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COVER



Herzl's 'Altneuland' can be used as a mirror to judge our society today

In an interview with the 'Magazine,' veteran historian Shlomo Avineri shares his thoughts on the significance of Herzl, the vision he articulated in his seminal work and how it is reflected in today's Israel

• GOL KALEV

Prof. Shlomo Avineri is arguably the most known contemporary expert on Theodor Herzl. Having written numerous books on 19th-century political philosophy, Avineri also has a broad understanding of the time period and can place Herzl's vision in this context.



HERZL STREET in 1934, during Tel Aviv's early years. The city is named after Herzl's work 'AltenuLand'; 'Tel Aviv' is the title of the Hebrew translation of 'Altneuland.' (Photos: Wikimedia Commons)

Avineri is not just an intellectual; he also fulfilled Herzl's vision with his own deeds, serving as the director-general of the Foreign Ministry in the 1970s.

He sat down with *The Jerusalem Post* to reflect on Herzl's legacy.

"In the public discourse of Israel, Herzl is usually called the visionary of the state. This is unfair," Avineri says, "because it gives him more credit than he deserves and less credit than he deserves."

"More credit because he was not the first person in the 19th century who had a vision of a Jewish state – there were others that preceded him. People like [Moses] Hess and [Leon] Pinsker wrote a book that created some impact, but had no follow-up."

"On the other hand, Herzl gets too little credit because he was not just a visionary, he was also a man of action. Herzl created an organization that became the foundation of the Jewish state. There is a clear continuation from the Executive Committee of the Zionist Congress to the provisional government of Israel in 1948. You did not need to reinvent the wheel or make constitution decisions when Israel was founded, because there was a political culture and a multiparty system."

Indeed, Herzl laid the foundation not only for the Jewish state but also for its democratic nature.

"Democracy is not an outcome of a text but of political culture," Avineri explains. "In America, the 13 colonies had representative assemblies and then they became the foundation of the federal system. Similarly, the Zionist organization had a political culture that can be traced back to Herzl, and that became the foundation for the government of Israel."

But was Herzl's Zionism merely a movement for the establishment of the Jewish state, or also a transformative ideology that would serve the Jewish people long after the Jewish state would be established?

To answer this, Avineri places Zionism in its historical context: "Zionism was a response to what was happening in Europe, where identities were shifting from religious identities to national and cultural identities. Until the 19th century, people's main identity was religious – both their own identity and the way they were viewed by others. In the 19th century, people shifted to define themselves in national and ethnic ways – as Italians, as Romanians. Around the same time, there was a revival of Jewish culture that went beyond religion, including the revival of the Hebrew language. Herzl responded to the emergence of that Jewish culture and gave it the institutional structure."

Avineri stresses: "Ideas have power when they capture the imagination of a lot of people and are then translated to institutions. If ideas remain just in op-eds of newspapers, they are interesting and important, but do

not have the staying power."

Avineri says that this is part of the reason Herzl decided to write *Altneuland*: "Herzl wrote a very unusual book – a utopia published in 1902, in which he describes how a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine would look in 1923."

Avineri claims that *Altneuland* was unique in a number of ways: "National movements have manifestos about a claim, about history, about what they want to achieve, but I am not aware of any national movement that has a blueprint of how its society will look like after it receives independence. Herzl did exactly that – the book describes the country, its institutions and its social life. It is not just about Jews having a right, but also about what Jews would do once they achieve the state."

THIS IS where Avineri sees the significance of *Altneuland* to today's Israel: "We can use the book as a mirror by which we can judge our own society today. It seems to me there are three elements that Herzl addresses that are germane to the challenges Israel is facing today: equal citizenship, social and economic order, and the relationship between state and religion."

Avineri explains each of those elements and how Herzl's view is expressed in *Altneuland*: "When it comes to equal citizenship, women in *Altneuland* have the right to vote. This is just as they did in the Zionist organizations. In 1902, this is quite revolutionary. Also, Herzl was very much aware that Palestine is not empty. Some of the people he describes in *Altneuland* are Arabs, and one of them is even one of the country's leaders. Herzl did not imagine in 1902 that there would be an Arab national movement in Palestine. At that time there was no Arab national movement anywhere. But Herzl recognized that there are non-Jews, and that they should be given equal rights."

"This is the core of the political narrative of the book. The country in 1923 is in the middle of an election to the parliament, and there is the emergence of a new political party led by a recent immigrant, a rabbi, who says that non-Jews should not have equal rights, because it is a Jewish state. The plot in the book is about how the political establishment in the country is fighting this Jewish racist."

Avineri points to the peculiarity of this: "Utopias usually show a perfect society. Herzl, being a journalist, having spent time in France, was very much aware that all societies, including democratic ones, have serious issues. Just as there can be racists in Europe, there can be racists amongst the Jews. Herzl describes the argument of the Jewish racist party and then the arguments of the liberals who want to maintain the



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democratic structure of a liberal Jewish commonwealth. The liberals' argument is twofold: On the one hand, it goes back to Jewish sources, remembering we were slaves in Egypt and invoking quotes from the Bible that speak about equality. But there is also another argument, which claims that a modern state needs to be based on equal citizenship."

The second element in *Altneuland* that Avineri feels is relevant to today's Israel is social order: "Herzl was not a socialist. He was critical of revolutionary socialism. But he was also very much aware of some of the dilemmas of capitalism. The kind of social order he describes in the Jewish commonwealth in *Altneuland* is a mix of capitalism and socialism. He gives it a name: mutualism.

