

ACTIVITY 2

Chaim Weizmann Meets Arthur James Balfour – Palestine, Zionism and the Balfour Declaration

(by Joel Meyer for UJIA)

A play featuring three actors:

- Chaim Weizmann
- Arthur James Balfour
- Narrator

Chaim Weizmann enters the Houses of Parliament where he is met inside a large entry hall by Arthur James Balfour.

Balfour: Weizmann! Good to see you old boy! Thank you so much for coming down to London.

Weizmann: Arthur my good man, delightful to see you too.

Narrator: It is now April 1917. Though colleagues and friends, the origins of Balfour and Weizmann could scarcely be more different:

Born into an aristocratic family, Arthur James Balfour had enjoyed a privileged upbringing, attending both Eton College and Cambridge. Now the Foreign Secretary for his Majesty's Government, he had earlier served as Prime Minister of Great Britain.

Weizmann, on the other hand, was born into a middle class Jewish family in the Shtetl (village) of Motal in Belarus where his father was a timber merchant. His flair for Chemistry had seen him rise from his lowly upbringings, eventually arriving in Britain to take up the position of a Senior Lecturer at Manchester University.

Balfour: Do come with me Charles. I hope you don't mind but I have taken the liberty of arranging a room for us.

Weizmann: Certainly, Arthur. Do lead the way.

Balfour leads Weizmann along a corridor until arriving at the meeting room.

Narrator: Though he was born in Eastern Europe and was active in advocating for the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine, Weizmann was nonetheless extremely at home in his adopted country – Great Britain. Well-known and well-connected, Weizmann was known to most of his British colleagues and friends not as 'Chaim' but rather by the English name 'Charles'.

Balfour opens the door to the room and leads Weizmann inside.

Balfour: Do sit down Charles.



Weizmann: Thank you Arthur. It's very pleasant here I must say.

Balfour: Indeed. May I pour you a drink?

Weizmann: Thank you. You will have one yourself?

Balfour: Naturally.

Balfour pours a glass of whisky for both Weizmann and himself before reclining into a chair facing that of Weizmann.

Weizmann: Do tell me Arthur, how is the War progressing?

Balfour: As I am sure that you are aware, the Americans have now joined us in the fight against our enemies. One would hope that such an act will confer upon us an advantage in the field.

Weizmann: I do certainly hope so. I understand that our losses have been considerable.

Balfour stands up and moves to a large map hanging on one of the walls. He points to the area around Arras in Northern France.

Balfour: As we speak our forces are engaged in fierce battle with the Germans on the Western Front, close to Arras in Northern France. We had hoped that a rapid victory would see us break through the German defences throughout the area, however, early positive signs have given way to a costly stalemate.

Weizmann: I can only imagine the devastation.

Balfour: Yes. One can only hope that the War will be over swiftly. Tens of thousands of good men have given their lives just this past month.

Narrator: Unbeknown to both Balfour and Weizmann the War was far from over. The date of the two men's' meeting was April 1917 and the war would continue on for a further year and a half until its eventual end in November 1918. By that time, close to one million soldiers of the British army would lose their lives. In total, perhaps as many as 15 million men, women and children on all sides would lose their lives in the Great War.

Balfour takes a seat once more.

Balfour: In any case, I am delighted that you were able to extend to me the pleasure of your company today. His Majesty's Government would like to convey once again its sincere thanks for all your efforts in supporting our troops.

Weizmann: Thank you Arthur. Please do extend my warmest wishes and thanks to the Prime Minister and the rest of the cabinet.

Balfour: I will do. Right away.

Narrator: The efforts that Balfour was referring to were indeed worthy of gratitude. Weizmann had discovered how to produce acetone from the bacterium *Clostridium Acetbutylicum*. Acetone was crucial for the production of Cordite – an explosive



propellant key to the production of munitions. By early 1916 Weizmann's method was being used to produce Cordite from maize in six different distilleries across Britain. By the end of the war 30,000 tonnes of acetone had been produced by this method.

Weizmann: I would, of course, prefer for my scientific efforts to be used for more banal pursuits however in this time of need I am honoured to have been able to contribute to what I hope will be a positive resolution and a swift outcome to this terrible war.

Balfour: Of course. We may only hope that the war will soon end and that a new era of peace will ensue.

Weizmann stands up and moves towards the window and whilst looking out at the view of the river below begins to speak.

Weizmann: And tell me Arthur, what is to be with Palestine?

Balfour: According to my colleagues at the Colonial Office we may soon find ourselves in possession of Palestine along with vast swathes of the surrounding areas.

