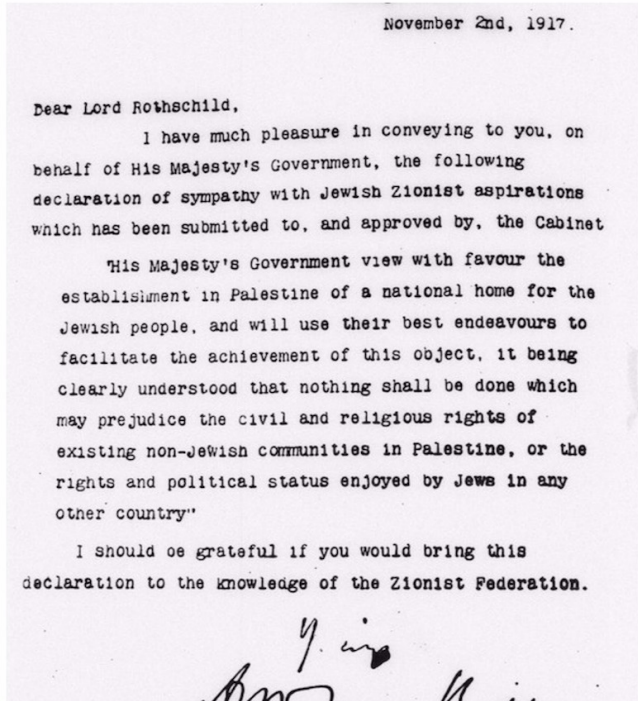


Commemorating the Balfour Declaration November 2, 1917.



Attributed to Blaise Pascal or to Voltaire or to John Locke is the aphorism that "if I had more time I would have written a shorter letter." Among those who apparently did not have time are Marcel Proust whose book, *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* contains 1,267,069 words, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* has 587,287, and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* has 545,925. But some writers did have more time. The 10 Commandments consist of 179 words, President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address of two minutes on November 19, 1863 has 275 words, the U.S. Declaration of Independence has 1,300 words, and the Balfour Declaration written on November 2, 1917, and whose anniversary is currently being commemorated has 67 words. The short statement of Balfour like that of Lincoln was of history's great political and historic documents.

Before World War I, the area of Palestine was a region of the Ottoman Empire with a small Jewish population. After the start of World War I, the British government began considering

changes in the Ottoman Empire, the sick man of Europe, which had entered the war on the side of Germany and the Central Powers in October 1914. Among other proposals, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Welsh nonconformist, sympathetic to Jews, favored partition of the Empire. In the Middle East, the last generally recognized sovereign power was the Empire, and the area of Palestine was a district not a political entity.

The Balfour Declaration was not a declaration but a letter of November 2, 1917, written by Scottish born Arthur Balfour, Prime Minister, 1902-5 and Foreign Secretary 1916-1919 to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, Balfour, who was raised as a Protestant in the evangelical tradition, had been a friend of Chaim Weizmann, the most important Jewish personality of his day, since 1906 when they opposed the Russian pogroms. The Balfour letter was the result of prolonged discussion in the British cabinet and with Zionist leaders, and the subject of several drafts of the letter. Various individuals have been suggested as the primary author, including Lord Milner and Leopold Amery, but there is no definitely acknowledged single writer.

The Declaration stated that "His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object." In the statement, two factors are clearly understood: nothing should be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

The Declaration gave rise to conflicting emotions: Jewish hopes and Arab disappointments. Lord Rothschild remarked that "for the first time since the dispersion, the Jewish people have received their proper status by the declaration of one of the great powers."

The Declaration was the first public support for Zionism by a

major political power, since Cyrus, the Persian king who liberated the Jews from their Babylonian exile in the 6th century BC.

It was the first time that a major world power publicly declared its support for Jews to return to their homeland.

The letter gave rise to conflicting emotions, expression of Jewish hopes and hostile Arab disappointment. But what was its purpose? There were personal, political, and geo-military factors. First, it can be understood as genuine sympathy felt by some, if not all, leading evangelical British Christian politicians, and some Catholics such as Mark Sykes. The influential editor of the Manchester Guardian, C.P. Scott, who had introduced Chaim Weizmann to Lloyd George, alluding to the massacres of Christian Armenians, now seen as a genocide, by the Turks, wrote that Jews needed a national home for their security. Some gratitude was expressed for Chaim Weizmann, a Russian born British resident, a scientist who had devised a method for manufacturing acetone useful for explosives essential for the British military.

In geo-military terms, Britain was concerned to safeguard the Suez Canal and thus the route to India by a British presence in the eastern Mediterranean. Britain and the U.S. were concerned about the Revolution in Russia in February and March 1917 and were anxious that Russia stay in the war as an ally, rather than be neutral or even support Germany. Leaders in the two countries believed that Jews in Russia or of Jewish origin in the U.S. would influence the Leninist regime to support the Allies, and that in general Jewish public opinion would be mobilized to support the war effort. Leaflets of Balfour were dropped over Jewish communities in Germany and Austria and over the Pale of Settlement which had been given to the Central Powers after the Russian withdrawal in 1917.

Palestinians and other Arabs saw the Declaration as a dark day, as British colonial policy, disregarding the presence of

the then national majority in the area. They argued that the Declaration was only one of three conflicting wartime promises made by the British. The other two were the highly disputed 1915 Hussein-McMahon correspondence, and the treaty with France known as the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement. The first is an exchange in July 1915 of correspondence between the Sheriff of Mecca, Hussein Ibn Ali, and Sir Henry McMahon, Britain's High Commissioner in Egypt. The UK agreed to recognize Arab independence after the war in exchange for the Sheriff launching the Arab revolt against the Ottomans.

Legend is of the help given Britain by Hussein's "uprising" in the desert against the Turks with the help of T.E. Lawrence, the British intelligence officer popularly known, mostly in the movies, as Lawrence of Arabia. The secret 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France, and Russian knowledge, leaked by the Russians, defined their mutually agreed spheres of influence and control in the Middle East when the defeated Ottoman Empire was partitioned. One understanding was that much of Palestine would be under international administration. reached political maturity. The new League of Nations confirmed the pledge in Balfour of a national home and awarded the Mandate for Palestine to Great Britain.

The Declaration spoke of a "national home ," for the Jewish people, an ambiguous term deliberately kept vague, and never precisely defined, when compared to a term such as "state." There were differences of interpretation, from a full sovereign state to merely a spiritual center for Jews. The letter did not define national home nor did it promise to create a Jewish state. The boundaries of "Palestine" were not defined, and the words of the "home in Palestine" did not necessarily mean all of Palestine.

Nevertheless, the Balfour Declaration was a central factor in the events leading to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, leading directly to decisions favorable to Zionism at the April 1920 San Remo conference by the victorious Allied

powers which decided on territories of the Ottomans. It created two mandates of the old province of Syria; the north part was mandated to France, the south (Palestine) to Britain. The territories would be subject to mandatory power until they reached political maturity.

Balfour stirred the aspirations of Zionists, after the horrors of the pogroms in Russia and the antisemitism witnessed in the Dreyfus affair in France. It was the central factor of the British Mandate for Palestine, key to mandatory Palestine, which became the State of Israel and the disputed territories under Palestinian control.

The much-discussed Declaration is a genuine cause to be celebrated on this anniversary a hundred years later. It is fitting that the modest residence of the prime minister of Israel is on Balfour Street.