

The B'nai B'rith World Center

Jerusalem

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

INTRODUCTION

The booklet before you tells the remarkable and little-known story of B'nai B'rith in Eretz Yisrael from its beginnings in the last decade of the 19th century until the period following the founding of the state. It is a story of dogged determination to form a community of activists who would drive a movement toward Jewish revival in the Land of Israel, supported by B'nai B'rith members in other countries. The fundamental tasks they undertook included fostering egalitarianism among Jews, initiating Jewish-Hebrew education, promoting settlement of the land and attempting to ensure the primacy of the Hebrew language. The overarching motivation for all these activities was a will to promote the idea of Jewish peoplehood through concrete action—all this beginning a decade before Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress. Through the activities of the pioneer “Jerusalem Lodge,” Jewish children and adults were exposed for the first time to Hebrew education; the first libraries were established; missionary activity was fought; hospitals were founded; settlements were established; barriers between the divergent Jewish sects were overcome; lodges were formed; and *aliyah* was encouraged from neighboring countries.

Although it is difficult to determine the cumulative effect these activities had in establishing the building blocks upon which the state was eventually founded, their significance should not be underestimated. The Jewish community in the country at the twilight of the Ottoman Empire, which numbered only some 50,000 souls, was controlled by the feuding leaders of yeshiva communities whose sole means of support was philanthropy from overseas. The B'nai B'rith leaders sought to create a new community, one in which members would help themselves while helping others and one that would strive toward rapprochement between the existing factions within the community. The towering figures who undertook this task—among them David Yellin, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, Yehiel Michael

Pines, and Joseph Mejoahas—became legends in their own time for their work within the B'nai B'rith framework and for other civic projects that they initiated.

One of the most striking aspects of this movement was the founders' wish to popularize the notion of Jewish nationalism. On the occasion of the Jerusalem Lodge's 40th anniversary, David Yellin, a founding member of the lodge and later its president and president of the Palestine District of B'nai B'rith, reminisced in 1928:

“What was the essence of the founding of the lodge? ... [To create a] union of forces which seeks to move society towards joint efforts. The fact that this body was different than all others in that it did not operate by fiat of an omnipotent and exclusive board of directors, whose members are called just once a year for a general meeting to hear its report, but where every one of the brothers must always come to meetings and participate...

“And to this was added a second purpose from the day the lodge was founded: to endeavour with this great association [B'nai B'rith] which counts its members in the tens of thousands from among the best active forces in the whole world, to know the concept of [Jewish] nationalism and to recognize it, and this is more than ten years before Zionism was born...

“From the outset, the common opinion within the lodge was that in order to create a strong force in Eretz Yisrael, assistance must be secured from all the energetic forces in other cities in Eretz Yisrael and, on the other hand, one of its main goals must be to penetrate the large communities in the ancient world...and to imbue them with a new spirit, the spirit of our national rebirth... This was the true ‘winning over of the communities’ that Herzl dreamt about...

“And how much more work there is to persuade the entire Order! Lately the attitude of the Order has completely changed

in regard to the idea of building the land and to Zionism. Eretz Yisrael is slowly winning over the hearts of thousands of members, and whereas before it was forbidden to speak at the lodges about Zionism at all, now we find in the official B'nai B'rith Manual a special article about Zionism.....”

The leadership of the Jerusalem Lodge was wise in the ways of old-world diplomacy and responded quickly to new developments. Before the First World War, while Eretz Yisrael was under Ottoman rule, it established lodges in Izmir and Constantinople which later successfully lobbied the sultan to lift restrictions on *aliyah* and on purchase of land by Jews. Just after the war, when Palestine came under British rule, the Eretz Yisrael District was established, led by the Jerusalem Lodge.

Jesaias Press, an early member and president, summed up his sentiments as follows: “The Jerusalem Lodge laid the healthy foundations for the development of Hebrew culture and the national spirit among the Yishuv not only in Jerusalem but in all of Eretz Yisrael, and from it came the message and the light throughout the East. The lodge created on its own, or provided the impetus for the creation of, cultural and financial values which, in their time, made an imprint on the Yishuv and whose great importance is recognizable until today”

Joseph Mejoahas, another founder, used metaphors to describe the significant foundation laid by the lodge: “The lodge truly served as a greenhouse in which all those healthy seeds of work for our rebirth in the land were sowed and struck roots, and which are today as splendid plants and essential laws for us, and toward which we are all committed in heart and in spirit.”

In this scheme of national rebirth, Jerusalem held a special place in the hearts and minds of the founders. The early founders spared no effort to strengthen Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish

people. As we celebrate Israel’s 50th anniversary in a united Jerusalem under Jewish sovereignty, it is right to hear how both Yellin and Mejoahas reminisced about their attitudes toward this city. Speaking about the establishment of the rural settlement of Motza outside Jerusalem by the Jerusalem Lodge, Yellin wrote with pride: “How great was the celebration of the founding of Motza by three young farmers, the *halutzim* [pioneers] of those days, when all the brothers of the lodge and their families traveled to the celebrations of the founding of *the first settlement near Jerusalem* [emphasis by Yellin]. And there was a principle in this step: at that time, when Jerusalem was completely neglected by the Baron’s [Hirsch] clerks in regard to agricultural settlement, the Lodge sought to begin in earnest agricultural settlement near the capital of Eretz Yisrael in order to be an example for others; and Kiryat Anavim (Dolev), and Atarot (Kalandia) and Neveh Ya’acov indeed followed....”

And Mejoahas: “[The lodge] did not forsake any means to elevate the value of our capital city in the eyes of our brothers abroad, who had always thought of it as a city of laziness and idlers who receive *halukah* [charity distribution].”

Today, as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel, we of the World Center are proud to present this essay on the Jewish return to Eretz Yisrael. All B'nai B'rith members should take pride in the story that unfolds in the following pages.

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