Narrator: The Ottoman Empire, already in significant decline for a decade, was in dire straits in the Middle East. The Arab Revolt which began in 1916 turned the tide against the Ottomans on the Middle Eastern front, where they initially seemed to have the upper hand during the first two years of the war. By early 1917 it was abundantly clear that the Ottomans would soon no longer be a factor in the region.

Weizmann: Very good. I imagine the information supplied by Nili was of help in increasing British influence there?

Balfour: Their efforts are greatly appreciated and should not be underplayed.

Narrator: Nili was a Jewish spy network which assisted Great Britain during World War One. The members of Nili hoped that the British would aid the Jews in their quest for a homeland in Palestine and supplied information to the British in order to help in their fight against the Ottomans. Many of their fellow Jews in Palestine disagreed with their actions, not as a result of fondness for the Ottomans but rather as a result of the fear of what they would do the Jews if Nili was discovered.

Weizmann: Regarding these territories, I have only very recently come to understand that arrangements have apparently already been made with the French for the division of these lands?

Narrator: Weizmann was referring to a hitherto secret treaty between the French and the British, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which provided for the dividing up of the Ottoman lands in the Middle East between the two powers in the event of an Ottoman defeat. The Zionist had not been informed of its existence and Weizmann only learned of its existence via a journalist in April 1917.



Balfour: It would be foolish of us not to consider future plans in light of the great changes that are likely to take place in the region. Palestine is of immense importance to many of the British Empire's subjects. Christians across the empire make pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Millions of our subjects in India are Muslim as are significant swathes of the population of Palestine. And of course, for your people the Jews, Palestine – the Land of Israel – is of course, your biblical and ancestral homeland.

Weizmann returns to his seat and sitting bolt upright speaks forcefully to his host.

Weizmann: It is on this point that I wish to speak.

Balfour: It is for this reason that I invited you here today.

Weizmann: The position of the Jews is unique. For us race, religion and country are inter-related. I am not aware of another case where the believers in one of the great religions of the world are to be found only among the members of a single small people; so intimately bound up with the long history of just one small portion of territory. For which other religion are its aspirations and hopes expressed in language and imagery so utterly dependent for their meaning on the conviction that only from this one land, only through this one history, only by this one people, is full religious knowledge to spread throughout the world? Severed from our land, Zionism can provide some mitigation of this great tragedy whilst providing autonomy and freedom for a people whose history is littered with persecution at the hands of those in whose lands they now dwell.

Balfour: My dear Sir, I view with favour a national solution for the Jews. In the early years of this century, when antisemitism in Eastern Europe was in an active stage, I did my best to support a scheme devised by Mr Chamberlain, then Colonial Secretary, for creating a Jewish settlement in East Africa, under the British flag. It was hoped that there Jews fleeing from persecution might found a community where, in harmony with their own religion, development on traditional lines might peacefully proceed without external interruption, and free from any fears of violence.

Weizmann: Your good intentions are not to be doubted Arthur.

Balfour: Indeed. Yet I have come to understand, in no small part from conversations with your good self that history could not thus be ignored, and that if a home is to be found for the Jewish People, homeless now for nearly nineteen hundred years, it would be vain to seek it anywhere but in Palestine.

Weizmann: I am deeply encouraged to hear this. I believe that ethical, moral and religious imperatives should rightly be given due consideration by the leaders of a nation steeped in Christian tradition.

Narrator: Sympathy or compassion for the Jews and the Zionist cause was noted among many in the political class. Back in 1840, prompted by the Christian Zionism of the young Lord Shaftesbury, the then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Palmerston instructed the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire to encourage the Sultan to allow Jews to resettle in Palestine. Shaftesbury's hope was that they would in due course embrace Christianity.



In 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, floated the idea of finding the Jews a homeland somewhere in East Africa – Uganda – or in the Sinai Peninsula at El Arish.

Balfour himself believed that the Christian world owed a moral debt to Jewish civilization over centuries of persecution and contempt. Balfour envisaged those Jews who could not or would not fully assimilate in their countries would move to their national home. This was not so dissimilar from Herzl's own vision.

Balfour: That being said, however, there are a number of wider concerns for our government to consider.

Weizmann: I appreciate the delicate nature of the subject for the British; however may I suggest that a positive resolution to the Jewish question in Palestine may be of unquestionable advantage to His Majesty's Government.

Balfour: How so may I ask?

