

## ACTIVITY 6

### **Balfour or Bust?**

#### **An Educational Session for Youth Movements**

**(by Robin Moss, UJIA)**

Target age group: 13-15 year olds

#### Aims

- To understand why both Zionists and the British Government were in favour of issuing the Balfour Declaration
- To understand the content and context of the Balfour Declaration
- To see how different Jews reacted to the Declaration, and how the Arabs reacted

#### Trigger – 10 mins

Two skits one after the other.

- 1) Group of stereotypically-dressed English gentlemen from early 20<sup>th</sup> century (black suit, bowler hat, starched hair etc). They are politicians sitting round a table.

***Madrich/a 1:*** “I call this meeting to order. Gentlemen, we sit here, at the start of 1917, and it is our job to work out our strategy for further enhancing the glory of the British Empire. First, let us hear a report from our colleagues at the War Office”

***Madrich/a 2:*** “The War is taking much longer than anticipated. The Western Front is at a standstill. Many of our brave young soldiers have died or are wounded. Nothing seems to be happening. In the Middle East, though, I am confident that a breakthrough is imminent against the Ottomans.”

***Madrich/a 1:*** “Thank you. Let me turn now to our colleagues at the Colonial Office. If this is correct and we may soon find ourselves in possession of Palestine, what are your thoughts?”

***Madrich/a 3:*** “Palestine is of immense importance to many of the Empire’s subjects. Christians make pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The majority of the population of Palestine are Muslims, as are millions of our subjects in India. And of course, for the Jews, it is their homeland.”

***Madrich/a 1:*** “So what?”

***Madrich/a 3:*** “Palestine may be the greatest prize in the Empire if we administer it appropriately. If we make mistakes, though, it could turn into our greatest disaster.”

***Madrich/a 1:*** “I will ask Lord Arthur Balfour to consider these issues in more depth. We must tread carefully. For the glory of the Empire, gentlemen, we must tread carefully...”



2) Group of Kibbutzniks – farming clothes, trowels, shovels, etc – in the Kibbutz meeting

*Lots of rowdiness, shouting, cheering etc*

**Madrich/a 4:** “Order! Order! I bring this meeting of the Kibbutz Council to order!”

**Madrich/a 5:** “Who put you in charge?”

**Madrich/a 4:** “As the Chair of this meeting, elected last year at our Annual General Meeting, I am in charge. And you will come to order!”

**Madrich/a 6:** “Well get on with it then!”

**Madrich/a 4:** “I will if you all just shut up!”

*They go quiet*

**Madrich/a 4:** “Right, first item on the agenda. The future of our Kibbutz. We were founded a mere eight years ago. We have done wondrous things. Our crops are thriving. Our cows give plenty of milk. Relations with our Arab neighbours are warm, if not brilliantly friendly. Every year, more and more Jews come to the Land of Israel to be a part of our national rebirth in our ancient homeland.”

**Madrich/a 6:** “So what’s the problem then?”

**Madrich/a 4:** “The future”

**Madrich/a 5:** “What about the future?”

**Madrich/a 4:** “It is uncertain. The war in Europe seems to be at a stalemate. And here in Palestine, I hear word that General Allenby and his British troops are only a few hundred miles away. We could well be on the verge of a new government.”

**Madrich/a 6:** “The Ottomans have been OK. They are a bit restrictive, but nothing too terrible. They have basically ignored us here in Palestine.”

**Madrich/a 5:** “What will the British be like?”

**Madrich/a 4:** “That is the question, comrades. They are a great and mighty empire. We must get them on side.”

Quick explanation of what is going to happen – we have seen the situation in 1917. The British Empire would soon control Palestine. The Yishuv (Jews who had come to settle the Land) are worried what the future might hold. All of this is the backdrop to one of the most important documents in the history of Zionism: **the Balfour Declaration**. In this programme, we are going to look at *why* the British issued the Declaration, *what* the Declaration said and *how* different groups reacted to it.



