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THEODOR HERZL (Wikimedia Commons)

Herzl vs Ahad Ha'am today



AHAD HA'AM (Wikimedia Commons)

As Israel celebrates its 70th anniversary, core issues behind the two Zionist leaders' feud come alive

OPINION

• By GOL KALEV

'The theme of the Ahad Ha'am vs Herzl feud – establishment vs outsiders – continued through the next 120 years of Zionism.'

At Zionism's inception, a debate ensued between Theodor Herzl and Ahad Ha'am – commonly summarized as Herzl wishing to save the Jews, while Ahad Ha'am wished to save Judaism and create a spiritual center in Palestine which would serve as a point of orientation for all Jews.

Today, 120 years later, we're seeing the repercussions of this feud develop, most notably in the de-nationalization of American Jews. The seeds for such de-nationalization were planted earlier in Western Europe, but affected only a small minority of Jews, most of whom lived in closed Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. It was not until the mass Jewish migration to America in the late 19th/early 20th century that Judaism, a nation-religion since its inception, was reduced to a mere religion.

But de-nationalization has failed. The majority of American Jews have since secularized and to one extent or another disaffiliated. American Jews are safe, but American Judaism is not.

Israel and Zionism address this. Just as Ahad Ha'am envisioned, Israel provides a Jewish point of orientation for Diaspora Jews. This is fortified by Israel's astonishing success. It is more appealing for a young American Jew to connect through happiness and the vibrant present than through despair and a checkered past. In addition, a Jew can now choose from a range of relationships with the Jewish homeland. That includes a connection through Israel without ever visiting the country.

Israel's desirability and accessibility is a celebration of Ahad Ha'am's Spiritual Zionism, but Herzl promoted similar concepts as well. Shortly after publishing the *The Jewish State*, he told a group of enthused students in Vien-

na, "Perhaps we will never get to Zion and then we must strive for an inner Zion."

Ahad Ha'am is also strongly associated with advocating the need to condition Jewish hearts to a new state to freedom. Some 19 centuries of oppression and persecution had taken their toll. One cannot just lift the Jews out of slavery into the Promised Land without such conditioning. "This is not the way," he proclaimed in 1892.

But Herzl, too, made similar arguments. For example, in a letter to German chancellor Otto von Bismarck, Herzl criticized the emancipation.

"There is no use in suddenly announcing in the newspaper that starting tomorrow all people are equal." He reiterated such views in his writings and plays. The exit from the ghetto is a process, not an event.

Upon the conclusion of the First Zionist Congress in 1897, Herzl famously wrote, "At Basel, I founded the Jewish state." He immediately clarified that such a state is not simply a collection of citizens.

"A territory is merely the concrete basis. The state itself, when it possesses a territory, still remains something abstract." It is this abstraction, this ideal, that has turned Zionism at Israel's 70th anniversary into the primary organizing principle of Judaism. Zionism has not only become a light to the nations, it is also a light to Judaism.

With its contributions to humanity, technological innovations and dynamic culture, Israel is generating a sense of pride and belonging for American Jews. Just as Chaim Weizmann, a disciple of both Herzl and Ahad Ha'am, envisioned, Zionism is about Judaizing the Jewish communities.

The above examples demonstrate that Herzl and Ahad Ha'am's early ideological differences were not excessively wide, and yet, they became rivals. What was their main difference? Ahad Ha'am was the Jewish establishment; Herzl was an outsider.

Ahad Ha'am lived among the Jews and

engaged with Jewish issues for years. Herzl lounged in the cafés of Vienna and Paris of the "Belle Époque." He stunned the Jewish world with his 1896 publication of *The Jewish State*. As he noted in his diary, his life was about to change.

Failing to recruit leading Jews such as the Rothschilds, Herzl abandoned the elites and took his messages directly to the Jewish masses. He convened the First Zionist Congress in 1897 and invited Ahad Ha'am, who declined. Instead, Ahad Ha'am showed up in Basel as a reporter.

From the confines of the press box on the balcony of the Casino Hall in Basel, Ahad Ha'am observed how the Jewish populous enthusiastically embraced Herzl. He witnessed the cheers, the tears and indeed the anointment of the outsider as the new Jewish leader.

This theme of the Ahad Ha'am vs Herzl feud – establishment vs outsiders – continued through the next 120 years of Zionism.

In America, the Jewish establishment was at first staunchly anti-Zionist, but the Jewish masses ignored the establishment and rallied around Zionism, forcing their leadership to acquiesce.

Continuing the process, another bottom-up shift is occurring today – away from liberal American Jewish elites, toward Zionist-centric Jews who are more reflective of the overall American admiration of the Jewish state.

In Israel, the old elites that founded the country are slowly losing influence. There is a gradual and amicable shift of power and narrative from the secular minority toward the religious/traditional majority, as well as from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – back to Zion.

As Herzl predicted, 50 years after convening the first Zionist Congress, the Jewish state was established. Emanating light, its 70th birthday serves as a powerful testimony to Herzl's words on that podium in Basel: Zionism is the return to Judaism.