HARD THINKING—A UNIVERSITY TASK

ADDRESS

by the

PRESIDENT OF THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY

J. L. MAGNES

Opening of the Term

16 Heshvan 5701 — November 17, 1940.
From the Hebrew

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To

President of the Hebrew University

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Thus far there have been forty enlistments in the army from the Hebrew University. Many others at the University would like to serve. Unfortunately the process has been slow in Palestine of associating the population with the war effort.

We send our greetings to our brothers in the field and we wish them health, and we bid them be of good courage.

We are all of us at the front. This is indeed a people's war insofar as each man and woman and child is subject to attack from the air at any time. In other wars we older people and the politicians and the generals were usually safe behind the lines. Now no one is safe. This equal distribution of danger in war, together with an equitable distribution of political responsibility, over all the population, is of the essence of democracy. Perhaps now for the first time the plain people of the world will be concerned to see to it that if ever the peace does come it will
be more enduring, not just a peace between the heads of governments and the leaders of armies, but a true peace also between peoples.

Can a University do anything to help prepare such a peace?

There is one thing above all that a University is supposed to be doing at any time: to bring hard thinking to bear on the problems that beset mankind. That does not mean that hard thinking is all that mankind needs. In fact mankind is in much greater need of moral and spiritual forces which are to control his mind and hand. But it is true that through hard thinking mankind has improved the powers of his mind and his hand immeasurably beyond anything dreamed of by him; and a University exists on the assumption that knowledge can be increased and deepened through hard thinking. How that knowledge is employed, whether beneficently or cruelly, is another problem, and one that is of much greater importance.

This is indeed not just a war. It is the swiftest, profoundest revolution mankind has ever seen since man became man. Never has the failure of all our religions and philosophies been so lighted up as in the sheets of flame that burst from devastated European cities. The flares that are dropped from the dark skies point out to the bomb-thrower historical monuments, homes, workshops that are to be set ablaze. In the glare of these fires we see the burnt-out hollow-eyed skeletons of our philosophies. Neither religion nor biology nor psychology nor
sociology has saved us. Gone are the glib answers that the various schools and proud systems have been wont to give to the inquiring mind. We are all of us engulfed together.

Can a University help at such a juncture in man’s destiny?

It is not possible to give a clear and decisive answer to such a fundamental question. This war may last as long as the Thirty Years’ War. That was also in its way, as is this, a war of religions, and before such passions are stilled a world may lie in ruins.

Yet a few things may be clear. The first is that the military victory over the German satan must be overwhelming, and we must all of us, young and old, do what we can to bring this about. There must be no equivocation about this. No sacrifice can be too great for this. On the other hand, a new world cannot emerge of itself from a military victory alone, no matter how overwhelming. Versailles is witness to this. We should guard ourselves rigorously against the delusion that a new world can spring into being overnight out of the brain of some Jove and appear suddenly on the ruins of the old. Exhausted mankind bled white is not capable of such miracles. The dream of a new world requires as its basis systematic collective thinking today during the war and tomorrow, and every day and night. Universities and university men and all teachers and scholars are required to do this thinking. It may all prove just another disappointment. But the inexorable duty lies there before
us to strain ourselves with all our might, soul and mind.

It has become necessary to reexamine every single basic assumption of our lives, every maxim, every prepossession, every one of our concepts. Men and women of a university are trained to apply what is called the scientific method in order to arrive at fundamental premises and in order to check and verify them. But for this it is essential now more than ever that we open our minds and without prejudice review our thinking and subject everything, from top to bottom, to the necessary revision.

Let me take an illustration or two from politics and from morals, not of clear answers—unfortunately I do not know such—but of the kind of problems university thinking should address itself to in times like these.

In politics there is great need of hard relentless thought. For a generation past or more, large parts of mankind and we Jews among them have exalted the principle of nationalism almost into a religion. Has this been for a blessing or for a curse? It is not possible or desirable to wipe out the distinctiveness of nationalities. Yet does a cultural nationality require state sovereignty for its fruition? Moreover, the present state of the world shows that small nationalist states have but little chance against predatory neighbours. On the other hand, some of the bi-national and tri-national countries are having a hard time of it to maintain a balance between the nationalities composing the state.
The League of Nations has failed, and what, if anything, can take its place? This failure surely does not mean that mankind should cease thinking in international terms. It is much more likely that much of our agony is due to the fact that our internationalism has been fainthearted and muddle-headed.

Indeed what has happened in England since the outbreak of the war is calculated to strengthen our confidence in the international idea. England has been the centre of three epoch-making political actions in the course of the past year. The one is the assumption of power by the state over the persons and the property of all British subjects. This is nothing short of a social revolution accomplished overnight and without bitterness. The second was the offer of federation with France. Who could have imagined that such a step was within the range of practical possibilities? Alas that the proposal came too late. The third momentous step is the arrangement being entered into between Britain and the United States for common defence. These steps and the manner in which they were taken show the heights to which true democratic thinking and action can rise.

All this is perhaps an augury that the imperialism, which is in large measure at the bottom of much of this conflict, can through hard thinking and generous action be converted into a force for mankind's better organisation.

