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Palestine at the Crossroads, 1938.

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# PALESTINE AT THE CROSSROADS

Will England repudiate the Balfour Declaration? Will the Jewish Homeland be sacrificed? Is Zionism still the solution?



By  
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At  
The Temple

On  
Sunday morning, October 30, 1938



American Jewry has been greatly agitated these last few weeks by ominous reports, many of these from London and Jerusalem, which seem to suggest that a radical new policy regarding the Jewish Homeland in Palestine is being considered by the British Government. With the memory of the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia still fresh in the minds of our people, fearing a similar drastic liquidation of the Palestine problems, the Jews of the United States, in a remarkable unity and solidarity, raised their voices in protest and sent tens of thousands of telegrams to Washington pleading for the intercession of our Government in behalf of the Jews in Palestine. Many meetings were held throughout the country. A great number of non-Jews joined in the appeal, in the political field as well as in the religious field. Governors of States, senators, city councils, state legislators, all rallied to the defense of the Jewish Homeland.

To be sure, no definite action has as yet been taken by the British Government and no new policy has, as yet, been announced. The Woodhead Commission which was to report its findings, has not yet reported. But those who put two and two together, were close to the situation and who have been watching, in the last few weeks rather strange and ominous co-incidences have come to feel that some drastic action is being contemplated. Thus, for example, the High Commissioner of Palestine was suddenly summoned to London ~~from~~ from Palestine. Then Malcolm MacDonald, of the Colonial Office, announced that the "terms of reference of this Woodhead Commission do not entirely exclude the possibility that it may report that partition is impracticable." The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq was suddenly discovered to be in London interviewing the heads of the Government in London, proposing new solutions in Palestine. It contemplated the establishment in Palestine of an Independent State allied by treaty with Great Britain in which local



autonomy in education and municipal affairs would be granted to the Jewish and Arab communities. No further immigration into Palestine would be permitted. In other words, an Arab State would be set up in Palestine in which the Jews would find themselves a minority, protected of course, by laws such as protect all minorities in the world today.

The London Times wrote an article which is strangely the same as the position which it took with reference to Czechoslovakia which stated that "only the promises to the Jews and the pathetic urgency of their plight in the world today have persuaded Great Britain to attempt what, in other circumstances, might be regarded by public opinion as an unjust attempt to make a people accept a state of affairs which they believe inimical to their national interests." We read between the lines and phrases about liberty and the principle of self-determination the same pietistic phrases which are employed in camouflaging a prompt reversal of policy with reference to the Jewish Homeland as were employed in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

All these indications, and there were many other warnings to suggest that the present Government of Great Britain was preparing another sweeping coup d'état to liquidate Palestine in some such manner as the Munich Pact. The only thing missing so far is <sup>air</sup> ~~an~~ flight of Chamberlain to the Grand Mufti. That may come yet.

Whether our concerted protest in the United States and in other parts of the world averted this calamity, it is yet too early to say. One encouraging fact has been the recent announcement of the new immigration quota for the next six months which is practically the same quota which prevailed for the past six months and which suggests that no stoppage in immigration is contemplated at least for the next six months. This immigration, itself, is of course pitifully inadequate to the tragic needs of the refugees and is not adequate to the economic needs of the country itself. Great Britain in the last two



years, ever since the Royal Commission Report, has set up a new arbitrary measure for the immigration quotas to be allotted for the Jewish immigration politically. The Mandates Commission of the League of Nations has challenged the legality of restricting immigration of Jews in Palestine on any other basis except that of the absorptive capacity of the country. Unfortunately the League of Nations today is ludicrous facade. Its prestige is gone. It is helpless. It set out to insure peace. It failed. It set out to protect the weaker nations from the stronger. It has failed. It set out to protect the minorities in Europe. It failed. It set out, by way of the Mandate to supervise countries, and it has failed. Collective security is dead in the world. International Law has been torn into shreds. Treaties and covenants are not worth the paper they are written on today. The age in which we live is the age of the Fist, the Lying Tongue, the Spiked Head.

