



Visit of High Commissioner Herbert Samuel at the city council—1920. Sitting right to left: Jaref Mejohas, son of Weizmann, Chaim Weizmann, Herbert Samuel, Menachem Ussihkin, David Yellin

CHANGING FOCUS: B'NAI B'RITH AFTER WORLD WAR I

By the outbreak of World War I, the impact of B'nai B'rith—with only four lodges in all of Eretz Yisrael—on the developing Yishuv was unparalleled. The population of the Yishuv had reached 85,000, and Hebrew had become the daily language of an ever-increasing number of workers, teachers, and young people. But World War I wreaked havoc in the country. The Ottoman regime levied heavy taxes on the Jewish population, confiscated property, even expelled Turkish citizens, including Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and David Yellin. With contagious diseases rampant and starvation the rule rather than exception, thousands of Jews perished. The Turkish military administration, headed by Jamal Pasha instructed all Zionist and Jewish organizations in Palestine to cease operations. The Jerusalem Lodge members continued to meet clandestinely in a private home. Someone played the piano throughout the evening sessions so as not to arouse Turkish suspicions.

On December 11, 1917, the British army, commanded by General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem, and Ottoman rule over the Holy Land came to an end after 401 years. Two months later B'nai B'rith Jerusalem Lodge officially reconvened—Jesaias Press was elected president—and the Abarbanel Library, soon to be transferred to the WZO, was reopened. During the British Mandate, the administrative and political landscape of the Yishuv changed drastically. The Va'ad Leumi (National Committee), the main executive organ of the Jews in Palestine, now shared responsibility with the Jewish Agency for providing certain services to the Yishuv, in particular, education, health, social welfare, land development, immigration, and settlement. The Yishuv, by organizing and centralizing its energies, was setting the stage for the establishment of an independent Jewish state.

The effect on B'nai B'rith was inevitable. The organization, which had been such a key player in the cultural, social, and political development of the Yishuv, now, in the natural course of things, had to change its



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focus, concentrating on social and welfare services. Lodges were established throughout the Yishuv, in Tiberias, Hadera, Rishon LeZion, and Ramat Gan, and, in 1922, the first women's lodge, Bat Zion, was founded in Jerusalem.

During the years immediately following World War I, over 35,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine. Most of the newcomers were young Zionists, but the impoverished and small Yishuv was incapable of absorbing them all. Some formed collective settlement groups, others worked on construction sites, but many remained unemployed and not a small number found themselves without a roof over their heads.

Although the Jewish Agency was responsible for immigration policies (within the limitations delineated by the British Mandatory Administration), it was the Jerusalem Lodge of B'nai B'rith that created the country's first absorption center. In 1920 the organization acquired a small seven-room 24-bed house called Beit Olim

(Immigrants House). Providing shelter for newly arrived Jews until they found employment, Beit Olim was forced to close its doors in 1926 for lack of funds. But the center's activities had impressed a well-connected Jerusalemite, Chana Strashlovsky, who raised what was needed to purchase a large house next to the Jerusalem Lodge building on B'nai B'rith Street.

While Beit Chana, as the absorption center came to be called, was undergoing renovations, the Jerusalem Lodge rented two small houses to help alleviate the plight of the thousands of Jews fleeing Germany. In 1936, Beit Chana opened its doors. A two-story complex, it had 24 rooms, four auditoriums and could house up to as many as 100 new immigrants. By 1940 Beit Chana had provided bed, board, and emotional sustenance to over 22,000 new immigrants.

The upper floor of the hostel was used as the temporary quarters of the B'nai B'rith's Children's Home, a facility for emotionally disturbed children that was established in 1943, at the suggestion of Henrietta Szold, the founder of the Hadassah Medical Organization. Initially intended for recent arrivals from Teheran, the home soon began absorbing and treating scores of Jewish children, many of them orphans, who had experienced firsthand the horrors of the Holocaust.

