

# SOUL of the JEWS

Jonathan Fishburn marks the eightieth anniversary  
of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

'It seems at first sight paradoxical that in a land with so sparse a population, in a land where everything still remains to be done, in a land crying out for such simple things as ploughs, roads, and harbours, we should be creating a centre of spiritual and intellectual developments. But it is no paradox for those who know the soul of the Jew. It is true that great social and political problems still face us and will demand their solution. We Jews know that when the mind is given fullest play, when we have a centre for the development of Jewish consciousness, then coincidentally we shall attain the fulfilment of our material needs' – Dr Chaim Weizmann, 24 July 1918, at the laying of the foundation stone of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

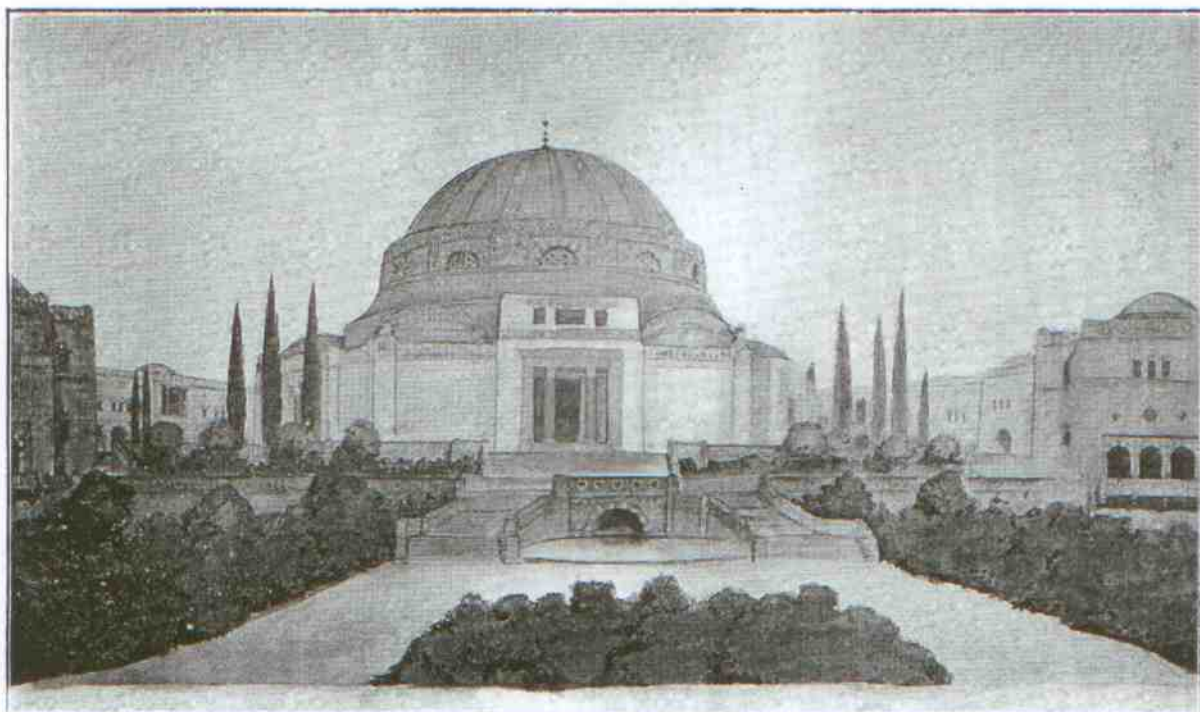
I'm pleased that Dr Weizmann is resting peacefully and so unaware of the proposed resolution by the Association

of University Teachers (AUT) to boycott his beloved Hebrew University. He would, of course, be devastated.

When Lord Balfour officially opened the Hebrew University in 1925, he acknowledged the unique challenge facing it:

We are now engaged in adapting a Western form of a University to an Asiatic site and to an education which is to be carried on in an Eastern language ... the experiment is predestined to be an inevitable success (*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1925-1950* [Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1950]).

With 100 subject-related and interdisciplinary research centres and an array of academic staff of international



Central Hall of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

standing, Lord Balfour would be pleased to know that, 80 years on, his prediction has proved accurate.

Several pamphlets relating to the university convey the tremendous commitment and heartfelt concern felt by leaders of pre-State Israel for the soul of the Jewish people. One entitled 'The Hebrew University in Jerusalem' (London: Keren Hayesod/Palestine Foundation Fund, 1921) states that:

A National University should be the intellectual centre of the nation, the source often and always the focus of its spiritual aspirations, interests and emotions. In the advancement of science Jews have always taken a noble part, but the fruit of their labours have not been reaped by Jewry. Is it conceivable that, in addition to the tragedy of Jewish science without a home, there could exist a Jewish National Home without science? The traditional pride of the Jewish people in their learned men would never suffer such humiliation.

Another publication of the same name from the University Committee of the Zionist Organisation (London, 1924) grandly declared:

A University that is a centre of Jewish culture is also a religious centre; a prophetic world centre cannot indeed be created by endowments or by good instruction, but a centre of culture on Mount Scopus has in it potentialities of becoming a prophetic world centre.