## Method – 45 mins

Divide participants into however many smaller groups works for your group. Recommended size is 5-10 per group. There are three activities – each group will do each one in turn (they have to be done in order).

### *Activity 1 – British motivations for the Declaration*

First, they will learn some of the many reasons that the British issued the Balfour Declaration.

All of the below reasons should be printed on a separate pieces of paper – “islands”. Make these pieces of paper yellow or brown or green. They are placed on the floor around the room.

Explain that the British Empire at the time spanned the globe, and the major method of transport was by ship. They need to work as a team to get to each of the “islands” (the pieces of paper with the reasons on) using only other pieces of paper (white). There is one piece of paper per two people. They have to move as a team. They have five minutes to reach each island and collect that reason.

### Reasons

- Leading British Jews who were Zionist lobbied the British Government on the basis of the basic justice of the Zionist cause
- Many of the British politicians were Christian and believed that Jews returning to the Land of Israel was part of God’s plan and/or that Christians should help Jews because of inter-religious brotherhood
- Palestine was between Egypt and Iraq, two very important territories for the British Empire in the Middle East. Controlling it would support Britain’s interests in this most important region
- The Jews of America were believed to have a large amount of power over the American government, which would be useful for the war effort
- Many of the Bolsheviks, the new Communist government of Russia, were Jewish, and their support would be useful for the war effort
- Jews in Germany were generally supportive of the Kaiser, but it was hoped that the British government showing support for Zionism might change that



Once they have gotten all of them back, have a discussion:

- Which of these reasons do you think is the most convincing?
- Which do you think is the least convincing?
- If you were the British Government, which of these would you be most willing to listen to? Which would you be least likely to listen to?
- Are any of them, in your view, motivated (paradoxically) by antisemitic ideas? e.g. the classic antisemitic idea of Jewish power and control

Summarise this activity by saying that there were many reasons – religious, moral, political – why Britain issued the Balfour Declaration.

### *Activity 2 – What the Balfour Declaration Said*

Split the group into two teams. Print out the words of the Balfour Declaration one word at a time on pieces of paper. On the back are the numbers of each word – but in Hebrew numerals. They have to piece together the complete Declaration in the correct order. Fastest team wins! When they think they have it, they have to read it out loud and only if they are completely correct do they win.

Give them out the following guide to Hebrew numerals:

1	א	15	טו
2	ב	16	טז
3	ג	20	כ
4	ד	30	ל
5	ה	40	מ
6	ו	50	נ
7	ז	60	ס
8	ח		
9	ט		
10	י		

<b>His</b>	<b>Majesty's</b>	<b>Government</b>	<b>view</b>
<b>with</b>	<b>favour</b>	<b>the</b>	<b>establishment</b>
<b>in</b>	<b>Palestine</b>	<b>of</b>	<b>a</b>
<b>national</b>	<b>home</b>	<b>for</b>	<b>the</b>
<b>Jewish</b>	<b>people,</b>	<b>and</b>	<b>will</b>
<b>use</b>	<b>their</b>	<b>best</b>	<b>endeavours</b>
<b>to</b>	<b>facilitate</b>	<b>the</b>	<b>achievement</b>
<b>of</b>	<b>this</b>	<b>object,</b>	<b>it</b>
<b>being</b>	<b>clearly</b>	<b>understood</b>	<b>that</b>
<b>nothing</b>	<b>shall</b>	<b>be</b>	<b>done</b>
<b>which</b>	<b>may</b>	<b>prejudice</b>	<b>the</b>
<b>civil</b>	<b>and</b>	<b>religious</b>	<b>rights</b>
<b>of</b>	<b>existing</b>	<b>non-Jewish</b>	<b>communities</b>
<b>In</b>	<b>Palestine,</b>	<b>or</b>	<b>the</b>
<b>rights</b>	<b>and</b>	<b>political</b>	<b>status</b>
<b>enjoyed</b>	<b>by</b>	<b>Jews</b>	<b>in</b>
<b>any</b>	<b>other</b>	<b>country.</b>	

