

The reality of 'on the ground' Zionism

• By DOUGLAS ALTABEF

This has been a joyful and contemplative time, as we marked the 125th anniversary of the Basel Conference which formally launched the Zionist movement. Anniversaries are intended to stimulate reflection: of what we have accomplished, where we have succeeded and failed and what more needs to be done going forward.

In the case of Zionism, we, of course, have so much to celebrate, focusing on the reality of the State of Israel. Indeed, Zionism has become inextricably related to, bound up with and existentially tied to the future of the State of Israel.

Of course, it is a two-way street: Israel without Zionism is a hollowed-out failure, regardless of whatever prosperity and strength to which one could point. Zionism without Israel would be a variation on the old joke that the operation was a success, but the patient died.

Therefore, given this melding of Zionism as a system of values of beliefs, and the State of Israel as the laboratory for putting those values and beliefs to work, what does it mean to be a Zionist today? Conversely, how is Zionism expressed in our personal and national lives?

Without claiming any kind of monopoly or exclusivity for this approach, I think one very healthy answer to the question lies in the dual-pronged mission rooted in classic Jewish wisdom that my organization, Im Tirtzu, has embraced: do good and distance yourself from evil.

This mission is for those of us who believe in the importance of Zionism on the ground: the real world actions that we take or refrain from that impact our lives here in Israel, and by extension, in the world at large.

Doing good means many things that ultimately boil down to awareness. It is absolutely essential that as a society we understand that which has brought us to where we are, and the values and beliefs that should propel us into the future.

This requires education. We must be constantly reinforcing among our citizenry, old and young, but especially young, that nothing good will continue just based on inertia. Rather, as Herzl famously prophesied, "Im tirtzu," if you will it.



CHAIRMAN OF the World Zionist Organization Yaakov Hagoel addresses last week's conference on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress in Basel. (Arnd Wiegmann/Reuters)

We took the name for ourselves because of the deep-seated belief that Zionism and its real life manifestation – Israel – must constantly be willed into being. In other words, we must constantly promote the awareness of who we are, what we stand for, and the role that we need to play in our collective life as a society.

This awareness takes on many forms, including the justness of our mission as the first manifestation of Jewish national

self-determination in almost two millennia; the blessings that such self-determination can impart not only to ourselves, but to others, within and outside our country; and the horrific, unimaginable prospect of not having this incredible adventure continuing.

This on the ground reality of the embrace of Zionism, is much like the love affair of Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs) between God and the Jewish people, and indeed,

of a couple in love: cherishing, nurturing and sacrifice. Distancing ourselves from evil means that as the defenders and protectors of Zionism/Israel, we will confront, oppose and, if necessary, fight those who would seek to delegitimize, demonize and, of course, destroy our mission.

In practical terms this means combating BDS on Israeli campuses (Yes, folks, there are Israeli academics who are calling for the boycotting of their own institutions.),

opposing the insidious influence of foreign governmental money as it tries to have backdoor influence on Israeli policy through various Israeli "human rights" organizations, and resisting efforts to downplay Israel as a Jewish state in favor of a "state of its citizens."

Right now, one of the critical initiatives involving Zionism on the ground is the synthesis of the two prongs of the mission: the critical need to project both sovereignty and control. This initiative reflects the understanding that perceptions shape reality and that the proper perceptions are needed, both for those who seek to oppose us, as well as for ourselves.

When Hamas threatens us for carrying flags on Jerusalem Day, accusing us of "Talmudic thuggery" that they will not abide, when illegal structures can somehow never be dismantled, when al-Aqsa is perennially "under attack," then we know that we have our work cut out for us.

The 2021 riots in several mixed Jewish-Arab cities laid bare the sense that many in the Arab community believe that we have no right nor ability to control the security situation here at home. This is a gauntlet tossed that demands to be picked up, and countered with unmistakable demonstrations of sovereign control.

Recollecting the fraught condition of the Jewish People 125 years ago is an important reality check as to how far we have come, and where we are today. In short, in the grand scheme of things, we are blessed to have the problems that we have. Our problems are manageable if we maintain the aspiration of our forebears who dreamed of a sovereign Jewish State that could serve both as a home and refuge for Jews anywhere and everywhere, as well as a light unto the nations.

What we do on a day-to-day basis – how we see ourselves and conduct ourselves – will be crucial to our future progress and blossoming.

May what we do daily be steeped in the awareness of the magnificence of our mission, in its decency and humaneness and in our ability to secure and to bequeath a wonderful future for generations to come.

The writer is the chairman of the board of Im Tirtzu and a director of B'yadenu and the Israel Independence Fund. He can be reached at dougaltabef@gmail.com.