

“MY HEART IS IN THE EAST, THOUGH I BE IN THE VERY WEST”

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and a conversation with our guest and my colleague and friend, Dr. David Mendelsson. Dr. Mendelsson is Senior Lecturer of Israel studies in modern Jewish history on the Toby Family campus of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem, both educator and historian of education. He wrote *The History of Jewish education in England between 1944 and 1988*. He's the immediate past director of HUC's year in Israel programme and he has been a scholar in residence at the University of Southern California, Brandeis University and Michigan State University, and a frequent lecturer across the US. David joins us from Jerusalem to discuss his recent article titled *HUC-JIR's Decision to Mandate a year of Study in Israel for rabbinical students*. David, thanks for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

David Mendelsson: My pleasure.

JH: Though perhaps you wrote this article as a niche study in the history of education. It now happens to be a really topical article getting to the heart of the Jewish connection to the land and the state of Israel at, it bears noting a hotly contested moment as we find ourselves roughly half a year past October 7th and the ensuing war in Gaza. But before we get to the contested parts of the story, tell us what this mandate is and give us a brief primer on the historical setting.

DM: Well, the decision to mandate the year in Israel programme was taken formally in October, 1969 by the Board of Governors of the College, and it's told students who wanted to come to the Hebrew Union College, Houston region, that they would be obliged to come to Jerusalem for a full year of studies. And it's perhaps worth saying that this was the first seminary in the United States America that made this obligatory. Essentially the idea was if you want to be a reform rabbi in the United States of America, you must spend a year of your studies in Jerusalem. It was decided that it would be the first year in the rabbinical studies.

JH: What motivated this mandate?

DM: When I wrote this article, there were a couple of bits of big things. One is the reform movements shift over the years to make this decision. After all, it's very dramatic and if you look at the history of the Reform movement, of course it has a history in the period of the late 19th century being anti sized. But my question essentially was what were the factors that led to this decision in terms of the historical context? And as you say, typically, while people refer to the drama of the six day war as having a major impact on the American Jewish community, what I was interested in examining was whether actually there were local factors, meaning American Jewish factors that had this impact. And my claim is that in addition to the six day war, the factors of the change in nature of American life and American Jewish life, these are the things that had a very significant impact.

DM: And here there's a whole host of topics which in the broad category, I think we could say a crisis of Jewish religious life, the synagogue life, the sense of a staleness around a lot of synagogue experiences, but also the sense of ethnicity becoming popular in the American context. And that's something that you can examine particularly in the initial stages, phenomena like the impact of the Holocaust and the interest in the Holocaust. We have phenomena of nostalgia towards Jewish life in Eastern Europe, fiddle on the roof as a classic example. The principle I want to argue is that in the American context, specifically the emergence of black power and the emergence of other ethnic minorities expressing themselves, Jews also felt it was now legitimate to be public about their sense of ethnicity and solidarity. But when we ask what motivated the mandate, I think there's a character issue here naming the president of the day was President Glueck, and he was committed to the idea of the rabbinical students spending a year in Israel before the six day war.

DM: And he was motivated, I think partly because of the feeling of frustration around how students were not learning effectively in America, the Hebrew language. But particularly important to him was the sense that students would have a deep and profound connection to the land, people, culture of Israel, of the land itself. When he was in Israel and he had been visiting multiple times, he was very connected to the land of Israel through his commitment to archaeology. He wanted students to share in this, and he believed it would impact them in terms of their relationship to Israel and the Jewish people. Now, he also thought it would strengthen the Reform Movement in its relationship to the notion of Jewish peoplehood, but he's not alone here. And here it seems to me that The Central Conference of American Rabbis, the CCAR was very distraught this time about the sense that liberal Jews reformism was in crisis.

