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In 1921, Albert Einstein's first trip to America triggered the kind of mass hysteria that would greet the Beatles four decades later. But as newly published documents show, it also tore a sharp rift between European Zionists and some of their fellow Jews across the Atlantic, men like Louis D. Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter, who felt that the best way for Jews to get ahead was to assimilate, not agitate for a Jewish homeland.

by Walter Isaacson

# How Einstein Divided America's Jews

ALBERT EINSTEIN'S FIRST tour of America was an [extravaganza](#) unique in the history of science, and indeed would have been remarkable for any realm: a grand two-month processional in the spring of 1921 that evoked the sort of mass frenzy and press adulation that would thrill a touring rock star. Einstein had recently burst into global stardom when observations performed during a total eclipse dramatically confirmed his theory of relativity by showing that the sun's gravitational field bent a light beam to the degree that he had predicted. *The New York Times* [trumpeted](#) that triumph with a multideck headline:

Lights All Askew in the Heavens / Men of Science More or Less Agog Over Results of Eclipse Observations / EINSTEIN THEORY TRIUMPHS / Stars Not Where They Seemed or Were Calculated to Be, but Nobody Need Worry

So when he arrived in New York in April, he was greeted by adoring throngs as the world's first scientific celebrity, one who also happened to be a gentle icon of humanist values and a living patron saint for Jews.

Newly published papers from that year, however, show a less joyful aspect to Einstein's famous visit. He found himself caught in a battle between ardent European Zionists led by [Chaim Weizmann](#), who was with Einstein on the trip, and the more polished and cautious potentates of American Jewry, including [Louis D. Brandeis](#), [Felix Frankfurter](#), and the denizens of established Wall Street banking firms. Among other things, the disputes about Zionism apparently caused Einstein not to be invited to lecture at Harvard and prompted many prominent Manhattan Jews to decline an invitation from him to discuss his pet project, the establishment of a university in Jerusalem.

The full extent of this controversy, which has been only touched upon in previous books (including a [biography](#) I wrote in 2007), is revealed in a volume of Einstein's correspondence and papers for 1921 that was recently published by the

Princeton University Press. None of the letters is newly discovered (all are available in public archives), but most have not been published before. The 600-page volume, the 12th compiled so far by the editors of the [Einstein Papers Project](#), pulls all of the letters and related documents together in a way that allows us now to see, even more clearly than Einstein did at the time, the political and emotional struggle he stumbled into.

Einstein was raised in a secular German Jewish household, and (except for a brief fling with religious fervor as a child) he disdained religious faith and rituals. He did, however, proudly consider himself Jewish by heritage, and he felt a strong kinship with what he called his fellow tribesmen or clansmen. His outlook in 1921 can be seen in the brusque answer he sent early that year to the rabbis of Berlin, who had urged him to become a dues-paying member of the Jewish religious community there. “In your letter,” he responded, “I notice that the word Jew is ambiguous in that it refers (1) to nationality and origin, (2) to the faith. I am a Jew in the first sense, not in the second.”

German anti-Semitism was then on the rise. Many German Jews did everything they could, including converting to Christianity, in order to assimilate, and they urged Einstein to do the same. But Einstein took the opposite approach. He began to identify even more strongly with his Jewish heritage, and he embraced the Zionist goal of promoting a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

He had been recruited by the pioneering Zionist leader Kurt Blumenfeld, who paid a call on Einstein in Berlin in early 1919. “With extreme naïveté he asked questions,” Blumenfeld recalled. Among Einstein’s queries: With their intellectual gifts, why should Jews create a homeland that was primarily agricultural? Why did it have to be its own nation-state? Wasn’t nationalism the problem rather than the solution? Eventually, Einstein came around. “I am, as a human being, an opponent of nationalism,” he told Blumenfeld. “But as a Jew, I am from today a supporter of the Zionist effort.” He also became, more specifically, an [advocate](#) for the creation of a Jewish university in Jerusalem, which became [Hebrew University](#).

