
“A University That Would Revolutionize World Jewry”:

*An Unpublished Letter
from Jacob Rader Marcus to Judah Magnes (1926)*

American School of Archaeology

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Dear Dr. Magnes:

I am taking the liberty of writing to you of my impressions of the country and the University after a stay of three months. I am primarily interested in the cultural development of Jewry here, and although the economic and political phases of life are closely related to it I shall not dwell upon them. I fear that my attitude toward these latter two elements is somewhat negative. I cannot, for the present, see any hope for a free and unconfined political development of the Jewish people here. The strategic importance of Palestine in the British Empire; its position on the highroad between Mesopotamia and Suez, the inherent conservatism of English foreign policy; the gradual progressive scrapping of the Balfour Declaration,—all tend to make me very pessimistic. Added to this difficulty comes the problem of Arabic-Jewish relations. I find the Arabs very nationalistic. I despair of any working agreement between the two groups, particularly since England will always be able to exercise—to the detriment of Arabic-Jewish concord—her traditional policy of a “balance of power.” The economic difficulties of furthering a land that is agriculturally poor and without maritime facilities appear to me to be relatively insurmountable.

The difficulties, however, that are inherent in the political and economic life of the land are not inherent in its cultural being. There is a magnificent academic tradition that runs for centuries through Palestine from the days of the earliest flowering of Hebrew literature to the last monograph of the University. Bible, Apocrypha, Mishnah and

Talmud are words to conjure with. Even after the Christianization of Palestine and the consequent limitation of Jewish school life Palestinian Jewry wrote the earliest Midrashim; possibly our first mediaeval poems; founded the Massoretic science, and developed an active cultural life under the Fatimid Caliphs. The Crusades, for a time, impaired the continuity of a learned tradition, yet Jehuda Halevi came, later Nachmanides, then Obadiah of Bertinoro until in the 16th century we find the academic work carried on with renewed force to the present day.

The cultural life of Palestine took on added impetus in the 80's with the new immigration, modern schools were established, Hebrew began to be a living tongue, an organized school system began to take form. Yet it was all a headless body, the system lacked its completion. There was no institution of higher learning, no university. The children of the old settlers left the farms, left Palestine to finish their studies. Some went to Beirut, many to Central Europe, many to France.

The present University, Dr. Magnes, must be expanded and completed in order to round out the Jewish educational organization of this country. If the Jews refuse to build a university that will be complete and adequate for present day needs then others will be found to undertake the work. I understand that influential Anglican non-Jews are anxious to build an English university here. It is obvious that such an institution will not solve the problems of Jewish education here but on the contrary make a free unhampered Jewish development impossible. Such an organization will not give back to Palestine the children of its settlers who are now scattered from Berlin to New York.

The probability of the immediate success of a big-visioned University is, in my opinion, unquestionable. The new school can link up with the magnificent old Jewish academic tradition. The work that was begun three thousand years ago can be carried on with vigour and energy. Two-thirds of Jewish communal life has been literary and academic,—two thousand years. The Jews are the people of the mind, of thought. If heredity and environment count for anything then the Jew is preeminently a thinker. He apotheosizes study, not the body. Every fibre of Jewish being strains toward intellectual life. The agricultural tendency, the return to the soil, the turning aside from the schoolhouse is hard, very hard. In 50 years we have not been able to settle 35,000 people on the soil, but in 5 years we built the great city of Tel Aviv; in

less than that we can found a great University big enough and broad enough to encompass World-Jewry. We not only can do it,—we must do it.

But it must be a real University. Now we have but the outlines, the scientific laboratories and the Institute of Jewish Studies. What has been done is good, very good. I have for three months, week in and week out, listened to lectures, and I know that the possibilities of spreading Jewish knowledge in a humanistic spirit are infinite. There is a freedom, a broadness, an earnestness about the work that tugs at the heart strings of any Jew who has a spark of Jewish sympathy within him. The charm of the place, of the instructors, of the hour is irresistible. But you must go farther.

The new University must be developed. There is practically no department of general education. The brilliant young Talmudists, the tanned Haluzim, the wiry settlers' sons are only too often deplorably lacking in the elements of a broad secular education. A thoroughly modern university is needed here with complete faculties of Liberal Arts, Medicine and Law. The school must have complete faculties in these three groups so that there be no need to run to the Sorbonne or to Vienna, or to knock at the doors of schools where the Jew is merely tolerated and where he is compelled to listen to instructors who pour obloquy on him and his fathers. I would like to see a new type of school on Mount Scopus:—a school that would be built basically on Continental traditions; a school that would further individual initiative, research and thoroughness through the seminar system; a school that would be filled with the best European traditions of academic freedom and liberalism. Yet because I am a Jew and this must be a Jewish University I would wish that this new school be filled with the social spirit and the finer nationalism that is so true of the better American colleges. The University dare not be an academic factory; it must not only produce students, but also Jews who are conscious of their social obligations to the Jewish people and its cultural traditions.

Such a university, I believe, would serve to stimulate profoundly Palestine life. It would at once crown the Jewish academic system; it would become the center of all thinking life and would add new impetus to economic activity and to political thought. Here—if nowhere else in the world—Jewry would be able to express itself freely, unhampered, boldly. Here those scholars who are sensitively Jewish could

pour themselves out and be understood. Here the attempt could be made to make of Palestine again a center of World Jewry. Jewish life in Poland and in Eastern Europe is being throttled by adverse economic and political conditions. Jewry needs authority. Palestine is now in a position to develop itself; to take upon its shoulders the task of stimulating World Jewry in a modern, progressive yet traditionally Jewish spirit. The possible influence of Palestine on the Jewish cultural center is tremendous. Primarily it would serve to coordinate, to develop and to inspire Palestinian life,—but even more it would form and hold together World Jewry. It would prevent the Jewries of all lands from nationalizing their Judaism in the narrower sense, of sectarianizing their religious loyalties, of subjecting their universal ideals to the narrowness of ephemeral geographical prejudices.

All this the new Jewish University can accomplish. It has the men, it has the tradition, it has the soul of the people with it. It merely needs money. Good God, with what it costs to establish a group of Jewish colonies about the size of a North Dakota farm we could build up a University here that would revolutionize World Jewry and start the blood pounding through its veins. There is nothing in all Jewish life more important than this school. Absolutely nothing. Jewry must recognize this. Jewry must build this school and the sooner the better.

Believe me I have the honor to remain,

Very respectfully yours,

(Jacob Rader Marcus)

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