

Theodor Herzl and the Dream
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Temple Emanu-El, Edison, NJ
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This past summer, as many of you know, I was privileged to be in Israel for a few brief days. On that trip, I had the incredible good fortune to visit a place I had never been, and to meet a voice from the past, one that would give me a new perspective on a very old tale. One that opened my ears, my eyes and my heart, in a way I had never imagined was possible. A voice that would encourage me to dream like I had never dreamt before. This is his story...

The year was 1860. The day was Wednesday, May 2nd. The place was the city of Budapest. The world was filled with challenge and great detest.

There are trials and tribulations in all lands. Perhaps similar to the ones you have read about in this morning's Torah portion, the famous Binding of Isaac passage. From what I can gather, God is putting Abraham through the greatest test of his life – the test of faith. Luckily for Isaac, Abraham is successful, and the miracles of the Bible hold true once again.

I am not such an avid believer. I am a dreamer. And I am a doer. But we will return to this topic in a few minutes. Why does the date and place matter? Well, Budapest is where I was born, on May 2nd, 1860. You see, my name is Binyamin Ze'ev Herzl, more often known in your day as Theodor Herzl, and I am here to share with you my story. People credit me as the father of Zionism....

However, in order for you to come to understand my vision and my dream, I think you must come to know a bit of who I am, for the environment in which I grew up, the atmosphere and culture I absorbed, all played a large part in developing my view of the world.

Where to begin? Let us begin with the personal. My parents Jeanette and Jacob Herzl provided me with a very nice and comfortable life. My family members were particularly close. My sister and I would read, walk and play together, and we spent much time together while receiving tutoring.

We lived almost next door to the large liberal Reform Temple in Budapest. I attended there regularly with my father on the Sabbaths and Holy Days. And at six years old I joined the Jewish school run by the Budapest Jewish community. Of course, at thirteen, I became a Bar Mitzvah. However, our home was not one filled with Jewish rituals, but we did maintain Jewish character. I especially recall receiving a blessing from my parents before each important endeavor in my life, a ritual I have never forgotten.

Perhaps greater than the influence of my father was the influence of my mother, with whom I developed a particularly close relationship. She was educated German through and through. On a daily basis, she could be found quoting German literature, especially the classics. Though she was familiar with the Jewish world, it was not her passion. Her life revolved around implanting the German cultural heritage in us, her children. And like many Jewish mothers, she was quite proud of me, and had a wonderful way of implanting in me her sense of form, of tactfulness and of simple grace. She had identified my special talents even as a young lad, including language studies, music and piano lessons, and perhaps that is why my only true love was literature.

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Now let me stray for just a moment from the personal to the communal. The world was a fascinating place during my formative years, especially for a young Jew in Hungary. Just a few years before I entered this world, in 1849 to be precise, many Jews participated in a failed revolution, and judicial and economic restrictions were subsequently placed on the Jews during the 1850's. These restrictions were finally lifted in the 1860's. Jews were allowed to settle in any community and participated in all aspects of commerce.

In December 1867, Jews were granted full emancipation. Jews began to play a vital role in agriculture, transport, communication industries, business, finance and the arts. During this time, the Jewish population continued to grow, and the Jews became prominent in the political, economic, and cultural spheres in Hungary. However, despite the economic growth and religious empowerment, Jews faced political anti-Semitism in this period. In the 1870's and 1880's, anti-Jewish propaganda increased and a blood libel occurred in 1882.

Though there was a trend to a strict Orthodox approach to Judaism, and the promotion of the study of Torah, many people, like myself, found their way to Haskalah, Jewish enlightenment, which came to Hungary in the 1830's, along with the Reform Movement, both of which countered the Orthodox trends. Zionism was also prevalent in Hungary since the early 1800's, when a great scholar recommended that his disciples move to Israel and they became part of the Ashkenazi yishuv movement.

There is no doubt that my education was in the spirit of the German-Jewish Enlightenment of the period, where I learned to appreciate secular culture. At fourteen years old, I founded a literary society called Wir, or We in English, in an effort to instill more German culture among its members. Through this club, I was able to publish my early works.