Einstein had initially thought that his first visit to the United States, which he jokingly called “Dollaria,” might be a way to make some money in a stable currency. He and his first wife had gone through a bitter divorce, and they were still fighting over finances. Hamburg banker [Max Warburg](#) and his New York–based brother Paul tried to help Einstein line up lucrative lectures. They asked both Princeton and the University of Wisconsin for a fee of \$15,000. In February of 1921, Max Warburg informed him, “The amount you wish is not possible.” Einstein was not terribly upset. “They found my demands too high,” he told his friend and fellow physicist Paul Ehrenfest. “I am glad not to have to go there; it really isn’t a pretty way to make money.” Instead, he made other plans: he would go to Brussels to present a paper at the [Solvay Conference](#), the preeminent European gathering of physicists.

It was then that Blumenfeld came by Einstein’s apartment again, this time with an invitation—or perhaps an instruction—in the form of a telegram from the president of the [World Zionist Organization](#), Chaim Weizmann. A brilliant biochemist who had emigrated from Russia to England, Weizmann asked Einstein to accompany him on a trip to America to raise funds to help settle Palestine and, in particular, create Hebrew University in Jerusalem. When Blumenfeld read the telegram to him, Einstein balked. He was not an orator, he said, and the idea of using his celebrity to draw crowds to the cause was “an unworthy one.” Blumenfeld did not argue. Instead, he simply read Weizmann’s telegram aloud again. “He is the president of our organization,” Blumenfeld said, “and if you take your conversion to Zionism seriously, then I have the right to ask you, in Dr. Weizmann’s name, to go with him to the United States.”

“What you say is right and convincing,” Einstein replied, to the “boundless astonishment” of Blumenfeld. “I realize that I myself am now part of the situation and that I must accept the invitation.” Weizmann was thrilled and somewhat surprised. “I wholeheartedly appreciate your readiness at such a decisive hour for the Jewish people,” he later cabled Einstein from

London.

Einstein's decision reflected a major transformation in his life. Until the completion of his general theory of relativity, he had dedicated himself almost totally to science. But the anti-Semitism that was oozing up around him in Berlin led him to reassert his identity as a Jew and to feel more committed to defending the culture and community of his people. "I am not keen on going to America, but am just doing it on behalf of the Zionists," he wrote to his French publisher. "I must serve as famed bigwig and decoy-bird ... I am doing whatever I can for my tribal brethren, who are being treated so vilely everywhere."

And so Einstein and his new wife, Elsa, set sail in late March 1921 for their first visit to America. On the way over, Einstein tried to explain relativity to Weizmann. Asked upon their arrival whether he understood the theory, Weizmann gave a puckish reply: "Einstein explained his theory to me every day, and by the time we arrived I was fully convinced that he really understands it."

When the ship pulled up to the Battery in Lower Manhattan on the afternoon of April 2, Einstein was standing on the deck, wearing a black felt hat that concealed some but not all of his now-graying profusion of uncombed hair. One hand held a shiny briar pipe; the other clutched a worn violin case. "He looked like an artist," *The New York Times* reported. "But underneath his shaggy locks was a scientific mind whose deductions have staggered the ablest intellects of Europe."

Thousands of spectators, along with the fife-and-drum corps of the [Jewish Legion](#), were waiting in Battery Park when the mayor and other dignitaries brought Einstein ashore on a police tugboat. The crowd, waving blue-and-white flags, sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" and then the Zionist anthem, "Hatikvah." The Einsteins and the Weizmanns intended to head directly for the Hotel Commodore, in Midtown. Instead, their motorcade wound through the Jewish neighborhoods of the Lower East Side late into the evening. "Every car had its horn, and every horn was put in action," Weizmann recalled. "We reached the Commodore at about 11:30, tired, hungry, thirsty, and completely dazed."

