

Keynote Address at the DFG Celebration Event marking 50 years of German-Israeli Diplomatic Relations

Berlin, September 10th, 2015

Hanoch Gutfreund

The present state of the scientific relations between Israel and Germany is characterized by extensive, divertive, and ever-more self-organizing modes of cooperation. This demonstrates what a great success story this cooperation has become, getting far beyond what could have been expected in the early days. It generated and continues to generate robust and fruitful knowledge, institutions, and personal friendships. Naturally, the anniversary celebrations are also part of the history of Israeli-German academic cooperation that has meanwhile become an active field of research, which may serve as a mine of experiences and reflections from which we might learn for the future. In this context, I would like to mention that within the framework of an ambitious project sponsored by the MP-Society, together with Jurgen Renn, director of the MPI for the history of science, and a participant in that project, Thomas Steinhauser, we are writing a book on this historical odyssey.

The general relationship between science, society and government has been the subject matter of numerous studies. In this context, cases in which scientific institutions and scientists played a significant role in mitigating conflicts and breaking longstanding taboos between long-time antagonists have attracted special attention. The contribution of science and scientific collaboration to the process of normalizing Israeli-German relations after World War II is a unique example of such a phenomenon.

It is unique because of the deep abyss that marked the relations of Jews in Israel towards Germany in the late 1940s and 1950s because of the crimes committed during the Nazi period by Germans and also by German scientists against the Jewish people loomed in the background of all the initiatives and attempts to normalize German-Israeli relations and to establish frameworks

of scientific cooperation. No diplomatic or cultural relations existed between the two countries and Israeli passports were labeled “valid for all countries with the exclusion of Germany”. With the exception of a few representatives of the government and public institutions, no Israelis visited Germany. Likewise, German visitors or tourists did not come to Israel. For most Israelis Germany was like a void on the world map, and for most Germans the crimes of the Nazi period were at best ignored or forgotten. Thus, the history of German-Israeli relations and the history of fifty years of scientific cooperation, that we are celebrating today, began as – and for a long time remained – a virtually impossible balancing act between the burden of the past and the needs of the present, between morals and pragmatics, between diverging views of the past and converging hopes for the future. Its realization became only possible because the political circumstances made it possible and even furthered it. The beginning of Israeli-German scientific collaboration was as much an achievement of heroic protagonists as it was a by-product of political contingencies.

One cannot talk about the development of the academic cooperation between Israel and Germany separately from its political context. The story of hesitant official governmental relations between Israel and Western Germany began with the negotiations over German reparations for Israel in 1952. Both sides were hampered by an internal opposition, which was particularly strong, of course, in Israel. But German post-war politics had its own obstacles against a rapprochement with Israel. In summary, the German position with regard to Israel was deeply ambiguous. West German politics aimed, on the one hand, at good political and economic relations with the Arab countries, but also at closer ties with Israel, not only because of the undeniable German responsibility for the Shoah but also because such ties would help support the respectability and legitimacy of West Germany’s geopolitical position.

It is on this background that we can understand not only the role of the outstanding leadership of Ben-Gurion and Adenauer, but also the beginnings of Israeli-German scientific cooperation and its funding from the German side. From the German political perspective, this cooperation was a part of

non-declared compensation for West Germany's pursuit of good relations with the Arab countries and its reluctance to set up official diplomatic relations to Israel. From an Israeli political perspective, such diplomatic relations, which Israel had tried to establish since 1956, would have helped to crack the wall of isolation established around the country as a result of the Suez crisis. Scientific cooperation therefore appeared as a natural channel easing the way towards this goal. In short, in the Ben-Gurion/Adenauer period day-to-day politics was dominated by a pragmatism that opened important windows of opportunity for those who wanted to pursue the establishment of scientific cooperations as a goal in itself.

