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Jewish Agency, Hebrew University, 1948.

Western Reserve Historical Society 10825 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106 (216) 721-5722 wrhs.org

HEBREW UNIVERSITY BEKA (Half-Shekel)*

The following is a suggestion for an institution of Jewish life, embodying and expressing:

- 1. Judaism's historic self-dedication to learning in both its ancient and modern manifestations.
- 2. The need for a deeper and more specific cultural and spiritual bond between Jews everywhere and Israel.

It is generally recognized that there must now be a lessening or complete discontinuation of political ties between the sovereign state of Israel and Jews outside of it. By the same token, the problem of finding a continued spiritual and cultural bond, takes on more importance than ever. In seeking expression for this bond, history offers precedent:

This precedent is in the <u>institution of the Beka through which Jews in the</u> <u>past expressed their support of the spiritual focal centers of their people</u>. The Beka, which was first offered to the Temple, and then to Yavneh and the later academies of Jewish learning, was the symbol first, of an unbreakable Jewish spiritual unity, persisting despite political and geographical diversity.' Second, it expressed the fact that this unity was historically centered in Israel. Through the support of the central institution of learning and spirit in Israel, both of the above important themes were expressed. The Beka was the concrete symbol of this expression. (In a broader and more personal sense it also indicated allegiance on the part of every Jew to the idea of Torah.)

Today, the Jewish people's <u>central institution of learning</u> stands on Mount Scopus overlooking the site of the Temple. Like the Temple and the later academies of learning, it is the apex of Jewrys cultural and intellectual striving. Like them, it is the common possession of Jews of every land no matter what their political or religious shading. Though not a purely re-

ligious institution, it is yet the <u>spiritual heir and continuum of that dedica-</u> <u>tion to mind and spirit which the Temple. Yavneh. and the academies of learning</u> <u>Once symbolized</u>. More than any other institution, it inherits their historic tasks. It can be both the unifying spiritual focus for world Jewry and the institution through which Jews can most naturally symbolize and express their cultural bond with Israel. Inheriting the historic functions of the previous

* The term "Beka per head" (Ex: 38-26) is used in referring to the half-sheke" paid by every Jew to the Temple.

** From the 1st to the 15th of ADAR, the Beka was collected. Later, Purim eve, before the reading of the Megillah, became the traditional moment for collection of the Beka. centers of learning, it is legitimate heir to the democratic manner of support which Judaism provided for them. To it belongs the instrument and symbol through which this support was expressed-namely, the yearly contribution of a Beka (halfshekel)on the part of every Jew. In brief, the Beka, which once expressed the cultural unity of world Jewry and its cultural tie to Israel, can again resume its historic function in a manner completely relevant to the present.

Educational Values

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To revive this "mitzvah" in Jewish life would do more than strengthen Jewrys modern Temple of learning and spirit. It would be an act carrying its own reward in educational terms and providing excellent program for all organizations. Among the themes which could be vividly projected through the Hebrew University Beka are the following:

- 1. Cultural and spiritual ties with Israel.
- 2. Cultural and spiritual unity of world Jewry.
- 3. Democracy, i.e. Israel's Temple of learning supported by every Jew no matter what his wealth or station. ("The rich shall not give more, nor the poor less", Ex: 30-13).
- 4. Jewish learning-its importance as mirrored in our heritage and as manifested in modern Israel.
- 5. Our literature-both Biblical and Rabbinical, providing a wealth of material illustrative of the above themes.
- 6. The University, its message and its needs.

Vehicles for Implementing Above

The importance of the <u>concrete act</u> in dramatising any idea or theme and making it real to the participants, is obvious to all educators. Equally desirable to educators is the type of project which activates as it educates, and vice versa. The Hebrew University Beka is this type of act and activity-education project.

