrit (the Hebrew Language Committee), the precursor of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, which to this day is the supreme authority on the Hebrew language. The committee, made up of Ben-Yehuda, Yellin, R. Hayyim Hirschenson, and Luncz, devoted itself to determining the Hebrew vocabulary needed for daily use and creating, out of the Babel-like variations, a uniform pronunciation for Hebrew speech.

Beyond the ideal of making Hebrew common to all Jews, the Jerusalem Lodge had a practical reason to support the widespread use of Hebrew. True to the egalitarian and pluralistic principles of B’nai B’rith, the Jerusalem Lodge was the only institution at the time which opened its doors to all ethnic groups and from its inception set out to meld the fragmented Jewish sects into a sin-



Hebrew Language Committee, sitting from left: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, Prof. Joseph Klausner, David Yellin.

gle Israelite community. If not yet the *lingua franca* of the burgeoning Yishuv, Hebrew was the common denominator between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, and the importance of maintaining its use at lodge meetings was constantly stressed.

Aside from Hebrew classes, B’nai B’rith

offered evening courses—continuing education, in today’s parlance—in several European languages. Taught on a voluntary basis by lodge members, it was part of an all-out effort to combat the missionary schools that were luring adults and children into their classrooms. So serious was the threat that B’nai B’rith denied membership to anyone who sent their children to one of the many missionary schools.

HEBREW FOR TOTS

Another B’nai B’rith initiative aimed at bridging the cultural and ethnic differences in the Yishuv and encouraging the use of

Hebrew, was the creation of the first Hebrew-speaking kindergarten in Jerusalem. (There already was one opened in 1898 in Rishon Le Zion and another in Jaffa opened in 1902.) Opened in 1903 in a rented house on B’nai B’rith Street, the kindergarten was immediately filled to capacity with 70 children. In a light-filled room, children of Ashkenazi and Sephardi backgrounds spent the day playing and eating together and learning to speak the same tongue.

The reaction from the ultra-Orthodox world was swift. Rabbinical authorities had already forbidden the study of science and foreign languages and they viewed the kindergarten with the same contempt. The rabbis posted warnings throughout the city—the kindergarten would lead Jewish children astray, down a path of corruption and ruin. David Yellin, one of the kindergarten founders, responded to the attacks in writing, expounding on the goals and activities of the new facility. Providing childcare for mothers who had to work, the kindergarten prevented youngsters from roaming the streets and offered them “an environment beyond the squalor of their homes.” Yellin stressed that children were taught the daily prayers (“so they will understand what is taught them at home”) and the elements of reading, while only hearing the strains of their “sacred tongue.”

The kindergarten was an educational experiment that set the tone for further Hebrew education in the country.

Subsequently B’nai B’rith opened a seminary for kindergarten teachers in Jerusalem, and the lodges in Jaffa, Safed, Tiberias, Rehovot, Haifa, and Beirut followed the Jerusalem example and opened Hebrew-speaking kindergartens. As the language wars were being fought on the university level—Hebrew vs. German as the language of instruction at the Technion in Haifa—the battle for Hebrew was being won with the new generation as scores of youngsters learned to speak what was destined to become the national tongue.



First Hebrew Kindergarten.



Second Hebrew Kindergarten-1907.