Minerva, in Roman antiquity the goddess of wisdom and later the "patron" of the Max Planck Society became also the patron of Israeli-German academic relations. The prehistory of the Minerva program is shaped by personal contacts within a circle of outstanding personalities committed to the promotion of scientific collaborations. Besides its scientific prestige, there were other reasons why the Weizmann Institute became the privileged partner of a German funding program rather than the Israeli universities.

The most active protagonists of the German-Israeli scientific relations were associated with the Weizmann Institute. They were the nuclear physicist Amos DeShalit and Abba Eban, President of WIS. But, the main driving force of the Minerva program, the first stable, institutionalized bilateral research program between Israel and Germany, was Josef Cohen formerly a personal assistant to Chaim Weizmann, who studied history in Heidelberg, and, supported by Albert Einstein, became a fellow of the Moses-Mendelssohn-Foundation. On the German side the key players were Otto Hahn, President of the MPG, and Wolfgang Gentner, the physicist, vice-director at Cern. All of them had close contacts with political leadership in both countries and were driven by a strong conviction that this is a noble goal to pursue.

At a reception of members of the Weizmann Institute at the MPI for Physics and Astrophysics in Munich in July 1962, Amos de-Shalit spoke about the Israeli-German relations. He pleaded for reconciliation:

“Our Torah teaches us that we should not hold children responsible for the deeds of their parents, a whole community responsible for the deeds of individuals, no matter how large their number is. Loyal to this old principle, I believe we should try to reestablish relations, and scientific cooperation probably forms the best first step. “

However, the zeal of these individuals and the political support that they had were not enough to secure a smooth path to an official agreement. It was a bumpy road, with obstacles on both sides, with reluctance and opposition in different stages and junctions of implementation.

The official agreement for the cooperation between the Max Planck Society and the Weizmann Institute was established in 1964. It is then that the German government decided to continue the Minerva program on the basis of an annual contract between the Minerva Limited and the Weizmann Institute, officially represented by its European Committee. From then on, the ministry prolonged and extended the contract on a regular basis.

The universities at that time were not ready to be involved in official scientific relations with Germany, the internal oppositions had to be dealt with patiently and tactfully. The Hebrew University, instead, started in the late fifties a very successful process of building friends organizations in different German cities. At the Technion – its president sent only in 1968 one of the professors to Germany to explore options of scientific cooperation supported by German agencies, specifically with DFG. This was done in secrecy because the chairman of the Board vehemently opposed any contacts with Germany.

Turning points are mostly not the outcome of sudden events or decisions, but rather the cumulative result of sometimes slow and gradual developments. This was certainly the case for the turning point that is marked by important structural changes in the bilateral relations between Israel and Germany in the 1970s. Now it really may have materialized, at least to some extent, what had been aspired from the earlier period, that science took the lead in the

partnership between Israel and Germany, thus vindicating the vision of the early trailblazers.

This development may be viewed as a transition between two different roles of the scientific cooperation in the overall relations between the two countries – a transition from “science for diplomacy” to “science for science”.

During the time of the German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, that is between 1974 and 1982, the situation in the Middle East entered a period of détente, but the chemistry between the leading political figures in Israel and Germany did not work well so that bilateral political relations, while good and stable in principle, remained difficult. Nevertheless, the scientific relations continued to deepen and became even more differentiated. In particular the Minerva centers, established as funding instruments since 1980, were visible signs of the growing scientific network of cooperation.

The driving force behind this development was Hans-Hilger Haunschild, Secretary of State at the German Federal Ministry for Research and Technology. The Minerva Centers at Israeli research institutions were created as a permanent framework for fostering scientific excellence and cooperative research in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences, where large groups of scientists could pool their expertise for the scientific exploration of wider areas of research.

The first centers were the Einstein Center for theoretical physics at the Weizmann Institute, founded in 1980, followed by the Fritz-Haber Research Center at the Hebrew University, and the Richard Koebner Minerva Center for German History also at the Hebrew University. As a matter of fact, in the 1980s the main beneficiary of this program was the Hebrew University. The research performed at these centers, with visitors, young scholars and graduate students from Germany, has changed the scientific landscape at the universities.

