
To gain entry into the powerful circles around the Rothschilds and the Round Table group, Weizmann sought and gained sponsors who introduced him and guided his initial steps. But his meeting with one of Britain’s most influential opinion makers was fortuitous. It took place in early September 1914, at a tea party at the home of one of Manchester’s well-to-do German Jewish families. Here Weizmann made the acquaintance of a distinguished-looking elderly man who wore a full white beard. Weizmann did not immediately catch his full name and launched into a severe indictment of tsarist Russia’s anti-Semitic policies, this despite the fact that Russia was a British ally. The gentleman listened attentively until Weizmann finished his tirade and then asked, “Are you a Pole” “No,” replied Weizmann, “I am not a Pole, and I know nothing about Poland. I am a Jew, and if you want to talk to me about that, Mr. Scott, I am at your disposal.” His new acquaintance did want to speak to him about this, and it was only then that Weizmann realized that he had met C.P. Scott, the controversial and influential editor of the Manchester Guardian.

A few days later, Scott invited Weizmann to his home, where they had a long and far-ranging discussion on the condition of the Jews in the East and West and on the Zionists’ aspirations for the future. Scott listened sympathetically and offered to introduce Weizmann to his friends in the government. This first meeting between Weizmann and Scott was followed by a close collaboration. The sixty-nine-year-old editor was captivated by Weizmann. In January 1915 he wrote to Harry Sacher:

I have had several conversations with Dr. Weizmann on the Jewish question and he has, I think, opened his whole mind to me. I found him extraordinarily interesting – a rare combination of the idealism and the severely practical which are the two essentials of statesmanship. What struck me in his view was first the perfectly clear conception of Jewish nationalism – an intense and burning sense of the Jew as Jew … and, secondly, arising out of that, necessary for its satisfaction and development, his demand for a country, a homeland, which for him, and for anyone sharing his view of Jewish nationality, could only be the ancient home of his race. To you … these views are familiar … but they … were not for me.

Don’t you think that the chance for the Jewish people is now within the limits of discussion at least? I realize, of course, that we cannot ‘claim’ anything, we are much too atomized for it; but we can reasonably say that should Palestine fall within the British sphere of influence, and should Britain encourage a Jewish settlement there, as a British dependency, we could have in twenty to thirty years a million Jews out there, perhaps more; they would develop the country, bring back civilization to it and form a very effective guard for the Suez Canal.

Document C: “Letter to Venetia Stanley”, Herbert Asquith (1914)

I have just received from [Herbert] Samuel a cabinet memorandum, headed “the future of Palestine…..” He goes on to argue at considerable length and with much vehemence in favour of a British annexation of Palestine. … He thinks we might plant in this not very promising territory about 3 or 4 million European Jews, and that this would have a good effect upon those (including I suppose himself) who were left behind. “The character of the individual Jew, wherever he might be, would be ennobled. The sordid associations which have attached to the Jewish name would be sloughed off” etc. etc. … It reads almost like a new edition of Tancred brought up to date. I confess I am not attracted by this proposed addition to our responsibilities. But it is a curious illustration of Dizzy’s favourite maxim that “race is everything” to find this almost lyrical outburst proceeding from the well-ordered and methodical brain of H.S.

Vocabulary

Dizzy: Benjamin Disraeli. (1804–1881) a British politician and writer of Jewish birth who twice served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. In his book Tancred in 1868 he wrote, “All is race – there is no other truth.”


I claim that the lives that British Jews have led, that the aims that they have had before them, that the part that they have played in our public life and our public institutions, have entitled them to be regarded, not as British Jews, but as Jewish Britons. I would willingly disfranchise every Zionist. I would be almost tempted to proscribe the Zionist organisation as illegal and against the national interest. But I would ask of a British Government sufficient tolerance to refuse a conclusion which makes aliens and foreigners by implication, if not at once by law, of all their Jewish fellow-citizens.

Zionism is not meant for these people [Anglo-Jewish anti-Zionists], who have cut themselves adrift from Jewry; it is meant for those masses who have a will to live a life of their own, and these masses have a right to claim the recognition of Palestine as a Jewish National Home. The second category of British Jews, I believe, will fall into line quickly enough when this declaration is given to us. I still expect a time, and I do so not without apprehension, when they will even claim to be Zionists themselves.