DM: And the crisis expressed itself in various ways, affiliation, association, attendance, rare, and so on and so forth. And there was this sort of intuitive feeling, no research into this whatsoever that Israel could play a very dramatic part in churning this story and strengthening Jewish identity. In other words, there was a sense that ethnic identity relation with Israel could turn the story. And what's remarkable about this is that after the six day war, we have evidence that The Reform movement in its broad strokes. The CCAR decided to put all sorts of things on the Israel agenda. Now these are committees, these are trips to Israel. These are holding the first CCAR conference in Israel. There is absolutely no doubt that this was a major factor as regards to the CCAR, and they complained to Nelson Glueck and the faculty that they felt that the curriculum

of the college was not leading to sort of creative dynamic innovation as regards Jewish life in the synagogue.

DM: And they suggested that reforms should be made, and this caused tension between the CCAR and Nelson Glueck. Not on the Israelis, but on the issue of what's the curriculum of the college. And the CCAR spent an enormous amount of money actually in trying to research the crisis that was facing Judaism at the time. By the way, this can be witnessed because other new phenomena in the Jewish experience were emerging. The Havurah movement and then the phenomena of, and then the phenomena of the singing Rabbi Carlebach. And the feeling was that there were Reform movement was not answering problems that were connected by the way, also the impact of the cultural scene in America, which was moving towards areas, as I'm sure we're aware of the cultural revolution, the younger generation, flower power, intimacy, and the demand that the synagogue structure change itself.

DM: So these two major factors, that's to say the Israel factor, which was seen as a solution to crisis in Judaism, but also the religious decline and their attempt to try and find new, innovative answers. This was also part of the story.

JH: For the sake of our listeners. The CCAR is The Central Conference of American Rabbis, the governing body for the Reform Rabbinate, and the partner together with the Union for Reform, Judaism with the Hebrew Union College, and constituting the institutional structures of what we call Reform Judaism. So there's a tremendous set of cultural shifts that conspire to make the idea of a year in Israel appealing. But you point out that the faculty of the Hebrew Union College had a lukewarm attitude towards this. What was then a potential mandate for the year in Israel? Where did this hesitancy come from?

DM: I think it's fair to say there were two issues here. One is, it would seem to me a pedagogic issue and the other would be a sort of ideological issue. But let's take the ideological issue first. It's clear that the enthusiasm of Glueck had much to do with his zeist motivations and his sense that this would be a new important dimension to reform Judaism. And it has to be said that much of the faculty, especially senior faculty, was less enthusiastic about the sort of Zionist dimension that's implicit in the idea of mandating year in Israel. The concern of much of the faculty was, that students need to have good grounding in biblical and rabbinic Hebrew. That's what really mattered to them. And from their point of view that could be studied and should be studied as it had been historically. One of the place called Towanda, which was a type of retreat, which was eight or nine weeks for incoming students where they were supposed to intensively learn sort of classical Hebrew, this hadn't been very successful.

DM: And it moved to Cincinnati actually after Towanda was closed, but also at Cincinnati, the reputation of the Towanda experience, which was not good amongst the students to put it mildly, continued. And there was a sense that the fear was, well, more than Hebrew is not actually what's important to our students. And in fact, the idea of using the Ulpan method, the intensive method of learning Hebrew, really wasn't what was necessary for rabbinic students. And they were very worried that the Hebrew that students might learn in Israel would actually not be effective. And I think here the point which is important is that students typically commented that

there was a traumatic experience in learning Hebrew Towanda. And when it came to studying texts in their second, third, fourth years and so on, they found themselves not well equipped to deal with these texts. What the claim was being made by people like Glueck and by Spice Handler, who was the director to be of the year in Israel.