In 1878, my life truly began to change. When I was 18 years old, after the untimely death of my sister Pauline, our family moved to Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the main spiritual and social capital of Europe at that time. A city known for its rich and pluralistic culture, it was the destination of leading thinkers and artists, including, of course Sigmund Freud. Vienna was a mixed metropolis, home to immigrants from many diverse lands. The relationship between the residents was relatively harmonious, for everyone wanted to have neighborly relations and strived to lend into a single multi-cultural Vienna. However, I would soon learn that this was merely what was seen on the surface.

While studying at the university, (I rarely attended synagogue anymore), I belonged to a fraternity called Albia, which was a German Nationalist Organization that became quite anti-Semitic. That would be my first encounter with the anti-Semitism that would shape my life. In 1884 I was awarded a doctorate of law from the University of Vienna. I chose not to work as a lawyer for long, but instead became a writer and reporter. I had the opportunity to travel to Holland, Belgium and Berlin at this time, and I quickly observed how anti-Semitism was on the rise.

I met my wife Julia during this period, and we were married in 1889. We had three children, and like many men devoted to a calling, I probably gave too little time and attention to my family, for the Zionist calling needed my undivided attention. But without question, my family did suffer for it.

By the early 1890's, I had become a successful writer, a playwright and a journalist. In 1891, I actually became the Paris correspondent of the influential liberal Vienna newspaper Neue Freie Presse, which at the time was still not overtly anti-Semitic. I remained in Paris until July 1895. It was during this time that I was exposed to various forms of anti-Semitism, and I began to conceive of different ways to resolve the Jews' distress.

Later, during my stay in Paris as a journalist, I was brought face-to-face with the problem. At the time, I regarded the Jewish problem as a social issue and wrote a drama, *The Ghetto*, in 1894, in which assimilation and conversion are rejected as solutions. I hoped that *The Ghetto* would lead to debate and ultimately to a solution, based on mutual tolerance and respect between Christians and Jews.

In October 1894, an assimilated Jewish officer in the French Army, Alfred Dreyfus, is unjustly accused of treason. I was assigned to report this trial to my paper in Vienna. I was present in the courtroom when Dreyfus was found guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment, and I was also present during the public ceremony when Dreyfus had his captain's rank ripped from his uniform. With my own ears, I heard the French mobs cry out 'Death to the traitor!' and 'Death to the Jews!' "I became a Zionist following the Dreyfus trial, to which I was witness."

At this time in my life, my sole purpose was to find a solution to the problem of anti-Semitism. “For some time, I had been engaged in a project of immeasurable scope. I did not know if I would ever complete it. It was for me the form of a tremendous dream. Yet for days and weeks it filled my being to the point of insensibility. What will come of this could not yet be estimated. But my experience told me that this was something wonderful, if only as a dream, and that I must put it into writing.”

I was greatly influenced by Eugen Duhring’s *The Jewish Question*, as I was certainly aware of the election of anti-Semitic candidate Karl Lueger as mayor of Vienna. It was clear that the “situation could not have improved. It would inevitably get worse – to the point of slaughter. The governments could no longer prevent this, even if they wanted to.”

Since, as I mentioned to you earlier, I am more about action than belief, I was determined to find a practical solution to this great problem, and the only solution I could imagine was the establishment of an independent state for the Jews. “We need do nothing but wipe the sleep from our eyes, stretch our strong limbs, and we can turn the dream into reality. Whoever brings this message – does not come as a prophet with bizarre expressions, nor as a dreamer.” I will admit, though, that many people thought I was dreaming, and I was often met with mixed reactions.

However, I was enthralled with the Zionist idea, and I conducted diplomatic ties to disseminate my plans and to gain a charter, the right of Jews to settle in Eretz Yisrael, granted by the Turkish Sultan. I realized that in order to ensure that the idea of the Jewish state could become a feasible proposition, I must secure both ideological and financial support. To this end, I initiated meetings with senior political and financial figures in the hope that I could convince them of the importance of Zionism and recruit them to the cause.