Indeed, the Zionist leader’s extraordinary gift for friendship was a not inconsiderable factor in the unfolding diplomatic triumph of the next half-decade. His sheer physical presence was arresting, for one thing. The brow of his massive bald head was finely etched with veins, his eyes were piercing, his mustache and goatee elegant, his clothing always superbly tailored. A slight Russian accent lent a touch of exoticism to his perfect command of English. More important, he possessed a rare, inner charisma. Years later Sir Ronald Storrs described Weizmann as

A brilliant talker with an unrivaled gift for lucid exposition. … As a speaker almost frighteningly convincing, even in English … in Hebrew, and even more in Russian, overwhelming, with all that dynamic persuasiveness which Slavs usually devote to love and Jews to business, nourished, trained, and concentrated upon the accomplishment of Zion.

With unerring skill he adapted his arguments to the special circumstances of each statesman. To the British and Americans he could use biblical language and awake a deep emotional undertone; to other nationalities he more often talked in terms of interest. Mr. Lloyd George was told that Palestine was a little country not unlike Wales; with Lord Balfour the philosophical background of Zionism could be surveyed; for Lord Cecil the problem was placed in the setting of a new world organization; while to Lord Milner the extension of imperial power could be vividly portrayed. To me who dealt with these matters as a junior officer of the General Staff, he brought from many sources all the evidence that could be obtained of the importance of a Jewish National Home to the strategical position of the British Empire, but he always indicated by a hundred shades and inflexions of the voice that he believed that I could also appreciate better than my superiors other more subtle and recondite arguments.

With the translation of the Bible into English and its adoption as the highest authority for an autonomous English Church, the history, traditions, and moral law of the Hebrew nation became part of the English culture; became for a period of three centuries the most powerful single influence on that culture. It linked, to repeat Matthew Arnold’s phrase, “the genius and history of us English to the genius and history of the Hebrew people.” This is far from saying that it made England a Judaeophile nation, but without the background of the English Bible it is doubtful that the Balfour Declaration would ever have been issued in the name of the British government or the Mandate for Palestine undertaken, even given the strategic factors that later came into play.


Weizmann’s efforts were buttressed by other advantages. One was the mystical veneration with which many devout Anglo-Saxon (or Welsh or Scottish) Protestants regarded the Old Testament traditions, the Children of Israel, and particularly the Holy Land itself. Lloyd George wrote later that in his first meeting with Weizmann, in December 1914, historic sites in Palestine were mentioned that were “more familiar to me than those of the Western front.” Balfour, too, had evinced a lifelong interest in the Holy Land and its traditions, as had Jan Christiaan Smuts, the South African member of the War Cabinet. These men felt deeply Christianity’s historic obligation to the Jews.

The Jewish bankers and capitalists of the West were with a few notable exceptions hostile to Zionism; so were most of the British military and officials in the Middle East; so was the French Government, and the Vatican. In ‘persuading’ the British Government, against this opposition, the Zionists with their empty coffers and scanty organization, and their individually important yet isolated well-wishers, could only pit the existence of the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, the faith of their followers, and, above all, the political skill of Weizmann and his unique access to the British Government. As General Smuts said about the British War Cabinet: ‘We were persuaded – but remember that it was Dr. Weizmann who persuaded us.’

Document K: The Balfour Declaration, (Nov. 2, 1917)

Foreign Office
November 2nd, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours,

Arthur James Balfour

The Balfour Declaration has for a long time been considered Weizmann’s greatest political achievement; even his political enemies had to concede that his feat captured the imagination of most Jews and had a force of its own. Though later historians – mostly those friendly to the cause of Zionism – have in hindsight questioned Weizmann’s role in obtaining the declaration, in the immediate aftermath of the cabinet’s decision there was little doubt in the minds of those who had observed the entire political process at close range as to who deserved most of the credit. On November 2, 1917, the day Balfour signed his letter to Lord Rothschild, one of Weizmann’s longtime opponents, Leopold Greenberg, wrote to Weizmann:

I am sure I did not say half or even much less of what I felt in regard to you wonderful success when I had the pleasure of seeing you this evening. You have performed miracles, especially having in mind surrounding circumstances and not only have you abundant justification for being proud of your accomplishment, but the Jewish People has manifest reason for being proud of you, one of its truest and best sons. Your victory so far should be an encouragement to you to carry on further for there is much to be done and only the beginning – great and glorious as it is – has been reached.