

Zionism: The beating heart of Jewish life for the past 125 years

What was true 125 years ago is still true today



YAAKOV HAGOEL speaks at the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress, in August in Basel, Switzerland. (World Zionist Organization)

THEODOR HERZL with a Zionist delegation in Jerusalem, November 1898. (Photos: Wikimedia Commons)



• YAAKOV HAGOEL

On the first day of the First Zionist Congress, right before it all began, Benjamin Ze'ev [Theodor] Herzl went up to the podium for the first time to speak. He chose his words carefully because time was short and "each of us will serve the greater purpose in the best way possible if we save the precious moments of the Congress." Nevertheless, he had to remind the event attendees of one central insight:

"Zionism has already succeeded in accomplishing a wonderful thing, which was previously considered impossible: the close connection between the most modern foundations of Judaism with the most conservative ones. Since this happened, without one of the two sides having to make concessions that were perceived as dishonorable or sacrifices, this is proof to add – if more proof was even needed – of the fact that the Jews are a nation. Such unity is only possible against the backdrop of a nation."

From the beginning, and at its core, the Zionist movement was an association of those who disagreed. At the Zionist conference in 1897, the disputes were between the more pious parts of the Jewish world, whose delegates came from Eastern Europe, and the more modern parts that came from the West.

The disagreement was acute: Questions about cultural, religious and settlement issues were on the agenda, and heated conversations followed. But at the same time, as Herzl pointed out, the very existence of the Congress and the very existence of the discussions indicate that the agreement on

the importance of Zionism was more comprehensive and valuable than any dispute.

What was true 125 years ago is still true today. A few weeks ago I arrived in Basel, together with hundreds of participants from all over the Jewish world. Everyone came to mark that historic event, the First Zionist Congress. The attendees came together to remember the past, bless the present and plan for the future.

When I looked at the hall where the ceremony was held, all of the shades of Jewish identity in the 21st century were spread out before me: men and women, religious and secular participants, Israelis and residents abroad, conservatives and liberals, young and old – an outstanding mosaic of beliefs and opinions.

But what was true then is still true now – the faith in our people and the movement. The importance of the Zionist movement and the vitality of the Zionist action burned in everyone's heart with a unifying fire, which was many times stronger than all of the differences.

Along with the joy and excitement, I was troubled by the question: Will we be able to maintain this special community even in the next 125 years? How will we keep the various tribes of our people united around the Zionist anchor, without fortifying each one in his place, each community within its walls?

These reflections accompanied me in the days after the ceremony to mark the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress; the days of the month of Elul and the High Holy Days. These are days of remembrance, days of learning lessons, days of personal correction, but also national correction. They come after the month of Av, in which the Jewish people remember and mark the loss of their ancient sovereignty in the Land of Israel – and above all – the reason that led to it: the baseless hatred and the internal division – which ignited Jewish society from within, even before the flames of the enemy breached the outer walls.

Jerusalem, “the city that joins us all together,” which makes all of Israel friends and come together as one, has become the center of conflict between sectors, the scene of power struggles and takeover attempts. In Jerusalem, the tribes of Israel fought each other, until it fell as a ripe fruit into the hands of those who sought her harm.

When more than 120 years ago the Jews began to return to their land, these memories rang in their heads like huge warning bells. The new Land of Israel, they promised themselves, would be different. There will be no strife in it, no injustice will be committed in it, and no hatred will exist in it.

