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Herzl, Israel, and the search for climate justice

With the UN Climate Conference in Dubai approaching, the Jewish state should revisit the vision of modern Zionism's founding father

By Yosef Israel Abramowitz

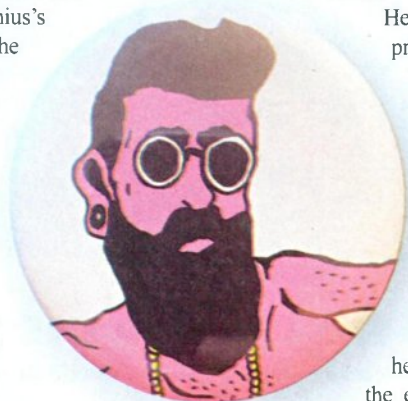
IN 1896, as Theodor Herzl was writing his Zionist manifesto *The Jewish State*, Svante Arrhenius, a scientist in Sweden, was calculating the effects of the doubling of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by people burning coal, gas, and oil, which he warned could increase the Earth's temperature by a disastrous five to six degrees Celsius.

Both Herzl and Arrhenius correctly predicted the course of events.

While we don't know if Herzl was familiar with Arrhenius's work, Herzl's vision for the future state of the Jewish people was amazingly designed as a corrective to the climate injustice in his day, and he planned for his future state to be carbon-neutral and free of smoke pollution. In other words,

— A Theodor Herzl pin.

COURTESY DAVID MATLOW



back in 1896, Arrhenius issued an early warning about human-created catastrophic climate change, just as Herzl was planting the seeds of his model country that was going to be a renewable light unto the nations and solve the looming climate crisis.

Arrhenius went on to win the Nobel Prize in Physics. Herzl created a state-building movement and was interred in a cemetery in Jerusalem, later named Mount Herzl in his honor.

Herzl gave us two blueprints of his future state.

The first, *The Jewish State* (1896), is a call to action to form a progressive society on the eastern Mediterranean. The second, *Altneuland* (1902), the novel he raced to write as his breath shortened and his heart murmured, recounts the experiences of two passengers on the coal-fueled ship

Futuro who visit the Holy Land twice, twenty years apart, marveling at what the Jewish people were able to accomplish within a generation.

At the heart of Herzl's hope for the future were humanistic values (with a Jewish flavor) and the promise of technology, for which his imagination was astonishingly prescient. As he tired of long train rides in Europe, he looked out the window of his carriage and imagined the future airplane, penning the play *The Steerable Airship*. Well before radio, Herzl imagined a "newspaper phone" that would bring news and music into people's homes. He had the uncanny ability to take a prototype of an idea – ideological or technological – and to quickly extrapolate to full-scale implementation into the future. And he used *Altneuland* as his platform to help the Jewish public imagine what they could – and mostly did – will into being. But Herzl's vision is much greener than today's reality in Israel.

In Herzl's imagination over 120 years ago, the future state would be a technological wonderland. Electric and telephone lines would exist in every home; fast electric trains would



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crisscross the country and even the region; electric boats would skim the Sea of Galilee; electric farming equipment would power the agricultural collectives; and electric cable cars would whirl above city streets to avoid creating traffic jams below. The land would be filled with electric cars ("provided there are enough recharging stations in the area one drives in," he wrote), all managed by cooperatives of drivers—over a century before Shai Aggasi introduced the same concept via Israel's Better Place venture. And Herzl shared the astounding vision that the future state would be 100 percent carbon-neutral in its power production, replacing the need for burning polluting fossil fuels.

The Zionist movement, including the tree-planting arm of the Jewish National Fund created by Herzl, began as a green movement. And while Zionism today is threatened from within by parochial and extreme voices in the political sphere, from without by Iran and also an international delegitimization movement, the National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office recently added to the list a new threat to the viability of Herzl's state: climate change.

Indeed, as Shira Efron of the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University writes in a devastating report:

The Middle East is one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change, including rising temperatures, water and subsequently food shortages, rising sea levels, and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. These changes could aggravate regional instability, lead to mass migration of refugees, and create comfortable conditions for terrorist organizations...Climate change also has direct implications for infrastructure, equipment, and defense and weapons systems, as well as the health and level of preparedness of military and security personnel.

