

# Herzl beyond the 'parochet' (curtain)

• By YAAKOV HAGOEL

The chronicles of history are colored with stories of visionary leaders who believed in the right to live in their ancestral homeland, based on their common values.

In Jewish history, Moses receives the divine command to unite the people of Israel and to give them hope and freedom. He meets with great world leaders to demand liberation, an exodus from slavery to freedom and to arrive in the Promised Land.

Some 3,000 years after Moses leads the Exodus from Egypt, another leader arises among our people, Theodore Herzl. Herzl envisions the people of Israel leaving exile and living a life of freedom in their own homeland. In many ways, Herzl reminds us of Moses. They both act tirelessly to arouse a glimmer of hope among the Jewish people and both are worried about the loss of identity of a persecuted and isolated people.

Herzl, like Moses, meets with world leaders and heads of state and tries to get the wheels spinning on the train of hope that will carry the masses towards unity, freedom and a national home.

Like in the days of Moses, the vision of freedom is accompanied by apprehension among the Jewish people. As in the story of the Exodus, in Herzl's time there are groups that resign to accept the current situation and to prefer the "fleshpots of exile" rather than risk the wrath of world leaders.

Herzl's Zionist journey amounts to only seven years, in which he devotes his energy and health in order to realize his vision. At the age of 44, following countless attempts to succeed in his mission, the first modern leader of the people of Israel since Moses passes away. Herzl is buried in Vienna, leaving behind a light of hope, Zionist institutions and, above all else, leaving a sense of unity.

Some three decades after his death, a resolution is passed at the Zionist Congress to bring his remains to the Land of Israel within one year.

The executive of the Zionist Organization contacts architect Oscar Strand and Judaica artist Arthur Weisz and asks them to design and prepare a *parochet* (curtain) to cover Herzl's coffin for when he is to be brought for re-burial in the Land of Israel.

The curtain is decorated with a blue-and-white motif and embroidered with gold with the image of a lion inside a Star of David. Next to the lion are seven gold stars, reminiscent of Herzl's original proposal for a flag of the Jewish state.

The verse, "Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, O My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:12) is written on the upper part of the curtain, followed by a verse from the Book of Psalms, "Those that sow in tears shall reap in joy." (Psalms 126:5)

The verses symbolize the fulfillment of his vision and the joy that his efforts led to the establishment of the Jewish state, here, in the Land of Israel.



THE AUTHOR stands next to the replica of the cloth that covered Theodor Herzl's coffin. (World Zionist Organization)

HERZL'S REINTERMENT in the Land of Israel is delayed due to the beginning of the Second World War.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, the Knesset decides to fulfill the Zionist Congress resolution and to bring his remains to Israel. The curtain covers Herzl's coffin during the ceremony. However at the end of the funeral procession, the curtain disappears and the circumstances of its disappearance remain a mystery to this very day despite a tremendous effort to find it.

Dr. Yitzhak Weisz, author of the well-researched book *Herzl - A New Reading*, is surprised to find that his own father, Arthur Weisz, was the artist who designed the curtain for Herzl's coffin.

Recently, following Weisz's visit to the Herzl Center, the idea was proposed to reconstruct the curtain this year, the 70th anniversary of Herzl's re-interment.

The newly reconstructed curtain is placed on Herzl's grave at Mount Herzl on the 20th of Tamuz (July 23, 2019) at the official memorial ceremony and will later be housed at the Herzl Museum.

The concept of a *parochet* first appears in the Book of Exodus chapter 26, in which Moses is issued a divine commandment to "Make a curtain... and the curtain shall divide unto you between the holy place and the Holy of Holies."

Herzl is etched into the Israeli consciousness as the visionary of the Jewish state and the founding father of the nation. The curtain that covered his coffin represents the idea of the continuation of his eternal vision.

The re-burial of Herzl in Israel on what is today called Mount Herzl cemetery near the Bayit Vagan neighborhood symbolizes the unbreakable bond

of the Jewish people with its eternal capital and history. Back then, the mountain peak was called "Hanishkefet," or "the viewpoint," because it was the highest peak in the area and overlooked all of Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

This is the first time since the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel where a place is sanctified and transformed to become a national monument of a renewed state. Herzl is buried on the top of the mountain and near his grave are the nation's great leaders and fallen soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the defense of the nation and the homeland. And from his grave-site, Zion and Jerusalem are spread before him. Both Moses and Herzl never had the chance to see the people of Israel in their own land.

71 years of independence, innovation and education have accompanied us since the rebirth of Israel. The words that were sewn on the original curtain - and now on the reconstruction - distinguish between the essential and the trivial, between the aspiration for perfection and reality. In his life, Herzl tried to plant within us the importance of realizing a vision, the inspiration of a model society and a Jewish-Zionist identity. He left for us the task to carry on the eternal torch of the people of Israel after his death.

Herzl would have been proud of the tremendous achievements of the country created by his vision. The path to achieving the goals are still large and the challenges facing the State of Israel are great. Our role as parents, as educators and as leaders is to inspire future generations with Herzl's vision and to continue to strive for a model society here in the Jewish state.

The writer is vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization.