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בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונות - 80790					

VERBATIM

'We must reclaim Zionism!'

The speech given by **President Isaac Herzog** at the gala event on August 29 celebrating the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress. The festive gathering was held at the Stadtcasino Basel concert hall, where the First Zionist Congress took place in 1897



In the Mishnah, Tractate Berakhot, we read: "One who sees a place where miracles occurred on Israel's behalf recites: "Blessed is He Who performed miracles for our forefathers in this place." And today, 125 years after that formative moment when a handful of pioneering, inspirational Zionist leaders changed human and Jewish history forever here in Basel, the cradle of political Zionism, in the hall where Theodor Herzl opened the First Zionist Congress, I stand before you as the president of the State of Israel, having come from Jerusalem, the eternal capital of the nation-state of the Jewish People, the State of Israel, the fulfillment of the dreams and prayers of so many generations, a miraculous model for the whole world, and I recite this blessing: 'Blessed is He Who performed miracles for our forefathers in this place.' "This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it' (Psalm 118:24).

I am so glad and moved, truly moved, to be here today with you, sisters and brothers in our Zionist family, and to mark the 125th anniversary of the formative moment in history that shaped our entire being and made us who we are: the First Zionist Congress.

I wish to address three pillars of Zionism here today: the dilemma – what is Zionism?; the privilege – to be Zionists and to be engaged in Zionism; and the duty – to reclaim Zionism, and to do so with pride and, most importantly, with responsibility: pride in our mighty achievements, which have brought us thus far, and responsibility for our Jewish identity as individuals and as a people, connected to our homeland, to the sovereignty and prosperity of the State of Israel, and to tikkun olam – healing our world. In conclusion, I shall seek to highlight the way (the only one, to my mind) in which we can address these three pillars – together. Only together.

I begin with the first pillar, namely the Zionist dilemma. Since the dawn of modernity, the pendulum of Jewish history has swung between a demand for normality and the pursuit of individuality. The demand for normality meant a demand to exist in the family of nations, according to its particular norms. The pursuit of individuality, meanwhile, meant searching for a unique Jewish identity, for a historical continuum, for continuity.

On this axis between normality and individuality, we find a considerable number of key points, points with which the Jewish People have been grappling for generations, and some might say ever since our earliest days as a people, into the present. But the pinnacle appears to have come 125 years ago, at the First Zionist Congress, here in Basel, when Theodor Herzl positioned, on this normality-individuality axis, Zionism itself. Herzl was Zionism's greatest instigator. He translated Jewish identity into an effective political doctrine, and he opened up the possibility for Jews to experience their identity as an independent

political community, as a state. He was entirely extraordinary, utterly distinctive and outstanding, even in the company of other heralds of Zionism.

Herzl's vision was so radical that it shook up the Jewish People, in unpredictable ways, and forced it to reconsider its path. What made his proposal earth-shattering was its departure from the conventional, rigid framework. It defiantly ignored the need to pick a side in the dichotomous struggle between normality and individuality; instead, it sought to create a new space for the Jewish People, a space that was at once political, diplomatic, territorial, and cultural. A space in which the Jewish People could continue arguing, debating, and making decisions about their great dilemmas between normality and individuality, but without the fears that had haunted this polemic until then: the fear of antisemitism and persecution on the one hand, and the fear of assimilation to the point of the erasure of identity, culture, and spirituality on the other. In other words, Herzl transcended the debate about individuality and created the infrastructure for something more existential – independence!

As I have said, Herzl's proposal to the Jewish People was a profound shake-up. It reflected not evolution but revolution, in the fullest sense of the word. Indeed, Zionism was nourished by the undercurrents of the multi-generational Jewish continuum, and even by the eternal expressions of the Jewish bookshelf. But it was also so different, so distinctive and ground-breaking, so modern in its establishment of a democratic and thoroughly Jewish polity. This was a bona fide revolution.

And when we study Herzl, when we follow his movements and pore over his speeches, delivered right here in this hall, we understand just how revolutionary his ideology was.

In his book *The Jewish State*, Herzl wrote, and I quote: "The idea which I have developed in this pamphlet is a very old one: the restoration of the Jewish State." Later on, he declared: "For we are a modern nation, and wish to be the most modern in the world." Thus, like his book *Altneuland*, he too included both old and new.

HERE, I reach the second pillar of Zionism: the privilege of being Zionists and of engaging in Zionism, because I wholeheartedly believe that Herzl bequeathed the responsibility and the obligation for deep debate and, most importantly, the duty to put the Zionist vision into action on a daily basis, this privilege – to the Jewish People, in all its stripes. That is, my brothers and sisters – to us, at all four corners of the Earth, from all sections of the Jewish People, in every generation.

In the operative paragraph of his opening speech, here, in his hall, 125 years ago, Herzl noted the immense spectrum of identities and ideologies in the audience, as well as the diverse mosaic reflected by the founders of Zionism, and he said this: "We have returned home. Zionism is the return to Judaism even before the return to the land of the Jews." He added: "Zionism has already managed to accomplish a wondrous thing, previously thought to be impossible: the firm bond between the most modern elements of Judaism with the most conservative. This union could only be possible against a national background." Thus said the visionary of our state.