Ahad Ha'am famously criticized Herzl's state-fixated Zionism in an essay called "This Is Not the Way." While Herzl won the battle within the Zionist movement, Ahad Ha'am's essay is true for Israel's backward climate policies.

About 116 years after Herzl published his fictionalized vision of Israel in *Altneuland*, Elon Musk met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "You know," he said, "your entire country could be powered by solar power. The Negev is Israel's energy future. You can deploy solar systems here that will give you more energy than you need—clean energy. Is-

rael is a technological superpower."

Herzl would be disappointed to learn that the Israel of today has deliberately ignored his green energy vision and embraced the polluting and expensive gas monopoly controlled by the barons of our day, planting the seeds of Israel's—and the world's—destruction rather than redemption. Indeed, while Eilat and the Arava are 150 percent

powered by the sun during the day and soon also at night, the rest of Israel is powered 90 percent by fossil fuels. This dark monopoly will control and exploit Israel's energy policy for at least another generation, with the state investing more and more tax dollars in gas pipelines and licenses rather than a solar-plus-energy-storage infrastructure. The result is that as the United States and Europe are advancing toward ambitious green goals that will also nurture their future economies with sustainable jobs, Israel is at the bottom of green energy lists in the OECD countries rather than the leader, which Herzl would have wanted.

Cruising on the *Futuro* from the poor and underdeveloped Turkish-controlled Palestine through the Red Sea in the pages of *Altneuland*, Mr. Kingscourt says to Friedrich, his Jewish companion:

With the ideas, knowledge, and facilities that humanity possesses on this 31st day of December, 1902, it could save itself. No philosopher's stone, no dirigible airship is needed. Everything needful for the making of a better world exists already. And do you know, man, who could show the way? You! You Jews! Just because you're so badly off, you have nothing to lose. You could make the experimental land for humanity.

Kingscourt and Friedrich return to Haifa 20 years later and discover a bountiful, well-planned, smog-free, green country:

In the middle of the square was a fenced-in garden of palm trees. Both sides of the streets running into the square were also bordered with palms, which seemed to be common in this region. The rows of trees served a double purpose. They gave shade



Theodor Herzl from the book 'Herzland' by David Harel.

by day, and at night shed light from electric lamps which hung from them like enormous glass fruits.

Herzl describes the city in which "automobiles sped noiselessly by on rubber tires," and he directs Kingscourt in the text to ask, "What's that?" He pointed to a large iron car running along the tops of the palms, whose passengers were looking down into the street.

The wheels of the car were not underneath but on its roof; it moved along a powerful iron rail: "An electric overhead train."

The tour de force of Israel's green energy development, in Herzl's vision, is the Dead Sea Canal, taking advantage of the drop from the Mediterranean down to the Dead Sea. Take note that Albert Einstein received the Nobel Prize in Physics for the photovoltaic effect—the basis of our solar power—only in 1921, so Herzl's green vision didn't include solar power.

And now they were in front of the power station. While driving down from Jericho, they had not been able to get a full view of the Dead Sea. Now they saw it lying broad and blue in the sun, no smaller than the Lake of Geneva. On the northern shore, near where they stood, was a narrow, pointed strip of land extending behind the rocks



Doron Schechori, Israeli disco record album cover, 1979.

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Climate

over which the waters of the Canal came thundering down. Below were, in fact, as far as the eye could reach around the shore, numerous large manufacturing plants. The water power at source had attracted many industries; the Canal had stirred the Dead Sea to life. The iron tubes through which the waters of the Canal beat down upon the turbine wheels reminded Kingscourt of the apparatus at Niagara.

There were some twenty of these mighty iron tubes at the Dead Sea, jutting out from the rocks at equal distances. They were set vertically upon the turbine sheds, resembling fantastic chimneys. The roaring from the tubes and the white foam on the outflowing waters bore witness to a mighty work.... From here the tamed natural forces were conducted into electric generators, and the current sent along wires throughout all parts of the country. The "Old-New-Land" had been fructified into a garden and a home for the people who had once been poor, weak, hopeless, and homeless.

I remember when prime minister Menachem Begin tried to revive Herzl's Dead Sea Canal. While water remains scarce, Israel is blessed with enough sun to power the whole country day and night – a "Niagara" of sunshine.