Interestingly, the Jewish National & University Library preceded the opening of the university. Founded in 1892, it serves as the National Library of the State of Israel, the National Library of the Jewish People and the Central Library of the Hebrew University. Established with 10,000 volumes sent by Dr Joseph Chasanowitz from Bialystok to Jerusalem, it also received many books from external sources. The International Congress of Librarians, which took place in Paris in the spring of 1922, urged the libraries of Europe and America to maintain friendly relations with the national library in Jerusalem. The Government of Palestine, in a letter to the Authorities of the British Museum, recognized the library as having academic rank, and High Commissioner Sir Herbert Samuel himself presented many gifts to it.

A small publication in 1924 on *The Jewish National and University Library* (Tel Aviv: Hapoel Hazair), emphasized that:

Without a library there is no means of scientific research and no university. The lack of a library compels scholars to leave Palestine. If there will be a large library, it will bring new scientific forces to the country... The Library is necessary for the labourer, the *chaltz*, who gave up his studies and became a labourer, but will not renounce the possibility to widen his education. But the Library first of all is destined to collect all that has been produced by Jews in spiritual works in the whole world and that has been written about the Jews by other nations. Other nations have their national libraries (Bibliothèque National in Paris, etc) but there is no

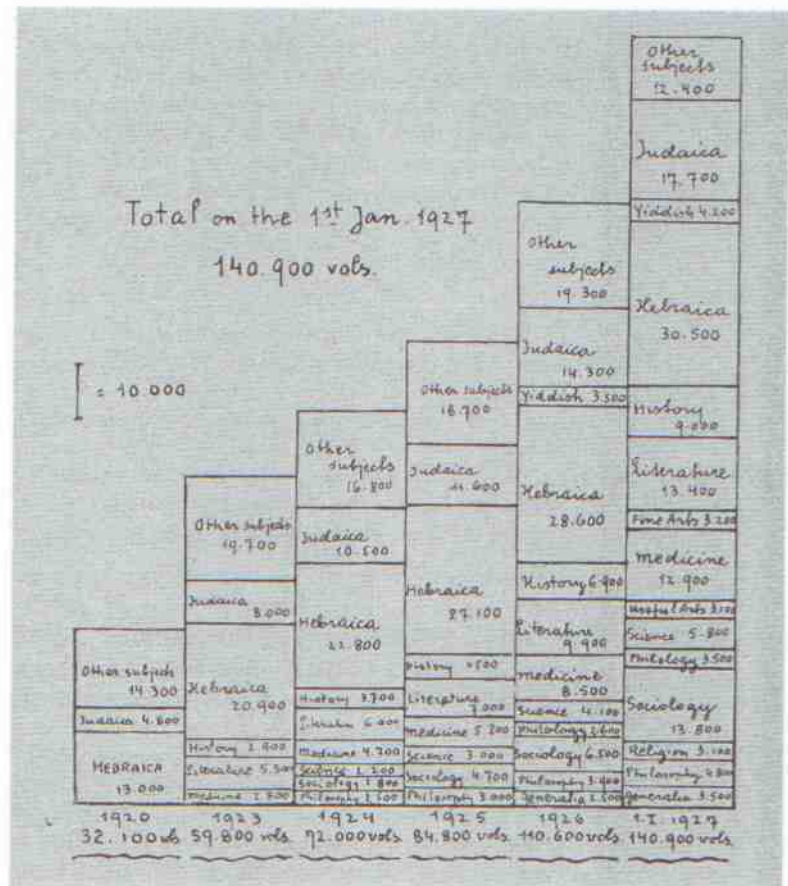


Chart showing the subject areas of the 140,900 volumes held by the University's library in 1927

place in the world, where the Jews will have a centre of their mental creations. Surely the most appropriate place is Jerusalem.

In 1927, there were 140,900 volumes, as shown in the chart from that year's report. The library started important publications, notably *Kiryat Sefer*,

a quarterly bibliographical review in Hebrew, which includes all Palestinian prints, the new publications in Judaism throughout the world, as well as accounts of manuscripts in the library.

In another report, 'The System of Education of the Jewish Community in Palestine - Report of the Commission of Enquiry Appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies 1945' (HMSO Colonial No. 201), the dearth of teachers for primary and secondary schools was raised as a matter of grave concern, and the role of the Hebrew University in the training of teachers was highlighted:

In our opinion... there is no greater service that could be rendered by it to them [the population] now than to extend its concern with the training of teachers in the Colleges and to expand the output of its own Department of Education, and, in this way, to take the lead in a big forward movement for the improvement of the quality of teaching in the Jewish

schools of Palestine . . . We realize that if the University is prepared to accept this task, a considerable increase in its expenditure will be involved, and we have made provision for this by recommending that the Government should make the necessary grants both to assist the University towards meeting the increase in expenditure, and for the fees and maintenance of students who are unable to undertake a course of training without financial assistance.