While helping with temporary housing for new immigrants, B'nai B'rith also set its sights on renewing its settlement activities. At the urging of lodge president Jesaias Yehoshua Press, the Jerusalem Lodge established in 1924 the B'nai B'rith Palestine Housebuilding Fund with money provided by the Constitution Grand Lodge in the United States. Press had his eye on an area of 25,000 dunams of wasteland on the western outskirts of Jerusalem, and, in the same year, B'nai B'rith purchased the land and established Achuzat B'nai B'rith, the nucleus of what is today's Bayit Vegan neighborhood. The neighborhood's synagogue still bears the B'nai B'rith title though most current residents would be hard pressed to explain why. It was in Bayit Vegan that American B'nai B'rith Women decided to build permanent quarters for the Children's Home, which includes sophisticated educational and treatment facilities.

B'nai B'rith also established Ramat Aharon, a settlement near Rehovot, in memory of Aharon Eizenberg, one of the leading figures of the Yishuv at the time and a founder of Rehovot. In his life, Eizenberg had been a vocal advocate for greater settlement activity by B'nai B'rith through the establishment of small settlements near the more established moshavot. When he passed away, his family bequeathed 26.5 dunams of land to B'nai B'rith upon which the settlement was founded, with the B'nai B'rith Palestine Housebuilding Fund providing loans to each settler.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

In the years leading up to the establishment of the State of Israel, as the Zionist leadership laid the groundwork for independence, B'nai B'rith in Palestine focused most of its energies on the social and welfare needs of the local Jewish population—on refugees from war-torn Europe, on maintaining its building funds, on its many cultural and educational facilities for children, teenagers and adults.

While B'nai B'rith in the Yishuv was able to recede, quite naturally, from the political arena, American B'nai B'rith worked tirelessly to ensure that independence would be achieved. As Jewish immigration and settlement resumed following World War 1, the B'nai B'rith Supreme Lodge Convention in 1925 in Atlantic City passed a resolution expressing “full sympathy with the practical work and construction” in Palestine.

In 1934, Chaim Weizmann proposed to B'nai B'rith in the United States that it purchase land in order to help create Jewish-owned acreage. An unheard-of sum of \$100,000 from the Emergency Relief Fund was designated to buy 1,000 acres of land. It was an unprecedented move: American Jewry's oldest and largest organization was concretely supporting a continuing Jewish presence in Palestine. With these funds, land was purchased in the lower Galilee upon which *moshav* Moledet B'nai B'rith was founded in 1937 by a group of German refugees.

Two years after the British issued their



Bayit Vegan—general view.



Ramat Aharon

infamous White Paper in 1939 severely restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine, an additional \$100,000 was pledged at B'nai B'rith's 16th General Convention for the purpose of buying land, also in the lower Galilee, to create another refuge for European Jewish refugees. The *moshav* was founded in 1942, and after the death of B'nai B'rith president and ardent Zionist Henry (Zvi) Monsky, it was renamed Ramat Zvi.

During his tenure as president, Monsky appealed to leaders of the United Nations and to State Department officials to safeguard the rights of the Jewish people in their historic homeland. A few days after Monsky's sudden and untimely death on May 2, 1947, grieving delegates to the Supreme Lodge's triennial meeting in Washington passed a resolution demanding the cancellation of the White Paper and calling upon the U.N. “to facilitate the



Ramat Aharon



Moledet B'nai B'rith—1937. First truck unloads in the plowing fields.

establishment of a homeland for Jewish people in Palestine.”

In September 1947, when it became clear that by a majority report, the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) was going to recommend the partition of the country into two states, one Jewish, the other, Arab, Frank Goldman, the newly elected president of B'nai B'rith, sent a telegram to President Harry Truman, appealing to him for an “immediate public statement supporting the principle of UNSCOP majority.”

