

“What would Einstein think? Neutrinos and a Palestinian State”

Robert F. Barsky

On Friday, September 23rd, top physicists, joined by millions of curious onlookers from around the world, were riveted to their computer screens trying to assess the implications of news that shadowy subatomic particles may be traveling faster than the speed of light. On that same day, United Nations representatives, joined by millions of viewers, saw President Mahmoud Abbas formally request full United Nations membership for an as-yet non-existent Palestinian nation. We might well wonder what Einstein could contribute to the current debate amongst the physics community; but in fact it would be instructive to look back to his words about Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine as well, and to others who were negotiating relations between Arab and Jews, pre-Israel.

Einstein was a key figure for a little-known student Zionist organization called Avukah, that had been founded as a Jewish social group at Harvard University in 1925, eventually growing to boast several thousand members on campuses of the US (and Canada) until its dissolution in 1942. In 1929, Einstein was returning from Europe to the US, and en route he accepted to make an address from the ship as it approached shore. An article in the December 1930 *Avukah Student News* reported that this speech, scheduled for December 11th, 1929, was to be addressed to Avukah, “the only organization under whose auspices he would make a public pronouncement upon his arrival in the United States.”

In the address which preceded Einstein’s talk, Avukah’s Executive Secretary George M. Hyman recalled that “in the library of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem is deposited the original manuscript of Professor Einstein’s ‘Theory of Relativity.’ This monumental document has revealed to the world a new truth, and it may well be that from Zion shall go forth to all humanity new values resulting from the development of the Jewish homeland in Palestine.” Two days later, Einstein gave another talk on the subject of Palestine from the National Broadcasting Company’s studios, this time preceded by an introduction from Dr. Mitchell Salem Fisher, chairman of the Administrative Committee of Avukah.¹

In his speech, Einstein declared that “In the first place, we must pay great attention to our relations with the Arab people. By cultivating these relations we shall be able to avoid a development in the future of those dangerous tensions, which can be exploited for the purpose of provoking hostile action against us. We can very well attain this end, because our upbuilding of Palestine has been so conducted and must be so conducted that it also serves the real interests of the Arab population. And in the second place in doing this we will be able to avoid the unfortunate necessity – unfortunate for Arabs and Jews alike – of being obliged to call in the Mandatory Power to act as judge and umpire between us.” Einstein’s views on Arab-Jewish relations remained constant, culminating with a speech he gave before the National Labor Committee for Palestine on April 17, 1938,² in which he reiterated that: “I should much rather see reasonable agreement with the Arabs on the basis of living together in peace than the creation of a Jewish state.”

Einstein’s words remind us that historical documents may be worth the attention of those now negotiating a new Palestinian state as part of an effort to build peace in the Middle East. Many people would be surprised to learn that Avukah is a crucial source for such historical analysis, and that so many American Jewish luminaries had been members

¹ The March 1931 *Avukah Bulletin* noted that The National Office eventually obtained a “talking motion picture” portraying Professor Einstein’s talk, translated by James Waterman Wise.

² *The Quotable Einstein, op. cit.*, p. 98.

during its 17 year existence. Resolutely anti-fascist, and remarkably prescient in its analyses, Avukah bears re-examination at a time when we're looking for new ways beyond the impasse, posturing and stalemate that has precipitated an inevitable confrontation in the United Nations and perhaps into the streets in the Middle East and beyond.

The first page of an October 1935 *Avukah Bulletin* sketched out some of Avukah's ambitions: "Avukah seeks to give its members a sound understanding of Zionism and of movements and conditions in which it is involved. Avukah sees in the collective and cooperative movement the most valid and most significant development in Zionism and works of the creation in Palestine of a collective society. Avukah reaffirms the resolution for the World Zionist Congress calling for the development of Arab-Jewish friendship and supports all the efforts of the Jews in Palestine for cooperation with the Arabs."

The advantage of returning to these documents is that they'll remind us of alternatives and approaches considered not only by those outside of the actual machinations of creating a new state of Israel, like Albert Einstein, but those on the inside as well, including David Ben-Gurion. In a letter he wrote to Louis Brandeis on December 6th, 1940, Ben-Gurion sets forth the types of proposals on the table that stood between Jews and Arabs during the war. In discussions with Arab leaders, Ben-Gurion found that "the Arab people as such, and especially those who represent the true national interests of the Arabs, would never willingly agree to hand Palestine to the Jews, or even to share it with the Jews on a basis of equality." Mussa Alami, who was once the Attorney General in Palestine, suggested to Ben-Gurion that the best solution would be "economic and social cooperation with those Jews already in Palestine" rather than heavy Jewish immigration. Ben-Gurion's preferred solution, which he proposed to Arab officials, was "the idea of a federation – a federation between a Jewish Palestine and neighboring Arab states."

Maybe our understanding of physics has changed so much since the 1905 Theory of Relativity paper that Einstein wouldn't be able to contribute to the current discussion; and maybe the Middle East has evolved beyond any of the early discussions leading up to the state of Israel. But to ignore how history has unfolded, in science or politics, might lead to new blindness about crucial phenomena we are now trying desperately to understand.