



25.31x32.3	1/6	1 עמוד	the jerusalem post - magazine	04/2026	97512087-9
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790					

: Inside the campaign to bring the founders grandparents to Mount Herzl

THE JERUSALEM POST

APRIL 17, 2026

# MAGAZINE



## Escorting Herzl's grandparents home

**WZO Chairman Yaakov Hagoel shares the journey to reinter their remains on Mount Herzl – and remodel the Zionist narrative**



26.35x31.32	2/6	10 עמוד	the jerusalem post - magazine	04/2026	97512082-4
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790					

: Inside the campaign to bring the founders grandparents to Mount Herzl

COVER



CHAIRMAN YAAKOV HAGOEL on the World Zionist Organization balcony in Jerusalem, in homage to Theodor Herzl's iconic pose at the Hotel Les Trois Rois in Basel, Switzerland, in the early 1900s. (Marc Israel Sellem)

## 'Herzl didn't come from nowhere':

# Inside the campaign to bring the founder's grandparents to Mount Herzl

WZO Chairman Yaakov Hagoel, who survived a bruising internal Likud power struggle to win a second term, says the reburial is part of a larger argument: the myth of the assimilated Herzl has done real damage to Zionist education

**INTERVIEW**  
• ZVIKA KLEIN

**T**he popular image of Theodor Herzl as a secular, assimilated Viennese journalist who stumbled into Zionism after covering the Dreyfus trial has never sat well with Yaakov Hagoel.

"People say Herzl was assimilated and so on, but it's not accurate," the chairman of the World Zionist Organization told the *Magazine*. "A significant part of Herzl's background regarding Judaism and the Land of Israel came from his grandfather."

That grandfather was Simon Loeb Herzl, born in the early 1800s in Zemun, a town on the outskirts of Belgrade in what is today Serbia. Simon was an Orthodox Jew, a respected merchant and community board member, and a devoted congregant of Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, the Sephardi rabbi of Zemun, widely recognized as one of the forerunners of modern Zionism.

The two men had known each other for at least 40 years. Simon served as *ba'al tokea* (shofar blower) and *gabbai* (synagogue warden) in Alkalai's synagogue. Contemporary scholars believe Alkalai may have officiated at Si-

mon's wedding to Rebecca Billitz, since Zemun had only one Jewish community and one synagogue at the time.

Simon was no passive congregant. He was among the first to acquire a copy of Alkalai's landmark 1857 treatise, *Goral la-Adonai* ("A Lot for the Lord"), which laid out a strikingly practical plan for Jewish return to the Land of Israel: a joint-stock company to petition the Ottoman sultan for sovereignty, a tithe-based funding mechanism, and the revival of Hebrew as a common language. Decades before *Der Judenstaat*, Simon actively promoted these ideas in his community.

In 1849, he was jailed for 10 days

for sympathizing with the Hungarian uprising and was released only at the community's request so he could observe the High Holy Days. He and his son Jakob were among the largest donors to the construction of the Zemun synagogue in 1862.

"Every summer, every holiday, Herzl would visit his grandparents," Hagoel said. "That was his real ideological foundation. In Herzl's writings and biographies, it is evident that his parents were physically closer to him. But ideologically, he drew it from the visits with his grandfather."

This is not a marginal academic



26.28x29.39	3/6	11 עמוד	the jerusalem post - magazine	04/2026	97512083-5
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790					

: Inside the campaign to bring the founders grandparents to Mount Herzl

argument. Herzl was so attached to Zemun that he was granted honorary citizenship of the town in 1903, a year before his death. And while his parents, Jakob and Jeanette, were German-speaking and culturally assimilated, they gave their son the Hebrew name Binyamin Ze'ev at his circumcision. As historian Gil Troy has written, Herzl "was far more rooted in Judaism and the Jewish struggle of the 19th century than most legends acknowledge."

For Hagoel, correcting the record is inseparable from what he considers one of his most significant initiatives as WZO chairman: bringing the remains of Simon and Rebecca Herzl from the Zemun cemetery to Israel for reburial on Mount Herzl.

### Closing the circle

The project has been years in the making. In 2021, Hagoel secured an agreement from the president of Republika Srpska, Zeljka Cvijanovic, during her visit to Mount Herzl, to assist with the exhumation.

However, a series of delays followed what appeared to be a straightforward diplomatic victory. COVID restrictions shut down cross-border coordination. Bureaucratic processes with Serbian authorities stalled. Then came Oct. 7 and the war that followed, which consumed institutional bandwidth and made any ceremonial reburial politically untenable.

