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An image of Theodor Herzl at the gala in Basel this week.

Arnd Wiegmann / Reuters

outlandish ones. But Zionism won. That state came into being. A state that now faces massive challenges, not to its existence but to its character, to what kind of Jewish and democratic state it is becoming.

But none of the panels

this week dealt with those real challenges. How could they? They were too busy “impacting,” “innovating” and “implementing.”

That’s what’s so different between the two congresses in Basel. Herzl had nothing, but from his words

and passion a real Jewish state was built. 125 years later, Hagoel and the other nonentities in their pathetic reenactment managed to reverse-Midas a very real Israel into two days of nothing but a pile of empty, ersatz and sterile words.



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Does Zionism even exist anymore?

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Does Zionism even exist anymore?

A vision, a cypher for bigots, a force for good or for evil? Since Israel became a reality, there's been no consensus on what defines Zionism

Jerusalem & Babylon Anshel Pfeffer

As low-hanging fruit goes, few events are riper for lamprooning than the reenactment this week of the First Zionist Congress at the original venue in Basel, Switzerland on its 125th anniversary. It really is too easy. All those clapped-out former politicians, prematurely old jobsworths, vainglorious billionaires and their hangers-on getting together to pretend that their cosplaying has any relevance to life in Israel or its future.

What made the 'first' congress in Basel was Herzl's incredible PR abilities. He had no real movement to speak of, no pioneers or soldiers of his own.

Just about every aspect of it is preposterous. And not only the secret budget of tens of millions expended on the two-day event by the World Zionist Organization, whose head, an anonymous Likud hack named Yaakov Hagoel has a taste for wasting other people's money on useless PR: Earlier this year he paid Channel 12 for a prime-time ad during the season finale of Israel's version of "Dancing with the Stars."

There's also the inflated self-importance, the sucking-up to oligarchs and the sessions competing with

each other to come up with the most meaningless faux-techspeak-jargon title, like "Impacting for the benefit of humanity" or "Israel: the ambidextrous experience." I thought the title "Implementing Zionism in Africa" was especially, unintentionally, poignant, as the Zionist movement nearly tore itself apart when Theodor Herzl, at the Sixth Zionist Congress in 1903 (his last), suggested just that: implementing Zionism in Africa instead of in Zion.

But since it's really too easy to make fun of the organizers and participants puffed-up self-importance and total detachment from the real Israel, let's ask a more difficult question. What was so special about Theodor Herzl's original Zionist Congress back in 1897?

After all, Zionism - both as a movement in the Jewish Diaspora and as pioneers establishing new agricultural settlements in the Jewish homeland - had already existed for decades. Herzl's congress in Basel wasn't even actually the first Zionist Congress. That title should go by rights to the congress held 15 years earlier in Focsani, Romania, by the Hovevei Zion movement. Some of the delegates at Focsani actually continued from there by boat to Ottoman Palestine, where they built Rosh Pina and Zichron Yaakov, which is a good sight more than the Basel delegates in their formal evening wear did after they wrapped things up at the casino.

But what made the "first" congress in Basel was Her-

zl's incredible PR abilities. He had no real movement to speak of, no pioneers or soldiers of his own on the ground. He had no guarantee that the Turkish sultan or the German kaiser or the leaders of France, Britain and the United States would receive him. He had precious little realistic understanding of the Arabs (or of many of the Jews for that matter).

But in his journalism, his books, his speeches and his activism, Herzl conjured out of nothing a grand vision of a modern Jewish nation-state in the ancient land of the Jews. A vision that was so compelling, so rich in promise, so right, that it continued to motivate

Jews long after Herzl died to fulfill it.

Fifty-one years after the Basel Congress, Israel became a reality. Herzl's Zionist dream had been fulfilled. No one has been able to work out ever since what Zionism means after that, or if it even still exists in the real world outside congresses and conferences.

The very word has become a cypher for Jews in general, a handy excuse for bigots - as in, "I'm fine with Jews, I just don't like Zionists," and a convenient label for virtue signalers of all stripes. But there is no consensus on its definition, neither among those who claim to be Zionists nor those who abominate it.

Another thing the so-called Zionists and anti-Zionists have in common is how little the real Israel resembles their idealized or demonized Zion. Those who believe in Zionism in 2022, as a force for good or evil, are obsessing about an abstraction as an alternative to dealing with the less exciting, but very real, challenges and moral ambiguities of Israel.

That congress back in 1897 was dealing with the very real challenges facing Jews in Europe. The pogroms, the discrimination, the lack of any security. A sovereign Jewish state was just one of the solutions for the Jewish predicament, and at the time one of the most