**The Inauguration Ceremony of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem:**

**Academic or National Event?**

I imagine that most of you can identify this photograph and the event that it immortalizes, and could tell me a fact or two about the occasion it captures. Anyone concerned with the activities of the Zionist movement in Palestine at the beginning of the Mandatory period certainly knows where “the great event”—as it was described by Rabbi Kook—took place, and can explain what happened there.

This lecture explores the organizing of this event, focusing on the presence of Lord Balfour in particular. I hope it will facilitate ongoing discussion of the significance of the inauguration for the University and for the Zionist movement as a whole.

My talk today is based on an exhibit currently on show at the Stern Gallery of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The exhibition is titled: “We Shall Open Wide the Gates and Windows of This Institution,” and I am one of its curators, together with Michal Mor. Those of you who will be participating in the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem this summer are cordially invited to visit it.

Ceremonies and other public events provide an important arena for research on how societies comes into being and how traditions develop, among other things. Scholars from a range of disciplines engage with the significance of ceremonies, the role they play in society and the manner in which they are organized, exploring different aspects of these occasions. We can learn a great deal about a society and its development by examining components of these events, from the physical space within which they take place to the subliminal messages conveyed by their content. Due to time constraints, I will be concentrating on only a few of these elements and their meaning.

The inauguration ceremony at Mount Scopus in April 1925 was a unique national event taking place under the auspices of academia. The University was just then starting out and had not yet made substantial contributions to science, but the presence of both foreign and local professors on Mount Scopus and the operation of the laboratories and libraries were the backdrop upon which the entire Zionist enterprise was displayed. It might be more precise to say that on this occasion, the national idea was seasoned with the potential for scientific contribution by the Jews to humanity as a whole and to the Land of Israel in particular. In this setting, Balfour represented two things: He and his activities were identified with the implementation of nationalist aspirations, but in his speech at the ceremony, he represented the elements of Jewish-scientific nationalism.

The inauguration was a national event without obvious external trappings: without flags, but with many words; without references to general Zionist ideas like a national home, settling the land, and other nationalist values, but with a strong focus on one specific enterprise—science. The reason for the gathering was scientific but the significance of the gathering was national. Thus, the inauguration ceremony of the Hebrew University became the central national event to take place in Jerusalem during the period of the British Mandate. Although activities of an academic character took place after the ceremony, such as a series of lectures by learned faculty and guests, these events were accorded relatively little importance by participants at the time, and in later historical accounts.

Some background: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem was founded in wake of the eleventh World Congress decision in 1913. The site on Mount Scopus was acquired even before the outbreak of World War I. Immediately after the conquest of Jerusalem by the British army in December 1917, representatives of the Zionist movement approached the British to set in motion the plans for building the University. In July 1918, the foundation stone of the University was laid in the presence of high ranking officials of the Zionist movement and British army representatives. After the ceremony, discussions about the academic character of the University continued and progress on Mount Scopus proceeded at a snail’s pace.

In 1923, the first professor of the university, Professor Andor Fodor, came to Jerusalem to establish the Institute of Chemistry, the first of the University’s institutes. In due course, the first researchers for the Institute of Microbiology arrived as well. Dr. Chaim Weizmann, a dominant figure in the advancement of the University within the Zionist movement, followed the founding of the Institute of Chemistry with great interest and maintained a continuous dialogue with Dr. Yehuda Magnes, chancellor of the University at that time. In the summer of 1924, the Institute of Chemistry began operating, and at the same time, preparations were made for opening The Institute of Jewish Studies, which was completed in December 1924.

The opening ceremony for the Institute of Jewish Studies took place on Hanuka of 1924 at Mount Scopus. The Times of London reported that the Hebrew University was now officially open. This news item infuriated Weizmann, who apparently had other plans for the official opening ceremony of the University, already in November 1923. Weizmann had not shared his plans with many people, but he intended to stage a large-scale event to mark the official opening of the institutes on Mount Scopus, in the presence of VIPs, and with a large crowd attending. During this period, Weizmann corresponded with Lord Balfour, then a politician and retired diplomat, in order to persuade him to come to Jerusalem for the opening ceremony. Although Weizmann did not explain his reasons for this request in the correspondence, we may assume that one reason for the importance of Balfour’s presence to Weizmann was the personal relationship between these two leaders.

However, Weizmann was not only motivated by the personal connection, although it was significant. Examining the list of those who attended the event, we can distinguish three groups: senior representatives of the Zionist movement in Palestine and from abroad; representatives of universities from around the world; and senior representatives of British rule, the most prominent of them being Balfour. The planners of the event in Jerusalem and London (where much of the Zionist leadership was situated) wanted to grant the University academic cachet by inviting notable guests from universities abroad. At the same time, they wished to gain approval on the internal national stage through the presence of representatives from different movements within the Jewish world. And finally, they obviously wanted legitimacy from the ruling authorities—the British.

The preparations for the ceremony were carried out by a local committee set in Jerusalem, which consulted continuously with Weizmann’s people in London. While the London group was responsible for inviting guests from abroad, the Jerusalem group worked on the technical aspects of the ceremony, inviting local dignitaries, scheduling the order of events, and inviting the audience. The event was planned as a four-day celebration, with a variety of speakers. After the program had been decided, the committee in Jerusalem worked on the seating arrangements for the stage, a task that exposed the power games within the Zionist movement as well as within the University. Magnes, for example, was seated at the edge of the dignitaries’ table, while Ahad Ha’am was given a prestigious spot. Ussishkin was absent from the table altogether, due to his tense relationship with Weizmann. Many other details of the seating plan illustrated the power struggles reflected on the stage.

The speakers for the event were seated at the presidential table. Five of them delivered long speeches with weighty content. To a great degree, Rabbi Abraham Isaac haKohen Kook and Chaim Nachman Bialik embodied the differing faces of Jewish identity as it was developing in the Land of Israel on the background of Zionist ideology. Rabbi Kook presented opposition and suspicion toward the idea of the University, while Bialik expressed the opposing point of view. Weizmann represented the Zionist movement but also scientific activity—Jewish and Zionist—and he conspicuously avoided referring to other nationalist activities taking place throughout Palestine, such as settlement. By their presence at the event and in their speeches, the High Commissioner Herbert Samuel, Lord Balfour, and retired General Allenby signaled British support for the potential contributions the University would make to humanity, science, the Land of Israel, and all of its inhabitants.

Twelve thousand people participated in the event on April 1st. Several thousand had been invited and assigned seating, while others gathered at Mount Scopus because of the magnitude of the occasion. As we noted earlier, the opening celebrations did not end with the ceremony at the theater. A number of academic events were held over the next two days, including the laying of the foundation stone for the Institute of Chemistry, and scientific lectures by a number of scholars. In addition, there were receptions at which greetings from international organizations were read aloud.

The official rationale for the event on Mount Scopus was academic, since the time was ripe for opening the formal research activities of the University. However, aspects of the ceremony itself—the combination of participants, the content of the speeches, some of the symbols and the tone of the occasion—testify that the organizers also had other intentions. As at the laying of the foundation stone in July 1918, here too, Weizmann and his colleagues wanted most of all to display a Zionist presence. On this occasion, they fortified their position through Balfour’s attendance. The inauguration ceremony for the Hebrew University was a unique opportunity to demonstrate a Zionist presence attentive to the British authorities, attempting to maintain good relations with them and hoping to strengthen British support for the Zionist idea, as well as for its academic aspirations.