Jewish rejoicing over the Partition Resolution, adopted on November 29, 1947, was soon followed by grave concern. The resolution was rejected by the Arab states. This sparked riots throughout Palestine, and the U.S. State Department, always sympathetic to Arab interests and



Moledet B'nai B'rith—1937. Erecting the walls.

opposed to Jewish statehood, succeeded in changing U.S. policy at the U.N. with a proposal that partition be suspended in favor of a “temporary” U.N. trusteeship over the area. The Zionist leadership recognized that adoption of trusteeship could doom the hope for a Jewish state.

The Zionist leadership in the United States attacked the White House incessantly, infuriating President Truman. The doors to the White House were bolted shut to all Zionist and Arab leaders. The president of the WZO, Chaim Weizmann, who had traveled to the United States in early February 1948 to appeal personally to the American president to restore U.S. support for partition, lay ill in bed at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, unable to get an appointment to see the American president.

It was the B'nai B'rith leadership that broke the deadlock. Frank Goldman, in a chance meeting with Weizmann's aid in the hotel lobby, learned of Truman's refusal to meet with Weizmann. Goldman then contacted Eddie Jacobson of Kansas City, Missouri, a long-time B'nai B'rith member and World War I friend of Truman's and his former partner in a Kansas City haberdashery.

Jacobson had once told Goldman that he was not a Zionist, but he reluctantly agreed to see what he could do and visited Truman on March 13, 1948. After exchanging personal greetings, Jacobson brought up the subject of Palestine. Truman became tense and grim, saying he was sick of the way the Zionists had badgered him. Despite all of Jacobson's powers of persuasion, the president remained firm and immutable in his refusal to meet with Weizmann. When Jacobson was about to leave he noticed a statue of the president's hero, Andrew Jackson, on his desk. Jacobson turned to Truman and said: “Harry, all your life you have had a hero. Well, I too have a hero, a man who is, I think, the greatest Jew who ever lived. I am talking about Chaim Weizmann.” A few seconds passed. Truman eventually looked Jacobson straight in the eye: “You win, you bald-headed son-of-a-bitch,” he is quoted as replying.

Elaborate precautions were taken to conceal Weizmann's presence in Washington

from the press. He registered at a Washington hotel in the name of the B'nai B'rith executive vice-president, Maurice Bisgyer. On March 18, 1948, Weizmann entered the White House through a side door. The discussion lasted nearly an hour and was cordial. Weizmann's unfailing dignity and charm had their effect on the president, and U.S. support for partition was restored. "When he left my office," Truman later wrote, "I felt that he had received a full understanding of my policy and that I knew what it was he wanted."

On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion announced the establishment of the State of Israel, the first sovereign Jewish state in 19 centuries. Moments later, President Truman extended de facto recognition to the State of Israel, the first country to recognize the new state and on January 31, 1949, Truman extended de jure recognition. The only guests invited to the signing ceremony in the Oval Office were Jacobson, Goldman, and Bisgyer.

In May 1965, at the Supreme Lodge Convention in Israel, the new B'nai B'rith building was dedicated in Tel Aviv to the memory of Eddie Jacobson. At the ceremony, a message from Harry Truman was read to the audience: "Although my sympathies were already active and present in the cause of Israel, it is a fact of history that Eddie Jacobson's contribution was of decisive importance."

So, too, was that of B'nai B'rith. It had fought hard for the revival of Hebrew and for the cultural unity of a people in their ancient homeland. B'nai B'rith actively encouraged resettlement of the land; aided new immigrants and veteran soldiers and supported educational endeavours for the young and old, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, religious and secular. It had fought long and hard for enlightenment, for tolerance and for justice. When the State of Israel came into being, a chapter of B'nai B'rith's history had come to a successful close. A new one was already beginning.

The activities undertaken by B'nai B'rith on behalf of Israel following independence, both by its international leadership and members and by its members in Israel, are too numerous to cover in this publication.



Moledet B'nai B'rith—1941. The guard tower.



From left to right. U.S. President Harry Truman, Eddie Jacobson, Maurice Bisgyer and Frank Goldman at the birth of the State of Israel.

The following are just a sample of some of the major initiatives.