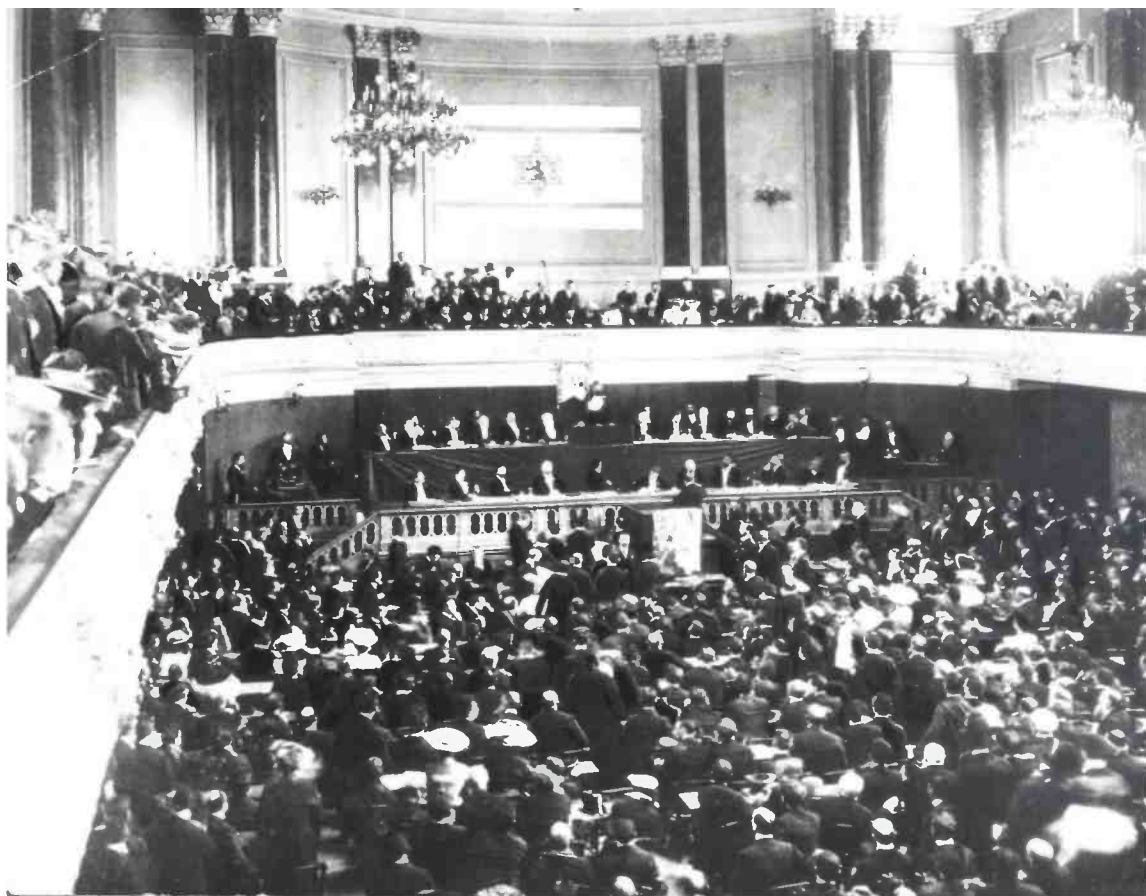
Many of them wanted to create a state that would allow everyone to live in their community and each community to live according to its own way and faith – all within a common framework of the traditions of the past, the values of the present and the hopes of the future. Herzl himself sketched the framework for this when he wrote in his book *The Jewish State*:

“When we leave Egypt for the second time, we will not forget the ‘meat pots’ behind us. In every new place, everyone can and will return to old habits, but they will be better, more beautiful and more pleasant this time.”

UNFORTUNATELY, this road has been abandoned. Over the years, many were required to leave behind the full “pots of meat” they had brought with them to the Land of Israel, on their way by foot or by immigration ships. Patience was replaced by temper, and the desire for a plurality of customs with a desire for uniformity.

In the first years of the state, the leaders tried to overcome the baseless hatred by blurring the huge differences among the immigrants from the various countries, and by adapting them to the Sabra culture of the “old residents” of Israel; the “new Jew” with the fluttering crystal and the Israeli slang was the only mold to which all immigrants were asked to conform to.

David Ben-Gurion, Herzl's successor, quoted: “In the melting pot of Jewish brotherhood and military discipline,” he declared in his article “Uniqueness and Purpose,” “flowing



from foreign passports and differences between men, the nation will be refined and purified from its lost foreign particles, the divisions between sectors will be erased, and the loyal unity of a nation renewing its youth will be forged.”

But forced social uniformity is not a magic cure, and there is no power of a bear hug to bridge a deep and essential difference. The reaction was sharp: from the 1980s to the present, the values of “multiculturalism” flourished as a counter-reaction to the values of the “melting pot.”

I have no doubt that those advocating “multiculturalism” are also trying to escape baseless hatred, but they do so while withdrawing from any common space and any discussion of collective identity. Instead of solidarity, they ask for tribalism, in which each group gathers within itself, takes care of the private interests of its members and disconnects from those sitting next to it, “each man leading his own Israel.”

Both sides of the coin – the quest to find one way for everyone or the quest to split our society into as many ways as possible – are destructive to me. On both sides lies the despair of the possibility of maintaining a complex situation of “unity without uniformity,” a situation in which the principled partnership between the various communities of the Jewish people is stronger than the differences between them.

I believe that the task of our generation is to keep walking on a third path, the golden path between the “melting pot” and “multiculturalism.” We need the recipe that will consist of all the Jewish “meat pots” and the knowledge to prepare a magnificent feast using all of them together.

We need the path where we can walk together in unity, each person and his faith, a group and its customs – without erasing the differences, but also without breaking into thousands of different and isolated communities. Such unity, as Herzl wrote, “is only possible against the backdrop of a nation.” If we are a nation, then it is our duty to succeed in this.

If we make sure to tread this path, we will have the power to reach social, cultural and moral prosperity together.

May we be blessed to have courage, strength and practicality in the Zionist movement in the next 125 years as well! ■

The writer is chairman of the World Zionist Organization.

OPENING OF the Second Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, August 1898. On the podium, center stage, Herzl is seen indistinctly, delivering the keynote address. To his L: Max Nordau, Zionist Organization co-founder with Herzl; to his R: Max Mandelstam, Zionist leader in Russia. The Zionist movement flag is seen – two blue stripes, and a shield of David containing seven stars and a lion.