The gravestones of Simon and Rebecca survived the partial destruction of the Zemun Jewish cemetery in the 1970s, when local authorities pressured the community to cede part of its burial ground, and many 18th-century monuments were ruined.

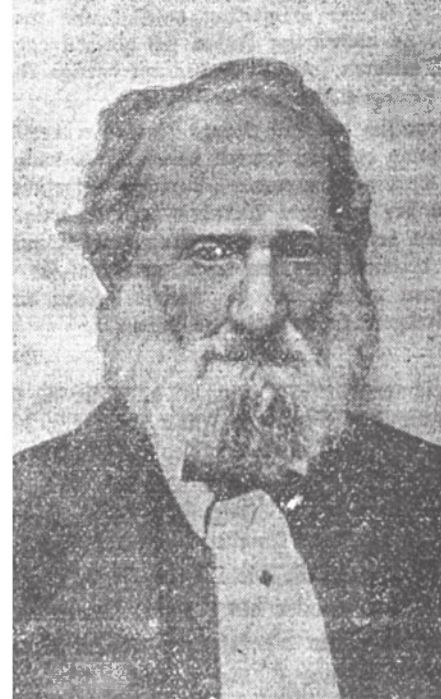
There is a logic of completion. Herzl himself was reinterred on Mount Herzl in 1949, along with his parents and sister. His children, Pauline and Hans, were brought from Bordeaux and a British graveyard in 2006. His grandson, Stephen Theodore Norman, was exhumed from a Washington, DC, cemetery and reburied in Jerusalem in 2007. Only the grandparents, the people who arguably shaped Herzl's ideological DNA, remain behind.

"We had everything ready about a year ago," Hagoel said, "but we froze the process until the hostages came home."

President Isaac Herzog, he added, has been deeply involved. The biggest obstacle was not diplomacy. "It was the local Jewish community," he said, allowing himself a dry smile. "They wanted a million dollars from us. They didn't get it. They got a five-minute meeting with the president instead."

Once conditions stabilize, the remains will be brought to the Herzl family plot. But for Hagoel, the reburial is a vehicle for a broader argument about Zionist origins.

"This is more than closing a circle," he said. "We want to use this for the education system. We aim to demonstrate that Herzl was not an isolated



HERZL'S GRANDPARENTS, Rebecca Billitz and Simon Loeb Herzl. 'A significant part of Herzl's background regarding Judaism and the Land of Israel came from his grandfather.'

(Grandparents: Central Zionist Archives of the World Zionist Organization; Herzl, below: Wikimedia Commons)

As *The Jerusalem Post* reported in October, internal Likud politics had fractured the party's delegation into competing camps. Hagoel, a longtime ally of Danny Danon in World Likud, faced a direct challenge from Culture and Sport Minister Miki Zohar, who had grown in influence within the slate and pushed for elections that Hagoel's camp resisted. Disputes over voting procedures and delegate eligibility repeatedly delayed the Eighth World Likud Conference, originally scheduled for August. Sources described Zohar's surprising defeat when the event finally took place.

Hagoel stated, "I had approximately eight hours where I was on the verge of leaving. I was written out of the deals due to internal politics within Likud, which were led by Miki Zohar. I was able to rejoin at the last moment."

What saved him was the implosion of Zohar's own coalition. As the *Post* reported, a broad power-sharing agreement between the center-left and center-right blocs was on the verge of being signed when it emerged that Zohar had arranged a senior position in the WZO for Yair Netanyahu, the prime minister's son. The revelation blew up the deal overnight. Liberal factions declared it a nonstarter. The congress voted to extend its proceedings by two weeks to allow fresh negotiations.

In the chaos that followed, Hagoel's path reopened. Zohar's overreach had alienated the center-left bloc, and a new arrangement was negotiated in pre-dawn hours. Under the final agreement, ratified by 480 of 525 delegates, Hagoel would become chairman for half a term, about two and a half years.

The expansion of WZO departments from 14 to 20, which critics called bureaucratic bloat, was part of the compromise. Hagoel frames it differently. "My approach is to take a lemon and make lemonade. Take these roles and direct them toward real work for the Jewish people."

### The demographic argument

With his chairmanship secured, Hagoel laid out what he considers the defining demographic fact of this generation: Within five years, the majority of the world's Jews will live in Israel.

The numbers have narrowed faster than most people realize. Israel's Jewish population stands at approximately 7.76 million. The worldwide Jewish population is estimated at 16.5 million, with the US home to roughly 6.3 million. Israeli Jewish births surged 74% between 1995 and 2025, from 80,400 to nearly 140,000 annually, according



figure. There were rabbis, many rabbis, in both East and West, who preceded him. He was the practical one." He paused. "From our perspective, Zionism did not begin in 1897. That was its outstanding achievement, but it came from somewhere. That's the connection we want to make."

