



PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu speaks in front of a portrait of Theodor Herzl at Independence Hall in Tel Aviv in 2010. Herzl's use of diplomatic means secured recognition for Zionism's goals, say the writers. (Lior Mizrahi/Reuters)

The first Zionist diplomat

• By LIORA HERZL and TOVA HERZL

We asked three AI systems to assess who the most influential geopolitical figures of the 20th century were. All three included in their top 10: Winston Churchill, prime minister of the UK; Franklin D. Roosevelt, president of the United States; and infamous authoritarian rulers. They also gave honorable mention to Mahatma Gandhi of India, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, and Theodor Herzl, whose death 121 years ago is marked these days – he died on July 3, 1904, 20 Tammuz, which this year falls on July 16.

When asked about their choice of Herzl, they explained that the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel created a new national center, altered the map of the Middle East, affected the regional balance of power, and had a profound impact on Jewish consciousness.

Those who grew up under the shadow of the “Visionary of the State” may take the man and his achievements for granted. But it is far from natural that a Jew born in Budapest, who studied law in Vienna, worked as a journalist and playwright, and died at 44, would be ranked among the most influential figures of the previous century, along with leaders of states who lived to an old age.

For many Jews, the Europe into which Herzl was born in 1860 was not an easy place. Even those who did not experience pogroms witnessed rising nationalism, a force that typically excluded Jews and often led to open discrimination.

The idea that Herzl promoted – to politically restore the Jewish people to their historic homeland – was preceded by others. The Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) group, and thinkers like Leon Pinsker, came before him. So why did he succeed where others did not? How did a man with no country behind him, no official apparatus, and little funding manage to build, in such a short time, a position for himself and for the cause he represented?

Alongside intelligence, energy, and extraordinary charisma, we suggest three reasons, and will focus on one: diplomacy.

First, Herzl understood that limited support wasn't enough – he needed a broad base. He therefore rallied supporters across all strata of Jewish soci-

ety: rich and poor, religious and secular, urban and rural, from across the Diaspora, and worked to build bridges among them.

Second, he recognized the practical needs and established institutions that laid the groundwork for a future state, such as the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish National Fund, a financial infrastructure, and more. Without these, the vision would have remained theoretical.

Finally, Herzl developed diplomatic channels and acted strategically in the international arena. True, influential and well-connected Jews operated before and during his time. But none acted as he did.

What, then, is diplomacy? It is the art of negotiation for mutual goals, without coercion or conflict. Understanding political culture and the driving forces of power are at its core. Also essential are skillful communication and out-of-the-box thinking – areas where Herzl excelled. Moreover, diplomacy values mutual interests over ideological affinity.

Put differently, a diplomat speaks people's language. Sometimes that means literal language; Herzl spoke multiple European tongues, enabling direct contact with his interlocutors. But it also refers to seeking common ground, using concepts and arguments that the other party can accept.

For example, in his dealings with the Ottoman sultan and his officials, Herzl proposed that in return for a charter over the Land of Israel (his top priority), he would help alleviate the collapsing empire's debt.

Admittedly, Herzl's meetings with leaders of the great powers that he hoped to engage – Germany, Britain, Turkey, Russia, and the Vatican – did not yield the breakthrough he hoped for during his lifetime. In many cases, he was rebuffed.

Nevertheless, that the meetings took place was in itself a success. When heads of major powers agreed to meet the leader of the Jewish national liberation movement and discuss his ideas, it lent legitimacy to the Zionist cause. Even if not immediately adopted, this recognition opened the door for the future.

Indeed, there is a direct line between Herzl's meetings with British officials and the Balfour Declaration, issued 13 years after his death, which spoke of a

national home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.

WE SERVED for decades in Israel's Foreign Ministry and witnessed the power of diplomacy. From our experience, we have come to deeply appreciate Herzl's understanding of his interlocutors, his strategic use of media to garner sympathy, his originality, and his insight into the need to recruit partners and how best to do it.

Regrettably, diplomacy is often sidelined in Israel today. One need only observe the continued budget cuts to the Foreign Ministry, the shrinking number of overseas missions, the individuals who recently served as foreign ministers, and the way significant foreign policy issues are carved up and distributed to other players for political expediency.

Some may argue that given the reality of the Middle East, military force is what solves problems, not diplomacy. We agree that without military strength, Israel cannot survive. But force alone is insufficient to build goodwill, forge partnerships, or advance goals. Diplomacy backed by strength – or strength guided by diplomacy – can achieve results.

In recent weeks, Israel seems to have improved its strategic situation. Strengthening its security can, and should, also be pursued through dialogue. History offers many examples where military action failed to achieve its goals and ended in defeat when a diplomatic effort was absent.

Consider one painful and urgent issue: the hostages. Against hollow declarations that only military pressure will bring them back, we believe only determined diplomatic efforts, however painful the compromises, will lead to their swift return.

To those who view diplomacy as naive, we urge a look at Theodor Herzl, the first Zionist diplomat, a man whose primary tools were determination and words. He lacked military might, but through the resolute use of diplomatic means, secured recognition for Zionism's goals.

Today, as Israel faces difficult decisions, it should look to the path charted by its visionary and embrace his wise methods.

The writers are retired Israeli ambassadors, distant relatives, and members of Theodor Herzl's extended family.