One group was missing at most of the subsequent welcoming ceremonies and celebrations: the leaders of the Zionist Organization of America. Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, who was its honorary president, did not even send pro forma official greetings or congratulations. Brandeis had traveled with Weizmann to Palestine in 1919, and the following year had gone to London to be with him at a Zionist convention. But shortly afterward they began to feud. Their fight partly stemmed from a few differences over policy; Brandeis wanted the Zionist organizations to focus on sending money to Jewish settlers in Palestine and not on agitating politically. It was also partly an old-fashioned power struggle; Brandeis wanted to install efficient managers and take power from Weizmann and his more ardent eastern European followers. But above all, it was a clash of personalities. Weizmann was born in Russia, emigrated to England, and shared Einstein's disdain for Jews who tried too hard to assimilate. Brandeis was born in Louisville, Kentucky, graduated from Harvard Law School, prospered as a prominent Boston lawyer, and was appointed by President Wilson to be the first Jewish justice on the Supreme Court. His crowd tended to look down on unrefined and unassimilated Jews from Russia and eastern Europe. In a letter to his brother in 1921, Brandeis revealed the cultural and personal underpinnings of his rift with Weizmann:

The Zionist [clash] was inevitable. It was one resulting from differences in standards. The Easterners—like many Russian Jews in this country—don't know what honesty is & we simply won't entrust our money to them. Weizmann does know what honesty is—but weakly yields to his numerous Russian associates. Hence the split.

Brandeis was initially happy that Einstein was coming to America, even though he was accompanying Weizmann. "The

Great Einstein is coming to America soon with Dr. Weizmann, our Zionist Chief," he wrote to his mother-in-law.

Palestine may need something more than a new conception of the Universe or of several additional dimensions; but it is well to remind the Gentile world, when the wave of anti-Semitism is rising, that in the world of thought the conspicuous contributions are being made by Jews.

But two of Brandeis's closest associates expressed misgivings. His protégé Felix Frankfurter, then a professor at Harvard Law School, and [Judge Julian Mack](#), the person Brandeis had tapped to be president of the [Zionist Organization of America](#), argued that it would be better if Einstein's visit were cast primarily as a trip to lecture on physics, rather than one to raise money for Palestine.

Frankfurter and Mack sent Weizmann telegrams urging him to make sure that Einstein scheduled some physics lectures during his trip. But they quickly changed their minds when they were informed that Einstein had tried to extract large fees from various universities for such lectures, even though he was speaking about Zionism for free. That was even worse. So they sent another telegram, this one warning of the danger that Einstein would be seen as trying to "commercialize" his science. Such crassness would hurt his image and that of Jews, Frankfurter and Mack feared. Some of the physics lectures should be done for free. As Mack cabled to Weizmann: "EINSTEIN SITUATION EXTREMELY DIFFICULT EXPEDIENT YOU EXPLAIN US FULLY HIS EXACT NEGOTIATIONS ... ALSO AWAITING YOU PROMISED CABLE WHETHER HE ACCEPT YOUR SUGGESTION COUPLE UNIVERSITY LECTURES FREE." In one telegram, they went so far as to urge that Einstein's trip be canceled. Another telegram made clear that there would be no lecture at the university where Frankfurter was an influential professor. "HARVARD ABSOLUTELY DECLINES EINSTEIN," the telegram read. It did add that he would be welcome to come for an informal visit without a lecture or a lecture fee. When Einstein found out about the telegrams, he was furious. Mack defended himself and Frankfurter—and by extension Brandeis—in a letter to Einstein insisting that their only motive was "to protect you against unjust attacks and to protect the organization against the result of such unjust attacks."

Brandeis and his cohorts at the Zionist Organization of America made matters worse, during Einstein's visit, when they reacted to a deadly clash between Arab and Jewish rioters in Jaffa by reinforcing their desire that adequate "safeguards" be in place before money was raised for Hebrew University. Einstein confided that this attitude made him suspect that the Brandeis crowd was "committing sabotage" of his mission. When Brandeis's friend and supporter Rabbi Judah Magnes proposed hosting a gathering in Manhattan for intellectuals to talk about the university, Einstein replied that he would come only if Magnes made the event a fund-raiser. "I did not have in mind a fund-raising meeting," Magnes replied in a cold and curt letter. "Under the circumstances, it is probably better to forego the meeting."

The resistance to Einstein's mission came not only from the Brandeis camp of cautious and restrained American Zionists, but also from successful New York Reform Jews of German heritage, many of whom were opposed to Zionism. When Einstein invited 50 or so of New York's most prominent Jews to a private meeting in his hotel, many of them declined. Paul Warburg, who had served as his agent soliciting lecture fees, wrote:

My presence would be of no use; on the contrary, I fear that, if at all, its effect would be rather to cool things down. As I already told you on another occasion, I personally have the greatest doubts relating to the Zionist plans and anticipate their consequences with genuine consternation.