What the immediate future of Palestine is to be is very difficult to say. It is all one vast uncertainty. In fact, uncertainty has attended the British policy in Palestine from the very beginning just as that same uncertainty and indecision has characterized British Foreign policy generally in the last twenty years, leading the British Empire from one diplomatic failure to another and leading the whole world into the international mess in which it finds itself today. This uncertainty, this indecision has retarded our work in Palestine, frequently interrupted and made it a hundred-fold more difficult. So much of the time and the energy and the substance of Palestine Jewry and world Jewry which might have gone in to the practical upbuilding of Palestine, into the constructive end, into the planning and expansion have had to be spent in haggling with the Palestine Government, in getting concessions <sup>from</sup> ~~the~~ the Government of things which should have been granted as a matter of right, in defending ourselves against hostile forces, in launching counter-propaganda movements against hostile movements and lastly,



to defend ourselves actually physically against the terrorism which this very policy of vacillation, of indecision, of contrariness has been largely responsible for it.

Had the Mandatory Government lived up to the letter and the spirit of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate loyally, had it facilitated, as it undertook to, altogether voluntarily, Jewish immigration into the country and the close settlement of Jews upon the land, the Jewish Homeland would by now be an accomplished fact, and the whole subject would be off the Agenda of the world. But such loyal cooperation was missing from the very beginning. When Great Britain took hold of Palestine, under the terms of the Mandate, instead of setting up the machinery and those agencies which would make possible the attainment of the objective of the Mandate, it set about to govern the country as though that prime objective of the Mandate did not exist, as if its chief objective was not to facilitate close settlement of people on the land and to build up a Jewish Homeland. Rather it put obstacles in the way. It resisted new suggestions from us. Any cooperation on our part was regarded as gross interference and by this attitude it gave the Arabs the definite impression that Great Britain was not taking the Balfour Declaration seriously. It governed Palestine in the same way as Iraq. Inasmuch as the majority in Palestine are Arabs, as in Iraq, Palestine would become an Arab State.

There was never any ambiguity in the Balfour Declaration as to its clear intent and purport. Balfour, Himself, over and over again defined in the clearest terms the meaning of the Balfour Declaration. Lord Peel, of the Royal Commission stated what the clear intent of the Declaration and the Mandate was. It was to bring in as many Jews into Palestine as quickly as possible to constitute a Jewish majority and set up a Jewish majority



state in Palestine. The Arabs, of course, and all other people, could be citizens of that state and should be. Their civil and religious rights would be protected. It was not intended by the Declaration or the Mandate that the Jewish Homeland in Palestine should be a sort of little "island" within an Arab State or a "token" homeland of eighty or a hundred thousand Jews. There was no promise given at any time that an Arab national homeland was to be set up at any time.

For years the Arabs claimed that there was a secret pledge given to them by General MacMahon that Palestine would become an Arab State. For some strange reason, MacMahon kept silent for nearly eighteen years about this pledge and only after the report of the Royal Commission did he himself make a clear statement that at no time did he ever give such a pledge to the Arabs.

Palestine was to become a Jewish homeland. The Arabs would have a majority in an Iraq state, in Transjordan and in Assyria. The Jews were to have their national home in their historic homeland. That was definitely understood and was signed by nearly all the nations of the earth. But from the very beginning, British Ambassadors in Palestine itself, the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office began to whittle down this Mandate by a series of unwarranted interpretations until, today, the very heart of the Mandate has been mis-interpreted. Because it is stated in the Mandate that it is to "safeguard the interests of the non-Jewish community", the Mandate has been interpreted to mean that it has a double responsibility in Palestine, a double undertaking in Palestine, that there are two major groups in Palestine. The Mandate must hold a balance between these groups. So as early as 1923, the Mandatory Government set up an Arab Agency in Palestine, exactly analagous to the



Jewish Agency in Palestine - a fact that was never dreamed of or contemplated in the Mandate. The Arabs gaining courage, began to make increasingly impossible demands. From demands they went to threats; and from threats to rioting. The Mandatory Government, from the very beginning, began to yield to this sort of pressure and to reward the terrorists, always at the expense of the Jews and Jewish life in Palestine.

Thus for example, following the bloody riots of 1929, which if Great Britain had any police force in Palestine worthy of its name would never have taken place and in which more than one hundred thirty Jews were killed and three hundred wounded - following those riots, Great Britain issued a White Paper based on the well-known Shaw Commission which was sent into Palestine to investigate the riots which announced that there wasn't room in Palestine for a single additional Jewish settler. Since that time some two hundred thousand Jewish people have entered Palestine and the Arab population has increased by hundreds of thousands. But in 1929, it was announced that there wasn't room for any other single Jewish settler. The great protest which was raised at that time forced Great Britain to change its policy. Since that time, Palestine has enjoyed its most prosperous period of growth and expansion. But the Arabs by the issuance of this White Paper which practically, in so many words, sought to nullify the Balfour Declaration and the rights of the Jewish people under the Mandate.

