

# B'NAI B'RITH

M A G A Z I N E

PUBLISHED SINCE 1886

WINTER 2017

## The Albert and Joseph Letters: It Wasn't All About Science

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Eight months after the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan to end World War II, the world-famous scientist whose discoveries unleashed the destructive forces of the atom wrote of his concern that “all of humanity” may be in danger of another “catastrophe.”

Albert Einstein's March 19, 1946, letter was addressed to Joseph Brainin — journalist, writer and archivist for the papers of Dr. Chaim Weizmann, also a scientist and the first president of Israel. The letter is contained in a collection of correspondence between Einstein and Brainin recently donated by Brainin's heirs to New York's YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

The correspondence, which has never before been published, spans a nearly 20-year period from 1932 through 1950 and sheds light on how the father of the atomic bomb saw his role in relation to the hoped-for Jewish state in Palestine and as a postwar supporter for liberal causes.

Einstein, who promulgated the revolutionary theory of relativity in 1916, was visiting the United States in 1933 when Adolph Hitler came to power and did not return to his native Germany. He took up residence in Princeton, N.J., where the Nobel Prize winner continued his research as a member of the Institute for Advanced Studies and died in April 1955, at the age of 76.



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Pictured on the deck of the SS Rotterdam, Albert Einstein, Chaim Weizmann and other Zionist leaders embarked on a fundraising tour for Palestine in 1921.

Joseph Brainin was the son of Reuben Brainin, a Russian Jewish biographer, publicist and literary critic who died in New York City in 1939. Joseph died in 1970, at 74.

The Brainin-Einstein collection is comprised of German and English typed and handwritten correspondence sent to and from Brainin and Einstein, his wife, Elsa,

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and secretary, Helen Dukas. Most are letters of transmittal, but they provide commentary on their enclosures, drafts or finished copies of speeches or statements that Einstein or his representative would deliver at fundraising dinners or read to the press.

Some are more personal — and pointed. In April 1937, Einstein wrote to Brainin criticizing Dr. Karl Landsteiner, born Jewish but a Catholic convert who objected to his inclusion in “Who’s Who in American Jewry” and even sued to have his name removed. Einstein wrote Brainin that “Dr. Landsteiner’s attitude is unquestionably deplorable, indeed pitiable.”

The relationship between Brainin and Einstein began to develop shortly after Einstein took up residence in the United States. The two men shared mutual philanthropic objectives and political sentiments and joined forces to heighten awareness of and raise money for the plight of war refugees and for charities in Palestine.

Einstein would also be identified by his connection to and love for the Jewish people, which had gradually evolved, he later wrote, as the “strongest human attachment ever since I reached complete awareness of our precarious position among the nations.”

Some letters contain details about the trajectory of Einstein’s relationship to the organizations with which both he and Brainin were associated. Lending his name as an enhancement to the boards of a number of labor organizations and Jewish philanthropies, Einstein served as honorary president of the American Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists and Writers (CWAS), possibly at the request of Brainin, who chaired its executive committee. One of many Russian-American friendship groups that flourished in the United States even before Russia joined the Allies during World War II, CWAS, and its Soviet counterpart, the Jewish Antifascist Committee, promoted Yiddish culture in both countries.

As evidenced by the short speeches



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A hand-tinted photo of the young Einstein.

Einstein drafted and sent to for approval to Brainin, the physicist was committed to the organization’s mission for a number of years after the war ended, but he tendered his resignation on Aug. 16, 1948. By letter of Sept. 9, 1948, Einstein explained to Brainin that he was convinced that CWAS was turning into “a Jewish party organization” reflecting his own fears that the perception of Jews forging a union that crossed international borders would feed into the anti-Semitic stereotype of the influence of a worldwide Jewish cabal.

Two years later, on April 21, 1950, Einstein complained to Brainin that he was still listed as honorary chairman on the committee’s letterhead. Eight days later, he resigned from the organization.

Einstein’s letters to Brainin reference statements, including one he intended to make on behalf of the presidential campaign of former Vice President Henry Wallace, whose progressive politics and anti-nuclear platform aligned with his own

views, and another, which was read on his behalf at the 1948 dedication of Poland’s first Holocaust memorial in the Warsaw Ghetto. Others focus on Einstein’s interest in Jewish music and theater.