(It is suggested that a replica of the ancient Beka, which we have, with the Hebrew University on the back, be used.) It would lend itself to the following types of program:

- The Hebrew University and the broader themes mentioned above can be woven, with the Beka as a vehicle, into regular program material, i.e. speakers, plays, literature, radio, etc. This can be supplied by a central office to the different organizations for distribution.
- 2. <u>Hebrew University Sabbath</u> The Sabbath before the first of ADAR, (Shabba., Shekalim) is the traditional Sabbath used for reminding the Jews of their obligation to the Temple and the academies of learning. It is on this

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Sabbath that the portion dealing with the Shekel-or Beka and its use for "strengthening and repairing the house" (Bedek Habait) is read. There is no need to stress the excellent sermonic material which springs out of this combination of tradition and modern Jewish living.

Purim eve, before the reading of the Megillah, is also a traditional moment for payment of the half-shekel---it might again be used for this purpose.

Both Hebrew University Week and Sabbath might be set within the first two weeks of ADAR, thus linking it naturally with the Jewish calendar and with Jewish history.

Seen in these terms, the Hebrew University Beka, while a meaningful institution of modern Jewish life, yet flows naturally out of the stream of our past.

Organization

The above program is ideal for every type of Jewish organization. It offers them not only the dramatic cultural linkage with Israel, which they seek, but also a vehicle carrying the most significant of educational themes and is non-political and "non-idealogical" in nature.

variety of organizations in Jewish life has already been received to warrant the above premise. This offers several advantages in terms of organization and expenditure:

1. It can be supported by <u>every</u> Jewish organization regardless of political or religious shading. Therefore, the organization of the Hebrew University Beka may utilize existing organizations rather than set up an elaborate structure of its own. It requires but a central office which

can feed educational and publicity material to the various organizations.
2. It is a project, not only <u>unifying different groups</u> in a common enterprise but completely applicable to different age levels. It is within the means of everybody, (a half-shekel would probably be about 50¢)
Therefore, much of the material could be submitted through group bodies like Community Councils, Synogogue Councils, Youth Conferences, Centers, etc.

3. The project naturally links up with the Jewish calendar, i.e. <u>Shabbat</u> <u>Skelalim-the custom of donating a half-shekel before the reading of</u> <u>the Megillah on Purim</u>, etc. Therefore, it can be linked on to existing programs and occasions, and in most cases there will be no necessity There are of course difficulties linked with any proposal which approaches historic dimensions. Among the questions are:

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- 1. The World Zionist Shekel. <u>It must be clearly understood that the project</u> <u>herein proposed is distinct and separate from the World Zionist Shekel</u>. The Hebrew University Beka could be a vehicle dramatically linking Jews with Israel and with historic Jewish ideals. It is tied to a very specific portion of the Jewish calendar and is completely without political connotations. It may be considered as a project in itself without connection to the comments that follow.
- 2. The tradition of "a shekel per head", itself has been taken far from its original meaning and used by the World Zionist Organization in the main as a voting ticket and as a source of support for the World Zionist Congres The emergence of Israel as a sovereign state radically effects this meaning of the shekel and places before the World Zionist Organization the choice of either finding a new interpretation for their shekel or dropping it completely.

Considering the above, it may be that the World Zionist Organization, since it seeks new content for its Shekel, and since it seeks deeper cultural ties with Israel, may decide to return the Shekel to its more authentic meaning—namely, the support of Israel's Temple of learning.
3. Whether or not the above is done in the future, the Hebrew University Beka is available now as an immediate project for all groups and areas not reached by the Shekel. Later, if the shekel should receive the new-old meaning proposed, it might remain the destinctive cultural symbol of the Zionist movement, while the Beka, (half-shekel) remained the symbol of other groups.

This has the advantage of:

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- Permitting the Hebrew University Beka to be launched immediately for as has been stressed, it is tied in with a specific calendar
 date.
- b. Giving the other groups a project specifically recognized as their own, a factor quite important in promoting intiative.