Following the riots of 1936 when some eighty Jews were killed and hundreds wounded by the Arabs, the Arabs were again rewarded. Great Britain appointed another Commission, the Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of Lord Peel. That Commission reported that the Mandate was unworkable and that therefore Palestine should be partitioned. The Jewish people would be given one-fifth of Palestine or one-twentieth of the



land designated by the original Balfour Declaration, the rest to be set up as an independent Arab State; and a good slice of it for some unaccountable reason was to be set up as a British State.. And following the riots of the last two years, the Arabs were again rewarded. They thus resorted to the most brutal acts of slaying helpless women and children....That is the reward for terror. Such has been the policy of appeasement in Palestine. From an undertaking to build in Palestine the national home of the Jewish people, it has seemingly become an undertaking to build in Palestine an Arab national homeland.

And what reward have the Jews received. What reward have the Jews received for twenty years of the most glorious and sacrificial pioneering labor which they invested in that neglected land, the hundreds of millions of dollars which they poured into the country, the backbreaking, heart-breaking labor of converting a desolate land into a modern country, of stamping out disease, of turning sand dunes into orange groves, of building hospitals, schools, technical schools and universities, of making the whole Arab in Palestine population/the most prosperous of the whole Arab population in the Near East, of giving Arabs social service and hospitals which they had never had in their history. Read the Royal Commission Report and see what the Britishers say of Jewish achievement in Palestine and who, under terror and under attack have kept themselves in restraint. What reward have they to received, who have gone into the country on the basis of these pledges. They have not even been given physical protection to life and living in peace.

There would be, my ~~fine~~ friends, no riots in Palestine today if the Mandatory Government had vigorously suppressed manifestations early in Palestine, had shown no indulgences to errorists, if they had not kept the Grand Mufti in the seat of power and subsidized him and ~~paid~~ paid him a salary while they



knew that he was the center of all the conspiracy against Palestine as a Jewish Homeland. They were never keen to suppress disturbances. When they acted, they acted always to reward the rioters and always too late to suppress terror. They finally sent a whole division of soldiers. The general arrived, clearly to do his duty as a general of the Jewish army. General Dill was sent home. He wasn't allowed to move. The High Commissioner had other plans for the appeasement in Palestine. Between the High Commissioner, the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office, every plan was so worried, so delayed, so frustrated until there almost was a break-down in the Government of Palestine.

What was relatively an easy task, five, ten, fifteen years ago, now is a very difficult task. Great Britain may have a rebellion on her hands.

What will happen in Palestine? And, my friends, anything can happen in this world in which we find ourselves. The present Tory Government of Great Britain- hell-bent for peace at any price, especially if someone else pays the price, may decide to scrap the Balfour Declaration and sacrifice the Jewish people for what it calls Imperialism. This would be a disaster of the first magnitude added to our already heavy load of calamity.

I am hoping that the moral sense of the British people, the sense of sportsmanship, of fair play, the traditional good will of the British people towards our people and towards the upbuilding of Palestine as a Jewish Homeland will assert itself and prevent such a thing from happening. I am hoping that an aroused British opinion will strengthen the hands of the British people who do not wish to dishonor again the name of the British Empire, who do not wish to see again a covenant broken. I profoundly and sincerely hope this will be.

What England will eventually do, we do not know. What we Jews



will do, that we know. We are going to carry on. My Friends, the historic task of building a homeland in Palestine for our people will not be abandoned because it cannot be abandoned. If anything, the road is crystal clear. If there is any program that can be read today unmistakably, it is written in large letters of blood and fire upon the whole face of Europe today. It is that the Jewish people, as a people, needs a homeland. If there is any truth, any bitter truth which has been distilled out of the boiled waters of our experiences in Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe in the last few years, it is that the Jewish people must gain, sooner or later, sooner, we hope, a majority status in the world so that these indecencies, these frightful humiliations to which we are subjected today will not happen. That cannot happen to any other people in the world who has a majority status, a home.

