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JUDAISM

JUDAISM 3.0 GOL KALEV

Herzl and today's strategic issues

Is it possible that Theodor Herzl researchers misunderstood a crucial aspect of the Jewish state visionary, and hence of Zionism? And can renewed understanding of Herzl help defuse contemporary issues ranging from the Palestinian issue to Israeli politics?

The apparent misperception stems from an article Herzl wrote in 1894 about the Alexandre Dumas play called the *Wife of Claude*. Herzl mocked the idea in the play of Jews returning to their ancestral land.

"The Jews have nothing to do anymore with the historic homeland," Herzl wrote. "It would be childish to go looking for its geographic location; any schoolboy knows where to find it. But if the Jews were ever really to return, they would discover the very next morning that they had long ago ceased to be one people."

Therefore, the conventional wisdom in academia and Zionism research has been that Herzl, in October 1894, was not a Zionist. He then made a radical switch, which some attribute to the December 1894 trial of Alfred Dreyfus.

Yet, a closer read of Herzl's words, cross-referenced with his other writing, shows that contrary to researchers' perception, Herzl's views had been steady: He argued that the dominant characteristic of Jews during his time (Judaism 2.0) is not being an organic "one people" but rather their reaction to European opposition. As Herzl wrote in that same article: "For centuries they have been rooted in diverse nationalities, different from one another, their similarities maintained only as a result of outside pressure."

A few months later, in July 1895, already in midst of his Zionist thinking, Herzl told [Max] Nordau something similar: "Only antisemitism turned us into Jews." Jews might have similarities, such as observing Shabbat and celebrating Jewish holidays, but these are secondary relative to similarities "as a result of outside pressure." After all, these pressures determine where Jews live, their professions, how many children they have, and mostly define the Jewish character.

"We are what the ghetto made us," Herzl wrote. He even explained to Vienna's chief rabbi in August 1895 that "antisemitism contains the divine will to make good because it forces us together, its pressure unites us."

And so, if the Jews go back home, those pressures that define and unite the Jews would no longer exist, and hence "they would discover the very next morning that they long ago ceased to be one people."

This is why a prerequisite to such a return is replacing Judaism's defining feature of European persecution that "turned us into Jews" with an ideological, political and diplomatic infrastructure of Judaism, and that is Zionism (Judaism 3.0).

Herzl's Zionism – contrary to popular misperception – is not about Jews moving to their ancestral land. "It would be childish to go looking for its geographic location; any schoolboy knows where to find it." When Herzl wrote that in Basel he founded the Jewish state, he clarified: "A territory is merely the concrete basis. The state itself, when it possesses a territory, still remains something abstract." So much so, that Herzl was opposed to unplanned "aliyah"; he made clear that immigration is a tool, not the essence.

The essence is the transformation of Judaism, and as argued in this column. Herzl's vision is now coming to fruition in the 2020s – Zionism is becoming the anchor of Judaism.

Researchers not only seemed to have misunderstood Herzl's words but also missed the defining Herzl principle implicit in them: One can neither build a nation nor a sustainable movement based on the negative. Herzl highlighted in that same article the universal aspect of his principle: "All oppressed people have Jewish characteristics, and when the pressure lifts, they behave like free men." Indeed, this Herzl principle can be applied to today's circumstances.

Herzl to the aid of Palestinians

The European promotion and massive funding of a single Palestinian ethos – "occupationalism" – led to the obliteration of any traces of organic Palestinian ethos. Palestinians are now defined exclusively through the occupation and their con-

flict with Israel. Palestinian individual interests are sacrificed for that ethos by the outside, such as through aggressive European campaigns to sabotage Palestinians' employment and mentorship in Jewish-owned businesses (for example, pressure on SodaStream to move its operations out of the territories; the EU requirement to label products that are made in the West Bank).

In addition, the Palestinian Authority's budget is dependent on conflict-related grants. Therefore, the end of the conflict could mean the end of Palestinianism. To put it in Herzl's words, if the occupation would end, Palestinians would discover the next morning that they are not one people.

Herzl's applied advice: "We need rest from Europe, its wars and its social complications." This way, Palestinians can regain their true character and pave a path to peace.

Herzl to the aid of the Israeli Left

Similar Herzl frameworks can be applied to domestic Israeli politics. As Zionism exited from Herzl's mind into a mass movement, parties emerged offering various Zionist ideologies. The one that took control in the 1930s and stayed in power until 1977 was the Ben-Gurion-led left-wing bloc (Labor and related parties).

Since 1977, however, it repeatedly lost elections, with few exceptions. This frustration led the bloc to abandon positive ideology and reposition itself exclusively through the negative: being the "non-Bibi." So much so that the government formed in 2021 was self-labeled "the change government" – the only thing in common was the removal of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Consistent with Herzl's principle, when the Left arrived at the "Promised Land," the lack of ideological commonality led to the quick disso-

lution of the "change government." Just as Herzl transformed Judaism from being reactionary, some in the Israeli Left feel it is time to abandon the obsession with Benjamin Netanyahu (or Menachem Begin or Likud) and transform the Left.

Herzl as a resource to understand the Torah

Understanding this Herzl principle can even shed new light on the Exodus from Egypt. Its essence, according to Herzl, was not aliyah – that was a tool. Instead, he argued, it was "education through migration."

Indeed, an existential threat emerged once the Hebrews arrived in the Promised Land. Being defined as "the nation that left Egypt," as labeled by the King of Moab, the Hebrews were akin to the Jews in *The Wife of Claude* – just as today's Palestinians and Israeli Left will lack a uniting narrative once pressures are lifted. Indeed, the motto was "Each man does what is right in his eyes."

However, the nation transformed. A uniting narrative anchored in the kingdom and the Temple (Judaism 1.0) replaced the unity of Egyptian pressures. This enabled Jewish survivability, just like Zionism – that "infinite ideal" that Herzl labeled as the return to Judaism, even before the return to the land of the Jews – does today.

The writer is author of Judaism 3.0 – Judaism's Transformation to Zionism (Judaism-Zionism.com)

From Exodus to Leviticus – Herzl's journey's blessing

The book of Exodus ends as the Tabernacle is built and the Godly presence enters. Those last verses of Exodus instill a principle that is often missed: When there is Godly presence we stay, but when that presence is gone, we are obliged to go on a journey to seek it. In that spirit, Herzl wrote one last article in his final days: "Journey's Blessings," reiterating that Zionism, that abstract Tabernacle, will continue being a dynamic "infinite ideal" even after we are home – because Zionism is "not just the aspiration to the Promised Land... but also the aspiration to moral and spiritual completion."



MOROCCAN OLIM arrive in Israel, 1954: Herzl makes clear that immigration is a tool, not the essence. (Wikimedia Commons)