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- 4. <u>The JNF</u> --- is the year-long heir to the smaller contributions of Jewry. There is absolutely no competition between year-long JNF activities and <u>a one day or one week project</u> such as is visualized by the Hebrew University Beka.
- 5. American Friends of the Hebrew University Membership:

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- a. It must be realized that no matter how successful be the organizational efforts of the American Friends of the Hebrew University a \$10 membership still makes it impossible to reach vast areas of Jewry. (This includes youth groups of all ages and many adult organizational areas.) These areas could be reached by the Beka.
- With regards to adult groups, it might first be pointed out that ъ. the Zionist use of the shekel has had no dilatorious effect at all on membership, but has rather provided this membership with program stimulus. There is no reason why the Hebrew University Beka could not be handled in similar fashion. Membership in the American Friends means that an individual becomes a "spiritual alumnus" of the Hebrew University and an all-year participant in the program of the American Friends of the Hebrew University--literature, speakers, yearly conference, Hebrew University Week, etc. Purchase of a Beka, which, after all, is as much as most Jews will be able to do, is simply a token expression of loyalty to the historic tradition of Jewish learning, and to the instituti which most centrally embodies that tradition-the Hebrew University Beka could in short time make every area of Jewish life Hebrew University conscious and greatly help a full membership campaign.

To summarize. the Hebrew University Beka:

1. Answers the need felt by every Jew for a concrete expression of his

spiritual and cultural bond with Israel and does it in a manner that

is historic, dramatic and relevant to the present.

- 2. Offers all Jewish organizations program which is its own end in educational terms---vividly linking its participants with basic Jewish ideals.
- Strengthens the modern center of Jewish learning for world Jewry, the Hebrew University, <u>in a manner which enables it to be of vital service</u> to world Jewry.

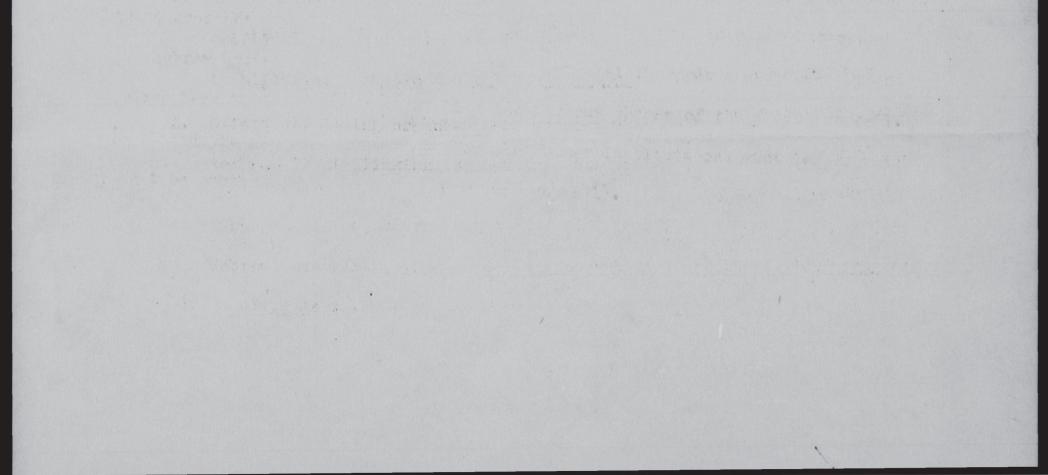
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The ancient Beka, was used to strengthen the academies of Jewish learning in Israel, so that they, in turn were able to strengthen world Jewry. The modern Beka might have the same function, namely, strengthening the modern center of Jewish learning in a manner which will help it better to serve world Jewry. This could be done through the establishment on Mount Scopus, with the cooperation of the Jewish Agency, of an Institute for foreign students. At the present time plans are under way within various organizations for study-visit tours in Israel. The Zionist Organization of America for example, is cooperating with the Jewish. Agency in providing a large number of scholarships for study and work in Israel. The Hebrew University is considering a Summer Institute on Mount Scopus. The Jewish Welfare Board is considering similar plans, etc. Physical facilities, scholarships, subsidies, organization, will be required. It is proposed that the proceeds of the Beka, which culturally ties Jews here to Israel, be used to create a human tie, by providing for an educational foundation centered on Mount Scopus which will foster and implement studying and visiting in Israel by Jews throughout the world.

The positive benefits which would accrue to Jewish life everywhere from the above mentioned Institute for Woyld Jewry are obvious. It might further be pointed out that the Beka campaign would be still considerably stimulated by allocating these proceeds to a function which would immediately serve the contributors. The Hebrew University and the Jewish Agency suggest themselves as the representative bodies best equipped for implementing the various phases of the above proposal. (Enclosed are the tentative plans for the Summer Institute on Mount Scopus which might be partially financed by the above proposal).