One of the first figures I met was Baron Hirsch, a wealthy philanthropist whom I had sent a detailed letter explaining my position prior to our meeting. “If only we had a united political state, we could begin to solve the ‘Jewish question,’” I shared with him. He did not agree in any way with my thinking, but that did not alarm me. I told him: “do not find fault with me because I am a younger man. Would you care to wage a bet with me? I shall found a national loan fund for the Jews” I said. And eventually I did, though not without many disappointing conversations, with the Rothschild’s and others.

In 1896, the stage was set to introduce the world to my book *Der Judenstaat*, the Jewish State, which would later become the fundamental manifesto of the Zionist movement. In it, the Zionist vision was described for the first time, reinforcing the readers’ faith that a Jewish state was neither a legend nor a dream. In clear, precise terms, in a well-developed and well-phrased text (so they say), I describe the steps to be taken in order to realize the Zionist ideal and the character of the future state.

I wrote in this book: “The plan would seem mad enough if a single individual were to undertake it; but if many Jews simultaneously agree on it, it is entirely reasonable, and its achievement presents no difficulties worth mentioning. The idea depends only on the number of its adherents. Perhaps our ambitious young men, to whom every road of advancement is now closed, and for whom the Jewish state throws open a bright prospect of freedom, happiness and honor, perhaps they will see to it that this idea is spread...”

Though others did not agree with me on this next point, even those who were Zionists, I believed it was important to gain international and legal recognition of the rights of the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael before beginning actual settlement there.

In 1897, I convened the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. It was at this conference that Zionism was established as an official movement. This was the conference that set direction and definition to who we were and how we would go about accomplishing our mission. Though there were some 200 Jewish figures from around the world, there were many rabbis of Germany who protested. However, it didn’t matter. We were there.

I recall saying to those gathered: “In this congress we are creating for the Jewish people an instrument that it lacked heretofore, but is now... a vital necessity... Our congress should live forever, not only until redemption from the old hardship but afterwards in particular... wherever we are... Our congress will be most serious and uplifted, a blessing to the unfortunate... an honor to all Jews....”

“If I were to sum up the Basle Congress in a single phrase, I would say: In Basle I created the Jewish State. Were I to say this aloud I would be greeted by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, and certainly in fifty, everyone will recognize this.... The foundation of a state lies in the will of the people for a state... Territory is only the material basis: the state, even when it possesses territory, is always something abstract... At Basel, then, I create this abstraction which, as such, was invisible to the vast majority of people.”

I of course would remain the leader of the Congresses for many years to come. I attempted to bring humor and drama to that stage, not faltering from message or impact. I know that people saw my tall stature, my beard and my black suit and white starched collar and may have assumed my presence to be intimidating or commanding, but for that I can take minimal responsibility. I simply desired then, as I do today, to pause others to take heed of what is being said.

Many have called me the truest of Statesman, which I take as a wonderful tribute, but being a statesman to a people without a State can be rather disheartening. I know many who have called me an exceptional person, a kind of prince in exile or a king without a crown who had pointed out the route his people should follow. But a king without a kingdom, or a crown, is a challenging place to be.

I understand only that the Jewish problem was a national matter, and its solution was an “international political problem to be settled by the civilized nations of the world in council.” I knew I would need to negotiate with the world powers for purchasing the lands of Eretz Yisrael. Therefore, I understood the level of importance to obtaining a charter that would guarantee free immigration, self-defense, independence and internal autonomy for the colonists.

On October 14, 1898, I left for Eretz Yisrael. I recall that “the parting from my loved ones was particularly difficult that day. I could be sitting peacefully in my beautiful home, with my beautiful children, whose pleasant years of childhood are passing by without my taking pleasure in them. I am undertaking the trials of such a distant journey, which may not be free of danger, but it is my duty to go.”