Weizmann: As you yourself have alluded to, we the Jews are one people despite the ostensible rifts, cracks, and differences between the governments and peoples of the world. Could Zionists not bring influence to bear on matters critical to British interests, both in ally states such as the United States and Russia but also in those we fight against, such as Germany?

Narrator: Weizmann was playing on the British leadership's rather inflated view of Jewish influence. Though far from the truth, the British imagined Jews, irrespective of whether they were Russian, American, or German, as a unified collective that could be used to further British interests. Zionist leaders in London had done nothing to disabuse the British of this belief.

Britain hoped that the Jews could help with the war effort. London needed Russia to stay in the Great War and for the Americans to accelerate their military involvement in the fighting. Sure enough, Russia's Kerensky was sympathetic to Jewish concerns but was not Jewish; Russian Communist revolutionary Leon Trotsky was Jewish, though neither were Zionist. In all fairness, President Wilson had nominated the ardent Zionist Louis Brandeis to the US Supreme Court in 1916 and another Zionist Felix Frankfurter worked in the War Department and elsewhere in the Wilson administration. Woodrow Wilson indeed signalled that he would welcome a Jewish homeland declaration by Britain.

Asked later about the Balfour Declaration, Lloyd George would make the case that the Zionist movement was "exceptionally strong in Russia and America."

Balfour leans in towards Weizmann.

Balfour: My good man, for upwards of ten years we have known each other. As always a sense of friendship and mutual respect pervades all our communications. At this present time, His Majesty's Government is formulating policy by which Palestine and the surrounding regions will be administered in the aftermath of this global conflict. Parties with related interests will be consulted. Arab considerations shall be taken into account along with the views of those Jews standing in opposition



to Jewish development in Palestine. May I suggest that you ensure that those views represented by you today, especially those upon which we are in agreement, will be forcefully heard and considered by His Majesty's Government?

Narrator: On 18th July 1917, Lord Rothschild wrote a letter asking the British to accept 'the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted as the national home of the Jewish people.' Over the following three months, amended and reconstituted versions of the letter went 'to and fro' taking into account the views for and against a Jewish national home in Palestine, culminating in Balfour's carefully worded final letter of November 2nd 1917 – the Balfour Declaration.

Weizmann: Thank you Arthur. I appreciate your support and will continue to advocate for Palestine to become a Jewish national home. Please ensure that those arguments for such an arrangement garnering furthering influence for Britain are conveyed to the Cabinet.

Balfour: Of course Charles.

The two men rise from their seats and shake hands strongly.

Balfour: Thank you again for coming.

Weizmann: My pleasure, thank you for inviting me.

Balfour: Let me see you out.

The two men walk to the door. Balfour opens the door for Weizmann who walks through followed by Balfour. The two men stride together down the corridor and exit the stage. As they walk, the Narrator concludes:

Narrator:

The Balfour Declaration:

“Foreign Office

November 2nd, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild,



I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall 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.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours,

Arthur James Balfour"

For some, Balfour's Declaration did not go far enough. What exactly was a national home? Was all of Palestine to constitute a national home for the Jewish People? Or would this home be in only part of the land?

Weizmann was informed of the final Declaration by an excitable Mark Sykes who exclaimed "Dr Weizmann, it's a boy!" Weizmann later wrote, "Well – I did not like the boy at first. He was not the one I had expected."

Nevertheless, Weizmann knew that delaying the Declaration in order to get it more perfectly worded would have likely meant that there would have been no Declaration at all.

And as even Weizmann would admit, following the Balfour Declaration, "A new chapter had opened for us...full of new difficulties, but not without its great moments."

Discussion Questions:

- What is the historical and religious significance of Palestine – the Land of Israel for the Jewish People?



- What motivations lay behind the Zionist quest for Palestine to become a homeland for the Jews?
- For what reasons did some Jews oppose the creation of a Jewish state?
- What reasons did the British have to support the Zionist enterprise?
- For what reasons may the British have been reluctant to support Zionism or even have opposed it?
- Is any of the wording of the Balfour Declaration deliberately confusing or ambiguous?
 - a. e.g. "a home", not "the home"
 - b. e.g. "home", not "state"
 - c. e.g. "civil and religious rights"
 - d. e.g. "in Palestine", not "Palestine will be"
 - e.
- Why was Weizmann disappointed with the final text of the Balfour Declaration?
- Could any of the motivations for creating the document be considered antisemitic? (i.e. tropes of Jewish power and control).
- If you could have been there when it was written, what would you have changed?
- In retrospect, how important or influential was the Balfour Declaration?

