

Herzl, look!

It worked out pretty well for you!

• By YAAKOV HAGOEL

Some 125 years after the first Zionist Congress, Jews from dozens of countries are returning to Basel.

This time though, they are leaving from the Jewish kingdom you dreamed of. They arrived in Basel not by trains or carriages, but by plane, in a flying metal capsule. They converse quickly in Hebrew, they own devices with technology developed in Israel and through these same devices they book a place in an Israeli restaurant that serves Jewish cuisine from all over the globe.

Theodor Herzl, you will see, the Land of Israel, which arose on its own, in terms of economic prosperity, diplomacy and policy, military and security, science and education, culture and social diversity, exceeds everything that a Jew in 1897 could have ever imagined. It surpasses the “*altneuland*,” an apocalypse for its time. It exceeds even your fertile and abundant imagination, Herzl.

In this Jewish country, the life expectancy and standard of living are among the highest in the world. Jews whose parents lived in a village in Ethiopia manage complex financial projects in this country today. Jews whose grandfathers survived the furnaces of the Holocaust command units and battalions in the IDF.

Every evening, weddings are held in this country where Jewish men and women of European, Asian, American and African origin marry each other. In the well-kept gardens on its streets, children of all colors play together. The gathering of the nation is almost complete.

The congress that you, Herzl, initiated in Basel, was financed by a private Dutch banker named Jacobus Kahn. Today's congress is led by one of the most important national bodies of the Jewish people, the World Zionist Organization, which you founded.

On the cards that you distributed to the congress visitors, a picture was drawn of a farmer sowing fields that leads all the way until the Western Wall. Those were your dreams.

The Western Wall is currently visited by about 12 million



Theodor Herzl at the balcony of the hotel in Basel where he stayed during the Zionistic Congress overlooking the rhine river (Imagno/Getty Images)

people every year. Israel is a leader in agricultural technology, exporting and output. The plow did not reach the Western Wall due to transportation constraints, but it crosses the length and breadth of the country – including in the Negev desert, and brings in tens of billions of shekels every year.

Look, Herzl, at the delegates in your congress. Only five generations after you, Jewish descendants.

These delegates will live in the Israel you dreamed of. It will be one of the leaders in the world in measuring development; one of the most educated and richest countries in the world.

Remember the ones who argued with you about whether it makes sense to wear a frock and a tie at 10 in the morning? Their great-grandchildren, citizens of the Start-Up Nation, wear jeans and a T-shirt to work.

Not everything is perfect, Herzl. We would be happy to report to you an optimal completion of

your vision. At the closing of the first congress, spontaneous singing broke out in the hall with the words “next year in Jerusalem.” We still say the same words every year on Seder night, because climbing the ladder is not over yet. We still have a lot of work ahead of us. There is still no model society here – in encouraging immigration and absorbing immigration, in security, in reducing gaps, in connecting the people.

Carl Lipa from the Hovevei Zion movement, the elder of the delegates in your congress, ended his speech with ancient words that aroused excitement: “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the world, that we have lived and existed and reached this time.”

We say “amen” to it to this day.

The writer is chairman of the World Zionist Organization.

The column was written on the occasion marking the 125th anniversary of the first Zionist Congress, about to take place in Basel at the initiative of the World Zionist Organization.