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THE PEOPLE & THE BOOK RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Reflections on Balfour 100

As we mark the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks considers what it meant in 1917 – and what it means today

What is the place of the Balfour Declaration in the history of Zionism?

“Dear Lord Rothschild...” These three words helped to change the course of modern Jewish history and ultimately create the State of Israel.

The Balfour Declaration was the beginning of really a massive new chapter in the 2,000-year longing of the Jewish people for its land. Of course, Jews had never forsaken the dream of return, and that return, *shivat tzion*, the return home to Zion, was written into every Jewish heart.

But it wasn't until the 19th century that that process of return really gathered momentum. In 1876, the British novelist George Eliot wrote perhaps the first Zionist novel, “Daniel Deronda.” And there was a huge wellspring of feeling in Britain, very much among Christians, that the dawn of the new age would see the return of Jews to their land.

Twenty years after was the first Zionist Congress. Theodor Herzl's dramatic shift of Zionism from a dream and an aspiration for individuals to a political program. The fact of the Balfour Declaration was the first shift of this from an aspiration to a real possibility. So this was the first time a national government had said Jews have the right to return home. It was a bold and history transforming act.

What was so unique about the Balfour Declaration?

What was unique about the Balfour Declaration was, I think, three things. First of all, this was the ultimate anti-imperialist gesture. Don't forget, between the Roman Conquest and the First World War, Israel had simply been a part, an administrative district, in an empire – Christian empires, and then the various Islamic empires, and ultimately the Ottoman Empire. So it had

never been a nation in its own right. As part of this new world brought into being during the First World War, one consequence of which was the final death of the Ottoman Empire, was the sense of giving lands back to their original inhabitants – all the lands given back to Arabs, given back to Jews. So it was the anti-imperialist gesture.

Secondly, it was the only bit of this gesture covering all the regions which actually reaffirmed a historically grounded state, the Biblical state and Land of Israel. All the others, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, were artificial creations that had never existed as nation-states in their own right. And that is one of the reasons why even today all those areas are riven by ancient tribal and civil animosities. Whereas Israel was the only country that had been a nation-state of its own for a thousand years, from the days of the Judges to the final Second Temple period. So it was a beautifully anti-imperialist gesture, and it was the restoration of a historic nation to its historic homeland.

And the third thing that was so powerful, but tragically not fully realized, was that it provided Jews with a place of refuge. Now, had there been open access of Jews to the land of Israel, I don't know how many millions of Jewish lives might have been saved during the Holocaust. But, of course, what happened during the Holocaust was that Jews realized there was nowhere they could freely go. However, the fact remains that the Balfour Declaration recognized that Jews as a nation subject to a thousand years of persecution needed a place that they could call home in the Robert Frost sense of the place where when you have to go there, they have to let you in.

What was the situation in Britain in November 1917?

In 1917, Britain was still deep into World

War I, and it would have been so easy for it to ignore the long-term vision and focus instead on the immediacies of war. And it says something for the vision and moral courage of Britain's political leadership at the time that it said, no, this war that we are fighting is not for ourselves alone, but to create a more just and secure world. And for it to be able to say to Jews and, indeed, to the Arab world as well – let us not forget that this was part of a larger picture – the Age of Empire is over; we want to give back these lands to their original inhabitants. That was visionary and moral politics of a high order, and we should salute it in retrospect.

