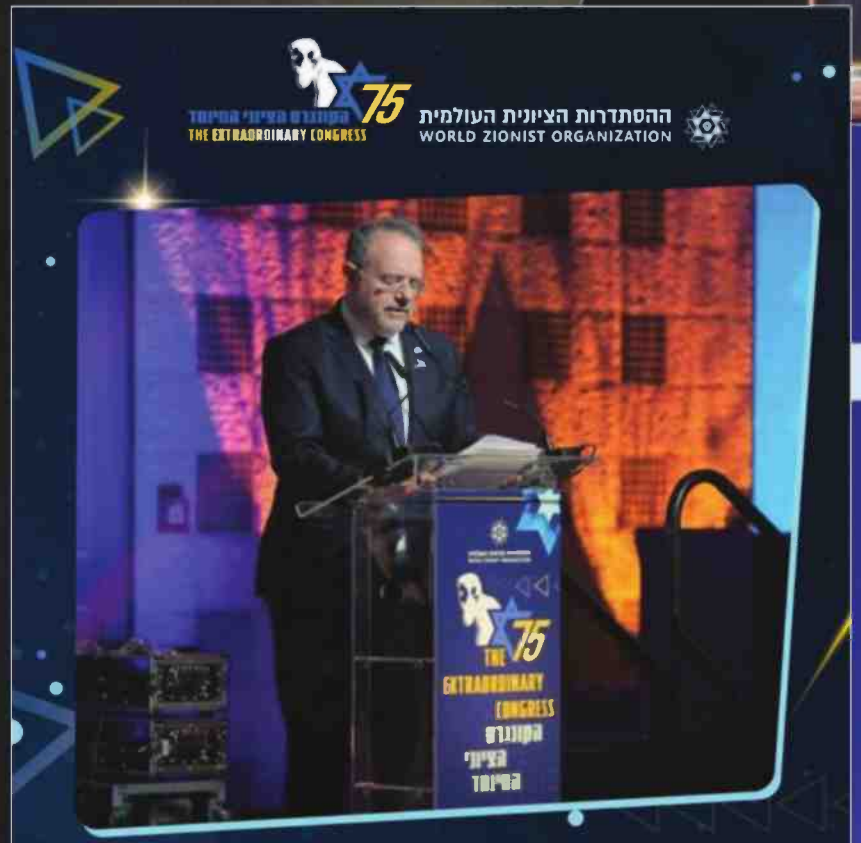




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Zionism has to be where the people of Israel need it, says WZO Chairman Yaakov Hagoel



YAAKOV HAGOEL addresses the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress in Basel on August 29, 2022 (large photo), and 'The Extraordinary Congress' of the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem on April 19, 2023 (small photos). (Arnd Wiegmann/Reuters/WZO)

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• Jerusalem Post Staff

In 2023, 75 years after the establishment of the State of Israel, does Zionism still have a mission? According to Yaakov Hagoel, chairman of the World Zionist Organization, the answer is a resounding yes.

"Zionism in 2023 must do exactly what it was doing in 1897," he said. "It has to stand where the people of Israel most need it."

Hagoel highlighted that there is no lack of challenges in the new millennium, both within and outside the borders of Israel, from societal and political divisions to antisemitism and assimilation.

It is to tackle these challenges that the World Zionist Organization – originally established in 1897 by Theodor Herzl – continues to work together with its many affiliated organizations that follow Herzl's visionary dream: to ensure that the Jewish people can live and thrive in a Jewish State in the biblical Eretz Yisrael (Land of Israel), Hagoel said.

"After we established the state and supported its development, today we are taking care of the contemporary challenges before the Jewish people," he said. "They include assisting immigration to Israel, fighting antisemitism, settling the Land of Israel, helping Israel become the exemplary society that Herzl spoke about."

One of the key fights of the 21st century is to ensure that young Jews in the Diaspora develop a connection both with Judaism and with Israel.