Herzl was obsessed not only with the Jewish Question but also the social question – the growing inequalities in society. Two years before writing *The Jewish State*, he penned a play called *The New Ghetto*. The main character, Jacob Samuel, an educated, assimilated Jew, organizes a coal miner's strike against the exploitative, stock-market-fixing aristocracy, and is killed off in a duel.

The exploitation of coal workers is at the heart of *The New Ghetto*. The flag that draped Herzl's coffin had two blue stripes and seven Jewish stars – to signify not the days of the week but the humane treatment of workers that could be achieved by a seven-hour workday, which the Jewish state was going to model for the world, along with green energy.

In Herzl's future state, there would be peace with our neighbors and full equality for its Arab citizens. He was moved by the Arab poor on his brief visit to Palestine and believed that their lives would be vastly improved by the new technology, including green electricity for all, that the Jews would bring with them.

FAST FORWARD 120 years since the publication of *Altneuland*. My 18-year-old daughter, Ashira, and I jump into a taxi in our third



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attempt to "vandalize" Herzl's grave in Jerusalem. Herzl's bones, like those of Joseph, arrived in Israel long after his death. He was buried in the State of Israel in 1949; it was 52 years after the First Zionist Congress.

In my bag is the masking tape to paste a Reuters article onto the slab of the black granite grave engraved with gold block Hebrew letters. In the taxi, I heard a ping on my "newspaper phone." There is a shouting match in the Knesset. We click to the link of Kan, the national TV broadcaster, to see and hear members of Knesset – mostly from the opposition – yelling. In the seat of the speaker's chair is Mansour Abbas, chairman of the Islamic party, Ra'am. A portrait of Herzl hangs above him on the left.

Despite the fact that Herzl imagined a civil political culture, Israel's politics have been intense and often unpleasant in the past several years, with four rounds of inconclusive elections. The political elephant in the room for the past several decades has been if, when, and how Israeli Arab parties might join a Zionist government and change the political map. The Israeli Arab sector has been deeply neglected, with vast discrepancies in government policies and spending on education, public transportation, police, infrastructure, and electricity.

"The electric light was certainly not invented so that the drawing room of a few snobs

might be illuminated, but rather to enable us to solve some of the problems of humanity by its light." Herzl wrote in *The Jewish State*. "In solving it, we are working not only for ourselves, but also for the many other downtrodden and oppressed beings." From his perch in the Knesset above Mansour Abbas, Herzl watches the debate taking place about hooking up unauthorized Arab homes to electricity.

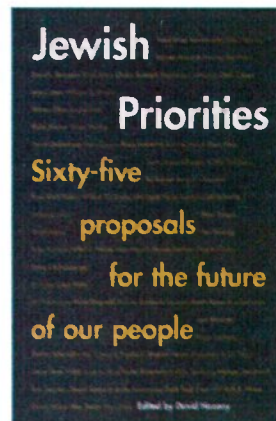
We jump out of the taxi at Mount Herzl, walk past the modest museum, and emerge into the open plaza. On my phone, Abbas is still trying to get the Knesset to order, but he is calm. The black granite tomb about one hundred yards away is flanked by soldiers and

two flags: the World Zionist Organization flag on the right, and the flag of Israel on the left. The soldiers, on a study tour, move on, and so Ashira and I approach and place the phone with the live Knesset debate on the grave.

From atop the tomb, Abbas's voice calls for a roll call on the third and final reading of the electricity bill, to help correct Israel's most blatant climate injustice. Nearly half the chamber walks out to boycott the vote they were about to lose.

Herzl is captivated by the intensity of the debate among Arabs and Jews, all in Hebrew. Naftali Bennett,

then-prime minister and head of the Yamina Party: "Yea." Benny Begin, son of the former Likud prime minister and from the right-wing



DAVID HAZONY

The cover of David Hazony's book, from which this article was extracted.



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party New Hope: "Yea." And nearly everyone else who stayed in the plenary votes in favor, with three abstentions, interestingly from secular Arab parties. Abbas, from the speaker's chair, not only declares victory by a vote of 61 to 0 but calls up MK Iman Khatib-Yasin for closing words, which she delivers in Arabic, wearing a hijab.