A significant development in this history, with further diversifications of modes of funding and cooperation and with the broadening of the scope of beneficiaries in Israel was the entry of DFG.

In 1970 the DFG signed an agreement with the National Council for Research and Development in Israel about joint colloquia and short visits of scientists from both sides. But the DFG wanted much more. The President of the DFG, Prof. Julius Speer, suggested in 1969 to the Federal Ministry of Science to allocate to the DFG a fund for the purpose of developing permanent scientific relations between Germany and Israel. Just as funds allocated to the MPG and designated to support cooperation with the WIS. DFG would use such funds to support cooperation with the entire scientific community in Israel.

In January 1973, the President of the HU, Mr. Harman, wrote to Dr. Nahum Goldmann, the President of the World Jewish Congress who got his Ph. D. from the university of Heidelberg who had good contacts in the German political establishment, to support the DFG initiative: *"It would be excellent if ...you could advocate that the Federal Government should encourage permanent scientific relationships between Germany and Israel through the DFG and assign DM 2.000.000 a year on a regular basis for this purpose. You should know that, in the past ten years, the sum of DM 5.000.000 was given annually by the German Government to the Max Planck Institute for cooperation with the Weizmann Institute. On no account would we want this arrangement to be disturbed."* Harman wanted that the German Government would do more through the DFG to encourage relations with the scientific community outside of the Weizmann Institute. We do not know if Goldmann tried to intervene on this matter. We know that the DFG initiative was not approved. The DFG then adopted a strategic decision, which had a tremendous impact, to develop its own program of cooperation with Israel, funded through its own budget. There was one caveat. The statutes of the DFG only allowed to support the scientific research of German scientists.

In a long and detailed letter from February 1972 to Prof. Hagin, from the Technion, Prof. Speer explained how joint German-Israeli projects could nevertheless be funded. The proposal has to come from the German partner and, if approved, the grant will be transferred to his/her institution. The Israeli partner, acting as a “subcontractor” will receive his/her share from the German institution. The program was launched in 1973. It was an informal program, not publicized until very recently. A recent report by Christoph Mühlberg on the DFG activities estimates that 600 to 800 such bilateral projects have been supported within this framework.

Another important initiative was launched by the DFG, under the leadership of its president Prof. Wolfgang Frühwald in 1994, the trilateral cooperation program, which included a Palestinian partner in every cooperative research project. It was motivated by the hope to contribute to Israeli-Palestinian peace process, following the Oslo agreement. Unlike in the bilateral projects, the DFG was authorized by a special government decision to transfer in this case the allocated funds to the participating partners directly. This program lasted for twenty years. Prof. Frühwald was awarded a honorary degree from the HU, because he, among other things: *“...actively encouraged and made possible collaborative scientific research between German and Israeli scientists, he also has fostered such cooperation between German, Israeli and Palestinians researchers in furtherance of his firm belief that such collaboration could contribute to the Arab – Israeli peace process.”*

I did not attempt to survey the history of this historical odyssey. There are many components in this story, which I did not even mention. Of course there are many more elements of this story that are still open for a historiographic interpretation. But what has become clear is that this was a historical odyssey of great significance for the recent history of the two nations, Israel and Germany.

In conclusion, we may say that though scientific research has its own dynamics, it cannot be seen as being isolated from its cultural, political and economical contexts. It is important to preserve the memory of the past also in the context of active science, even if that memory is one about the

tragedies of the past. At the beginning of our story, the burden of these memories, but also that of the political contexts of the time, was so overwhelming that science almost seemed to be completely subjected to them. Nevertheless, over time, the courage and the persistence of a few trailblazers and pioneers managed to strengthen scientific cooperation and personal relations between Israeli and German scientists to an extent that these relations emancipated themselves from their strong dependency on those contexts. Moreover, now it is possible to reflect on those contexts and to address problematic and controversial issues. This, I believe is characteristic of the history of Israeli-German scientific relations that I have sketched here.