In the 1940s the University found another niche market: Adult Education. According to a brochure,

After 1940, when Italy entered the war and Palestine was practically isolated, the demand for Adult Education courses increased. Special intensive courses were held for cattle, poultry and fish breeders, dieticians, fruit growers, school teachers, physicians, dentists, civil servants, hospital nurses, Army officers and Scout leaders.

In 1950, the 'Semi-Jubilee Volume' entitled *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1925-1950* cites Chaim Weizmann's reflections on its establishment in his memoir *Trial and Error*.

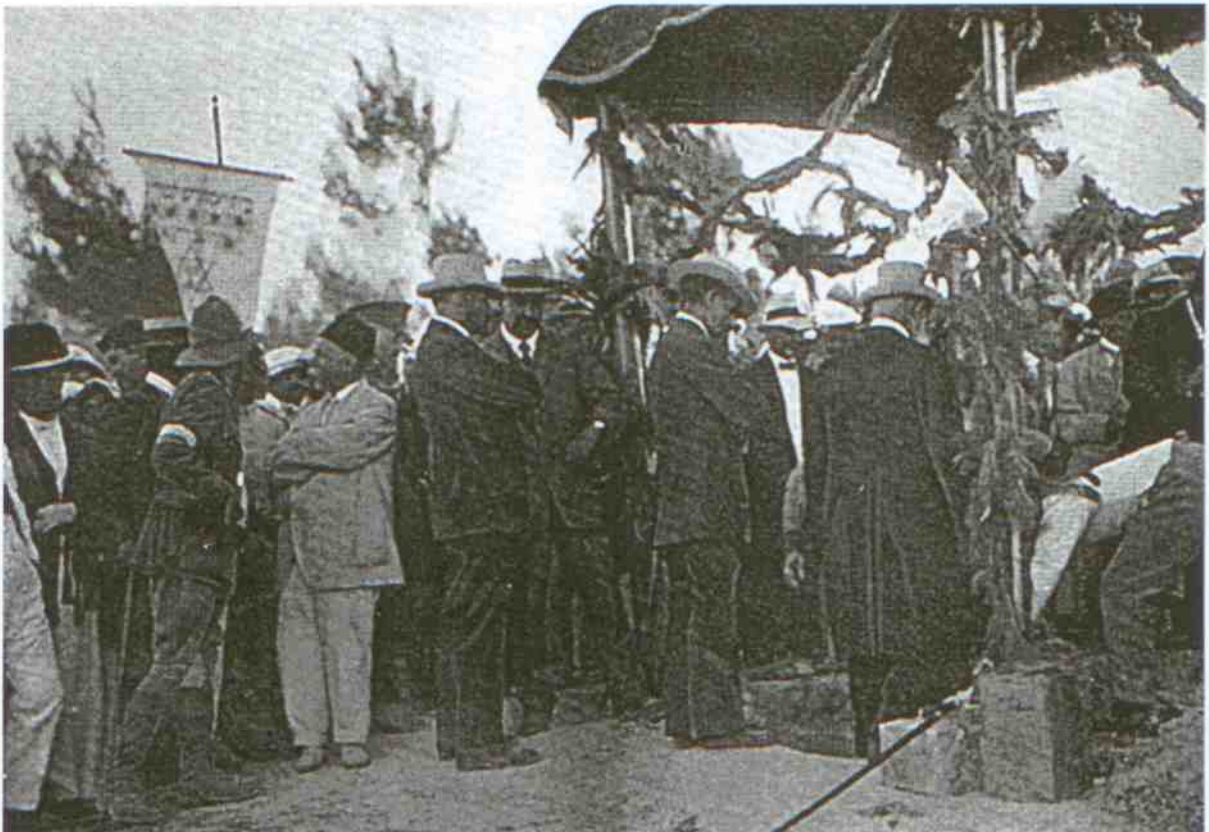
The ideal of the Hebrew University was for many of us the noblest expression of our Zionist humanism . . . A Hebrew University in Palestine would mean release from the pariah status which was the lot of Jewish youth in so many of the Universities of Eastern and even Central Europe.

In light of the growing anti-Zionist feelings reported by university students on campus in the UK – and the scandal surrounding the AUT boycott – it is tragic to think that Dr Weizmann's words are as relevant in 2005 as they were in 1950. ●

**Note:** The AUT passed a resolution (now overturned) to boycott Bar-Ilan and Haifa universities, but it also proposed a resolution to boycott the Hebrew University, based on an alleged claim that, after 1967, land belonging to Palestinian families living nearby was confiscated for use by the university to build student facilities. This has been denied by the university, and the AUT has deferred further discussion of this resolution to a later date.

For more information about the libraries of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's see:  
[www.huji.ac.il/huji/eng/library\\_e.htm](http://www.huji.ac.il/huji/eng/library_e.htm)

Jonathan Fishburn is an antiquarian bookseller specializing in Judaica ([www.fishburnbooks.com](http://www.fishburnbooks.com)). His latest catalogue has 1,000 items relating to Zionism.



Ceremony to mark the laying of the foundation stones of the Hebrew University in 1918