

HILLEL KOOK

Keynote Speech by Moshe Arens

Hillel Kook came to the United States at the age of twenty-five, at the beginning of World War II, as a soldier in the Irgun Zvai Leumi. His commander and comrade-in-arms was David Raziel, while the Commander-in-Chief of the Irgun was Zeev Jabotinsky.

He arrived in the US after having been an Irgun emissary in Poland, raising funds for the Irgun, mobilizing support for it among Polish-Jewish intelligentsia, and aiding the organization of “illegal immigration” to Palestine from Europe, a movement that had been inspired by Jabotinsky – he called it the National Sport – and that through the efforts of Betar, the Revisionist Organization, and the Irgun, led by people like Avraham Stawski, William Pearl, and Eri Jabotinsky, succeeded in bringing close to 20, 000 Jews to the shores of Palestine in the years prior to the War, saving them from the oncoming Holocaust.

Within months of Germany’s invasion of Poland, almost the entire reservoir of support for Jabotinsky’s movement – Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic countries – had disappeared under German and Soviet domination. The scene of Zionist political action had switched to America. Jabotinsky arrived there in May 1940 and with him a number of his associates, including Hillel Kook. Kook joined a group of Irgun emissaries that had preceded him to the US: Yitzhak Ben-Ami, Alex Rafaeli, Arye Ben-Eliezer, and Shmuel Merlin, all dispatched there by David Raziel with the aim of building a base of support for the Irgun there. Jabotinsky, intent on Jewish military participation in the War, launched the campaign for a Jewish Army, a

campaign that was continued with great vigor, after his death in August 1940, by the Irgun emissaries under Kook's leadership, within the framework of the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews that they had set up.

It was now that Kook and his associates, all newcomers to the US some speaking no English on arrival, showed a flair for the organization of political action in the US, that had been sadly lacking among the leaders of the Zionist establishment there. They mobilized members of Congress, prominent media personalities, American Jews who in the past had had no connection with the Zionist movement. At their initiative motions were introduced in Congress, the Administration was lobbied, and full-page advertisements were placed in newspapers around the country.

Kook, the youngest of the Irgun emissaries, was their leader. His eloquence and charisma, his energy, the logic of his presentation swept away the many obstacles put in his way by the Zionist establishment, that would not agree to cooperate in joint action with him. But the Jewish Army did not come to be. The British adamantly rejected the idea, agreeing to setting up a Jewish Brigade only toward the end of the war. Shortly after American entry into the War on December 7, 1941, Kook's efforts on behalf of a Jewish Army to fight alongside the Allied Armies effectively came to an end.

The year 1942 brought to the World the news of the German campaign to exterminate the Jews in all of the areas that had come under the occupation of the German Army, a campaign of murder that began with the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. This situation posed the greatest challenge for the leadership of the American Jewish community. It was incumbent on them to try to stop the murder of their brothers and sisters in Europe. Painful, as it may be, it is now generally recognized

that they failed in this Herculean task. Too much in awe of President Franklin Roosevelt, in fear of being accused of interfering with the war effort, too hesitant and hidebound, their feeble efforts to get the Allies to take action to stop the murder of Europe's Jews was completely ineffective.

The only activity of significance in attempts to save what could still be saved of Europe's Jews was taken by Hillel Kook and his group. In March 1943 they staged Ben Hecht's pageant "We Will Never Die" in Madison Square Garden. The producers and actors included Billy Rose, Moss Hart, Kurt Weill, Paul Muni, Paul Henreid, Edward G. Robinson, Stella and Luther Adler. The pageant's performance was repeated many times as it toured the United States, bringing America face to face with the tragic fate of European Jewry.

In July 1943 they convened in New York the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe. They succeeded in bringing to the Conference, and thereafter to the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, which they set up, many of America's leading personalities, including Herbert Hoover, Fiorello La Guardia, Senators Edwin Johnson, Guy Gillette, William Langer, Elbert Thomas, Representative Will Rogers Jr., and the columnist Max Lerner. In October 1943 they organized a march of five hundred orthodox rabbis from Union Station to the Capitol in Washington calling for action to save the Jews of Europe. At Kook's initiative Senator Gillette and Representative Rogers introduced a resolution in Congress calling for a US government agency to be set up to deal with the problem. In direct response to the pressure they applied President Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board in January 1944. Ira Hirschmann, a Vice-Chairman of the Emergency Committee was appointed the WRB's representative in Turkey. Kook

and his associates were literally raising heaven and earth in a last ditch effort to save what could still be saved. And some were saved, yet, 500,000 Hungarian Jews were shipped to Auschwitz during the first half of 1944 in the last chapter of German mass killings before the war ended.

On February 1, 1944, Menahem Begin, the newly appointed commander of the Irgun Zvai Leumi, announced the beginning of the revolt against British rule in Palestine. For Kook and his associates it was a call to marshal support in the United States for the Jewish underground. Now the American League for a Free Palestine was formed, and in parallel Kook announced the formation of the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation, modeled on De Gaulle's French Committee of National Liberation, to represent the interests of the future Jewish State in Palestine. Ben Hecht wrote another pageant, "A Flag is Born", and the League carried out intense activity in support of the underground in Palestine until the departure of the British from Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel. The efforts of Hillel Kook and his team played a significant role in supporting the underground's activities, leading to Britain's decision to leave Palestine and to the establishment of the State of Israel on May 15, 1948.

There is probably no parallel for the success in the US of this small group of youngsters led by Hillel Kook in mobilizing support for the Jewish cause. They were opposed every step of the way by the Jewish establishment, Zionist and non-Zionist. Israeli governments have to this day not given them the recognition they deserve. And yet, to Israeli diplomats and Israel's supporters abroad they can serve as an example even at the present time. They were the pioneers of Israel's representation abroad.