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ZIONISM



# Herzl – It’s about time

• DR. ALIZA LAVIE

**H**erzl was the forefather of one of the most successful revolutions in the history of mankind. I am referring to the fact that a dispersed people, living separately among the nations of the world, shook off the dust of, cast off its cloak of desolation, to reunify and stand upright in its historical homeland. There, the people successfully revived a dormant language, defended its survival and has built a prosperous, forward-looking country – one which leads the world in many spheres.

Despite all of this – perhaps because of this – an inverse ratio prevails between the phenomenal success of the Herzlian vision itself and the level of tangible acquaintance with Herzl’s persona, and – most importantly – his conceptual legacy.

It is also pertinent to remember that there are sections of the Jewish people, which deem themselves opponents of the Herzlian vision. These include the diverse positions that can be found – certainly in ideological terms – on a spectrum ranging from non-Zionist through anti-Zionist, as well as the post-Zionist milieu, which casts doubt on the just nature of the Zionist vision, per se.

Yet, beyond all this, even among those who consider themselves an integral part of the Zionist phenomenon, Herzl remains a distant figure at best – a person of historic importance as the ‘visionary of the Jewish state’ – but one devoid of genuine relevance in our time. The implications, however, are highly significant, in that this remoteness exacts a price.

Over the millennia of its existence, the Jewish people has been distinguished by the manner in which it has transformed the events it has undergone into a living, engaged memory with contemporary relevance. The reality, as revealed by this survey, is that we have been unsuccessful in transcribing the amazing process of national renewal, actively led by Herzl, into a vibrant memory with a contemporary significance. Indeed, even at the narrative and historical level, Herzl and his legacy are not afforded their due status within Israel’s national and collective memory.

This immense but unfulfilled potential is a wrong the Herzl Center seeks to right.

HERZL HIMSELF was highly sensitive to complex nuances and challenges. Just before the First Zionist Congress, he wrote, “Zionism is the Jewish people setting out on a journey.” Herzl went on to declare that the Jewish story both continues and seeks to progress forward along this path, as well as in reverse: ‘forward’ refers to its vision and deeds; the ‘reverse’ mode denotes the formation of collective memory.

The limited address afforded by the education system and the collective Israeli narrative to Herzl’s contemporary rele-

vance as the visionary of Zionism stems from the assumption, by some, that Zionism’s task was complete from the moment the State of Israel was established. There are others who consider the realization of the Zionist vision to be the sum total of all of Israel’s positive achievements – from its prosperous agricultural sector through becoming a start-up nation – as expressions reflecting Zionism’s contemporary essence. Obviously, there is no disagreement with the fact that Zionism’s primary goal of the establishment of a state for the Jewish people has, indeed, been attained – or that amazing and inspiring things are happening in the here and now.

In addition to the establishment of a state, however, Herzl’s Zionist paradigm included a social and moral supra-echelon that we are obliged to address. In his philosophical dicta, he devoted significant attention to his ethical conceptualization of the manner in which the state should conduct itself, envisioning a social framework he defined as an “exemplary society.”

Was Herzl’s perception of the aspiration to an exemplary society founded entirely in the enlightened European school of thought in which he was nurtured and educated? Or did the progenitor of Zionism – consciously or unconsciously – owe his inspiration to sources from Jewish heritage and the concept of *tikkun olam* (improving the world), as exemplified in Judaism and the Jewish people over the millennia?

I wish to propose an integral understanding, wherein the Western world’s vision of freedom and equality is founded, to a large degree, upon the Jewish concept of the creation of Man in the image of God. Moreover, that it was identical to the Jewish vision of being “a light unto the Nations,” as held by the ancient prophets – with the literal and fundamental meaning of this axiom signifying the establishment of a society that behaves justly – being diffused over the centuries and permeating Herzl’s own philosophical mindset, either directly or indirectly.

With respect to building this exemplary society, we remain yet at the early stages. Israeli society finds itself situated within a larger framework of existential threats, in terms of security and other factors, originating in different cultural perceptions, some of which are indirectly antagonistic. Under these circumstances, it has not had space to address a significant discussion towards issues relating to the ethical identity of the society in which we wish to live and sustain. Nonetheless, over the course of its existence, Israeli society has adopted a philosophy of equality, assistance to the needy and equality opportunity. The road ahead, however, remains long.

IN THE BROAD strokes of his literary paintbrush, Herzl described his vision; in detailed and gifted prose, he set down ideas that have withstood the test of time and

The “Herzl 2019” Magazine generated robust discussion since it was published three months ago. To continue the conversation, here are three more articles from leading Herzl thinkers.

continue to be relevant. These range from his views on personal liberty through obligations towards the needy, all of which still hold true today, outlasting the storms and political strife of the ensuing 120 years.

There are many patently different questions and there are not always clear answers to them, as different social worldviews will generate contradictory responses. Yet, I believe we may still take on board some of the guidelines together with the vision of social justice and equality expressed in Herzl’s works. In my opinion, this also pertains to the timeless question asked by Jews down the generations, as to whether ‘someone in my own circle or community is in need of something that I have the capacity to give him / her.’

A pertinent example is that recently on Sigd (Ethiopian Jewish pilgrimage festival on 29th Heshvan), we hosted for the first time members of the veteran population from the Ethiopian Jewish community who came on aliya many years ago – but have never previously entered our Center. They belong to a community that successfully preserved their heritage through the millennia of exile, a collective that is an integral part of the Zionist story belonging to all of us. Had we only perceived this from the outset, our brothers and sisters in the Ethiopian Jewish community would have been spared a great deal of pain and suffering.

Yet another task before us is also immense and highly complex. I refer to our relationship with our fellow Jews in communities in North America – be they Zionist or of the school that continues to hold to the spirit of the Blaustein-Ben Gurion agreement (1950), shortly to mark its seventieth year, whereby Zionism was not forced upon them.

The road ahead remains long and its demands will be rigorous – a fact that Herzl also recognized and documented in his talented, meticulous prose, in a testament to future generations – among whom we, needless to say, constitute the present heirs. “Placing the Jews under one hat will be terribly oppressive labor, even though each one of them has a head, or maybe specifically because of that.” ■

The writer is the chairwoman of the Herzl Center, World Zionist Organization.



MODERN-DAY HERZL: ‘Herzl Smokes’ mural in Jerusalem’s Talpiot neighborhood, 2018. (zeevveez/Flickr)

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