"In the past 15 or 20 years, we have been influenced by a process that is not directly connected with Israel or Judaism, but nonetheless has a great impact on both: globalization," Hagoel pointed out. "New generations feel less connected to the concepts of peoplehood, language and nation. It is a big challenge."

"In this context, we are compelled to act to strengthen both the Jewish identity and the bond with Israel, and we do so with many initiatives in cooperation with the Israeli government," he said.

These initiatives include programs that bring young people to Israel for shorter or longer periods (from 10 days to 10 months). In addition, the WZO has some 250 Israeli emissaries in Jewish schools across the world with the specific mission of fostering Jewish education, including the knowledge of the Hebrew language, which is considered an important tool to deepen the ties between Jews living in the Diaspora and Israel.

A great obstacle in this mission is the anti-Israel sentiment that has become so prevalent on college campuses, in the United States and around the globe. According to a recent survey by the Anti-Defamation League, over 350 campus anti-Israel incidents were recorded in the United States in the academic year 2021-2022.

"Unfortunately, Zionism has become one of the most slandered terms on social media," Hagoel said. "While describing oneself as an antisemite is not considered polite, describing oneself as anti-Zionist is seen as completely acceptable. But there is no doubt that this is used as a facade to hide antisemitism."

The WZO chairman stressed that on the contrary, today

more than ever being Zionist, as well as belonging to the Jewish people, should be considered a great source of pride.

"Thank God, there are millions of people around the world who call themselves part of the Zionist movement and part of the World Zionist Organization and its affiliated organizations," he said.

Looking at Israel at 75, there are many reasons to be proud, Hagoel pointed out. For example, the way a small nation with few natural resources was able to become the "start-up nation" that the whole world look up to.

"I think that Israeli entrepreneurs today are the true heirs of Herzl," he said. "He was a start-up entrepreneur himself. He took the initiative and turned a 2,000-year-old idea into a reality."

"Every young entrepreneur should see himself as a part of the successful story of a country that is only 75 years old, and yet already so accomplished in this field," he added.

In order to support innovation and new initiatives, the WZO recently launched a new program for regular and social entrepreneurs, from Israel and the rest of the world.

"They met for the first time in Basel, Switzerland, last August, and recently gathered again in Israel," he said.

Asked about what Israel's secret sauce is, Hagoel did not have any doubt.

"The Jewish mind," he said, laughing. "Look also at the number of Israeli and Jewish Nobel Prize winners."

(Since 1966, 14 Israelis have been awarded the Nobel Prize, while at least 20 percent of the Nobel Prizes awarded to more 900 individuals have been awarded to Jews.)

Hagoel also emphasized how Israel has succeeded in developing as a Jewish and democratic state, as the Knesset's diversity and work showcase.

"And it is not easy to be the only democracy in a region like the Middle East," he pointed out.

Israel's ability to protect the freedom of religion of its people and visitors alike is also remarkable, Hagoel emphasized.

"In my view, there is no better place in the world to see a vivid portrait of what freedom of religion means than the Old City of Jerusalem, with millions of Jews, Muslims, Christians and pilgrims of all religions praying at its holy sites," he said.

If in the first 75 years of its life, Israel has accomplished a lot, much is left to do, Hagoel suggested.

"There are many gaps that still need to be closed, between Israel and the Diaspora, Ashkenazis and Sephardis, right-wing people and left wing-people, secular and religious," he said. "One thing that I call on every single Israeli to work on is to help new immigrants become truly part of the Israeli society, a challenge that I feel is on all of us."

While the population of Israel was just over 800,000 at the time of its establishment in 1948, Hagoel noted, it now has well over 9 million.

"For its birthday, my wish for Israel is that in another 75 years, it will have a much larger population, with many Jews from the Diaspora moving here, in order to develop as a glorious country that is a light onto the nations and more united than ever," he concluded. ■

This article was written in cooperation with the World Zionist Organization.