I arrived in Eretz Yisrael through the port city of Jaffa two weeks later, for my first and only trip to the Promised Land. I arrived by boat, as we all did at the time, and from the minute I arrived, I felt the tangle of peoples in Jaffa. Though Jaffa seemed to be on the fall when I was there, there were several hundred Jews living in Jaffa from several different countries, mixed with the Arab population.

Oh, “how I remember the narrow streets, which smell to high heaven, which were unsanitary and poorly kept up. On all sides one can see nothing but multifaceted misery: indigent Turks, filthy Arabs, fearful Jews, all living in complete idleness, hopeless poverty, without a shred of hope. One’s nostrils are filled with the unpleasant smell of putrefaction, the odor of mold and mildew.”

The first place I visited upon my arrival to Palestine was Mikveh Israel, an agricultural colony founded in 1870 by the Universal Israelite Alliance. What was unforgettable about this visit is the long awaited introduction to Kaiser Wilhelm II there. He, of course, was the German Emperor and King of Prussia. I had for years been trying to meet the Kaiser, to enlist his aid in convincing the Turkish sultan to grant a charter of colonization for the Zionist movement, and how fitting to make his acquaintance in the land I am trying to redeem for the Jews.

While in Palestine this one time, I visited Rishon L’tziyon, where I spent several hours and was rather dismayed by the tight control exercised on its inhabitants. But I loved visiting Rehovot, where people performed in the streets for me and the others. You do know – if you have not been – you must make a point to go – at least once, like I did.

Jerusalem evoked mixed feelings in me. My visit in Jerusalem began in not such a great manner. I arrived by train to the City of David, and unlike the way I tend to run my life, perhaps it is the German roots in me, the train was quite late. And it was Friday. I was traveling with some companions who were observant of the Sabbath, and so I walked with them to the hotel, out of respect... but of course. What a walk it was, on the Jerusalem streets. A difficult way to begin my visit to that city.

I remember thinking after my visit to Jerusalem: "All I can do is look out of the window and conclude that Jerusalem is magnificently situated. Even in its present decay it is a beautiful city; and, if we Jews get in here, can become one of the finest in the world."

After climbing the Mount of Olives, I recall thinking: "I am firmly convinced that a splendid New Jerusalem can be built outside the old city walls. The old Jerusalem would still remain Lourdes and Mecca and Yerushalayim. A very lovely beautiful town could arise at its side." "If Jerusalem is ever ours, and if I were able to do anything about it, I would begin by cleaning it up. I would clear out everything that is not sacred, set up workers' houses beyond the city, empty and tear down the filthy rat-holes, burn all the non-sacred ruins, and put the bazaars elsewhere. Then, retaining as much of the old architectural style as possible, I would build an airy, comfortable, properly sewerred, brand new city around the Holy Places."

I know there were many people who felt the way I did about Jerusalem. I believe it came to be referred to as the Jerusalem syndrome. This is the obsession so many Jewish voyagers have about using the Book of Lamentations to describe the city of David. It is as if they feel in the depths of their soul the pain of the true believers when they celebrate, every ninth day of the month of Av, the destruction of the Temple. For these visitors, despite the reality of what Jerusalem has become, it will only always be the humiliated city, the destroyed city, the city whose reconstruction they await on the Day of Judgment.

In 1901, the first office of the Jewish Colonial Trust was founded in London, as an instrument for Zionist economic and political activity. The Jewish National Fund was also established at this time as a national fund, whose goal is to purchase land in Eretz Yisrael using money raised by the Jewish people. I believe you are all probably familiar with the many trees the now called JNF plants each year.

In 1902 I had the idea to write a utopian novel. I entitled it *Altneuland* –the Old-New Land. It was my vision of the Jewish state 21 years later, in which a socialist utopia would be established. I know it seems hard to believe, but I envisioned a new society that was to rise in the Land of Israel on a cooperative basis utilizing science and technology in the development of the land. I saw immediately the future state's political structure, immigration, fundraising, diplomatic relations, social laws and relations between religion and the state. I was certain the Jewish state would be a pluralist, advanced society, a real light unto the nations.

