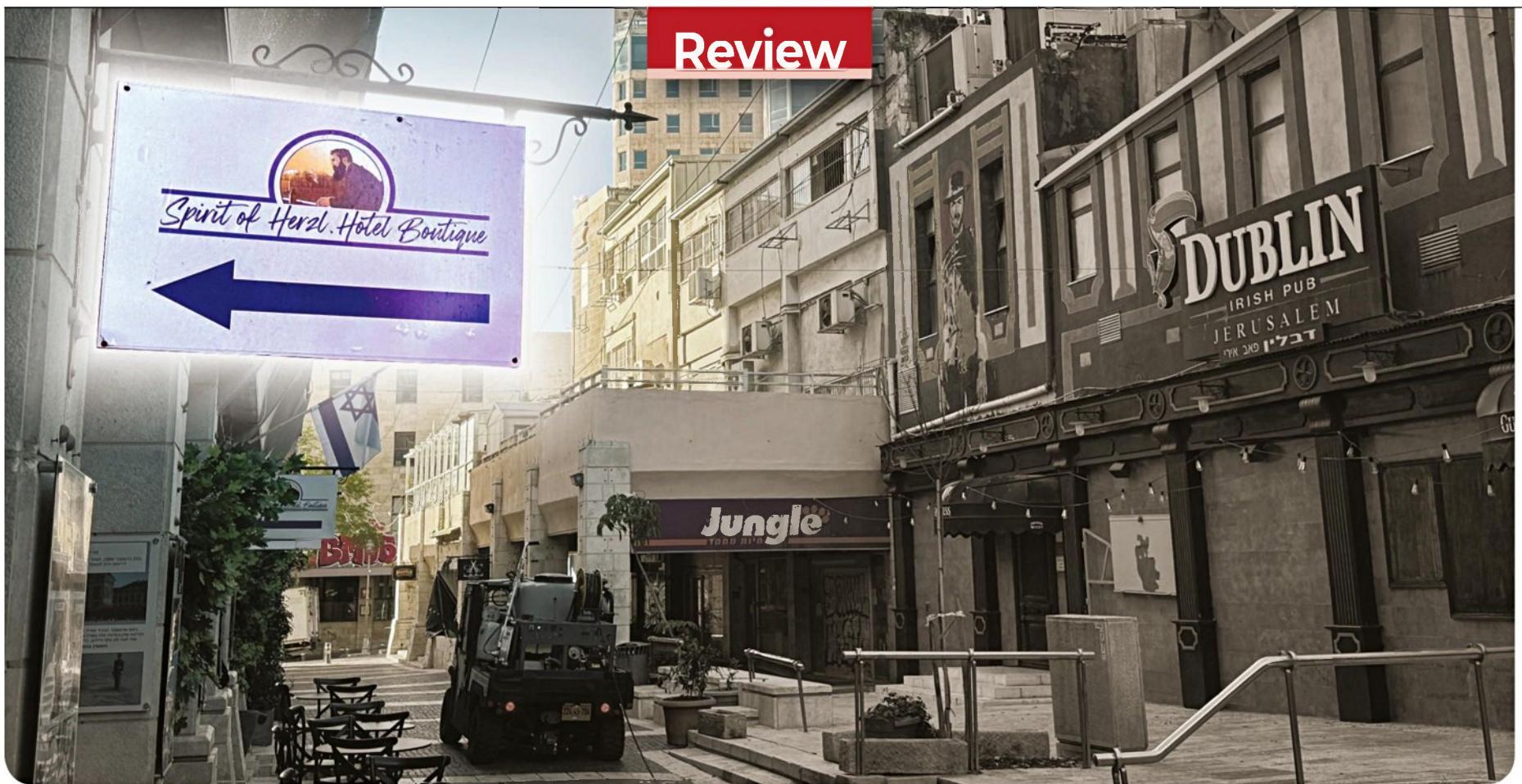




Review



Welcoming guests. (Photos: Howard Blas)

Spirit of Herzl Hotel

HOWARD BLAS

It took three days at a centrally located Jerusalem boutique hotel and a conversation with reservations manager Rabie Dabit to finally understand the story behind the large, framed comics featuring great Zionists of the 1990s, portraits of Herzl and Dreyfus, an assortment of lesser-known Zionists, and a coffee-table-sized book for sale behind the reception desk in three languages – English, Hebrew, and French. The book titled *Herzl: If You Will It, It Is No Dream*, by Abraham Bilah. Welcome to the Spirit of Herzl Boutique Hotel.

According to Dabit, a Christian Arab who has worked at the hotel for 10 years, the property was formerly known as the Shani Hotel – also the Rimonim Shani Hotel or the Lion's Heart Hotel. It was purchased two years ago by none other than the book's author himself. Bilah, a French Jew who, according to Dabit, "loves Zionism," wrote the text for the book on display in the lobby and paid illustrator Kiran Babu to create all the artwork. Scenes from the comic book appear at the entrance and on every floor of the building, from the dining room on minus 1 to the synagogue and the hallways of the six floors containing the hotel's 80 guestrooms.

