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: Herzls Secret: The Dream He Shared Before He Died

Herzl's Secret:

The Dream He Shared Before He Died

Rabbi Elie Mischel

The man who became the father of modern Zionism was the least likely candidate for the role. For most of his life, Theodor Herzl lived as a thoroughly assimilated Austrian journalist. He barely observed *mitzvot*, possessed little knowledge of Torah, and moved comfortably through Vienna's secular intellectual circles. He wrote plays, covered politics for major newspapers, and sought acceptance in European society. Nothing in his public life suggested a man driven by Jewish destiny or dreams of redemption.

Yet this same man devoted the final years of his short life to an impossible mission: persuading the world's powers to support the return of the Jewish people to their land. The standard historical narrative attributes Herzl's transformation to the Dreyfus Affair – the 1894 trial of a Jewish French officer falsely accused of treason amid cries of “Death to the Jews.” According to this account, the shock of seeing how quickly European nations could turn on their Jewish citizens compelled Herzl to seek a political solution to antisemitism.

But this explanation is not enough. Antisemitism can make Jews flee; it does not make them build. It does not explain why a secular journalist with minimal Jewish education would sacrifice his career, health, and ultimately his life for the restoration of Jewish nationhood.

On December 25, 1903, just months before his death at age 44, Herzl sat with his first biographer, Reuven Brainin. Brainin was struck by the signs of premature aging on Herzl's face and sensed that he knew he would not live much longer.

Herzl used the moment to share a story from his childhood. “When I was twelve years old, a German book fell into my hands... in which I read the story of *Mashiach*, the king of Israel, whose coming any day is expected by many Jews even in our generations. He will arrive as a poor man riding a donkey.” Though the details were fragmentary, something stirred within

him – sorrow and a vague yearning he could not yet name.

That night, lying in bed, the story of the Exodus merged in his mind with the messianic visions he had just read. Past and future fused into a single image of redemption. Then came a dream that would quietly shape his destiny.

Herzl saw himself lifted in the arms of *Mashiach*, soaring on the wings of the wind until they encountered *Moshe Rabbeinu*, who appeared like Michelangelo's statue that had captivated him since childhood. *Mashiach* called to Moshe, “For this child I have prayed!” Then he turned to Herzl and commanded: “Go and announce to the Jews that I will soon come and perform great miracles for my people and for the whole world!” (Georges Yitshak Weisz, *Theodor Herzl: A New Reading*, 107–109).

Herzl never revealed this dream publicly, yet it stayed with him. It was this vision – not antisemitism alone – that drove him to establish and lead the Zionist movement.

After the destruction of the first *Beit HaMikdash*, Yirmiyahu told the Jews exiled to Babylon their exile would last seventy years. But after the destruction of the second *Beit HaMikdash*, no end date was revealed for our exile. Redemption was left deliberately open-ended.

Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum explained: “How fortunate we are that the exact timing was never revealed! Instead, we have waited each day expecting the Messiah's arrival. This daily hope for redemption has been what preserved us from disappearing among the nations.”

“Whoever mourns for Jerusalem will merit to see it in its joy” (*Ta'anit* 30b). This mourning – this “sacred ache” for Jerusalem – is the engine of Jewish activism. Yearning for redemption drives us forward and fuels our determination. It is the most powerful force in Israel's history. It sustained our ancestors through two millennia of exile, pogroms, and persecution. When troubles intensified, this messianic spirit was “reborn in the hearts of the afflicted

and humble masses. Like a divine presence hovering over turbulent waters threatening to overwhelm them, this hope provided inner light that strengthened them through their greatest sufferings” (*Chomer L'Derush* 84-85).

Herzl followed this same pattern. His biographers focus on his response to antisemitism because they cannot fathom what really happened: that the soul of even the most assimilated Jew carries within it the DNA of redemption. Herzl himself testified to this reality in words that should be carved in stone: “In the depths of my soul, the legend continued to be woven, even unknown to me.” Unknown to him – yet driving him toward his destiny.

Herzl's dream clarifies what is being asked of us. If even an assimilated Jew could not escape the pull of redemption, then we certainly cannot pretend it is someone else's task. The return to Jewish sovereignty did not begin with politics, and it will not be completed by politics alone. It began with longing, and it will be completed by Jews who are willing to take responsibility for that longing – by building, settling, serving, and shaping a society worthy of the destiny that first stirred in Herzl's soul. The question is whether we are ready to carry it forward.



(PHOTO: CARL PIETZNER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)



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