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COMMENTARY EITAN HERZEL

From Herzl to Herzl: The ongoing struggle over the Zionist identity of the Jewish state



MORE THAN a century has passed since the First Zionist Congress, convened by Zionist leaders to launch the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people. Since then, young Jews – all keen on self-determination – have returned to their ancestral home to lay the foundations for a society based on equality, freedom, and security for all its citizens.

At the Jewish state's founding, the Declaration of Independence formed the bedrock of Israel's democracy. It ensured that we could truly become "a light unto the nations" – an enlightened, broad-minded, and modern state in the heart of the Middle East.

As someone raised in a Zionist home, a second-generation survivor of the Hungarian Holocaust, and a descendant of Theodor Herzl, my commitment to preserving the state and its values is unwavering.

Growing up on Kibbutz Saad, the values of Religious Zionism were instilled in me, especially the sanctity of the Torah and the Land of Israel, combined with the defense of the state and the protection of its core democratic values.

Beyond standing against external enemies who continue to challenge us, Zionism today faces an internal struggle over Israel's identity. While the external battle involves defending our borders and ensuring the safety of our citizens, the internal one centers on preserving the democratic and pluralistic values that are at the essence of who we are.

These two struggles are of equal importance. Both are critical to the continued existence of the State of Israel.

For me, Zionism is love for the land, its landscapes, and its people. It is a deep connection – physical, emotional, and cultural – expressed in a commitment to defend the state from external threats while strengthening its internal cohesion.

Zionism creates and shapes Hebrew culture, promotes local creativity, and integrates modern

educational values with a deep connection to our Jewish heritage, alongside democratic and global principles. It fosters a society that upholds freedom of choice, mutual respect, and acceptance of every human being, regardless of background.

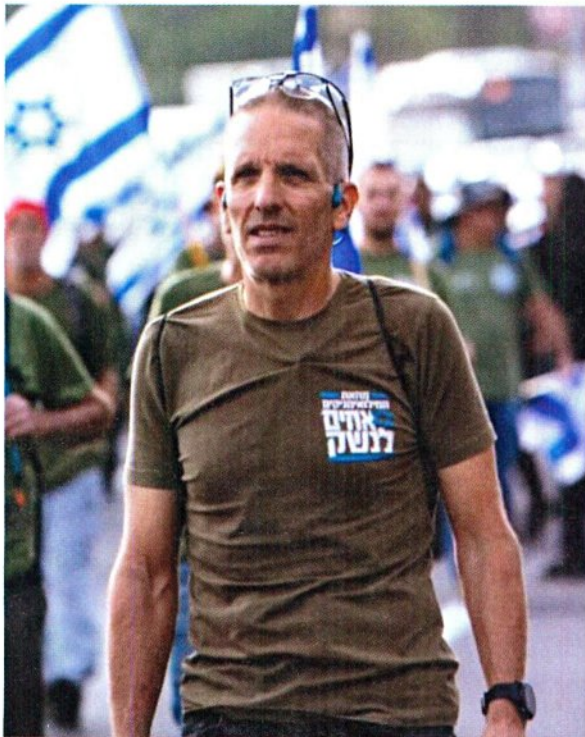
However, while Israel has invested sig-



Theodor Herzl, January 18, 1900.



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Eitan Herzl

nificantly in building military strength, forging peace treaties, and improving strategic capabilities, recent years have seen our democratic values steadily eroding.

A sectarian, racist, and intolerant politi-

I grew up in alongside my fellow kibbutz members – has gradually faded, almost unnoticed.

But two years ago, in January 2023, we received a wake-up call when Justice

cal culture has suppressed equality, tolerance, and progress. This culture, which undermines unity and risks transforming Israel into a totalitarian state, is evident in the rise of extremist political parties and the erosion of civil liberties. The promise of the exemplary society that Zionist leaders dreamed of – the culture

Minister Yariv Levin announced his plan to transform Israel into a non-democratic state. His plan involved curtailing the powers of the judiciary, restricting freedom of speech, and undermining the rights of minority groups.

We realized we needed to take action.

Over the past two years, I have been at the forefront of the fight for the identity of the State of Israel, advocating for it to remain a Zionist, pluralistic, egalitarian, and democratic state fully committed to the principles of its Declaration of Independence.

It is clear to me and my pro-democracy activist friends that the Zionist struggle is far from over. Anyone who considers themselves a Zionist in 2025 must heed the call to nurture a new generation that is connected to its roots but can also look ahead; a generation that understands that Zionism is not just a historical memory but an ongoing living project.

My generation of pro-democracy activists serve in the army and fight to nurture the identity of this state as a homeland for Jews and for every Israeli citizen. We must continue building and developing Israel into a place with a thriving economy and an education system that integrates Jewish heritage with humanistic principles, democracy, and progress.

Our Zionism is aimed at creating a free, safe, and egalitarian society, at building a country that we can all call home, where we are all Jews, and Israelis are free.

This Zionism is the vision of the majority of Israelis, who have been taking to the streets for two years, fighting for these values. And we will ultimately prevail. As Theodor Herzl famously said: "If you will it, it is no dream."



BROTHERS IN ARMS

Brothers in Arms volunteers work on a farm in Israel's South.