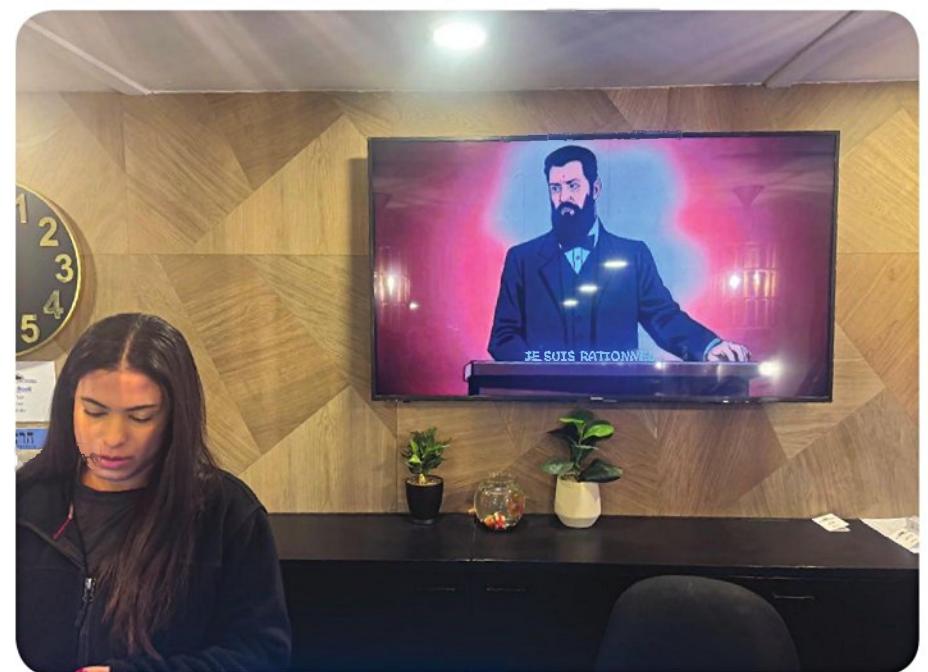
Some of the less well-known Zionists you may read about during your

buffet breakfast of cheeses, vegetables, eggs, cereal, pastries, and more include Reverend William Hechler (1845–1931), described as "a Christian Zionist who became an early supporter of Theodor Herzl and facilitated early meetings with key figures." The description notes that "despite his significant contributions to the Zionist movement, Hechler's role was largely forgotten, and he died in poverty."

During dinner – which may include brisket, two types of chicken, rice, potatoes, soup, and several salads – you may read about Frederick De Bade (1826–1907), "Grand Duke Frederick of Baden, a German prince who was a key supporter of Theodor Herzl and facilitated access to Kaiser Wilhelm II."

Downtown location, lots to do inside and out

The hotel is listed as being located at 6 Shamai Street, on a pedestrian-only street across from Dublin Irish Pub at Shamai 4. The entrance, however, is technically on Darom Street, between streets named after Hillel and Shamai, the famous first-century sages. The hotel sits around the corner from the Prima Vera Hotel at 23 Hillel and is a three-minute walk from shops and restaurants on and around Ben Yehuda Street, as well as virtually any



Promoting the face of Zionism at the reception desk.

type of store a traveler might need, from a laundry to a 24/6 convenience store and an Asian supermarket.

The Spirit of Herzl features 80 rooms across six floors. When our Birthright autism spectrum group stayed there recently for five nights, the hotel was nearly full over Shabbat, hosting Birthright groups from Russia and Argentina, a group from

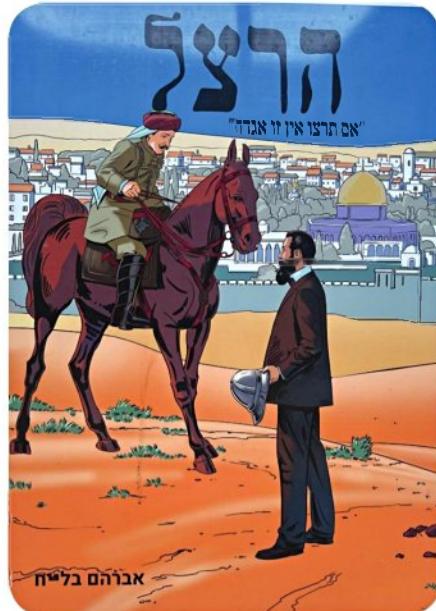
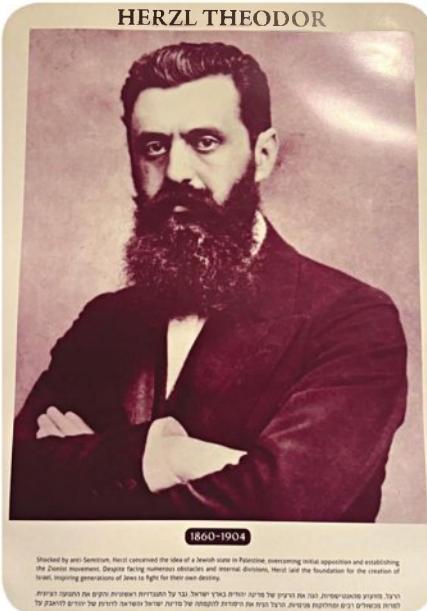
Mexico, a bar mitzvah group, and a bride and groom celebrating a post-wedding Shabbat with 50 guests.