Other rejections came from Arthur Hays Sulzberger of *The New York Times*; the politically connected financier Bernard Baruch; the lawyer Irving Lehman; the first Jewish Cabinet secretary, Oscar Straus; the philanthropist Daniel Guggenheim;

and the former Congressman Jefferson Levy.

On the other hand, Einstein and Weizmann were wildly embraced by less assimilated and more enthusiastic Jews, the ones who tended to live in Brooklyn or on the Lower East Side rather than on Park Avenue. More than 20,000 showed up at one event, causing “a near riot,” *The Times* reported, when they “stormed the police lines.” After three weeks of lectures and receptions in New York, Einstein paid a visit to Washington. For reasons fathomable only to those who live in that city, the Senate decided to debate the theory of relativity. On the House side of the Capitol, Representative J. J. Kindred of New York proposed placing an explanation of Einstein’s theories in the *Congressional Record*. David Walsh of Massachusetts rose to object. Did Kindred understand the theory? “I have been earnestly busy with this theory for three weeks,” Kindred replied, “and am beginning to see some light.” But what relevance, he was asked, did it have to the business of Congress? “It may bear upon the legislation of the future as to general relations with the cosmos.”

Such discourse made it inevitable that when Einstein went with a group to the White House, President Warren G. Harding would be faced with the question of whether *he* understood relativity. As the group posed for the cameras, he smiled and confessed that he did not. *The Washington Post* carried a cartoon showing him puzzling over a paper titled “Theory of Relativity” while Einstein puzzled over one on the “Theory of Normalcy,” which was the name Harding had given to his governing philosophy. *The New York Times* ran a front-page [headline](#): “Einstein Idea Puzzles Harding, He Admits.”

During the Washington visit, the noted journalist and power broker Walter Lippmann tried to set up a peace meeting between Weizmann and Brandeis. Negotiations between the camps of the two Zionist leaders broke down over a variety of issues, and the summit never occurred. Einstein, however, was happy to pay a call on Brandeis, even though Weizmann urged him not to. They hit it off well. Einstein told the friend who arranged the visit that he came away with an “utterly different” opinion of Brandeis than the one pushed on him by Weizmann. Brandeis was also pleased. “Prof. & Mrs. Einstein are simple lovely folk,” he wrote his wife the next day. “It proved impossible to avoid some discussion of the ‘break,’ though they are not in [it]. They specialize on the University.” The one day of personal harmony, however, ended up doing nothing to heal the rift between the Weizmann-Einstein camp and the Brandeis-Frankfurter one, which continued to worsen during the visit.

Einstein subsequently went to Princeton, where he delivered a weeklong series of scientific lectures and received an honorary degree “for voyaging through strange seas of thought.” He did not get the \$15,000 fee he had originally requested, but he did receive a more modest one, plus a deal that Princeton would publish his lectures as a book and give him a 15 percent royalty. Einstein’s lectures were very technical. They included more than 125 complex equations that he scribbled on the blackboard while speaking in German. As one student admitted to a reporter, “I sat in the balcony, but he talked right over my head anyway.”

Einstein seemed to like Princeton. “Young and fresh,” he called it. “A pipe as yet unsmoked.” From a man who was invariably fondling new briar pipes, this was a compliment. It would not be a surprise, a dozen years hence, that he would decide to move there permanently.

Harvard, where Einstein went next, did not endear itself quite as well. Einstein graciously took a tour of the campus, dropping in on labs and commenting on students’ work, even though he had been explicitly not invited to give a formal lecture there. For the rest of his U.S. trip, he and Frankfurter engaged in an exchange of letters in which the Harvard professor tried to deflect the blame for the snub. People have “accused me of having wanted to prevent your appearance at Harvard,” Frankfurter wrote in a short note. “The accusation is absolutely untrue.” Einstein, however, knew of the telegrams that Frankfurter and Mack had sent objecting to Einstein’s request for lecture fees. “It now does seem plausible to

me that you acted the way you did with honest, good intentions,” Einstein replied, not quite accepting Frankfurter’s denial. He added a humorous jab at Jews such as Frankfurter who were eager to avoid ruffling the refined sensibilities of non-Jews. “It would not even have been serious if all universities had withheld invitations,” he wrote, “although I certainly know that it is a Jewish weakness always anxiously to want to keep the Gentiles [*Gojims*] in a good mood.”