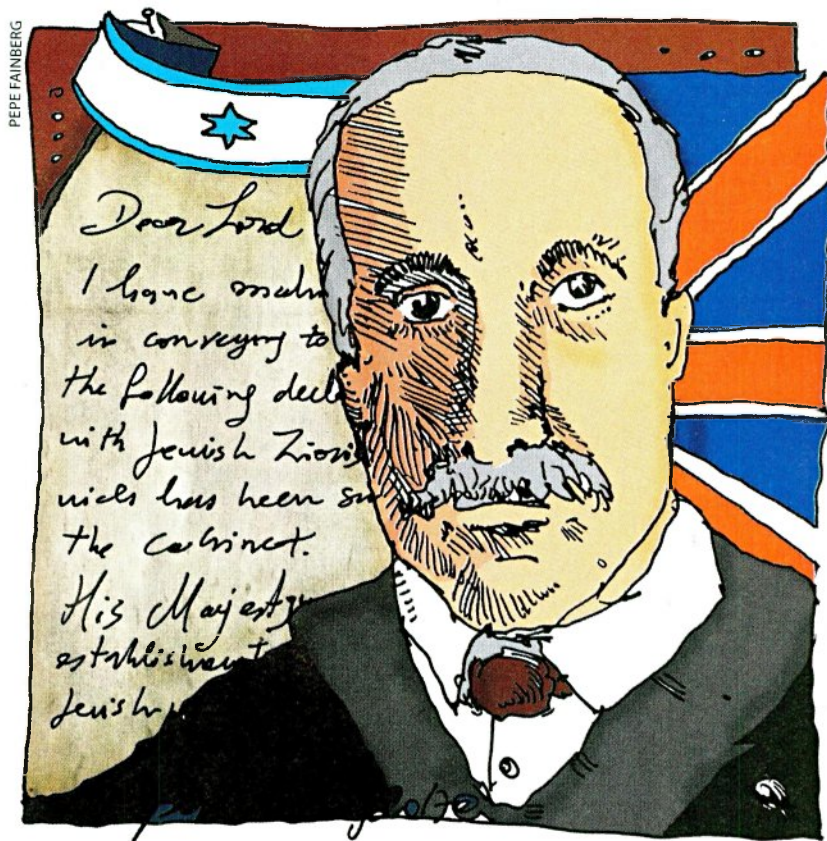
What are the lessons of the Balfour Declaration 100 years on?

The Balfour Declaration was very clear, in a rather murky area, in that it recognized the rights of Jews to a homeland, but it also respected the rights of the other people who were living there at the time. So it was predicated on some peaceful coexistence of Jews and Arabs in the land. And for a moment it seemed as though that might happen, because two years after the Balfour Declaration, Chaim Weizmann, who was the leader of the Zionist movement at the time, and Emir Faisal, who was the leading Arab politician at the time, came to an agreement in which Jews recognized the claim of Arab nationalism and Muslims recognized the claim of Jewish nationalism. It was a very blessed moment, in which both sides saw that they would both gain from a Jewish presence in the region.

And therefore, it is the sense of possibility that we need to recapture, because the reasons for coexistence have not diminished in a hundred years; but what has diminished is the sense that each is willing to make space for the other.

On the Jewish side, we've always been

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willing to make space. Weizmann was, Ben-Gurion was. There have been key moments when Israel offered peace and statehood to the Palestinians, and unfortunately met with very uncompromising attitudes. I don't want to level blame in any direction here. But the dream of the Balfour Declaration, of this coexistence of two distinct groups of people, remains the dream today, and I don't think we should waste another hundred years in unrealized dreams. My

plea is that finally we make space for one another.

What does the Balfour Declaration teach us about the power of the individual?

The Balfour Declaration does dramatically illustrate the power of a single individual, let alone a small group, to change history. Don't forget, the return to Zion had been a dream for 2,000 years, but it took Theodor Herzl to turn it into an effective political

movement. It took Chaim Weizmann, an extraordinarily charismatic figure, to persuade leading figures in Britain to issue the Balfour Declaration. It took David Ben-Gurion to provide that visionary leadership that brought the state into being. Here are three individuals who changed the pattern of history. And one shouldn't forget the role of women in this story, like Dorothy de Rothschild, Dorothy Pinto as she was before she was married, who was a key factor in helping Weizmann achieve these results with the British cabinet. So here are individuals who really, by the force and courage of their conviction, brought others with them and changed the world.

I believe that the world is a better place with the State of Israel. It's not just Jews who have benefited from the return of a people to its land, and the return of a language, the language of the Bible, to everyday use, as well as the extraordinary achievements of the State of Israel. And one element of that was the Balfour Declaration, so in looking back at this seminal moment in history, we have to say thank you to the vision of the British government then, and we hope the world will come to see how Israel is a symbol of hope for any small and much persecuted people when given the chance to create a new chapter in the story of humankind, which is what Israel is in today's world. ■

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is an internationally recognized religious leader, philosopher and the author of more than 30 books, who served as chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991-2013. The transcript above is from a video produced by Rabbi Sacks to mark the Balfour Centenary. To watch it, please visit www.RabbiSacks.org/Balfour100