Ladies and gentlemen, whereas in the past, Jewish communities and groups, whatever their beliefs, positions, and value systems, were separate and distinct from each other, along came Zionism, reshuffled the deck, and entrusted responsibility for their fate to them, to the Jewish People, to us. The contours of the many Jewish communities around the world, and indeed the boundaries between these communities, have changed, and the questions most critical to our existence were posed to the whole Jewish People to resolve, for us to resolve, so that we may debate them together, in a spirit of mutual responsibility and, most importantly, of full and institutionalized partnership.

The importance of the founding generation, headed by Herzl, therefore lies not only in the ideological infrastructure that he bequeathed to us but also in the institutional infrastructure that he laid down for us: the national institutions established long before the establishment of the State of Israel, and chiefly the World Zionist Organization and

(Marc Israel Seilem/The Jerusalem Post)



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President Isaac Herzog reenacts Theodor Herzl's famous balcony photo in Basel this week. (Haim Zach/GPO)

then Keren Hayesod and later the Jewish Agency. Herzl created a critical and firm basis for proactive Zionist and Jewish action around the world, and indeed for collective dialogue, including all shades of our dazzling Jewish mosaic, both in Israel and in the Diaspora – a dialogue that we must also persevere in maintaining today, especially today, as the walls between us seem to be rising ever-higher.

Herzl and his partners in the Zionist movement, those stateless statesmen, pitched statecraft for a stateless nation. They created, ex nihilo, a brand-new ideological reality and brand-new institutional reality, alongside which they also put in place the most essential conditions for success: responsibility, partnership, and that compound of old and new.

AND NOW, brothers and sisters, I wish to focus on the final pillar: our duty to claim positive and proactive ownership over Zionism, especially now: to reclaim Zionism.

If I were to tell you that a major social media company had considered treating the word “Zionist” as a term of abuse, you might tell me that this is a ridiculous thought. But it is true. Around a year ago, there was a discussion about whether the word “Zionist” should be censored on social media, for fear that it is being used as a term of antisemitic abuse against Jews and Israelis, or whether, to quote the counterargument, the word “Zionist” is a term of legitimate criticism of Israeli policy. I heard about this discussion, and I was appalled. I was appalled because, inconceivably, at no point did anyone suggest that “Zionist” might actually be a positive term!

Ladies and gentlemen, we must fight this antisemitic and anti-Zionist approach; history has already shown what dark depths it can reach. We must reclaim the term “Zionism” for ourselves, with our heads held high and our backs straight, as an expression of our own national identity, traditions, hopes, pride, enlightened values, justice, and commitment to tikkun olam. I appeal to you

all, dear brothers and sisters, with this clear and lofty call: We must reclaim Zionism! This is the mission of our generation.

We must breathe new meaning into the term “Zionism.” I believe that the meaning of Zionism is chiefly responsibility. Responsibility for our deep-rooted Jewish identity as individuals; responsibility for our cohesion as a diverse, opinionated people, whose deep and binding connection to its ancestral land, Zion, finds expression in the name “Zionism”; responsibility for the existence and prosperity of the Jewish and democratic State of Israel, the ultimate sovereign and political expression of the Zionist movement; and no less importantly, responsibility for the fact that we are part of the family of nations, in an effort to help solve the greatest challenges of humanity, bequeathing tikkun olam to the whole world. “Instruction shall come forth from Zion!” (Isaiah 2:3).

In this sense, Zionism is an indispensable mix of old and new, because it cannot exist without either of these elements. Zionism represents the deepest roots of our identity, which we must not forgo under any circumstances, while at the same time it is also utterly modern in its engagement with the constantly changing reality of life and in its contributions to solving the challenges of the present and the future.

Therefore, from a Jewish and Israeli perspective, Zionism means populating the Land of Israel and building Israeli society; it means fortifying Israeli democracy, with a proper culture of debate and discussion, and the perpetual pursuit of peace and coexistence with members of all peoples and faiths living in Israel and in the whole Middle East; it means guaranteeing aliyah to the State of Israel, the beating heart of the Jewish People and their firmest foundations; it means fostering Jewish identity among all our nation's communities, bolstering mutual responsibility in the Jewish world across its many stripes, and of course the security and prosperity of Diaspora Jewry.

And from a universal perspective, our generation's Zionism is expressed in its essential contribution to building whole worlds of intellect and culture, across the world; to fighting to solve the global climate crisis; to extending assistance to people in disaster zones; to providing economic, medical, and welfare support for those who need it; to waging an all-out war on hatred and violence, and so forth.

That is to say, modern Zionism gives us our sense of not only shared fate but also shared destiny, as long as it remains anchored in our deepest roots, weaving together the inseparable threads of peoplehood, land, and state.

Thus, if I may summarize in a word again: Zionism, both historically and in its modern form, means responsibility. Responsibility that we must bear with pride and etch on our hearts, from generation to generation, forevermore.

From the moment of its establishment, Zionism was a movement that championed shared responsibility for our destiny. And today, now that the mission rests on our shoulders, we must bear it together. Only together. Together shall we follow the path of the visionary of our state and Zionism's founding generation; together shall we believe in Zionism and be proud of it; together shall we choose responsibility every day and keep our country and our people safe; together shall we continue debating and arguing and grappling with questions about normality and individuality, old and new, while fostering a respectful, enriching, and responsible dialogue between all parts of the Jewish People.

Only together. Not just because “Herzl said so.” Not just because our past was shaped thus, but because this is the only way, and the safest and most responsible way in which we may build a prosperous and promising future for our people and our state, for future generations, and for Zionism. And thus together, only together, shall we continue to fulfill our hope – our two-thousand-year-old hope. Amen, may it be God's will.”