Herzl appreciates the sweet drama, the attempt to right a social wrong against the Arab citizens, as would have his *New Ghetto* character Jacob Samuel.

With the historic Knesset vote done, we turn off the phone. Ashira and I sit on the ground in front of the Hebrew letters of Herzl's name and begin our work.

The Jewish Colonial Trust was incorporated by Herzl during the Second Zionist Congress as the under-capitalized bank for the Zionist movement. He would be astounded to learn that the Israel of today has over \$215 billion in foreign currency reserves; it also has one of the biggest gaps between rich and poor, with one-third of our children living in poverty. The annual budget, which thanks to bringing the Islamic party into the previous government finally passed, is a little shy of \$150 billion, or about 50 percent greater than Herzl's native Austria.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Israel needed to raise money to cover the budget deficit caused by the crisis. It went to the markets, offering \$5 billion in bonds; it was over-subscribed for \$25 billion. Lost amid the pandemic news is a sweet financial footnote that Herzl would have appreciated and Ashira and I, fifteen years after our family's *aliyah* from Boston, were there to deliver in person.

One billion dollars of the bond offering was snapped up for a term of one hundred years. One hundred years. We tape the article titled "Israel Sells Rare 'Century Bonds' in Record \$5b. Debt Issue" to Herzl's grave, leave the plaza, and go back to fighting to change Israel's climate-dangerous energy policies and for a more just Israel – a renewable light unto the nations.

MY FRIEND David Matlow, the world's largest private Herzl collector, gave me a pair of blue Herzl socks that I tend to wear on the international stage when I am promoting a comprehensive Israeli solar vision for our country and the world. (I had planned to do this before the war broke out at COP 28, the



A 20th-century carpet featuring Herzl from Jerusalem's Alliance School made of wool, now part of the Tower of David Jerusalem Museum collection.

2023 United Nations Climate Conference in Dubai from November 30 to December 12.)

In one of my recent journeys where I had the privilege of walking in Herzl's footsteps, or at least his socks, I shared a panel at the 2022 United Nations COP 27 Climate Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, with the chairman of the board of Bank Leumi – the bank once known as the Jewish Colonial Trust. The session focused on new financial models to scale renewable energy to help save the world from the gloomy and accurate climate predictions of 125 years ago by Svante Arrhenius.

Herzl loomed large for me that day on stage at the Israeli Pavilion at the UN Climate Conference. What would he have said?

Luckily, I didn't have to wonder because

from the podium, in front of the flag of Israel, came a good, Zionist answer from the chairman of Herzl's bank:

Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today in light of the global threat of adverse climate changes with long-term and maybe irreversible impact on humanity. There is unequivocal evidence that the Earth is warming at an accelerated pace and that the root cause is our own activities.... Israel is making inroads in leading climate tech innovation and investment, as well as setting up responsible financing policies by the financial sector. The spirit of the Israeli private sector, coupled with the talent from the regulators and incentives from the Innovation Authority, along with Israeli government R&D which led with \$280 million between 2018 and 2020, has created an impressive ecosystem in climate tech innovation.

The chairman then switched from English to Hebrew to close with a quote from the ancient rabbinic work *Ecclesiastes Rabba*:

When the Blessed Holy One created the first human. He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eder and said to him: 'Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world. If you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you.'"

The chairman of Bank Leumi, it should be noted, was an economist named Samer Haj Yehia, a Muslim-Israeli. As he finished his remarks, I could feel Herzl applaud from heaven. We were one step closer to long-delayed climate justice in the Jewish state. ■

Yosef Israel Abramowitz, Israel's solar pioneer, was nominated by 12 African countries for the Nobel Peace Prize and serves as CEO of Gigawatt Global, an impact investment platform, and is associated with impactLDC, a new nonprofit that promotes solar fields in Africa and the Middle East. He also serves as a leader of President Isaac Herzog's Climate Forum and co-chair of Shamsuna, a Bedouin-Jewish NGO promoting climate justice in the Negev. He can be followed @CaptainSunshine. This article is reprinted with permission from Jewish Priorities, edited by David Hazony, and published by Wicked Sor Press, 2023.

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