Throughout the correspondence, Einstein and Brainin write to each about their shared passion for the land then called Palestine. Einstein professed in his writings that this sense of belonging was integral to Jewish survival, and he emphasized in an essay that “the Jewish nation is a living fact . . . Zionism strengthens the self-confidence of the Jews” and he reiterated throughout his life that “Palestine creates a strong bond which gives the Jews moral support.”

It was in 1921 that he joined his colleague Chaim Weizmann, then-World Zionist Organization president, on a successful trip in the United States to raise funds for Jerusalem’s proposed Hebrew University. Later, Einstein would present the University’s inaugural lecture.

Throughout the 1930s, Einstein urgently promoted the Jewish homeland, as desperate Jews sought a means of escape from Europe. Soliciting contributions for the League for Labor Palestine, and Jerusalem’s Children’s Hospital, he concluded in a 1933 speech that the educated classes of German Jewish professionals who had settled there and were now working as artisans or farmers were perhaps best suited to be “in a position to create a healthy relationship with the Arab nation . . . the support of labor also means the furthering of a human and worthy political policy.”

One of the most interesting items in the YIVO collection is a typed document in English, with a handwritten date of February 1941. Headed simply “Einstein message,” it may have been prepared for one of the several Palestine advocacy organizations in which the two men were involved.

In this speech, Einstein remarks that “Eternal calamity provides the ultimate test of the vitality or individuals or communi-

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Einstein lived modestly in this house on Mercer Street in Princeton, where he taught at the University's Institute for Advanced Study.

ties. ... In but a few years' time, the common destiny of all Jews has become a matter of course to all of us .... our responsibility [is] the upbuilding of Palestine as a center of Jewish life ... may our love for our Palestine work therefore remain alive in our souls ...” Einstein also expressed his hope for “a permanent understanding with the Arabs ...”

Also in the Brainin papers are several copies in English of Einstein's January 1946 letter to the Zionist philosopher Martin Buber, written in their native German. In it, he condemns the British for imposing “restrictions on immigration, limitations on land acquisition by the Jews ...”

Agreeing with Buber's positing of a two-state solution, Einstein also wrote to Brainin on Aug. 7, 1947: “As per your request, I am expressing my longstanding conviction that a bi-national form of government is the only just and expedient government form for Palestine. However, administration functions would have to be essentially



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Designed in 1968, Israel's Five Lira note commemorates Einstein's discoveries in physics.


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handled by the United Nations for the foreseeable future, since political life in Palestine is thoroughly entrenched and the country is therefore not yet ripe for political independence.”

In 1948, Einstein, along with many other Jewish Zionists who had endorsed and worked for Israel, publicly criticized an alleged massacre by the paramilitary Irgun faction in an Arab village during the War for Independence. In response, Einstein and Leo Baeck, the B'nai B'rith leader and theologian, in a letter to The New York Times called for mutual cooperation in an effort to avoid what they decied as “a futile war.”

Rejecting what he felt to have been a transgression against Judaism's moral code, and for some years after 1948, Einstein turned a critical eye to Israel but remained a supporter. Following the death of Chaim Weizmann, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion had a letter delivered to Einstein in Princeton in November, 1952, requesting that the physicist assume the Israeli presidency. In his answer, Einstein expressed his distress at having to decline, citing both his advanced age and what he considered his poor interpersonal skills.

Just prior to his death, Einstein worked with Israeli diplomat Abba Eban to compose a message intended for a national broadcast on American radio and television but which was never recorded or delivered due to his failing health. Again citing Israel as the haven for the survivors of the Holocaust, Einstein hailed the country as a living monument which “actively engages the conscience of this generation.”

A document evidencing the metamorphosis of his attitude to the Jewish homeland, the speech called attention to the “bitter paradox that Israel was threatened by dangers to its own security.” Einstein observed that the world powers endeavored to maintain the conflict in the Middle East as the wedge that would exacerbate the “struggle between East and West . . . It is anomalous that world opinion should only criticize Israel's response to hostility, and should not actively seek to bring an end to the Arab hostility which is the root cause of the tension.” 



Credit from the Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

Photographed for the cover of this South American magazine, Joseph Brainin, far left, and Albert Einstein, posed with Ilya Ehrenburg, leader of the Jewish Antifascist Committee of the Soviet Union. Both men helped to promote its mission in the United States.