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HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE BEKA (HALF-SHEKEL (In connection with the Hebrew University)

In the Bible, the term Beka or half-shekel is used frequently in conjunction with the obligation of every Jew to support the Temple. In the Pentateuch, "Ex: 30-13, Ex: 38-26" etc. a half shekel or Beka is required per head.

The Talmud has a complete tractate for "shekalim" which discusses the obligation on the part of every Jew every place to pay the Beka or shekel. So important was the obligation considered, that even children and priests, normally exempt from all taxes, were yet urged to pay this tax.

After the <u>destruction of the Temple the commandment of the Beka or shekel received</u> the character of a "tax for learning" and was sent with enthusiasm to the new center of learning at Yavneh. Later, it was sent to the academies of learning in Israel which supplanted Yavneh. An indication of the importance which was attached to this voluntary tax is afforded by the reaction of the Jews when Vespasian decreed that the shekel should be paid to the Temple of Jupiter rather than to the Temple in Jerusalem. Jews sent their tax to the Jupiter Temple and in secret, sent another shekel to the Jerusalem Temple.

There are extant actual replicas of shekel coins dating from the time of the Hasmoneans. (These coins can be used in the art work for the Hebrew University Beka.)

The traditional time for collection of this tax was set from the first of ADAR to the fifteenth. Even today many communities observe the custom of donating their half-shekel for "copair of the house" (Bedek Ha-Bayit). This would suggest that our Hebrew University Week and Sabbath be linked, or rather relinked with the period from the 1st to the 15th of ADAR. The actual collection could be made in that period and in some cases even linked with the reading of the Megiliah on

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Purim (in accordance with tradition).

In brief, the proposed institution of a Hebrew University Beka has the most authentic roots in tradition and history, and a legitimate place in the Jewish calendar.

Proposal submitted to american Friends of Helsew reneversety by Roblic Herbers Weiner

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OUTLINE AND RECOMMENDATION FOR SUMMER INSTITUTE

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No offer on the part of the University would be more attractive to American Jews than a Summer Institute on Mt. Scopus. The possibility of study at the University, in combination with guided tours to various parts of Israel, makes an appeal to which hundreds would respond. Many of the Jewish students now going abroad for Summer study would be attracted to Israel; many would come who otherwise are not interested in studying abroad; Rabbis and workers in Jewish education would be deeply attracted to refresher courses, etc.

* * * * *

For the University, a Summer Institute would not only be a source of income, but would present it with the opportunity of immediately becoming an educational force in world Jewry. The students who would attend the Institute would bring their personal gains and the message of the University itself, to all communities of America. In brief, the opportunity is now presented to the University of becoming, in the truest fashion, a "spiritual center" for world Jewry. COURSES:

The courses offered in the Summer Institute could be for the most part along lines similar to those given by summer institutes in other countries, and similar to those which have been offered to American students in the past. These courses might be of two categories. First, there could be courses offered for credit. In all cases this credit must be arranged for in advance by the student with his particular university. An intensive course stretching from 6 to 8 weeks might be entitled to 8 credits, or a quarter of a year. (This is the arrangement made by Yale with respect to an 8-week tour and course offered to its students in Great Britain.) The above system of arranging for credits before-hand is one already carried out with respect to summer institutes by a number of American Universities. The numerous Jewish organizations now considering plans for educational visits of their members to Israel, could coordinate their plans with the Institute. Courses in "Problems of the Near East" or "Survey of Jewish Civilization" would be the type of theme which would be eligible for credits at American Universities.

The second category of courses would be without actual credit, but a certificate of attendance could be awarded to those individuals who attended a minimum number of them and passed the minimum examination requirements. Many Jewish educators and teachers would be interested in this type of <u>achievement certificate</u>. Again, there is precedent for this type of award among foreign summer institutes in France, etc. Among these courses would be Hebrew, Palistinography, History of Zionism, Survey of Modern Hebrew Literature, Bible, Jewish Philosophy, etc. These courses might be offered on several levels. One level would of necessity be given mostly in English and be of a popular nature. A second level can be given in Hebrew but still on a non-credit basis, for those who have sufficient Hebrew only. A third level can consist of one or two seminars arranged for Rabbis and advanced Jewish students.