ד	ג	ב	א
ח	ז	ו	ה
בי	אי	י	ט
זט	וט	די	גי
כ	טי	חי	זי
דכ	גכ	בכ	אכ
חכ	זכ	וכ	הכ
בל	אל	ל	טכ
ול	הל	דל	גל
מ	טל	חל	זל
דמ	גמ	במ	אמ
חמ	זמ	ומ	המ
בנ	אנ	נ	טמ
ונ	הנ	דנ	גנ
ס	טנ	חנ	זנ
דס	גס	בס	אס
	זס	וס	הס

Once they have read it out, have a discussion about the following points:

- Is there anything they do not understand in the Declaration?
- Is any of the wording deliberately a bit confusing or ambiguous?
  - e.g. “a home”, not “the home”
  - e.g. “home”, not “state”
  - e.g. “civil and religious rights”
  - e.g. “in Palestine”, not “Palestine will be”
- (If you have time) If you were writing the Balfour Declaration, is there anything you would change?

Summarise this activity by saying that the core thrust of the Balfour Declaration was British support for the project of Zionism, but that there was sufficient ambiguity in the wording for it to have many different meanings.

### *Activity 3 – How different groups reacted to it*

Set up an “agree-disagree” line and get the group to place themselves on it depending on how much they support a certain statement. After each one, ask a few of them why they placed themselves as they did, and then move on.

#### **Statement 1: The Balfour Declaration was the best the Zionists could have hoped for**

- Some Zionists were satisfied with it
- Others thought it did not go far enough, e.g. with talk of a ‘home’ not a ‘state’ and “in Palestine” implying not necessarily the whole of Palestine
- Though no Zionists relied upon the Declaration to validate their claim

#### **Statement 2: The Balfour Declaration might risk British Jews being accused of not being loyal to Britain**

- This was a very real fear of part of the establishment of the British Jewish community
- Notably, the Board of Deputies of British Jews was enormously split over the question
- Some leading British Jews were in fact anti-Zionist and actively opposed the Balfour Declaration

#### **Statement 3: The Balfour Declaration was good for all of the inhabitants of Palestine**

- The Yishuv (the pre-State Jewish population) largely agreed – they saw a Jewish home as economically, socially and politically good for Arabs and Jews alike
- The Arab inhabitants of Palestine (the term ‘Palestinians’ would not have been in common usage at the time) did not see this as true. They saw this as Britain prioritising the rights/needs of the minority (the one-in-nine inhabitants who was Jewish) over the rights/needs of the majority (the eight-in-nine inhabitants who was Arab)



#### Statement 4: **The British Government had the right to issue the Balfour Declaration**

- Most British Jews, and the Yishuv, believed that they did – they were about to take control of the area, and the colonialist politics of the time said that the conqueror had the right to decide policy in the conquered area (though the Jewish claim was not reliant upon it)
- The Arabs did not agree – they saw the British as unwelcome invaders who should not be able to decide the future of a land that was not their own

