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Learning firsthand about Theodor Herzl...

... from my grandfather Rabbi Jacob Koppel Goldbloom (1872-1961), a forgotten Zionist activist

• DAVID FAIMAN

My grandfather, known in English Zionist circles as the Rev. JK Goldbloom (1872-1961), but “Zeyde” to me, died when I was 17. We had always been very close, and during his final illness we shared a bedroom.

In fact, his influence on me was so great that it was obvious to us both that I would eventually make aliyah, the dream Chaim Weizmann had denied my grandfather because his Hebrew teaching in London was considered far more important for the Zionist cause than for Zeyde to become just another Hebrew teacher in Israel.

His “*Ivrit b'Ivrit*” method of teaching resulted in literally hundreds of his pupils immigrating to Israel. Other pupils would also turn up in all kinds of unexpected places. For example, when inquiring at an Oxford Library for a copy of a children’s play Zeyde had written in 1916, about life in Eretz Yisrael in 2016, the librarian informed me that the library did not have the play but that he, personally, had performed in it during his childhood!

I vividly recall the hypnotic effect my Zeyde’s synagogue sermons would have on congregants, urging them to send their children to Eretz Yisrael (the only words I could understand because he invariably spoke in Yiddish on such occasions). I also recall my grandmother Rivka telling us that when Zeyde practiced a Zionist speech in his sleep, she waited patiently until he finished and then applauded enthusiastically. “So that’s what woke me up!” Zeyde added with a smile.

Not surprisingly, on their living room wall there hung a large wooden bas relief of Zeyde’s “messiah,” and he even named his youngest son, Benjamin Ze’ev Herzl. Naturally, I was keen to learn as much about all the famous Zionists with whom he had personal contact, primarily, of course, about Herzl.

One of my early recollections is of Zeyde opening a book and allowing me to copy a poem he had composed on the occasion of his first meeting with Herzl when Herzl first visited London in 1896. Zeyde was unaware at the time that Herzl knew no Hebrew, and would consequently be unable to appreciate the craftsmanship that had gone into the 10 lines, which, in style, could have come straight out of the standard prayer book. Each line began with a Hebrew letter that together spelled out the acrostic: “To the glory of Herzl: May his torch bestow enlightenment” (my translation).

THE POEM was written in rhyme, with two quatrains followed by a couplet. The first quatrain enumerated various places on Herzl’s crowded itinerary, persuading monarchs and other dignitaries to recognize the Jewish nation’s need for a land of its own. However, the second quatrain (“HERZL” in acrostic) included the line: “Command, command, put your words into our mouths!” After having met with the high and mighty of Great Britain, what was Herzl’s “command”? To hold the next Zionist Congress in the country that he regarded as having the foremost importance to the cause.

Zeyde often mentioned the shine that emanated from Herzl’s face and the hypnotic intensity of his eyes. So it was natural for him to work tirelessly to organize the Fourth Zionist (“London”) Congress in 1900. From then on, Zeyde took part in all Zionist Congresses until his death.

In my teens, I was too young to know anything about the



SEALING STAMP of the Jewish National Fund depicting Theodor Herzl in his iconic posture on the balcony of the Hotel Les Trois Rois in Basel, Switzerland, during the First Zionist Congress, 1897. The quoted Psalm 137, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning,” was how Herzl ended his closing speech at the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel in 1903. (Wikimedia Commons)

politics of these congresses, but one stands out because of a radio tape I treasure, of Zeyde being interviewed on the 50th anniversary of Herzl’s death. In it, he relates that at the Sixth Congress, in Basel, the tendentious issue of Uganda came up. Zeyde, who was an indefatigable propagandist for Eretz Yisrael, was ready to vote against the proposal (to send a commission of inquiry to Uganda to check out its suitability for a future Jewish state). However, Herzl sent Zeyde a message via Israel Zangwill, urging him to persuade his fellow English delegates to vote in favor of accepting the British government’s proposal. In the interview, Zeyde explains in beautiful, fluent Hebrew how he found himself caught between “a hammer and anvil.”

How could he go against the will of his almost messianic hero and vote for a cause that was anathema to him? He goes on to recount Zangwill explaining that Herzl regarded it as being of the utmost importance that the congress should unanimously agree to the government’s offer in order to keep the lines of communication open. Yet after the congress, when back in Britain, Herzl would permit Zeyde to continue his agitation against Uganda.

The writer is professor emeritus of physics at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. After an academic career in elementary particle physics and applied solar energy (see Wikipedia), his retirement hobbies are biblical geography and musicology. His latest book is Giacomo Meyerbeer: A Deliberately Forgotten Composer (to be published by Gefen).