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Zionism won in 1948, but you wouldn't know it in 2024

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If you spend much time following the interminable social media battles over Israel and the Jews, you'll soon see a supporter of Israel posting a screen-shot of some particularly toxic, antisemitic rant under the heading "This is why we need Israel" or "This is why I'm a Zionist." It's a seemingly perfect argument. The irrational hatred that the Jewish state provokes is the ultimate justification of its existence.

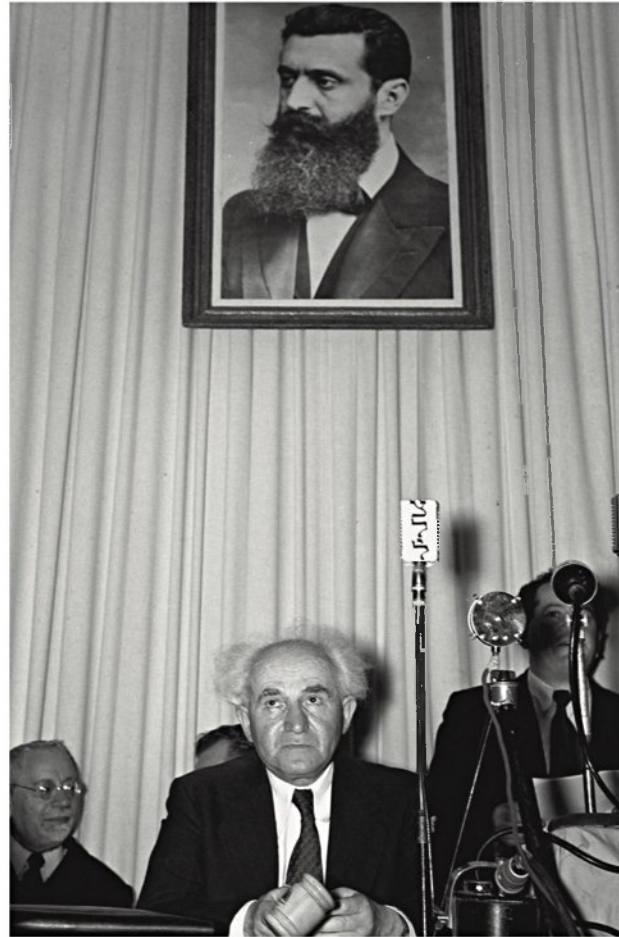
But what's good for Twitter fights is only ever good there. In the real world, a real country serves a purpose other than just as a haven from persecution. Theodor Herzl wasn't the first Jew to experience Jew-hate, in his case as a journalist while covering the Dreyfus Trial in Paris, and then in his home-town Vienna with the election of the Jew-baiting Karl Lueger as mayor – and, as a result, dream of a return to the ancient homeland. But the two books he wrote on the subject – "The Jewish State" and "Old-New Land" – focused on an upbeat vision of what that renewed homeland would look like, rather than the desperate situation it was supposed to solve.

That was Herzl's genius. He didn't invent the idea of a return to Zion; that had existed in prayers and the yearnings of generations for over 1,800 years, between the destruction of Judea and the birth of the Zionist project. He re-imagined that idea, not as a mythical place or a salvation, but a modern nation-state. The tension,

however, between the desire for a contemporary Jewish homeland and the urgent necessity of a sanctuary from murderous hatred almost brought Herzl to ruin his own idea. Frustrated by his own failures to negotiate a lease on the Ottoman-ruled province, and depressed by the recurrence of pogroms in the Russian empire, he tried to secure for East European Jews an alternative, temporary refuge in one of Britain's colonial possessions in Africa.

Today, 111 years after Herzl presented the "Uganda Plan" to the Sixth Zionist Congress in 1903, Zionist mythology prefers to focus on the vehement opposition to the plan, and the storming out of the hall by the delegation representing Russian Jews. The fact is that a majority of delegates voted in favor of investigating the offer from the British government. But it was a non-starter and Herzl, who would die a year later – before the next Zionist Congress decided to formally reject the plan and focus on the Promised Land – asked that his burial in Austria be temporary, until the Jewish people bring his remains to Israel. He didn't think he would be buried in Africa.

The failure of the "Uganda Plan" didn't resolve this inherent tension within the Zionist project – homeland or haven? Not even when the project failed, when a haven had not been established in time for Jews to flee Europe and save themselves from the Holocaust, or when it succeeded with Israel finally becoming a reality in



Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion below a portrait of Theodor Herzl, in Tel Aviv in May 1948. *Frank Scherschel/GPO*

1948. It should have ended then. Zionism ended then. The project launched by Herzl half a century before had been fulfilled. Zionism was a plan to found a Jewish state in the historic land of the Jews. Seventy-six years ago, next week, Zionism succeeded and that should have been the end of it. But despite Israel becoming a reality, the arguments over Zionism, as if it still exists, continue.

They continue because the Palestinians, another

nation living on the land, see it as their homeland and because, thanks to the Palestinians, those who hate Jews can cover their antisemitism by feigning concern for the Palestinians, calling themselves "anti-Zionists." And they continue, too, because Jews still can't make their minds up about what Israel is and what it should be.

Israel isn't an embodiment of Herzl's vision. How could it be? Herzl was a man living in the heyday of empires. The only Jewish state he could

imagine was a gemütlich mitteleuropean outpost established at the pleasure of some emperor. Unlike him, Israel's hard-headed founder knew it would have no choice but to be born in war against the Arab neighbors and largely in defiance of the postwar powers.

Like Herzl, David Ben-Gurion also tried to downplay the notion of Israel as a haven. He tried to establish a forward-looking national narrative, refusing to visit the museums that were being founded in Israel's early years to commemorate the Holocaust. The survivors and refugees were coming

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to build a brave new state, not save themselves and obsess over what had forced them to leave the countries where they were born.

Ben-Gurion failed in that regard. In his later years in office, he realized belatedly that a decade-old Israel needed that link to Jewish tragedy which preceded it to bolster its sense of purpose. That's why he ordered the Mossad to hunt down Nazi war criminals and staged Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. He was pragmatic

enough to change course and establish Israel as the inheritor of those Jews who had lived and died before the state came into being. And every leader who came after Ben-Gurion has struggled to maintain that balance. You can see that tension in every major decision to make war or peace they have made.

And when you strip away the political and personal motives of Israel's leaders today as they conduct the current war, which was forced on Israel, you can see that tension. Israel today is a prosperous state with a powerful military. After being caught by surprise on October 7, it could have responded like a state, with a combination of military and diplomatic moves, with a coherent strategy. Instead, it has elevated Hamas, a much weaker enemy, to the level of an existential threat. It is a mindset that has not only served to empower Hamas, despite the massive losses it has taken and even greater ones it has incurred on the people of Gaza, but to delegitimize a justified war in the eyes even of those in the world who support Israel.

Next week's Independence Day, in the eighth month of an unwinnable war with no end in sight, will be the most somber of Independence Days since the country's foundation. Many Israelis will understandably be incapable of celebrating it. If there is to be a glimmer of joy, it can be found in the memory of leaders who were capable of balancing the fear of destruction with aspirations for a brighter future, and in the hope that we will see their like again, once this current rotten crop, Israel's worst-ever government, is swept away.