

Judah L. Magnes and the Hebrew University

BY LEON ROTH

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THE late J. L. Magnes joined the Jerusalem Committee for the Hebrew University soon after it was founded in 1922. He became almost immediately its centre and driving force and was soon in the midst of the tiring and anxious labors which were to last over a quarter of a century and of which the successive fruits were the opening of the Institute of Jewish Studies in the winter of 1924, the inauguration of the University in April 1925, the establishment of the University Press (1928), the opening of the University to undergraduate students in the Humanities and the Biological Sciences (1928, 1931), the laying of the cornerstone of the Rothschild-Hadassah-University Hospital (1934), the founding of the "pre-Faculty" of Medicine and the School of Agriculture (1937, 1940), and the joint work with Hadassah and the Allied Forces during the long years of the second world war.

His formal position was changed in 1935 from that of Chancellor to that of President, a post which he held (with successive renewals of the election by the Board of Governors) to the day of his death (27 October 1948). But he remained throughout the father of the University. His prolonged service was one of devotion in the full Latin sense: it was a self-dedication without thought of self.

Magnes held a definite idea of the function of the University. *It was to be the instrument for the re-discovery of Judaism in our time.* Others spoke of a University for Jews. Magnes thought primarily of a University for Judaism. And in his view Judaism was to be not only teacher but, in a very special sense, taught. It had itself to be trained for modern needs.

This conception, clearly nurtured on the teaching of Ahad HaAm although by no means identical with it, is in apparent conflict with those more generally held. If the University in Jerusalem was to be a substitute for the ordinary higher education, especially in the physical and medical sciences, of which Jews on the continent of Europe were deprived owing to the *numerus clausus*, then neither the Hebrew language nor classical Jewish literature was of any especial significance; what mattered was international science and laboratory fact. If on the other hand it was conceived to arise from the needs of Jewish scholarship, it should have been planned as a school of Jewish Studies based on historical and documentary research. Magnes would have neither of these and suffered the fate of all who reject easy solutions. Standing as he did between the Scylla of "positive" science and the Charybdis of philological scholasticism, he was attacked as an amateur (the word usually used was "Rabbi") meddling foolishly with the discoverers of truth either in the sciences or (to taste) in the arts, whether Jewish or general.

The truth was that Magnes realised as few others that knowledge is one, and that therefore the physical sciences, as well as the general arts, were essential to the proper basing of the University. But he knew that, when justice had been done to all other University subjects, it was Jewish Studies which were going to "make or break" the University because Jewish Studies were its final *raison d'être*. Jewish *studies* were to constitute the intellectual soil from which was to spring the new Jewish *man*. Thus the University effort was strictly parallel to that of the new agricultural settlements. Its aim was to produce for Jews a new

type of life and a new way of living.

This new way of living, although a Palestinian product, was not in Magnes' view to be confined to Palestine. It was to be an exemplar for world Jewry. For Magnes, although Palestino-centric (and it should always be kept in mind that, alone of the American Zionist leaders, with the exception of his great sympathizer and co-worker Henrietta Szold, he made Palestine his permanent home), kept a keen and firm regard on the periphery. He was always interested in what was happening "over there" and tested much of what was produced in Palestine by its effect "over there." From first to last he tried to stimulate a "two-way" passage between his old and his new home. No one cared for the very stone of Palestine more than he, but no one more than he realised Palestine's wider significance.

But his dreams for the University, as they were not confined to Jerusalem and Palestine, were not confined to world Jewry either. He looked beyond world Jewry to the world. He could echo wholeheartedly the prophetic call of the first Return: "Now be the Lord magnified beyond the border of Israel." He was inter-nationalist in educational outlook as well as in daily practice. A University meant for him expansion to the full limit of the human mind, and it is noteworthy that one of the last books he re-read in Palestine was that vision of world science and experimental research which gave birth to the scientific societies and learned academies of modern Europe, the *Novum Organum* of Francis Bacon.

Hence his practical work for education was both broad and deep. He realised that the University needed a foundation. He was one of the prime helpers in the consolidation of the Reali School in Haifa, the most successful attempt in Palestine to give in Hebrew a "western" *literary* education with due emphasis on traditional Jewish knowledge; while his recent work on behalf of the Brandeis center in Jerusalem showed his deep appreciation of the detail of, and the necessity for, *technical* training. He was

behind every effort made in the country to improve public health and the education of public health and social workers. He raised actively, and gave much thought to, the problems of the training of a Jewish civil service. There were thus few aspects of general education which he did not touch in some of their various stages either as preliminary to or in connection with the schools of the University, and there was nothing he touched which he did not leave improved. He was particularly alive to the necessity of proper scientific equipment, and he fought hard for the provision of laboratory and library and workshop facilities in all the institutions with which he was connected. In the University he gave detailed and prolonged attention to the schools of Agriculture and Medicine. He thought that the University must and should help in the creation of the new Jewish body as well as of the new Jewish mind.

But the new Jewish mind remained for him the end, and he dug eagerly into any traditional source-book or any modern work of exposition which seemed to promise help in the quest. He cared passionately for the Bible and tried for many years to set up a special Bible Institute in the University which should contain all commentaries and translations and aids to the understanding of the text. That text he held sacred, and he studied it to the very last. His excitement at the recent discovery of the oldest manuscript of Isaiah was intense, and he tried from his sick-bed to acquire it for the University.

