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## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

# What's in a Name?

*It is incumbent upon us to define Zionism* | By Rhoda Smolow



**M**OSSES HAD 40 YEARS TO prepare the Jewish people for self-rule. When Theodor Herzl arrived in Basel, Switzerland, on August 25, 1897, he had just four days to prepare the scene for the First Zionist Congress—the most consequential manifestation of Jewish independence in 2,000 years.

As crucial as the agenda was that the Congress would set when it convened, Herzl was also determined to create a sense of the moment for the diverse collection of delegates from 17 countries. His most conspicuous piece of stagecraft—requiring formal attire for all—reflected not snobbery but psychology. “Even more than impress the outside world,” Amos Elon wrote in his legendary biography, *Herzl*, the leader “wanted to impress the delegates themselves with their own importance.”

In August, I was privileged to travel to Basel with a delegation of Hadassah leaders to join more than 1,000 participants from around the world in celebrating the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress.

The gathering included speeches, discussions and commemorative events focused on Israel's successes as well as challenges facing the Jewish state and people. The three-day event was organized by the World Zionist Organization, the body inaugurated at the First Zionist Congress and now chaired by Yaakov Hagoel. The celebration culminated at a gala in the Stadt Casino, where the first Congress was held. Israeli President Isaac Herzog and his wife, Michal, joined attendees at the gala.

Three things stood out for me in comparing Herzl's era and our own. First and most obvious, Jewish sovereignty, instead of an aspiration, is now a reality. Indeed, November 2022 marks the 75th anniversary of the United Nations Partition Plan that endorsed the creation of a Jewish state and the 105th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, a statement from the British government in support of the establishment of a Jewish homeland. Both acts flowed directly from Basel.

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### LET US ALL REMEMBER AND CELEBRATE RESTORED JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY.

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Second, our challenge has changed from addressing a world unfamiliar with Zionism to one that is largely misinformed. Of the 111 United Nations member states that achieved independence after World War II, virtually all had national movements built around independence struggles, but only Israel is routinely singled out for censure.

The Zionist movement accepted the 1947 partition plan that called for two states—one Arab and one Jewish—in historic Palestine. Many Arab nations that originally opposed the plan have since made peace with Israel. On numerous occasions, the Jewish state has also engaged in negotiations for the emergence of a

Palestinian state and will undoubtedly do so again.

As a concept, Zionism was not new in 1897; what Herzl introduced was political organization. After Judaea revolted against colonial rule between 66 and 73 CE, the Romans enslaved and deported most of the population—but the expulsion was incomplete. There was a second expulsion after the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132 to 135 CE). Even after that, some Jews remained; the Land of Israel has never been without a Jewish community. The restoration of the Jewish homeland and rebuilding of Jerusalem has been a feature of Jewish daily prayer since Roman times.

Unfortunately, the assault on Zionism has prompted even many Jews to distance themselves from the term that embodies our self-determination. I believe it is incumbent upon us to define Zionism, and not allow it to be ill-defined by people and movements motivated by ignorance at best and antisemitism at worst.

The third thing that stood out to me in Basel was the absence of a dress code at the events. There were a few tuxedos and long gowns at the gala, but lots of conventional suits, short dresses and open collars, too. I'm sure Herzl would understand that Jewish psychology has changed for the better and need not be molded by dress codes.

As we enter the season of Hanukkah—which recalls our liberation from the Greek yoke that preceded Roman domination—let us all remember and celebrate restored Jewish sovereignty. And call it by its name.

*Chag Hanukkah sameach* to all! **H**