"Herzl takes the better elements of capitalism (freedom and initiatives) and the better elements of socialism (justice and equality). In contemporary terms, it is a social democratic welfare state. On the one hand, there is no private ownership of land, so there will not be land speculation. Services such as electricity are run on a national basis, there are old-age homes and medical insurance – something quite revolutionary in 1902. On the other hand, retail marketing and retail commerce are in private hands. So you have a combination of socially controlled elements of solidarity and the ability of people to do business."

Avineri points to another unique aspect in *Altneuland*: "There is no army in *Altneuland*. The Jewish commonwealth is established through international agreement, and therefore there is no need for an army. However, there is national service. Every young man and woman, after finishing high school, spends two years in national service, as teachers, nurses or welfare workers in old-age homes. Herzl's idea of mutual-

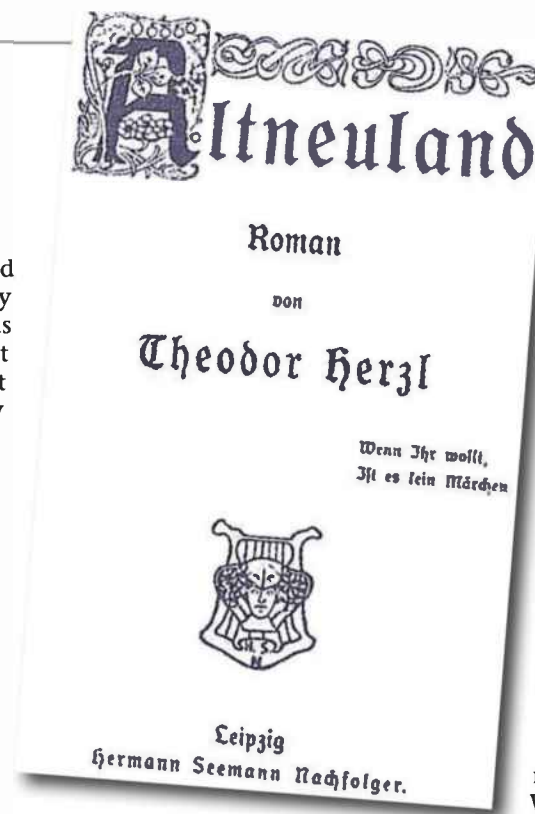
ism is of very deep solidarity."

Avineri moves on to address the third element of *Altneuland* relevant to today – that of religion and state: "Herzl was not religious, but he understood that respect for religion is an important social element of cohesion and a very central element of Jewish consciousness. He therefore respected the role of religion in the public sphere. Herzl describes that on Friday afternoon, the city of Jerusalem is closing down. Everybody goes either home or to synagogue, because, as Herzl said, the Sabbath dwells in people's hearts. Herzl even said that the Temple will be rebuilt. It is not where the mosque is – the mosque is part of the skyline of Jerusalem in Herzl's book. The Temple is basically a modern Orthodox synagogue – men and women sit separately."

SO HOW did the utopia translate into reality?

"All those elements in *Altneuland* are about trying to be inclusive," Avineri explains. "Indeed, when Israel was established, it followed these inclusive lines: Israel allowed in 1948 those Palestinian Arabs who remained in Israel and did not flee or were not expelled to participate in the first election, and that was in the middle of war. Israel maintained that Arabic is the second official language. Israel also maintained that Arab citizens have a right for state-sponsored education in their own language and own culture."

But in Avineri's view, there has been a shift since: "In the last few years, there are forces and political parties and leaders in Israel who try to diminish the equal rights of Israeli-Arab citizens, and that is done in the name of Zionism – this is utter nonsense. The Zionist vision, as expressed by Herzl, views Israel



as a Jewish state that respects the civil and cultural rights of its minorities."

Avineri points to a shift on social and economic issues as well: "For many decades, Israel was used as a model for social democratic parties in Western Europe: the kibbutz, the Histadrut labor federation, the idea that you can balance social responsibility and solidarity with a society that has private enterprise. In the last decades, the Israeli welfare state has been undermined by far-reaching privatization. The element of solidarity has been pushed aside and replaced by capitalist components, including land speculation."

Avineri acknowledges that this is part of global developments, but concludes: "Israel today is far away, not only from what it has been until two or three decades ago, but also from the vision of Herzl, which was trying to create a third way, to use a contemporary term, between capitalism and socialism."

Avineri claims Israel has also moved

away from such a third way when it comes to state and religion: "The role of religion in Jewish national consciousness is, on the one hand, a fact, but it is also a contested fact, since it depends on interpretation. Israel was able to create something that was called the status quo, which was trying to ensure some aspects of Jewish identity in the public space. This enabled coexistence.

"In the last few years we see radicalization on both sides: On the ultra-Orthodox side we see attempts to enlarge the scope of religious institutions and religious control. On parts of the left-wing radical seculars, we see an attempt to identify any religious element as evidence of Israel moving in the direction of Tehran. We live in a more polarized situation today."

So should the vision that Herzl outlined in *Altneuland* be taken into consideration when chartering the direction of Israel?

Avineri is clear: "*Altneuland* can be a model to what historical Zionism tried to achieve. On those three issues - equal citizenship, a third way between capitalism and socialism, and an uneasy coexistence of state and religion – there is something one can learn from Herzl more than from any other Zionist activist, thinker or politician."

Shlomo Avineri is professor emeritus of political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. In his latest book, Karl Marx: Philosophy and Revolution, Avineri traces the impact of Marx's Jewish background, as well as his father's conversion, on his writing. The book was published on August 6 by Yale University Press. For more articles by the interviewer: europeandjerusalem.com