### Surviving the congress

Hagoel's ability to pursue any of these projects was, until recently, in serious doubt. The 39th World Zionist Congress, the largest in the movement's history, with 543 voting delegates from 42 countries, nearly ended his tenure as chairman.



26.39x29.73	4/6	עמוד 12	the jerusalem post - magazine	04/2026	97512086-8
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790					

: Inside the campaign to bring the founders grandparents to Mount Herzl



FOR HAGOEL, correcting the record is inseparable from the initiative to bring Herzl's grandparents' remains to Israel. (Reuven Kastro)

to the Central Bureau of Statistics. Diaspora communities are aging, and several, such as France and Russia, are shrinking. Natural growth alone, before any *aliyah*, is shifting the balance steadily toward Israel.

"The gap is only about 1.2 million," Hagoel said. "If 700,000 *olim* arrive, even before natural growth we cross that threshold."

He argued that the shift carries consequences well beyond census data. "There are *halachic* implications. I'm calling on the Chief Rabbinate to prepare for this."

Hagoel did not elaborate in detail, but the question is not hypothetical. A number of Jewish legal obligations are understood to apply differently, or to become newly operative, once a majority of the world's Jews reside in the Land of Israel. These include certain agricultural commandments, the applicability of the Jubilee year, and broader questions about communal governance and religious authority.

Whether and how the rabbinate addresses this threshold could reshape the relationship between religious law and state institutions.

He pointed to the precedent of the 1990s, when roughly one million Jews arrived from the former Soviet Union and became an engine of economic

growth. "After this war, we'll need that kind of economic motor again." And he noted that the physicians who arrived in that wave are now retiring, creating a healthcare gap that needs filling. "Miriam Adelson said the same thing to me."

*'Every "oleh" who isn't absorbed here and goes back to their country of origin causes a hundred other olim not to come'*

The challenge, he acknowledged, is not just getting people to come. It's keeping them. "Every *oleh* who isn't absorbed here and goes back to their country of origin causes a hundred other olim not to come," he said. "We've seen it with France. We've seen it in too many places."

He called on Israeli society to change how it receives immigrants. "If we who sit in Zion know how to embrace the olim, how to respect them, how to be their WhatsApp group, to tell them 'Come, consult with us, we'll help you,' and not tell them 'You made a mess;

better to stay in the Diaspora,' then we'll know how to absorb olim."

#### The broadest tent

Hagoel takes visible pride in what he describes as the widest ideological coalition the Zionist movement has ever assembled. Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, haredi Ashkenazim, haredi Sephardim, Meretz, Likud, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, veteran Israelis. All of them sit on the same executive board.

The 39th Congress emphasized how real that breadth has become. Record American participation, with nearly 225,000 valid votes cast in the US elections alone (an 80% increase over 2020), drove total registration of Jews worldwide past 350,000, three times the previous congress. "Nothing like that has happened since the movement was founded," Hagoel said.

He attributed the surge directly to Oct. 7. "After Oct. 7, people want to be part of the Zionist movement, part of *Am Yisrael*, part of the State of Israel."

Managing the coalition that breadth produces is another matter. "About 20% of the time, we're dealing with internal disputes driven by ideological gaps," he said. "But 80% of the time, we're doing real work for Am Yisrael. And I think that 80% is worth more than 100%."

Why? "Because the spice of getting all these people to create something together is rare."

He recalled how far the tent has stretched. "Fifteen years ago, if you'd told me haredim and Reform Jews would sit at the same table, I'd have laughed." He pointed to the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, together with Arye Deri, leading Shas into the national institutions.

"There were celebrations in Bnei Brak and Jerusalem. Today the Ashkenazi haredim are part of it, too. That's something I've driven over the years: to expand the Zionist tent. We have the broadest one there's ever been."

#### Olim under fire, and Friday night in Paris

Some of the most striking moments in the conversation were not about institutions or numbers but about what Hagoel has witnessed on the ground during months of war.

He described greeting new immigrants at Ben-Gurion Airport while missiles were falling. "Sometimes it was only 26 olim from North America or 52 from Europe. But missiles are landing here. And they come. We're in safe rooms, and they're packing their bags and coming." He singled out a family in Ashdod that made its final decision to immigrate on the first day of the Iranian



26.49x29.39	5/6	13 עמוד	the jerusalem post - magazine	04/2026	97512085-7
80790 - בהקשר לציונו - בנימין זאב הרצל					

: Inside the campaign to bring the founders grandparents to Mount Herzl



YOUNG THEODOR, a high school student, ca. 1875.  
(Photographie von E. Kozmata/Getty Images)



WITH HIS wife, Julie, and children Paulina, Hans, and Trude at David Wolffsohn's house in Altaussee, an Austrian summer resort, 1900. Wolffsohn, a close associate of Herzl, succeeded him as Zionist Organization president. (Getty images)

attack in June. "They arrived in the summer. With several children."

