

Two views of excellence in research, two views of zionist nation-building: pure mathematics at the Hebrew University, applied mathematics at the Weizmann Institute

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I will present a comparative analysis of the early years of two world-class centers of mathematical research in Mandatory Palestine, and then in the recently created State of Israel. They pursued different ideals of mathematical excellence which were strongly associated with two different views of Zionism and of the role that science institutions should play in the national project envisioned by each.

The Einstein Institute of Mathematics was established in 1925 at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (HUJI). Edmond Landau came in 1937 as the first professor and scientific leader, and was succeeded by Avraham Halevy Fraenkel. The neo-humanistic spirit of German pure mathematics dominated activities in Jerusalem and it was very much in accordance with a view of Zionism that sought to establish a leading intellectual and spiritual center for the Jewish people in Palestine with a Hebrew University as its flagship.

The Weizmann Institute of Science (WIS) was established about twenty years later in the rural town of Rehovot. It had a thoroughly practical and applied orientation meant to serve the aims of political Zionism in its most activist version, which saw in the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine the most urgent and significant task. A Department of Applied Mathematics was established at WIS in 1948 under the leadership of Chaim Leib Pekeris, whose mathematical views consolidated against the background of his wartime activities at MIT and Columbia, and under the marked influence of John von Neumann. His purpose when joining WIS was to build a high-speed electronic computer and to implement a wide-ranging program of research in various fields of applied mathematics based on computing-intensive methods. This talk is partly based on joint work with Dr. Raya Levithan.

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