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# Joseph and Herzl seeking their brethren

Two strangers, one who encountered Joseph and another who encountered Herzl, lead them to their brethren and change Judaism

• GOL KALEV

**T**wo mystery men, one who encountered Joseph and another who encountered Herzl, lead them to their brethren and altered the course Jewish evolution. The first finds Joseph while lost in the fields around Shechem (today's Nablus): "And the man asked him, saying: 'What seekest thou?'" Joseph tells the man that he seeks his brethren, and the man directs him to them. This brief conversation triggered a sequence of events that changed the faith of a nation: Joseph finds his brothers, they incarcerate him in a ditch, he is fetched by traveling merchants, sold to Egypt as a slave, rises up the ranks to deputy king and then invites his family to descend to Egypt to survive the famine. That family-turned-nation stays in Egypt until Moses emancipates them, and in doing so, instilling the Torah and setting the core principles of Judaism.

The other mystery man appears in the Jewish ethos about 3,500 years later in somewhat similar circumstances. Theodor Herzl, in the summer of 1895, is lost in his thoughts. Infatuated with the Zionist idea that was bestowed upon him, Herzl departs Paris and heads to the Austrian lakes for summer vacation with his family and fellow Jews. This rural area has been transformed around that time into a prime summer vacation destination for upscale Jews and other intellectuals from Vienna as well as from other European metropolises (akin to today's Hamptons).

Herzl notices how Jews expand their lakeside properties, purchase more and more land from the locals and build hotels to welcome more Jews in. The Jews were complacent. The hypnotizing view of the lake made the idea of the Palestine wilderness utterly ridiculous.

The occasional antisemitic slur, such as the one heard by the lake in the week Herzl arrived from Paris, generates some good chatting over beer in Schuneidewirt Gasthaus, but not much more than that. In conversation after conversation, in beer after beer, Herzl's despairs increase: A Viennese lawyer tells Herzl that the frustration is not against the Jews but merely against the liberals, and that the government will protect the Jews from antisemitism.

Two doctors from Budapest explain to Herzl that the Hungarians actually look favorably at the massive land purchase by Jews. A doctor from Berlin shares with Herzl that he is certain that baptizing himself will save his children, not realizing that all it would do, as Herzl notes, is change the slur that was heard by the lake a few days prior from "Jewish pig" to "baptized pig."

Herzl sees how deeply those liberal cosmopolitan Jews are enslaved to their own delusion. The Jews refuse to be saved, and are due to utterly reject his grandiose idea. Herzl recognizes he is alone. Wandering in the field of his despair, he seems to be on the verge of giving up. And it is right there, like Joseph before him, that Herzl encounters a mystery man on the banks of the lake – a fisherman who tells Herzl: "The most remarkable thing is a man who never gives up."

Those simple words of encouragement seem to have provided Herzl with the boost he needed. Within six months, he publishes *The Jewish State* – a book that would change both Herzl and Judaism. Herzl noted that the one man who appeared in his mind on the day of publication while he was staring at those 500



ALTAUSEE. FOR upscale Viennese Jews, the hypnotizing view of the lake made the idea of the Palestine wilderness utterly ridiculous. (Gol Kalev)

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fresh copies of *The Jewish State* was, indeed, that fisherman from the lake.

LIKE JOSEPH'S angel, Herzl's fisherman triggered a sequence of events that eventually led to the establishment of the Jewish state. Right there at those two intersections of Jewish history, an angel arose who helped navigate the path toward Judaism 1.0 (Moses's Judaism), and to Judaism 3.0 (Herzl's Zionism).

Joseph epitomizes the fisherman's axiom that the most remarkable thing is when a man does not give up. Joseph persistently sought his brethren. Yet, they never accepted him – not when he was expressing his dreamy vision as a teenager, nor decades later while in Egypt. This is in spite of everything that Joseph did for his brethren: saving them from famine; giving them prime Egyptian real estate; exempting them from the state-wide re-domiciling edict; providing them government jobs (as indicated by Pharaoh's offer); and arranging for a grandiose state funeral for Jacob, even including embalming.

As Parashat Vayeshev and the Book of Genesis conclude, we learn that in spite of all this, the brothers continued their rejection of Joseph's courting. "And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said: 'It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully requite us all the evil which we did unto him.'"

Offering themselves as slaves to Joseph to save their lives from the threat that did not exist, Joseph could only do one thing: "And Joseph wept when they spoke unto him."

Joseph's weeping would continue long past his death, as his brothers' descendants continued to reject his. This would lead to civil war, and eventually result in the disappearance of Joseph's tribes. Joseph was an

outsider, and tragically stayed on the outside in perpetuity.

Like Joseph, Herzl, too, was an outsider. He as well had only filtered exposure to his brethren growing up, and he, too, engaged in dreamy visions for them that they utterly rejected. He, too, was critical of his brethren, and even shared his dreamy indictment of them through his play *The New Ghetto*. They rejected him, but Herzl, like Joseph, listened to the advice of his angel and did something remarkable; he never gave up and he continued to seek his brethren.

Herzl, just like Joseph, was 37 when he began the process to revive the spirit of Israel. Herzl was welcomed with cheers in the First Zionist Congress in Basel, where he declared: "We are one nation." And yet, just like with Joseph, this did not translate into broad unconditional acceptance. Sadly, by the time of his death in 1904, less than 1% of the Jews joined Herzl's Zionist movement. Many remained staunch anti-Zionists.

Yet, unlike Joseph, Herzl's acceptance spread to the vast majority of the Jewish nation shortly after his death, so much so that his vision, Zionism, has turned into a primary vehicle by which Jews connect to Judaism and the prism by which the outside world relates to the Jews. In Zionism, Herzl implanted a bedrock ideology in which the Jewish state is rooted. Herzl himself remains a symbol of unity – the national Independence Day ceremony of the state he dreamed takes place by his grave in Jerusalem.

Yet, there are still Jewish brethren who fail to respond to Herzl's cry. The angel near Shechem and the fisherman at Altaussee – those good people in the middle of the Jewish road – remind us of a core Jewish principle: Never give up in the search for our brethren. ■

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