Here, in the Near and Middle East also, the idea of federation is brought forward increasingly
but rather vaguely. Here and elsewhere such problems are very complex. They involve questions of sovereignty, perhaps of dual allegiance, the uses to which an individual may put his property at home and the equitable distribution of raw materials from abroad, questions of language, education and religion, and the place of freedom of speech in a democratically controlled community.

A further central question: Is it possible to guarantee to every individual and to every family two precious and essential things that thus far in man’s history have been kept apart: Bread for the body and freedom for the soul? England is exalted above all nations because she has been the mother from whom civil liberty has come into the modern world. As a consequence, particularly in England and in America, minority religions have proceeded from slavery to freedom; and every father of a family has had the opportunity of giving his children an education. One of the greatest results of the idea of civil liberty was this, that the United States and England for the first time in the history of mankind broke the chains that bound the slaves of two continents. But neither England nor America have found the way of abolishing degrading poverty and of creating opportunities for work and a modest living for all their inhabitants.

Finally this very conception called democracy, on behalf of which our youth are called upon to immolate themselves, what really is it? and how will it benefit mankind?
There is no help in such matters except through hard, clear, persistent, generous thinking.

The totalitarian philosophy makes its powerful appeal to certain types of enslaved minds and not in Germany alone. But this type of mind cannot be met by steel and fire alone, but by another living philosophy which commands the allegiance of free men’s minds and spirits. Where, if not at a university, are all such problems to be worked over? Perhaps there will be a peace conference some day. Will the members of the Hebrew University have anything systematic, constructive, large-minded to contribute?

Moral questions also require a great deal of hard thinking. Morality is not as simple as sometimes it seems. To do the good — what good? and why? Naziism proclaims a morality of its own. But what morality? and what are its sanctions?

It is simple enough to point to the main elements of Jewish morality. “The Lord, the Lord, a God full of compassion and greatness, slow to anger and abundant in mercy and truth”. Thus, for the Jews, morality has consisted from biblical times to this day primarily in compassion and kindness towards the weak, mercy to the helpless and a love of truth. This morality was taken over by Christianity and Islam, and in this morality a wicked man is described in Psalm 109 as one who “remembered not to show mercy but persecuted the poor and needy man, that he might even slay the broken in heart”.

It is not surprising therefore that present-day Germanic heathenism should resent this basic teaching
of Judaism. The Christianity of "Blessed are the meek" is an offence to their martial, primeval, forest instincts. From their point of view the superimposition upon them of the Jewish morality contained in Christianity was indeed a mesalliance, and the dilemma of German Christianity has been: how reconcile this Jewish obsession of protection for the weak with the unrestrained instincts of the "Blond Beast"?

This contradiction has come into the consciousness of European Christianity during the past two generations more than ever before, and it has reached its rather logical conclusion in the collective antisemitism of modern Germany and those individuals and groups in other parts of the world who have come under Germany's influence.

The resentment of Nazi morality against the Jewish morality is intensified beyond measure not only by the content of the Jewish morality, incompatible as this is with unrestrained savagery, but more especially by the religious sanction of this morality—the God of Judaism.

The German heathen has said, for the most part unconsciously and now more and more consciously and defiantly: Not only does this Judaism tell me what to do and not to do, when and how and to what end to repress my natural "Herreninstinkte", but it tells me also what to believe and what not to believe, and in what God.

With the thoroughness and organising power the Germans seem to possess they are making war upon Jewish morality and the Jewish God, and Christian
morality and the Christian God, no less. It is a combat for the salvation of the German heathen soul, and they are trying in every way to shake off this hated yoke and to get what they regard as this poison out of their blood and soil. The Jews in Germany and elsewhere enrage them as the living, imperishable and mysterious symbols of their bondage to Judaism and to the Jewish ethical code.

In such a warfare for the possession of their Germanic souls every means is permissible. The recovery of their true, heathen selves, this is an end which justifies the means. It is a holy warfare in whose service science, history, statistics, the theory of race, patriotism, prejudices, persecution, stupidities, forgeries are available or can be manufactured to order.

We thus see how realistic, how burning is the question of Jewish morality; and in the Hebrew University, is it not more of a sacred duty than in any other place to seek to understand the nature of this morality, to search out its sources, to become clear as to its sanctions? It is the university scholar who through his intensive work, his hard thinking, has the inestimable privilege and the function of seeking truth without fear and of fortifying other men with the results of his research into profound and living problems.

In closing let me commend to every one of you the reading of the Hebrew Bible. This is the primary source of Jewish morality. Read in this Book of Books and you will understand why it became the
eternal possession of mighty sections of mankind. Particularly in these fateful days, read and re-read the prophecies of wrath and the prophecies of consolation, and the magnificent book of Psalms and consider how in days gone by the People Israel over and over again were in danger of destruction, as they are today. Read and study and you will find words you will not be able to forget, words which will exalt your spirit.

Are there greater words for our aspirations today than the words of Isaiah in his sixty-first chapter:

"The Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek He hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,

To proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound,

To comfort all that mourn.

For I, the Lord, love judgement, I hate robbery as a burnt offering, and I will direct their work in truth and I will make an everlasting Covenant with them."

Read and read again and thus perhaps you will acquire, here a little and there a little, the faith, that the God of Israel who delivered His people in days past will save His people and His world today.