When the hotel reaches capacity, there is limited space in the lobby or elsewhere to relax, play cards, eat sunflower seeds, or hold a quiet conversation. The synagogue, lecture hall, small meeting room on the *ben-onim* (in between) floor, and the two



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Zionist pride is evident everywhere.

meeting rooms just to the left of the entrance – accessible only from outside – were all in use by other groups.

On quieter weekday mornings and evenings, after Shabbat guests departed, Birthright groups had a choice of meeting spaces. Dabit noted that during the summer months, tables and chairs on the patio near the entrance also serve as a meeting area.

Safe room, safe in a room

My corner room on the sixth floor was very comfortable. Giant windows offered views in two directions – north toward the *midrehov* and west. A larger-than-expected refrigerator allowed me to store Shabbat treats, and an electric kettle and a Landwer coffeemaker with pods were a nice touch. As often happens in hotels, one item was missing: the pods did not arrive until several days into my stay. The room had been recently renovated, and the bathroom featured a spacious walk-in shower with a fully closing glass door – something I have come not to expect in many hotels, where wet floors are common.

Rooms measure 24 square meters and offer either a double bed or two single beds. The website lists “Classic” rooms (\$121 per night on weekdays, \$158 on Shabbat) and “Superior” rooms (\$133 or \$170), both suitable for singles or couples. The “Grand Classic,” measuring 27 sq. m., accommodates a couple and a small child or third adult (\$151 on weeknights). A “Classic Family Room” fits a couple with two children (\$158), while the Classic Suite, starting at \$194, accommodates families of up to six.

I appreciated the presence of a safe, though it was too small to hold even

my very small computer, and it was broken – something I discovered minutes before Shabbat began. The front desk, sensing the urgency in my voice as I was carrying 24 Birthright passports, responded quickly and sent a technician before I returned to my room. When he ultimately informed me that it could not be fixed, I was directed to the front desk to receive a special key.

The hotel features two elevators, one set to Shabbat mode. Both were large enough to accommodate a wheelchair, which was regularly used by one of our participants and her attendant. We were pleased to find the hotel largely accessible – until we attempted to access the benonim floor with the synagogue and discovered that this floor alone lacks elevator access, a fact that had not been shared with us in advance.

We were also surprised that, given the recent wars and the possibility of

future attacks from Iran, there were no signs indicating the location of a *miklat* (bomb shelter) or *ma'amad* (safe room). After considerable inquiry, we learned that guest room 611, and presumably similar rooms on each floor, serve as protected spaces. The minus 1 dining room is the preferred shelter, as is the stairwell. We were still uncertain about the best option for our participant who uses a wheelchair in the event of an *azakah* (alarm).

A comic journey

Despite these minor flaws, the hotel was comfortable and conveniently located. Birthright participants loved being able to walk to a kosher McDonald's or Pizza Hut, or purchase a kippah or necklace, all within five minutes. Within 12 minutes, they could enjoy mouthwatering rugelach at Marzipan in the Mahaneh Yehuda shuk. During heavy rains, they appreciated free Wi-Fi and the wide selection of channels on the large television.

And if they grew bored or wanted to learn more about Zionism in comic form, they could wander the halls and read. The hotel's owner, also the comic's author, describes his journey to Israel in 1983, his career

A swan made from carefully folded towels greet hotel-goers.

Just some of the many salads and vegetables awaiting visitors at the breakfast buffet.

as a lawyer, and his financial struggles as a writer. He writes playfully, “I have a knack for wasting a lot of money with all my artistic creations, and I have to get back to business if I am to fund my next fad.”

He explains his decision to write about Herzl, noting that “the dialogue is drawn from both Herzl's diaries and President Georges Clemenceau's memories,” referring to France's prime minister from 1906-09. Bilah concludes, “Some continue to utter hideous slander about Herzl for ideological reasons. This book is my humble contribution to the man to whom we owe today the ability to live independently on our ancestral land.” He does not explain how he acquired the funds to purchase the hotel.

While visiting Jerusalem and exploring the ancestral land, the Spirit of Herzl is hard to beat at its price point, historical significance, and terrific location. ■

Spirit of Herzl Hotel
6 Shamai Street, Jerusalem
(02) 627-0000 / Hotelherzl.com



▲ **Meeting rooms** available for Taglit-Birthright and other groups.