Immediately after Israel had proclaimed its independence, the armies of seven Arab nations invaded the fledgling state. B'nai B'rith's response was immediate. Food, clothing, medical supplies, trucks, and jeeps were carried by ship after ship to Haifa port. The total value of these shipments was well over \$4,000,000.

During the Six-Day War in 1967, under



Capt. Shalom P. Doron (far left), an unidentified woman and Capt. Yehoshua Yardeni examining food parcels marked “B’nai B’rith Food for Israel”—New York, 1949.

the presidency of Dr. William A. Wexler, and again during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, under the presidency of David Blumberg, B’nai B’rith members demonstrated their ability to mobilize manpower and rally behind the State of Israel. Not only did B’nai B’rith succeed in selling millions of dollars in Israel Bonds—more than any other Jewish organization—but through local Hillel

foundations enlisted scores of volunteers for service in Israel. Perhaps most moving were the rallies of solidarity for the beleaguered Jewish state.

Of course, B’nai B’rith did not limit its efforts to wartime activities. At the B’nai B’rith International Convention in 1950, two resolutions were passed concerning the new state. One called upon the United

States and the U.N. to use “their respective good offices to bring about the cessation of the flow of arms and ammunition to the Arab countries.” The second resolution was passed to protest the U.N. resolution to internationalize Jerusalem. The same year, the 200th Hillel unit was established at the Hebrew University and in the 1950s, B’nai B’rith donated funds to build recreation centers for Israeli war veterans. Until B’nai B’rith brought these institutions into being, the disabled Israeli veterans had only the crudest kind of recreational facilities. B’nai B’rith also established a Rehabilitation Fund, granting loans to new immigrants, in particular for the purpose of establishing small businesses.

In 1954, B’nai B’rith launched a monumental project—the planting of half a million trees as a memorial to both B’nai B’rith members who perished in the Holocaust and European lodges that had been destroyed. A grotto was also hewn out of solid rock to serve as a central memorial. When the Martyr’s Forest was fully planted in 1965, in time for the 1965 Convention held in Israel, a decision was made to plant another half million trees. The result is one of the Jerusalem area’s most popular picnic and recreational spots. Set in the midst of the forest is the B’nai B’rith “Scroll of Fire” Monument. Dedicated in 1972, it is an evocative relief sculpture, commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and the triumphant birth of the Jewish state.



Shalom P. Doron presenting tribute to Authur Lelleveld, director, B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation; Prof. Hugo Bergman; and Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky, the first director of Hillel in Jerusalem—1952.

Always an organization of firsts, in 1959 1,300 B'nai B'rith delegates gathered in Jerusalem for the first international convention of any Jewish group ever held in Israel. B'nai B'rith President Philip Klutznick opened the Supreme Lodge Convention in Jerusalem's new (the roof was not yet finished) convention center, Binyanei Ha'uma. The highlight of the convention was Prime Minister Ben Gurion's nighttime address at the Hebrew University amphitheater at Givat Ram. B'nai B'rith held another convention in Israel in 1965, electing Dr. William A. Wexler—who, after retiring from professional activity, became the only B'nai B'rith president to settle in Israel—as successor to Label Katz. B'nai B'rith's third convention in Israel was held in 1974. Originally planned for London, the '74 convention was moved in answer to the British government's pro-Arab policies during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. B'nai B'rith was the first Jewish group to visit Egypt, at the invitation of President Anwar el-Sadat—only six weeks after Israel and Egypt signed the Camp David Accords. And when the U.N. Security Council voted in 1980 for an Arab-sponsored move not to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, B'nai B'rith responded by establishing its World Center in the nation's capital.



Entrance to the grotto at the B'nai B'rith Martyr's Forest Memorial Shrine.



Entrance to B'nai B'rith Martyrs' Forest in Israel. Since its opening in 1954, over 1,088,000 trees have been planted.



“Scroll of Fire” Monument. Dedicated in 1972, set in the midst of the B’nai B’rith Martyr’s Forest.