One dream he was fortunately able to see in the way to practical fulfillment, and that was the printing of the traditional text of the Hebrew Bible by the united efforts of the University Press and the Jewish Publication Society of America. The day of the making of this arrangement was a great one for Magnes because it brought together in one project so many of the things which he held dear—Judaism, education, Palestine, the University, world Jewry, humanity. The law was once again to go forth to the world in a text prepared by scholars working

in the "mount of the Lord" in Zion, and it was to be printed in a special type designed by the University Press in Zion; and this was to be done with the help and collaboration of the greatest Jewish publishing house in the new pulsating centre of world Jewry.

For Magnes grasped the dual truth that Jewish learning, Jewish effort, Jewish education is at bottom one all over the world, but that although it is unique it cannot be dissociated from the learning and effort and education of the wider world in which we live. By that he would not have meant that a textbook used in a Tel-Aviv school should be imposed on world Jewry and might be expected to effect a revolution in the world at large, but that from Palestine there should emanate a stream of living ideas from which world Jewry could be nourished, and through world Jewry perhaps, God willing, the world. These ideas required first to be created, and this was possible only in a seat of learning dedicated to the task. The University was thus for Magnes the creative center for the revitalization of Jewry, and through Jewry, if the miracle be vouchsafed, for the revitalization of mankind. Magnes' view of the University entailed the renaissance of a Jewish humanism.

I use the phrase "Jewish humanism" for want of a better. I could as easily say (if the word be permitted) a Jewish theologism. For Magnes, with many others, subscribed to the belief of Plato, the greatest humanist of them all, that the measure of things is not man but God. He encouraged every attempt to attach to the University a school for the training of Jewish spiritual leaders. The difficulties of making a Rabbinical College part of the University are well known, nor indeed is it at all clear that it would be desirable to try to overcome them. But Magnes thought that the facilities offered by the University could and should be utilised in order to help train Rabbis even in the traditional sense. But again his interest was not so much in Rabbis in the traditional sense. Although himself a traditionalist (or perhaps be-

cause he was himself a traditionalist) he realised that the new conditions demanded the re-adaptation of the old tradition. He therefore interested himself in any attempt to bring to the University men from outside Palestine who would return to world Jewry and infuse it with new life. It was due to his initiative that fellowships from Jewish colleges in America were instituted in the very early days of the University (it is melancholy to recall that the late Josh Liebman was one of these early Fellows), and he lived to welcome with enthusiasm the "veterans" of the last world war who came to the University under the G.I. scheme. Magnes wanted Jewish scholars, but he wanted something more. He wanted Judaism for Jewish *life*; and he saw that in addition to the scholarly clarification of Jewish ideals and their fresh evaluation in the light of the facts of the modern world there were needed men who would carry the message from the scholars and the books to the people. He believed in the mission of Israel (first and foremost to and for Israel itself); but he saw that no mission could work without missionaries.

Thus Magnes' vision was of a University in the full sense of a center for the discovery and diffusion of knowledge. It was to be first for the Yishub, then for Palestine and the Near East as a whole, then for world Jewry and through world Jewry for the world. It was to embrace knowledge in all its spheres, to be based on the best elementary and secondary education, yet to culminate in a School of Jewish Studies which should illumine and deepen Jewish values. As a University it should be linked with all other similar institutions throughout the world; but as a Hebrew University it should be linked particularly with all Jewish institutions of higher learning, interchanging with them both students and teachers and the fruits of their scholarship. It was to be served by a University Press which should take upon itself the duty of disseminating (both in the original and through translation) the best produced by itself, and of receiving

in translation the best produced by others. It should have departments for the training of teachers and spiritual guides who would fructify both Palestine and world Jewry with the ideas of the old and new Jerusalem.

To these eternal ends Magnes labored, whether successfully or not time alone will show. If not, the fault was not his. He was an ideal Head of a University. His energy and courage were an inspiration. He was warm-hearted: nobody turned to him in vain. It was no accident that he worked so hard, particularly during and after the second world war, for the Joint, for Hadassah, and for Youth Aliyah. Everything human touched him and called forth his whole self. He never forgot an old student, however devious the paths into which he might have strayed. He was particularly open to the calls of his political opponents. He had a craving to help and to understand, and would attend endless conferences in order to get at the other point of view. He carefully guarded his time in order to give it more prodigally.

Magnes took for his office the tower room on the top of the Library building, and to that lofty tower room streamed callers from all parts of Palestine and of the world—workmen and farmers as well as high Government officials and

diplomats and men of science and learning. They all came away with something of the vision of greatness which clung to Magnes and was diffused from everything that he said. For he said what he felt, and he felt deeply. He was no saint or babe in the wood. He knew what he was doing and what others wished to do to him. But he kept his course with simple dignity.

In his work for the University he met endless difficulties. The financial difficulties were not the worst. It was not easy to find men for posts in a Hebrew University in Palestine, a cultural backwater where honors were not to be won and external contacts were difficult to maintain. But Magnes' own example was a force, and his infectious charm often prevailed to bring a waverer in. His very humanity summoned the human in others.

But we shall never see that smile again, hear that voice, listen to that courageous word. We shall never again stand round that commanding figure at University gatherings as new colleagues are introduced, visitors welcomed, members of all the staffs congratulated on family events and put at their ease with a quiet joke or a courtly gesture. The hand has vanished; the voice is still.

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view of the almost insuperable obstacles, our community progress in Jewish education has been gratifying. But our people still do not understand the meaning of "unity in diversity," and we are very far from "communified" action in education. Not only do vested interests, party outlooks, and personal ambitions stand in the way. We have to struggle also to make

the community idea in education clear, to ourselves as well as to others. "Communification" must still be taken on faith. In that faith, the memory of Judah L. Magnes and his "success-in-failure" should be a source of continuous inspiration to us. In a real and literal sense, we can say of him: "The memory of the righteous is for a blessing."—*זכר צדיק לברכה*