Three weeks into the latest military operation, he flew to Paris for a Shabbat visit. "One of the hardest flights of my life," he said. "I left my kids at home in the *mamad* [safe room]. A very unusual Shabbat." But the reception was overwhelming. "They received me like no one has ever received me. 'You came, you left your family, you came to us.' They were thirsty for it." He delivered an address at the Grand Synagogue. At the end of the service, the entire congregation stood and sang "*Hatikvah*." "I've never been so moved in my life."

The fear, though, was palpable. At a Friday night dinner with a local family, the conversation turned urgent. "They said to me: 'Listen, the missiles will reach Paris soon. We don't have *mamadim*, we don't have shelters. What do we do?' I became a consultant, explaining about parking garages and stairwells."

"Those comments aren't frivolous," Hagoel said. "The Jewish world understands that this won't end in Israel."

### Miracles, attacks, and Australia

Hagoel ticked off a string of recent attacks on Jewish communities, each marked by narrow escapes. Synagogues shot at in Toronto. A bomb in Belgium that detonated prematurely, harming no one. Two synagogues set ablaze in Cologne. A vehicle attack outside a synagogue in Michigan where 170

children were present, stopped by the security team. "Miracles, on one hand," he said. "On the other, being Jewish today is not simple."

The WZO has reported an eightfold increase in antisemitic incidents since Oct. 7, amounting to hundreds per day.

"The most troubling thing," Hagoel said, "is that many Diaspora Jews are beginning to accept this as normal, as the price of being Jewish outside Israel."

He drew a sharp contrast with the Israeli experience. "When we think that only our sense of security was damaged, we should look at the Jewish world. Theirs was damaged far more. And it's easier to restore security here. You can bring tanks. In the Diaspora, they don't have that."

Two months before our conversation, Hagoel traveled to Australia with President Herzog, weeks after the attack that killed 15 people in the largest terrorist attack in Australian history.

"Normally, Jewish communities send solidarity delegations to Israel," he said. "Here it was the opposite."

He was at the President's Residence when the news broke, at a ceremony for lone soldiers with Aliyah and Integration Minister Ofir Sofer and Jewish Agency Chairman Doron Almog. "The president stopped everything. I told him right there: 'We have to go.'"

The trip required choreography. The president needed a formal invitation from a head of state. The prime minister



THEODOR HERZL'S funeral in Vienna, July 7, 1904. (Photos: Wikimedia Commons)

was slow to provide it. The local community initially pushed back on protocol.

But Hagoel described the Australian Jewish community of roughly 117,000 as the most Zionist in the Diaspora. "Per capita, they contribute more to Israel than any other community. Physically the farthest. Mentally the closest." He

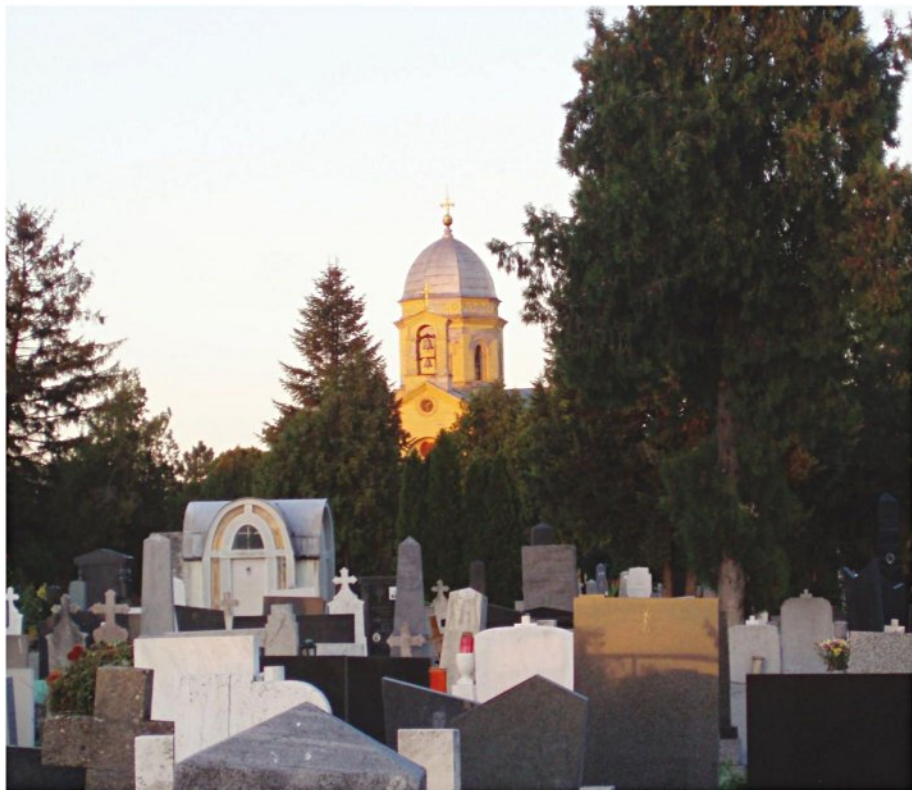
praised its educational institutions as the finest anywhere. "Not just Jewish education. Zionist education."