One of the final stops on the grand Einstein-Weizmann tour was Cleveland, where several thousands thronged the train depot to meet the visiting delegation. The parade included 200 honking and flag-draped cars. Einstein and Weizmann rode in an open car, preceded by a National Guard marching band and a cadre of Jewish war veterans in uniform. Admirers along the way grabbed onto Einstein’s car and jumped on the running board, while police tried to pull them away.

The Zionist Organization of America was about to meet in Cleveland for its annual convention, and the “downtown” Jews loyal to Weizmann were preparing for a showdown with the “uptown” Jews loyal to Brandeis. The convention turned out to be raucous indeed, with bitter speeches that included denunciations of the Brandeis camp for, among other sins, not showing enthusiasm for Einstein’s trip. Weizmann’s supporters, fortified by his presence, were able to block a vote of confidence endorsing the leadership of Brandeis and his point man, Julian Mack. Mack immediately resigned as president, Brandeis resigned as honorary president, and others in the Brandeis camp—including Felix Frankfurter and Stephen S. Wise—resigned from the executive committee. The deep rift in American Zionism would persist, and would undermine the movement, for almost a decade.

Einstein was not at the convention. He had already boarded a ship back to Europe, feeling somewhat baffled and amused by what he had seen in America. “It is more easily aroused to enthusiasm than other countries I have unsettled with my presence,” he wrote to his best friend, Michele Besso.

I had to let myself be shown around like a prize ox ... It’s a miracle that I endured it. But now it’s finished and what remains is the fine feeling of having done something truly good and of having worked for the Jewish cause despite all the protests by Jews and non-Jews—most of our fellow tribesmen are smarter than they are courageous.

The opposition he encountered served only to deepen his support for the Zionist cause. “Zionism really offers a new Jewish ideal that can give the Jewish people joy in its own existence again,” he wrote Paul Ehrenfest right after the trip. In this regard, he was part of a trend that was reshaping Jewish identity, by choice and by imposition, in Europe. “Until a generation ago, Jews in Germany did not consider themselves as members of the Jewish people,” he told a reporter on the day he was leaving America. “They merely considered themselves as members of a religious community.” But anti-Semitism changed that, and there was a silver lining to that cloud, he declared. “The undignified mania of trying to adapt and conform and assimilate, which happens among many of my social standing, has always been very repulsive to me.”

The fund-raising part of Einstein’s tour was only a modest success. Even though poorer Jews and recent immigrants had poured out to see him and donated with enthusiasm, few of the eminent and old-line Jews with great personal fortunes became part of the frenzy. Only \$750,000 was collected for Hebrew University, far less than the \$4 million that Einstein and Weizmann had hoped for. But that was a good enough start. “The university seems to be financially secured,” Einstein wrote Ehrenfest.

Four years later, the university did indeed open, on top of Mount Scopus, overlooking Jerusalem. In an ironic twist, some of the New York financiers who initially spurned Einstein ended up supporting it, and they insisted on installing as chancellor Rabbi Judah Magnes, the person who had clashed with Einstein in 1921 and canceled a reception when Einstein insisted on

turning it into a fund-raiser. Einstein was so upset by the appointment of Magnes that he resigned from the board in protest. Nevertheless, he would eventually leave his papers and much of his estate to the university.

There was one other ironic footnote. In 1946, after he had emigrated to America, Einstein again became associated with fund-raising for a Jewish university. The organization was initially called the Albert Einstein Foundation for Higher Learning, and it acquired the campus of a dying university near Boston. But once again, Einstein clashed with some of the donors and their choices for administrators. When they asked whether they could name the university after him, Einstein refused. So the founders decided instead to honor their second choice, who had died five years earlier. They named the new university [Brandeis](#).

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