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VIEWPOINT DR. NISSIM LEVY

From vision to reality

THEODOR HERZL is not only the visionary of The Jewish State.

For the Jews he is a kind of modern biblical Moses.

This being the case, in order for us to better understand who we are today, it is important to continue to research Herzl's writings and Zionist theory.

The first international conference on Theodor Herzl and Contemporary Zionism – “From Herzl's Vision to the Reality of Zionism in the Twenty-First Century” – held in October deliberated over the central topics with which Herzl dealt: state, religion, economy, society, science, technology and other issues.

It is our intention to continue to spread his legacy in Israel, the Jewish Diaspora and the free world in various ways that are related to the man who said that Zionism is an eternal ideal.

I often ask myself, what would Herzl's reaction be if he would arrive in Israel today and see what is going on?

On the one hand, he would be very happy because he would see a modern state with a lot of construction, with many start-ups and a strong economy. Israel is today very strong in international business markets, with a very strong currency. Relative to the small population in Israel, it is a leader in the world economy and hi-tech. Herzl wanted Israel to be a modern nation with a liberal society.

By studying religious texts alone it is not possible to create start-ups. He envisioned a country with total separation of religion and state.

On the other hand he would be unhappy with the electoral system where a small minority of ultra-Orthodox Jews control the political system and thereby control the day-to-day life of the country where the majority of people are traditional and secular. No public transportation on Shabbat, few shopping opportunities on Shabbat, and strict laws on kosher certification of food. In my opinion, the issue of kosher certification has nothing to do with religion but is merely a money-making enterprise. For example, the Rabbinical Court in a recent divorce case took away the custody of a mother from her children because she did not keep kosher.

Herzl believed in institutions: a strong police force, prosecution and court system. Today these three institutions are under



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President Reuven Rivlin addresses the first Herzl Conference held at the World Zionist Organization's Herzl Center in Jerusalem on October 30

attack for personal reasons, and once these three institutions lose power to government, democracy is threatened.

There are about 5,000 soldiers currently serving in the IDF who are not recognized as Jews by the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. They risk their lives defending the country but, nevertheless, their Jewishness is not recognized by the religious establishment.

Herzl felt that Zionism can only survive if there is a strong army. We need such an army because we live in a region faced by existential threats from Syria, Iran, the terror organizations Hamas, Hezbollah and others, and not in a country with neighbors like Italy and Switzerland. Everybody must serve in the army – from all sectors of Israeli society. If there should be a war, those studying religious texts will not be able to defend the country, in my opinion. Only a strong, modern, hi-tech army will be able to save Israel from its enemies.

Herzl also believed in equality for women, and women were given the right to vote already at the second Zionist Congress of 1898. Therefore, regarding the issue of women's rights at the Western Wall, it is imperative that the plan to expand the egalitarian section must be implemented.

Women have the right to pray with their fathers, husbands and sons together at the Kotel. ■

Dr. Nissim Levy is chairman of the Board of Governors of The Herzl Center and Museum on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem. The views expressed here are his own and do not reflect any policies of The Herzl Center and Museum. www.herzl.org.il