DM: Their claim was that actually learning the Hebrew language in Israel would provide a much better, a more constructive and more comfortable atmosphere for acquiring the Hebrew language. And it's fair to say that the faculty was not particularly interested in all the experiences that would come by living in Israel. On the other hand, it's fairly clear that certainly Spice Hadler and Glueck thought this would be a wonderful thing, that there would be a connection with the land of Israel. There would be a connection with Israelis. And of course, whilst you're in Israel, you'd learn about the politics. You live a year's cycle, and therefore, there was this serious debate between, I would say the sides, albeit Glueck's dominance was very clear. I'd say, and of course, the fact that you had CCAR backing for this, they were prepared to raise substantial money to help Glueck implement this programme. I think they overcame the faculty. Now, there were individuals who were sympathetic. Professor Weinberg in Cincinnati had been a bit of a lone voice saying, we need students to go to Israel to study, because that way they'll improve their Hebrew. But he was the lone soldier, if you will, at people's Glueck's authority that met.

JH: So let's shift then to the questions that were raised by the CCAR and Glueck on the one hand and the faculty on the other hand to the students, but in particular, I'm thinking about the potential students, was the requirement that they would've to move to Israel for a year understood as at least a risk to recruitment?

DM: Well, the concern there was that actually would this extend the period where students were studying from five years, which it had been to a sixth year? That was an issue that concerned the Board of Governors and indeed Nelson Glueck. And he made a commitment, Nelson Glueck, to say, no, this would be a five year programme, so things would have to be adjusted. The question though of the student attitudes towards the year in Israel, remember this is the context of 1969, and the students were very enthusiastic, by and large, to the idea of coming to Israel. And I want to perhaps make a bit of a preface by saying students had been coming to Israel prior to the mandate decision. Now, I don't remember the exact numbers, but I can tell you that by 1967, '68 students were coming and they were coming, knowing that this would be an additional year to their rabbinical studies.

DM: And they did so, it seems, not only 'cause they were interested in Hebrew and being encouraged to come to Israel to improve their Hebrew, but they did, because they wanted to be in Israel. So, just to give you a sense of this, between 1962 and 1968-9, the numbers increased from maybe five or six students coming to Israel without securing credit to 35 or 37 students in 1968,'69. So, there's already an example of enthusiasm, but remember, here the context is important.

DM: This is, of course, a period of student unrest, and the student unrest focused very often on the sense that the college was this very, dare I say, stale, old institution that was very committed to what one would call studies that were primarily textual, but not practical. That's also in the mix

here. Now, students complained, and they said, we want to have an Ulpan in Israel, and they recommended that would happen.

DM: So, the answer to your question is that actually Sy Gitin, who was responsible for recruitment, when the students heard their first year would be in Israel, there was enthusiasm. And when he reported this to some of the members of the faculty in Cincinnati, they turned to him and said, please don't tell President Glueck. So I think the simple answer to your question is, yes, people were enthusiastic to come to Israel in the Year of Israel program, and I think much of that had to do with the sense of the atmosphere of the time.

JH: So we find that there's an appetite for this, but it's complicated because as you intimated before, The Reform Movement actually underwent a shift from being downright anti-Zionist to embracing Zionism along the lines that you've shared with us. But that took the better part of half a century or so. The story that you teach us about Nelson Glueck himself is in fact much more dramatic. His own Zionism seems to have undergone an almost 180 degree reversal in a matter of a few short years. Tell us what happened and how far it went.

DM: Nelson Glueck spent a lot of time in Mandate, Palestine, because he was pursuing archaeology. I mean, his true love was archaeology. And in fact, one of the reasons why he set up the campus in Jerusalem opened in 1963, had much to do with the fact that he wanted to use this as a platform for archaeological work, his own work, and the idea of bringing other archaeologists to Israel. So he had a commitment to the land of Israel and excavations and what we would call biblical archaeology.

DM: He was part of that school of thought that wanted to examine the biblical account through excavations and so on. However, on the political level, he was what was unknown to be a sympathizer to the movement called Brit Shalom and the Covenant of Peace, which was led by Judah Magnus, president of the Hebrew University. But interestingly, Magnus himself had been ordained in Cincinnati by the Hebrew Union College in 1900, and they were close friends.

