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# What would Herzl think?

## Herzl Day, 2023



**CENTER FIELD**  
• By GIL TROY

Last August, I published Theodor Herzl: Zionist Writings, three volumes of Herzl's books, articles, diaries, and speeches. I wrote an introduction to Herzl's life and introductions to each of the 11 years Herzl was a Zionist activist. Since then, people keep asking WWHT: "What would Herzl think?"

Sadly, they often snort the question, as doomers-and-gloomers assume he would detest the primitive gang of Neanderthals currently destroying his dream. Although I have criticized this government, as we celebrate Herzl Day, Iyar the 10th, May 1, this year - 163 years after Herzl's birth - I beg to differ.

Herzl would probably say, "Yes! The con worked - I fooled them." Herzl the lawyer knew that he and his people were playing a weak hand. But Herzl the playwright, the showman, knew how to wow them - convincing czars and sultans, kings and prime ministers, that he was "King of the Jews" - and that Zionism was as central a movement then, as it actually is now, thanks to him and his fellow dreamers.

Founders are funny phenomena. They can be caricatured into meaninglessness, hijacked left and right, or used as battering rams to say, "you see, how we disappoint them." And, yes, Theodor Herzl is often better remembered today for his look, not his books. And it's striking: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls him our "modern Moses," while Tel Aviv hipsters grow Herzlian beards and some protesters, these days, wield iconic photos of him with a tear streaming down his cheek.

But at this critical moment, Herzl and Zionism's other founders remind us what most of us felt this Remembrance Day and Independence Day - there's much more uniting us than dividing us, and it goes way beyond our vicious enemies. Headlines emphasize the few disruptors at the military cemeteries - I was moved by the shared quiet and pain that enveloped the country on Monday night -



PRESIDENT ISAAC HERZOG and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attend an event for outstanding soldiers, at the President's Residence in Jerusalem, on Independence Day. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

followed instantly by Wednesday's joy and barbecuing during Israel's still-whiplash-inducing double holiday.

Headlines highlight the most mulish ministers and protest-leaders - I keep hearing about progress in the President Herzog-supervised negotiations and the 74% of Israelis craving judicial compromise. Headlines revel in Israel's flashpoints - I loved watching downtown Jerusalem turn into one, big, blue-and-white flash mob on Tuesday night.

SO, LET'S look at it all from a Herzlian historical perspective.

In 1897, this 37-year-old, Budapest-born, Viennese-trained, lawyer, playwright and journalist convened a Zionist Congress in Basel to "solve the Jewish Question in

a humane and modern way." Europeans wondered why so many people hated the Jews - while Jews wondered why they were so hated. The Enlightenment promised to mainstream Jews into Europe, but it misfired. Reeling from this increased ancient hostility, some Jews immigrated, fleeing their tormentors; others assimilated, fleeing their Jewishness.

Eventually, Herzl decided the only answer was to transform "the Jewish Question into a Zion Question." We're not just a religion, he realized, "We are a people," with a particular history, heritage, and homeland, Zion, meaning the land of Israel. Knowing that a national political renewal requires a strong cultural foundation, Herzl deemed the Jewish national liberation movement, Zionism,

"a return to Jewishness even before there is a return to the Jewish land."

Unfortunately, especially when examining Eastern Europe's Jewish masses, this proud Westernized Jew, with his piercing dark eyes and impressive black beard, saw a paralyzed people demoralized by poverty and persecution. He wanted his Zionist Congress to reawaken the Jewish people. Sensitive to optics, he insisted that the 197 delegates - including 13 women and some non-Jews too - attend the Congress in formal eveningwear, reflecting the Jewish people's dignity.

This frustrated playwright valued the script more than the costumes. As a peoplehood-person, Herzl appreciated the past; but, as a dreamer, a social-experimenter, and

a liberal-democratic nation-builder, he was future-oriented too. "Our hearts cling to the old, it is true; we love the glorious past of our people, so full of struggle and suffering," he warned, "but we do not want to revert to any narrowness of spirit."

Appreciating a good prop, Herzl insisted that a flag was not just "a stick with a rag on it.... With a flag, one can lead men wherever one wants to, even into the Promised Land." The flag carried a people's "imponderables," their "dreams, songs, fantasies," because "visions alone grip the souls of men." While charmed by the spread of individualism, industrialism, and capitalism, he nevertheless believed that individuals cannot help themselves "politically nor economically as effectively as a community can help itself."

In 1899, reflecting the 19th century faith in humanity's redemptive capacity, Herzl defined "the chief tenet of my life: Whoever wishes to change men must change the conditions under which they live." Preempting any impulses toward narrow-minded illiberal nationalism, he challenged Zionists: "Make your State in such a way that the stranger will feel comfortable among you."

He labeled this Jewish state-to-be Altneuland - old-new land, envisioning what is now this 75-year-old State in the ancient Land of Israel. In emphasizing Jewish rootedness, the term itself proved that Zionism isn't European colonialism.

Every day, when 9.7 million Israelis, Jewish and non-Jewish, wake up in their beds, at home in their homeland, most know that every crane that builds, every start-up that starts, and every new investment through the Abraham Accords that appreciates, helps explain why they are safer, freer, and more prosperous than their great-grandparents would have dared imagine. And that's why Herzl would also think, it worked! It's really true - if you will it, is no dream!

The writer is an American historian, the author of *The Zionist Ideas and the editor of the three-volume set*, Theodor Herzl: *Zionist Writings, the inaugural publication of The Library of the Jewish People, just published marking the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress* ([www.theljp.org](http://www.theljp.org)).