Our claim to Palestine does not rest upon the Balfour Declaration, or the Mandate. Our claim to Palestine antedates the Mandate. It antedates the very founding of the British Empire. It antedates the birth of nearly every nation in Europe today. The Balfour Declaration and the Mandate simply recognizes and acknowledges our historic claim to Palestine. They did not ~~grant~~ create fifteen centuries, fifteen hundred years of living in Palestine, the building in Palestine one of the noblest civilizations and achieved in that land those great spiritual gifts, the last half century of grave digging, sacrificing in that disease ridden country which they sanitized, which they rebuilt, which we now have made so attractive that the Arabs want it. A half century of such labor has again vindicated our claim to that land.

We cannot accept any minority status in Palestine because that is our tragedy in the world today. We are ready to accept any feasible plan which will give us majority status and national equality in Palestine. We do not



seek to majorize the Arabs or to dominate them. And with the strong and loyal backing of Great Britain we can find a way to reconcile the interests of Jews and Arabs in Palestine to the benefit of both and to the hurt of neither.

The partitioning of Palestine is not necessary. You may recall that, a year ago, at the Zionist Congress in Switzerland, I offered as my opinion that partition would be off the agenda within six months or a year. It was an unsound idea. The idea was to take a little country and fragmentize it into three little countries. Such a thing was doomed from the very beginning. Cantonization of Palestine is preferable. A federated state is preferable. A bi-national state is preferable. With good will, with a loyal acceptance of Jews not as individual refugees but as with members of a Jewish nation - that basic recognition, the solution could be found and it would be a blessing to both peoples who basically belong to one race and who in the past have found it not impossible to cooperate on the friendliest terms.

I close my address with this phrase which I read to you this morning from the Book of Isaiah. That was also spoken in exile by Isaiah. It was also spoken in a dark moment of Jewish history when Israel lay broken and bleeding when everything seemed to conspire against us, to humiliate our people. Then the prophet arose and proclaimed these words:

"God giveth power to the weary and to him that has no might, he increaseth his strength."

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ABSTRACT OF ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER AT THE TEMPLE, ANSEL ROAD AND EAST 105TH STREET ON SUNDAY MORNING, OCTOBER 30, 1938

### PALESTINE AT THE CROSSROADS

What the immediate future of Palestine will be, no one can say. It is all one vast uncertainty. Uncertainty has attended British policy in Palestine from the very beginning - the same uncertainty, vacillation and lack of decision which have characterized British foreign policy generally, and which have led that great Empire from one diplomatic defeat to another, dragging the whole world into that chaos in which it finds itself today.

It is this uncertainty and lack of line which has retarded and frequently interrupted the upbuilding of the Jewish homeland in Palestine. Had the Mandatory Government loyally lived up to the letter and spirit of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate, had it facilitated, as it undertook to, altogether voluntarily, Jewish immigration into the country and the close settlement of Jews upon the land, the Jewish homeland would by now be an accomplished fact. But such loyal fulfillment of an international obligation was missing from the very beginning. What was the clear and unmistakable purpose of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate was progressively whittled down by a series of unilateral interpretations so that what is practically being proposed now is not the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, but an Arab homeland.

There would be no rioting in Palestine today if the Government had vigorously suppressed the terrorists in the early days and if it had not constantly yielded to pressure and rewarded rioters by concessions at the expense of the law abiding element of the community.

What will happen to Palestine? Anything can happen in this anarchistic world. The present Tory Government, hellbent for peace at any price, provided someone else is paying the price, may abrogate the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate and sacrifice the Jewish homeland to what it thinks is British



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Imperial interests. We hope, however, that the moral sense, sportsmanship and ~~xxx~~ traditional friendship of the English people will assert itself again, as it has done in the past, and will prevent such a cruel and dishonorable thing from happening.

The Jewish people cannot accept a minority status in Palestine. The whole purpose of the great historic effort was to give to the Jewish people national status in the world by establishing in Palestine a national homeland - a privilege possessed by every other people. The purpose of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate was not to establish an "island" Jewish homeland within an Arab State in Palestine, or a "token" Jewish homeland of a few hundred thousand Jews. The Jewish people is prepared to accept any feasible plan which will give it national status and national equality in Palestine. It does not seek to majorize the Arabs or to dominate them.

A way can be found to a peaceful settlement of the Palestine problem which would be just both to the Jews and <sup>to</sup> the Arabs. The partitioning of the country is not necessary. I was opposed to it from the beginning. Cantonization is preferable. A federated state is preferable. A ~~xxx~~ bi-national state is preferable. But in order to be just and acceptable, any ultimate solution must take into account the national status of the Jewish people in Palestine and the right of free immigration into the country.