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JEWISH HISTORY IN MODERN TIMES

by
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THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE BALFOUR DECLARATION Experimental Edition

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(1) RAV KOOK'S LETTER TO HIS PARENTS ON THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN ERETZ ISRAEL

I very much implore my honoured parents, whom I love with all my soul, that you should not have any sorrow because of the conflicts in which I needs must be involved on behalf of our colonies. There is absolutely no reason for sorrow. Thank God our holy land is being built up before our very eyes. The words of God, sent through his servants the prophets regarding the return to Zion and the resurrection of the house of Israel on the hallowed ground — they are in the process of realisation in His great lovingkindness. The prisoners from all lands of the exile come with a longing soul to the cities of Judea, which have begun to shake off the dust of their desolation — and our eyes see all this and are glad, we are filled with eternal jubilation and hopes as of paradise. And while the hand of God is stretched out full of love towards his downtrodden people and his land that has been lying waste so many hundreds of years — we find ourselves privileged to take part in all this — whether in a small or a large way . . . Is this not a source of the greatest happiness which is more than enough to compensate for some inconvenience, for some feeling of regret or uneasiness. Praise unto God who has given me this soul and who in His highest wisdom has created the conditions in which I may do my share of service on the hills of Israel in this most happy time, when the stream of life of the people of Israel is gathering strength, that He has raised me above all those minute and negligible considerations, so that they do not touch my soul or my heart . . .

(2) THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN SIR HENRY McMAHON,
THE BRITISH HIGH COMMISSIONER IN EGYPT AND SHERIF
HUSSEIN OF MECCA

Britain through her senior representative in Cairo, conducted a correspondence with Sherif Hussein to enlist his help in her struggle against the Turks and the possible recompense for such help.

This correspondence did not end in a binding agreement, but its implications and the different interpretations given to it, particularly by Arabs claiming that the commitments included Palestine (hence the "illegality" of the Balfour Declaration), have been debated by politicians and historians to this very day.

In his letter of 24 October 1915 — the key letter in the whole episode — McMahon refers to the territory which Great Britain was prepared to grant Sherif Hussein as follows:

The two districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and should be excluded from the limits demanded. With the above modification, and without prejudice to our existing treaties with Arab chiefs, we accept those limits. As for the regions lying within those frontiers wherein Great Britain is free to act without detriment to the interests of her ally, France, I am empowered in the name of the Government of Great Britain to give the following assurances and make the following reply to your letter . . .

Cmd. 5957, 1939

After the war, the Arabs raised the argument that this correspondence was tantamount to a pact between the two sides and that since Hussein had fulfilled his obligation by joining Britain in the war, Great Britain ought to fulfill her part according to the specifications of McMahon's letter.

The Arabs argued that Palestine was included in the areas which McMahon agreed to recognise under Arab control.

On 26 October 1915, two days after writing to Hussein, McMahon sent a dispatch to the Foreign Office in London explaining what he had written two days earlier to Hussein:

I have been definite in stating that Great Britain will recognise the principle of Arab independence in purely Arab territory, this being the main point on which agreement depends, but have been equally definite in excluding Marsina, Alexandretta and *those portions on the northern coast of Syria* which cannot be said to be Arab, and where I understand the French interests have been recognised. I am not aware of the extent of French claims in Syria, nor of how far His Majesty's Government have agreed to

recognise them. Hence, while recognising the towns of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo as being within the circle of Arab countries, *I have endeavoured to provide for possible French pretensions to these places by a general modification to the effect that His Majesty's Government can only give assurance in regard to those territories in which Great Britain is free to act without detriment to the interests of her ally France.*

Public Records Office, ser. 371, file 2486

It is apparent from this letter that as regards the whole of Syria, which included Palestine, British commitment was explicitly conditional on the safeguarding of French interests in this area. As is well known, France had definite interests in Syria. The Arabs continued to quote McMahon's letter in their claim to Palestine and a bitter controversy over its interpretation arose during the thirties between Great Britain and the Arabs. Henry McMahon and Colonel C.E. Vickery wrote on this subject to "The Times" of London as follows:

Sir: Many references have been made in the Palestine Royal Commission Report and in the course of the recent debates in both Houses of Parliament to the "McMahon Pledge," especially to that portion of the pledge which concerns Palestine and of which one interpretation has been claimed by the Jews and another by the Arabs.

It has been suggested to me that continued silence on the part of the giver of that pledge may itself be misunderstood.

I feel, therefore, called upon to make some statement on the subject, but I will confine myself in doing so to the point now at issue — i.e., whether that portion of Syria now known as Palestine was or was not intended to be included in the territories in which the independence of the Arabs was guaranteed in my pledge.