In August, 1903, we held the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basle. I proposed the Uganda Program, in which the Jews would settle in the British territory of Uganda. The proposal aroused a storm at the Congress and in order to prevent a split in the Zionist movement, I quickly announced that this was merely a temporary solution. I suppose I simply wanted to have a place for the Jewish people – a Jewish State.

Many have questioned my desire in wanting a Jewish State. Was I insane? What right did I have? But look at Israel today. It may not exactly be the Israel that I dreamed of, but it exists. And it will never leave. Jews have come to Israel today, in 2008, from places I didn't even realize had Jews.

Take a walk with me down Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem. Who could possibly begin to question the importance of Israel's existence?

And when I visit Israel today, I am touched that some remnants of my connection to the creation of the State still remain. The city of Herzliya, founded in 1924 by American Jews, and the major metropolitan city of Tel Aviv, the name given to my book *Old-New Land* when it was translated to Hebrew, serves both me and our ancient Biblical texts with pride.

I am thrilled to wander the streets and see the incredible use of technology, far more than I dreamt would be in existence. I am sorry that Jerusalem is a place of such great conflict. I had always envisioned a Jerusalem that was internationalized. I desired for there to be a Palace of Peace, somewhat like a League of Nations, as you know it. Well, perhaps that is YOUR dream to make a reality.

I am surprised and quite pleased to hear the unbelievable use of the Hebrew language. Quite honestly, I thought the official language of the land should have been German. I am thrilled that the Zionist Congress established the World Zionist Organization, and these bodies continue to serve you, and I understand are making wonderful impacts especially for Liberal Jews in the Land of Israel.

I am saddened that I was not able to live to see the realization of my vision, since I died at a young 44 years old in Vienna on July 3, 1904, of pneumonia and a weak heart overworked by my incessant efforts on behalf of Zionism. I did not live to see my ideas come to fruition, since the State of Israel was established fifty years after my death. However, I am thrilled to know that they followed my wishes, and in 1949, my remains were brought to Israel and re-interred on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, just next to that museum where I met your friend.

I am also saddened that my own family, my children Pauline, Hans and Trude could not see the actual creation of this State, due to their tragic deaths. But my soul lives on in every building erected in Israel, every song written in Hebrew, every invention made by an Israeli. My descendants are the citizens of Eretz Yisrael, and so, in some sense, I suppose calling me their father is fitting.

So what is your job today? It is quite simple. You must keep alive my dream. The world should never again know a time when Eretz Yisrael will not exist. YOU should never again know a time when Jews from ALL lands will not have a place to call home. So be a part of Eretz Yisrael, in whatever way you can. Study her history. Breathe her beautiful air. See her incredible sites. Taste her wonderful foods. Simply connect. Like you have never connected before. Never take her for granted, for though you may not have lived in my shoes, you can

certainly imagine NOW the path that I have traveled, and you should NEVER travel on that path again.

But there is more. You must dream your OWN dreams. As a Jew. As a Zionist. As an American. As a human being. Think big. Think beyond what you even think is imaginable. Be generous in your time, demanding of your mission and determined to see the dream to the end.

“Im tirtzu, ain zo agada. If you will it, it is no dream!”

Kein Yehi Ratzon.

So long as within the inmost heart a Jewish spirit sings, so long as the eye looks eastward, gazing toward Zion, our hope is not lost – the hope of two thousand years: to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.

We Rise: HaTikvah

Resources:

Web Sites:

Herzl.org

Jewishvirtuallibrary.org

Books:

The Diaries of Theodor Herzl. Marvin Lowenthal, editor and translator. The Dial Press, Gloucester, MA: 1956, 1978.

The Imaginary Voyage with Theodor Herzl in Israel. Shimon Peres. Arcade Publishing, NY, 1998.

The Jewish State. Theodore Herzl. Dover Publications, Inc., New York: 1896, 1988.

Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism. Jacques Kornberg. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN: 1993.