DM: Now when the discussion came up as who should be the new president in 1947 of the Hebrew Union College, Glueck, one of the reasons why he was a popular candidate, he wasn't in favor of Jewish statehood. He was in favor of something called trusteeship, which was the idea that Britain and America would be responsible, indeed responsible for Palestine. But after the state was created, there was a sort of turn in his position.

DM: And this became really dramatic in the 1950s when he undertook, particularly his work in the Negev. By the way, he appeared on the front page of Time Magazine in 1963, if I'm not mistaken, with a Bedouin sort of headdress.

JH: A sort of Lawrence of Arabia, but HUC.

DM: Yes, absolutely. And to appear on the front cover of the Time Magazine was, of course, in itself a major statement of his status in his field, but also, of course, for the college. Now he shifted it. He actually got agreement from the army that he could take certain soldiers down to

help him with his investigations and map of the Negev Desert for his archeological purposes. And he actually examined the students by basically saying if they were committed interest in archeology. And this led him more and more to have a close contact with some key political figures in Israel. And that helped him, especially when he was trying to get the land to build the Hebrew Union College's campus in Jerusalem.

DM: And these contacts were very effective. But why is this important? Because what it meant for Israel was that he was an archeologist proving the historical relations with the Jewish people to the land of Israel. And in the world of Israel pre-state, and indeed until the '70s or '80s, archeology was a very important form for the Zionist movement to legitimize its claim to the land of Israel. And Glueck played a very important role, if you will, in trying to make this claim. So he really shifted. And when you read about it, he came to Israel almost immediately after the Six-Day War was over.

DM: I think at the end of June 1967, he spent a few months here. And the language that he employs to talk about his experiences traveling the country, remember he was now able to visit places in the West Bank, in Judea and Samaria, which he had visited back in the pre-state period. And he was very excited about this. And he was at an event where Zalman Shazar, the president of the day, hosted a number of people. And he spoke very excitedly about Israel's borders today are the borders of Shloma. And he used the term miraculous about Israel's victory in the Six-Day War.

DM: I should say that lots of people were using that term. In other words, to say that he became a religious messianic figure, I think is exaggerated. But it is true that the euphoria of 1967 definitely affected him. For him, the euphoria was very much not only the military victory without a question, but I think it was the sense of the excitement as a story of him getting agreement from Levi Eshkol, the prime minister of the day, to go on a helicopter with Ezra Spicehandler, the director of the program in Jerusalem. And they would take this helicopter and it was over the area of the Negev. And the story goes that Glueck had the map and he was on the floor of the helicopter like an excited young boy looking at the map and seeing where he was actually passing. So a real transformation without a question.

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JH: So we are particularly privileged to talk to you about this topic, not just because you wrote the article, but because as a professor on our Taube Family Campus in Jerusalem, the very campus we're talking about, and as the former director of our year in Israel, the very program we're talking about, you are a direct heir to this history. So bottom line, did this mandate to require our not only rabbinical students anymore, but it expanded to our education students and

our cantorial students as well, did this mandate achieve its goals? And looking forward, what should the goals be for the next generation of Jewish leaders educated by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion?

DM: Well, if we identify the goals primarily in the realm of the Hebrew instruction issue and the Ulpan and so on, and the second dimension being the relationship with the land, people, and state of Israel, then certainly the goals were achieved. In other words, there was some discussion that this would be an experiment. Let's see how it goes. And we can change our minds if we think it's not successful. Tragically, Glueck died in February of 1971, and in his place was Alfred Gottschalk. And Gottschalk announced that the year in Israel, in his opinion, had been a tremendous success. There were problems, but he said it had been a success, and therefore we should continue the program and the mandate. Students conducted a survey about how the year had been, and particularly important to them was a statement that they made, which was, what we can learn in Israel is what we should study in Israel. So that was very much about learning Hebrew clearly, but also learning about the land, people, and society in Israel. The interviews that I conducted with many of these people, there were words used like, this was a transformative experience.

