



HISTORY

From vision to a celebration of Judaism and life

The seeds for a Jewish transformation, planted by Theodor Herzl, were in full bloom at the recent first Herzl Conference on Contemporary Zionism

By GOL KALEV

In the spring of 1895, as the idea of Zionism was brewing in his mind, Theodor Herzl got struck with a morbid fear of death. Herzl did not fear his own death, but rather that of the fetus he was carrying – Zionism. He understood the magnitude of his idea as well as his own indispensability to bringing it to fruition. This is why Herzl went through the strange act of renting a safe in a Parisian bank, storing his notes, and then sending a letter with the location and code to his friend Arthur Schnitzler.

Herzl of the spring of 1895 was akin to Noah right before the flood about 4,000 years earlier. Noah knew that he is the only one who held the secret formula to the ark that would save humanity. One can also draw parallels to Rabbi Yohanan Ben-Zakkai, 2,000 years later, roughly half-way between Noah and Herzl. As Jerusalem was being decimated by the European invader, Ben-Zakkai rescued a scion of Judaism out of the burning city, and replanted it in Yavneh.

Indeed, this transformation from biblical Judaism (Judaism 1.0) to rabbinic Judaism (Judaism 2.0) enabled the Jewish nation to survive in exile against all odds. But by the 19th century, this architecture that bound Judaism began to crumble. Secularization on the one hand, and the intensifying of age-old European opposition to Judaism on the other, threatened Jewish continuity. Herzl understood that Judaism needed to transform, and he knew how. He was holding the baton of Judaism in his hand!

In that letter to Schnitzler, Herzl wrote that he felt like the poem of Paul Heyse: "Worried that he could disappear overnight / While his work is not yet done."

Thankfully, Herzl did not disappear. Six months later he published *The Jewish State* and the following year he convened the First Zionist Congress, planting the seeds of a Jewish transformation. Indeed, Herzl's fetus, turned into a beacon to the world, advancing humanity through cutting-edge innovations, technologies and ideas.

Secured under their own vines and own fig trees, Israeli poets and artists flourished. One of them, Yankale Galpaz, wrote a popular Israeli song, which seems to represent the polar-opposite of Heyse's: "And when the end of the road will come / I shall lock my life in peace / And a new young and vibrant song will be sung: Hallelujah."

Humanity roams in a range between the pessimistic end of Heyse and the faithful end of Galpaz. Israelis, having accomplished so much, naturally gravitate toward the optimistic end.

In November, at the first Herzl Conference on Contemporary Zionism, which was held near Herzl's grave, such bewildering achievements were showcased



A worker places freshly harvested grapes in a crate in one of the vineyards of Kibbutz Tzuba, near Jerusalem.

(Illustrative file photo: Baz Ratner/Reuters)

alongside discussions of the success of Herzl's Zionism. It was as if we were updating the patriarch on the accomplishments of his disciples.

"We have surpassed Herzl's vision," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wrote in his address to *The Jerusalem Post's Herzl 2019 Magazine*. Herzl himself predicted this success: "We shall not revert to a lower stage, we shall rise to a higher one."

Such a higher state was evident in the conference in more than one way. In the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Herzl seemed to mock the choice of wine made by his fellow delegate – French Beaujolais. Some 120 years later, those vines under which Israelis are sitting so securely are yielding superb Israeli wines which often defeat French wines in blind-tasting competitions. Indeed, delegates to the first Herzl Conference on Contemporary Zionism enjoyed a higher state of wine: Israeli wine. Incidentally, Europeans try to refute this reality by comically claiming that Israeli wine is not Israeli.

Ridiculous assertions about Herzl and Zionism are not limited to one way. In the conference, two of Zionism's prominent historians, Prof. Anita Shapira and Prof. Shlomo Avineri, refuted theories by "new historians" who say that Herzl did not really intend to establish a Jewish state. Others today voice the ludicrous assertion that Herzl rejected religious ways of life.

On the contrary, Herzl repeatedly reassured that Zionism would not do anything that might hurt the religious aspect of Judaism. The sight of thousands of haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) converging on multiple synagogues on a Saturday morning is indeed a powerful testament to Herzl's legacy. Just as Galpaz, a secular Jew from a kibbutz, praises God through his song "Hallelujah," so do the ultra-Orthodox through their own prayers.

President Reuven Rivlin underscored the Jewish nature of Herzl's Zionism in his address to the conference by stressing that Herzl viewed Israel as both Jewish and democratic.

"There is no conflict between the two," the president emphasized. Indeed, Herzl viewed Zionism as an ideology that would unite the Jews. On the eve of the first Zionist Congress, he noted, "Already Zionism was able to achieve something magnificent that was considered before impossible: the tight connection between the most

modern elements of Judaism with the most conservative."

Some 120 years later, such unity around Zionism is strongly evident in Israel. There is a misperception that Israeli Jewish society is composed of three distinct "Israeli tribes" that are in conflict with one another: Seculars, National-Religious and ultra-Orthodox. In any society, there are disagreements and diverging lifestyles, but Israeli society is one of the most unified, thanks to Zionism which served as the bedrock of the Jewish state.

For some, Zionism promotes religious expressions, for others, secular ones. For some, it is de jure, and for others, such as haredim, it is de facto. It is this strength of the Zionist ideology that enables the robust and passionate debates.

Herzl designed Zionism this way: "For everyone will take a piece of the Promised Land into himself. This one, in his head, another, in his hands, a third, in his savings. The Promised Land is where we carry it."

A haredi medical volunteer on his motorcycle ambulance saving Israeli lives; a National-Religious soldier defending Israel; a secular scientist producing unimaginable innovations that advance humanity – these are all snapshots of Herzl's Zionism. The blurring of sector lines and cross-consumption of Israeli experiences underscore Herzl's words: "We are one people." This includes the increasing participation of haredim in the military and hi-tech sector while staying ultra-Orthodox, as well as secular Israelis' growing consumption of religious experiences a-la-carte while staying secular (the "datlafs," sometimes religious).

Indeed, thanks to Herzl, Zionism (Judaism 3.0) is becoming the architecture that binds Judaism in a similar way that rabbinic Judaism (Judaism 2.0) did before, and biblical Judaism (Judaism 1.0) did prior to that.

The first Herzl Conference on Contemporary Zionism yielded a strong urge to glance a few meters toward Herzl's grave and say one thing: "Thank you!"

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For more of his articles visit Europeandjerusalem.com.

This article is part of an ongoing occasional series of features about Theodor Herzl.