I feel it my duty to state, and I do so definitely and emphatically, that it was not intended by me in giving this pledge to King Hussein to include Palestine in the area in which Arab independence was promised.

I also had every reason to believe at the time that the fact that Palestine was not included in my pledge was well understood by King Hussein.

Yours faithfully,
A. Henry McMahon
July 22, 1937

Sir: Since it has been decided to publish the letter addressed by Sir Henry McMahon to Sherif Hussein in 1915 it may be of interest to record my impressions of the interview that I had with the late King Hussein in 1920

under instructions from Cairo to read personally the original copy of this letter held by the King. My information was that no copy existed at Cairo, but as to that I am not in a position to say whether this was so or not.

It happened that the King had arrived at Jeddah the day before I received my instructions, and I asked for my audience, which was at once accorded. It was not my custom to take an interpreter with me for these audiences and I was received by the King alone on the top storey of his Jeddah house. For an hour or more I listened to the bitter complaints of King Hussein of the way he had been treated in defiance of pledged and written word; again and again I brought the discussion round to the 1915 letter and tried to provoke the Sherif into showing it to me. It must have been after midday when I had been with him over three hours, for on looking down from my seat in the bow window there was no shadow in the street and the sun was suspended like some sword over the city, that the King suddenly clapped his hands and bade the slave who came in to bring his portfolio. This was done and unlocked by Hussein himself; he fumbled through some papers and finally threw one at me. "Read yourself, O light of my eye," he said. I read the letter through very slowly; it was not written in very scholarly Arabic and had no English translation in the margin, and it was quite evident that Palestine was not included in the proposals to the King.

I can say most definitely that the whole of the King's demands were centered round Syria and only round Syria. Time after time he referred to that vineyard, to the exclusion of any other claim or interest. He stated most emphatically that he did not concern himself at all with Palestine and had no desire to have suzerainty over it for himself or his successors. He did, however, frequently and vehemently, point out to me the following excerpt of the letter, and as it is to be published, the accuracy of my memory can be established. "Bil niabah el hakumah el britannieh el azimah ana aqbil bi kull motalibkum." "On behalf of the great British Government I accept all your demands." This may have been worded unfortunately, for there was no doubt in my mind that it referred to the requests for munitions of war which he demanded with great frequency. Nothing would persuade the Sherif Hussein that it did not refer to everything that he had asked for in the acquisition of territories to form the Arabian Empire which inspired every waking moment of his life.

So many are the historians of the Arab revolt and so many are the stories of events which one person had from another who knew a third who was present, that I venture to send you this account of an interview at which there were only two people present and one had long since passed to that paradise that the great prophet promised to the faithful.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient servant,
C.E. Vickery.
February 21, 1939

(3) THE ARAB REBELLION – AN EVALUATION BY
COLONEL LAWRENCE

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible. This I did. I meant to make a new nation, to restore a lost influence, to give twenty millions of Semites the foundations on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thoughts. So high an aim called out the inherent nobility of their minds, and made them play a generous part in events: but when we won, it was charged against me that the British petrol royalties in Mesopotamia were become dubious, and French colonial policy ruined in the Levant.

I am afraid that I hope so. We pay for these things too much in honour and in innocent lives. I went up the Tigris with one hundred Devon Territorials, young, clean, delightful fellows, full of the power of happiness and of making women and children glad. By them one saw vividly how great it was to be their kin, and English. And we were casting them by thousands into the fire to the worst of deaths, not to win the war but that the corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia might be ours. The only need was to defeat our enemies (Turkey among them), and this was at last done in the wisdom of Allenby with less than four hundred killed, by turning to our uses the hands of the oppressed in Turkey. I am proudest of my thirty fights in that I did not have any of our own blood shed. All our subject provinces to me were not worth one dead Englishman.

*T.E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom,
London, 1955, p. 23.*

(4) THE OTTOMAN CITIZENSHIP CAMPAIGN IN ERETZ ISRAEL
DURING WORLD WAR I

The Russo-Turkish declaration of war on 30 October 1914 at the beginning of World War I, followed by hostilities between Turkey and Britain brought many difficulties to the Jews of Eretz Israel. Food was scarce and Jews were ordered to enlist into the Turkish army. All enemy citizens – the majority being Russian Jews – were ordered to leave the country or renounce their foreign nationality in favour of Ottoman citizenship and remain in Eretz Israel. Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sought ways to prevent expulsion and the "Poalei-Zion" party (which included David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Zalman Shazar and others) decided on obligatory application for Ottoman citizenship. Thus began the period of "Ottomanization" and at least 15,000 Jews were thus able to remain in Eretz Israel. At the same time