DM: The people who graduated the year in Israel program, many of them took up responsibilities in their Rabinal, which led to them playing important roles in developing the relationship between Israel and North American Jewry. The founder of ARZA, the American Zionist Reform Movement's wing, was established by someone who was on the program this particular year. But it has to be said that this was also relevant for future years. In 1976, the college conducted amongst the faculty, a survey asking the faculty what impact the year in Israel program had had. And the faculty overwhelmingly said that it improved the Hebrew level of the students, as well as their ability and comfort level to deal with sacred texts. And of course, for many students, it had deepened their relationship with the land and people of Israel. I think that's fair. Now, it is important, of course, to say that that position, that sympathy, that enthusiasm with Israel has gone through a certain shift. And that has to do with a number of different issues.

DM: I think some of them have to do with the American context, some of them to do with Israel itself. I think students got frustrated about the status of the reform movement here in Israel, a sense that Reform is not recognized here, a feeling that they're not validated. And I think some of them, especially here in Jerusalem, feel that ultra-orthodoxy and religious nationalism has a very strong impact on their experience. So there has been some shift, not to mention issues to do with Israel's control of the West Bank and Gaza, and wars, particularly now, of course, with the events around Hamas. Now, some of our students, because of their experience in the United States of America with friends and colleagues at universities and so on, some of these students have become open to the language of what we call the progressives. So I think there, there has been some distancing from Israel. Now, the human experience of meeting Israelis, that's been interesting 'cause I think some students have more impact and more connection. But I think there has been a shift in that sense. And I would say that the enthusiasm of the 1970s has in some areas been challenged by the issues that I just mentioned.

DM: You ask me about the future, I'm not sure that I'm the right person to ask about the future. After all, it's not me who's going to be not only running the program, but attending the program. I'm now reaching an age where I'm going to depart the college after 21 years at the College Institute. I would say, though, from my point of view, I still firmly believe that the Hebrew language learnt in the context of Israel creates a very strong base for students to work on their Hebrew and to help them with their texts. The second thing that I would say, and this was certainly part of the mandate and the commitment of Nelson Glueck and others, the issue of the relationship with the land of Israel seems to me to be critic. I think here what I would argue is that I'm not sure that we have to have students coming out being full time paid up members of the organizations that sort of look at Israel perhaps without criticism. No, that's not my point. I think, what I would look for is the ability of students to understand and appreciate Israel in the context of something particularly interesting for me about Israel.

DM: The Jewish experience has been with family. It's been with community. Jews of the diaspora have experienced autonomy in various historical times. But there's not been a time for, what, 18, 1900 years where Jews have had sovereignty. And it seems to me that our students really need to grapple with the responsibilities and I would say privileges of having sovereignty and ask themselves whether they identify or appreciate the framework of a state as a way of advancing not only the security of Jews, but also the cultural creativity of the Jewish people. And that, by the way, also helping to strengthen, historically, there was a claim of Jewish light in that. So for me, that's a very important part of what the program should look like. The mission should be to grapple exactly with the question of Israel and its place in Jewish life, especially 'cause of its difference to the American context. So I would certainly look to that. And I would hope that our students who come here would appreciate. What does it mean when you live in an environment where the yearly cycle is dominated by the Hebrew calendar? That seems to be a really exciting part of the experience.

DM: I think for many of the students it is. The experience of Shabbat, for example, is particularly pertinent. So I would be keen on certainly maintaining those dimensions and developing particularly those areas. Obviously, there are other areas that need to be examined.

JH: Well, here's to our continued work in educating Jewish leaders in Israel and the United States. And to you, my friend David, since you mentioned your impending retirement, I wanna thank you for the privilege that you've given me of your friendship and your collegiality in working with you. I wanna wish you all good things and every success on the next stage of your life. And to thank you for sharing this incredible chapter, which we so take for granted now at Hebrew Union College, but which in fact has a rich and textured and dimensional history that you've brought out for us. Thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

DM: Many thanks. And I want to say how privileged I've been to be able to teach and direct the program over these years. It has been a very meaningful experience.

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