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: When Herzl Refused to Kiss the Popes Ring

When Herzl Refused to Kiss the Pope's Ring

Rabbi Elie Mischel



In January 1904, six months before his death, Theodor Herzl entered the Vatican for an audience no Jew had ever been granted before. He came as the representative of the Jewish people, asking for recognition of their right to return to their Land after centuries of exile.

Herzl had been briefed carefully on Vatican protocol. He knew exactly what was expected of him. Every visitor to Pope Pius X knelt. Every visitor kissed the pope's outstretched hand. Herzl did neither. He remained standing, with his back straight and head held high.

The Pope, to put it kindly, was not amused. "The Jews have not recognized our Lord," Pope Pius X declared. "Therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people." He left no room for misunderstanding: "We cannot give approval to this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem, but we could never sanction it. *Gerusalemme* must not get into the hands of the Jews" (*Diary of Theodor Herzl*, January 26, 1904).

This was not an isolated incident. Chaim Weizmann later wrote that "in his meetings with various heads of states, Herzl adopted a proud attitude that bordered on arrogance and often seemed inappropriate in light of the political insignificance of the movement he represented" (Introduction to *Theodor Herzl: Medinat HaYehudim*).

Chazal teach that "one who walks even four cubits standing fully erect is as if they were showing disrespect to the Divine Presence" (*Berachot* 43b), and "Be very, very humble, for the hope of mortal man is worms" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:4). Our tradition prizes humility before both G-d and man. Yet when Herzl stood tall before the Pope, he did exactly the opposite. Was the founder of modern Zionism completely out of sync with these Torah values when he insulted the Pope?

"I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt from being slaves to them; and I broke the pegs of your yoke and led you upright (*komemiyut*)" (*Vayikra* 26:13). The word *komemiyut* appears nowhere else in the Torah. Rashi explains it simply as "with upright posture, with one's head high, with dignity." Rav Zadok HaCohen of Lublin, writing in 1890 as Jews were beginning to return to the Land, explained: "Erect, standing upright, not like those who travel to the Holy Land today to grovel and be in exile among the peoples that govern it, for this is not a true return to our Land and our holiness" (*Yisrael Kedoshim*, 34). Groveling in our own homeland before those who rule over us contradicts the very purpose of Jewish return.

But how does this attitude fit with Chazal's call for humility? The distinction, explains Rav Shlomo Aviner, lies between an individual Jew and the collective nation of Israel: "Private pride is a bad trait, but national pride is a good trait. What we lack is tremendous national pride, because for many generations we had no state. Worse than this, even the heart has been emptied of national pride, after we were so humiliated, until we forgot what national pride is" (*Commentary to Eicha*, 24).

Chazal themselves make this distinction, poetically teaching that G-d weeps "because of the pride of Israel that was taken from them and given to foreigners" and "because of the pride of the Kingdom of Heaven" that is "despised and trampled upon" (*Chagigah* 5b). National Jewish pride represents the honor of Heaven itself. When a Jew bows before a foreigner, he diminishes G-d's glory in the world.

At the Vatican, Herzl did not stand as a private individual but as a representative of the Jewish people. Personal humility was not his to display because he carried

the dignity of an entire nation on his shoulders.

Herzl grasped instinctively what the Vatican feared: that after two millennia of exile and humiliation, the Jews were emerging from the shadows to speak for themselves. His upright posture in the Pope's presence declared that the days of Jewish groveling had ended. His refusal to kiss the papal ring announced that the heirs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would no longer seek validation from those who had spent centuries trying to replace them.

His "arrogance" was actually *komemiyut*, the upright posture that G-d commanded His people to maintain when they walk in freedom.

Herzl must guide us today. Individual Jews must cultivate personal humility before G-d. But when representing the Jewish people, when speaking for the State of Israel, when confronting those who would deny Jewish national rights, *komemiyut* is not optional. It is a divine command. Standing tall in such moments honors both the dignity of our people and the G-d who shattered the yoke of our exile to lead us upright into freedom.



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