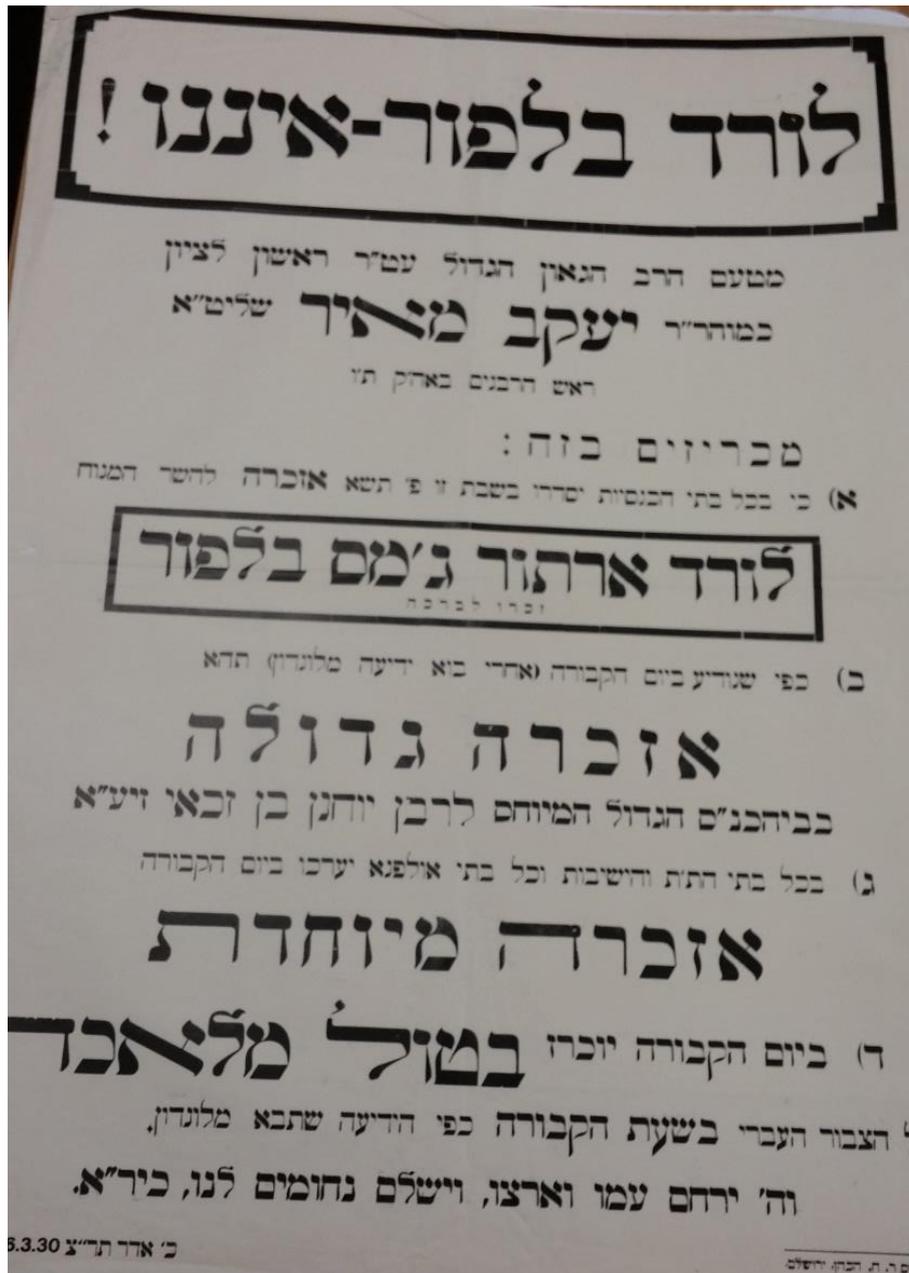
Once you have gone through each question, summarise:

- British Jews were split
  - The Zionists were delighted with the Declaration, even if they had some misgivings about the wording
  - The non- or anti-Zionists were fearful about what it would mean for British Jews and their relationship with the rest of British society
- The Jews in the Land of Israel (the Yishuv) saw it as incredible – a miracle even
- The Arabs in Palestine saw it as an unwelcome and immoral expression of colonialist arrogance, that privileged the Jewish minority over the Arab majority

#### Sikkum – 5 mins

Print off and show them the following photo. See if they can decipher the Hebrew in either of the two boxes (the top one says “Lord Balfour Eineinu” “Lord Balfour is not with us” (ie he has died); the middle one says “Lord Arthur James Balfour”). (The rest of it says that memorial prayers will be said in all synagogues etc).





It is from 1930, the year Lord Balfour died. It shows something of the depth of appreciation that the Jews of the Land of Israel felt towards him. The Balfour Declaration was controversial at the time and has had massive consequences for Jews, Arabs and others. Its importance cannot be overstated.