TIME:

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The Summer Institute would best be held between the period of July 5th and August 25th. This would allow travel time for American students and not conflict with their winter commitments. The July 5th - August 25th period would have to contain at least a complete week of freedom for students. In addition, free weekends combined with guided tours would have to be allowed for by the Institute plan. The shortness of time available for academic work makes it strongly advisable therefore, that the actual sailing time be utilized to advantage. Students traveling to Europe last year hired two complete ships, brought with them leaders and teachers, organized courses

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and activities on board both coming and going. The same pattern could be followed by students going to the Hebrew University. These arrangements could be made by the American Friends with the help of the participating agencies.

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Most Summer Institutes in Europe charge under \$100. for tuition. A tuition fee of \$100 to \$125 on the part of the University would be considered reasonable by most students. In addition, another \$25 would be added, which sum would be needed for the office (A.F.H.U.) for arranging publicitytransportation details - orientation courses on ship, etc. Assuming that a round trip would amount to about \$500.00, that minimum living expenses for 6 or 7 weeks would be \$250, the total expenditure involved would be between \$900 and \$950.

IMPLEMENTATION:

- A. Announcements for the Summer Institute <u>must be made by the middle of</u> <u>the year</u> and can be easily circulated through regular college channels--Hillel Foundations--Jewish organizations, etc.
- B. A Hebrew University Youth Council has just been formed with the express purpose of publicizing and implementing the above plan. This council represents all major Jewish national youth organizations.
- C. The Jewish Agency and the Zionist Organization of America are offering 100 full year scholarships for study in Israel. Although the purposes of these scholarships do not coincide on all points with the purposes of the Summer Institute, there can be cooperation in at least two areas:
 - The ZOA Scholarship fellows can make joint shipping arrangements with the Summer Institute candidates.
 The ZOA Scholarship fellows can participate in the

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Summer Institutes. Mr. Asculai, who is aponsoring the plan in the name of the agency agrees that both the above areas of cooperation are possible.

- 3. Last Summer, over a thousand students went to Europe by plane. Transocean Airline which arranged this, has offered to work out an arrangement whereby the round-trip would be under \$650. The Hebrew University Youth Council, through the A.F.H.U. could also make arrangements for the above method of transportation.
- 4. The Youth Council, with the aid of the A.F.H.U. could seek ways and means of financing at least in part, the various expenditures involved in the Institute
- 5. In general, it is essential to realize that combination study-tour visits to Israel are desired by a large and varied number of Youth Groups. The Hebrew University could, with the cooperation of the Jewish Agency and the various organizations, act as a focal center for these plans. <u>The A.F.H.U. could be the central</u> organizing agency.

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November 30th, 1948

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver The Temple E. 105th Street & Ansel Road Cleveland, Ohio

Dear Dr. Silver:

The enclosed proposal comes to you with the endorsement of people like: Rabbi Arthur Lilyveld; Dr. Emanuel Gamaron; the President and National Educational Chairman of Junior Hadassah; Dr. Mordecai Kaplan of the Board of Directors of the RECONSTRUCTIONIST; etc.

In spite of the backing of the above mentioned Jewish leaders, I might still hesitate to trouble you with a matter like this had I not heard your address at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations assembly in Boston. Having, however, heard your reference to the spiritual and cultural unity of Israel as it was symbolized by the ancient Shekel-I now think that the enclosed project represents but an extension in deed of your own line of thought.

As you will see in studying the proposal, time is essential to the whole scheme. May I then be so bold as to ask you to grant me:

- Your personal and non-official opinion on the Beka project. 1. May I ask that you separate, in your consideration, the Beka project from the Shekel suggestion, and both of them from the question of allocation of proceeds.
- 2. Your opinion on the Shekel aspect of the plan.

I would appreciate your early reply.

With best wishes,

Sincerely.

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Rabbi Herbert Weiner Program Services Director

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