During the visit, he and the president presented official certificates from the Israeli government recognizing the victims as casualties of hostile acts, under a government resolution Hagoel helped pass a year and a half earlier.



26x29.13	6/6	14 עמוד	the jerusalem post - magazine	04/2026	97512084-6
80790 - בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו -					

: Inside the campaign to bring the founders grandparents to Mount Herzl



ZEMUN CEMETERY in Old Town, Belgrade, Serbia.



RABBI YEHUDA ALKALAI and wife, Esther, in 1874, before their immigration to Palestine. Herzl's grandfather Simon Loeb was a devoted member of Alkalai's congregation in Zemun.



FIRST ZIONIST CONGRESS delegates in Basel, Switzerland, 1897. The 39th World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem, Oct. 2025, nearly ended Hagoel's tenure as chairman.

**'The persecution is a badge of honor'**

But the Australia trip also carried a sting. During the visit, the Australian Centre for International Justice and Palestinian legal organizations filed criminal complaints with the Australian Federal Police against Hagoel, alleging that the WZO's Settlement Division, which operates under his chairmanship, is complicit in unlawful settlement activity in the West Bank.

It was the third such complaint filed against the Israeli delegation. A broader coalition, which included Amnesty International Australia and the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network, simultaneously urged the Australian government to impose targeted sanctions on the

WZO itself. The complaint landed while Hagoel was in the country to comfort a community still reeling from the terrorist attack.

The WZO's Settlement Division has operated since 1971 as the primary body responsible for planning, funding, and developing Israeli settlements in the West Bank on behalf of the state. In 2015, legislation championed by Bezalel Smotrich formalized the division's status as a government-authorized body.

In July 2024, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion finding Israel's presence in the Palestinian territories unlawful and calling for an end to settlement activity. In June 2025, the Australian

*'The fight for our right as Jews and as Zionists isn't confined to Israel's physical borders'*

government imposed targeted sanctions on Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir for inciting violence against Palestinians, as well as on settlers and settler entities linked to illegal outposts, some of which had received land allocations through the Settlement Division.

Hagoel was not inclined to be diplomatic about it.

"This is peak absurdity," he said. "I came to Australia to embrace a Jewish community bleeding after a horrific antisemitic attack, and I found myself the target of a legal campaign by organizations that want to silence our Jewish and Zionist voice. These complaints are a desperate attempt to turn the victim into the aggressor and the builders of the land into criminals."

He said the threats only sharpened his sense of purpose. "They don't intimidate me. The opposite. They distill my mission. They're a sharp reminder that the fight for our right as Jews and as Zionists isn't confined to Israel's physical borders. It's being waged in every arena in the

world where people try to undermine the justice of our cause."

Then he went further. "For me, this persecution is a badge of honor. I'm proud to lead the organization that established the State of Israel and continues to settle it, from the Negev and the Galilee to Judea and Samaria. We're not guests in a foreign land. We're deepening roots in our historic homeland. This legal and political pressure only proves that the World Zionist Organization is the spearhead of the Jewish people, and as such, it will always be a target for those who oppose our very existence."

His answer to the complainants, he said, was simple: "For every attempt to intimidate us, we will respond with more Zionist action, more Jewish solidarity, more powerful building, and more unapologetic Jewish pride."

It was, in its way, a fitting coda to the conversation. Hagoel had started by talking about Herzl's grandfather, a man who was jailed for his convictions and kept advocating for his people anyway. Hagoel ended by casting himself in the same mold. Whether the analogy holds is for history to judge. But the combativeness is real.

He paused, and returned to a quieter register. "We are one people. Unfortunately, we usually remember that only during events like these. We need to remember it more, for our own sake, too."