



ICONS

Theodor Herzl and the USA

• DAVID GEFEN

The 20th of Tamuz (July 20) will mark the 102nd yearzeit of Theodor Herzl, founder of the World Zionist movement.

In seven brief but intense years of activity, Herzl fashioned the building blocks upon which the Jewish state became a reality. Unknown in Jewish circles in Europe and the US until his first book, *Altneuland* (*The Old New Land*), appeared, he wove together a coalition of secular and religious Jews with world leaders and committed Christians for his project. He showed that "if you will it, it is no dream."

As with any world leader like Herzl, questions arise as to his relationship with American Jewry, which was in an isolationist mode at the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore, I have chosen as my task, in honor of the anniversary of his death, to bring to people's attention what were some of the milestones in that relationship.

First, a few questions bearing on this topic:

Were any of you surprised when US president Barack Obama visited Theodor Herzl's grave not once but twice? Was anyone aware that a Jewish US Army chaplain, Oscar Lifshutz, arranged for the disinterment of the remains of Herzl and his parents at a cemetery in Vienna so they could be flown to Israel by an honor guard in August 1949? Did you know that Herzl was planning to go to the United States when he suddenly died in 1904? Or that a memorial service was held in Carnegie Hall in New York, with the mourners "filled to the rafters" and people paying tribute in the streets?

Were you aware that the only complete report in English of the First Zionist Congress in 1897 was written and published by Rosa Sonnenschein in her monthly magazine, *The American Jewess*? Finally, have you ever heard that the death of Herzl in 1904 inspired American Zionists to lobby and succeed in having the Magen David flag flown publicly in the US for the first time at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri?

The impact of Herzl, "who, against all odds, a mere cosmopolitan Viennese playwright and journalist, became the father of modern political Zionism," has been continually felt ever since his *Altneuland* appeared in 1894. He was a fresh voice then, and his words and his inspiration are renewed regularly a century after his death.

HERZL NEVER walked on US soil, but numerous American publications in cities like Norfolk, Virginia; Scranton, Pennsylvania; and Atlanta, Georgia, carried both his picture and his words. In 1900, he wrote, "But we wish to give the Jews a homeland. Not by dragging them



THEODOR HERZL (1860-1904), visionary. (Shutterstock)

ruthlessly out of their sustaining soil but by removing them carefully, roots and all, to a better terrain."

Over a century ago, that definition of aliyah was one everyone could live with. The only problem is that American Jewry – then, now, and in between – has never been inspired or committed enough to take that step in great numbers. Yet, this narrative is shifting; Nefesh b'Nefesh has proven that modern American Jews harbor a deep interest in aliyah, resulting in rising numbers.

The first American Jewry ever heard of Herzl was a small item in the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*. In 1886, there was a brief story about a young Austrian playwright whose first theatrical attempt went very well. Then, for the next eight years, not a word about Herzl in the American Jewish press.

After his book appeared in English, some American Jews sat up and took no-

tice. Already in the US, there had been attempts to collect money and purchase land in Palestine. The land was bought, but the American *halutzim* did not appear. Herzl's dream had an impact on a larger number of US Jewry, which, ultimately, in the years after Herzl's death, resulted in numerous projects including the St. Louis Achooza project in Poriya and the Nachlass Atlanta project in Ra'anana.

At the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, only four Americans participated. The number can be stated with certainty because there are pictures of only four Americans on the official composite of that Congress; one American representative was even a woman. Prof. Richard Gottheil, president of the Federation of American Zionists, urged his membership to attend but the interest had not yet been generated. As the American Zionist president, Gottheil

was able to be involved with some of the major resolutions passed, especially the location of the state in Eretz Yisrael.

The woman on that 1897 composite was Rosa Sonnenschein, editor of *The American Jewess*, the first Jewish woman's magazine in the world. A talented journalist from St. Louis and a committed Zionist, she had corresponded with Herzl and received his blessing to be an observer. Her description of the deliberations at that Congress, plus some entire speeches, appeared in *The American Jewess* bearing a feminist slant. She labeled the meeting "the first Jewish parliament in 2,000 years," but she noted as quickly that there was not "a female face among the delegates."

The only English description of that initial Congress known until 25 years ago was one translated from German and published in *The Jewish Chronicle* of London. Rosa so wanted "to spread the excitement of Zionism," but her efforts did not penetrate significantly to make the Congress a household word. Herzl was not dismayed – he knew he had additional paths to tread to bring his hopes into being.

FOLLOWING THAT First Congress in 1897, *The New York Times* assumed two positions regarding Herzl. The first, appearing in an October 1897 article, was a modified evaluation of this young visionary. "Dr. Theodor Herzl, originator of the Zionist scheme that has been so much discussed in Europe, and so coldly received by those to whose attention it has been cited in this country, is a resident of Vienna."

We must understand that the Jews with the power in the US were the "Our Crowd" group – those who had come to America and made it. As one put it in the oft-repeated phrase: "Washington was their Jerusalem and America their Palestine." The paper then pointed out that in Vienna, Herzl "is a man of enough importance" that when he writes or speaks, people take notice. An Englishman, whom the *Times* quoted, described Herzl this way. "He is tall, handsome, courteous... but when he talks about a Jewish nation in Palestine, he is full of fire."

Now, the paper offers a more definitive description of this maker and shaker, even though not sure of the merits of the project. "The doctor brings to the execution (of getting a homeland) the vigor of maturity and a large amount of varied experience, for he has been in turn a lawyer and a playwright, and is now a journalist and a bicycle rider." (Herzl was a bike rider for the last few years of his short life, a habit that mirrored the eco-friendly future he envisioned in his writings.)

The lengthy article praises Herzl's enthusiasm, his ability to woo the sultan of



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'AMERICAN JEWESS' cover, first issue, April 1885. (Photos: Wikimedia Commons)



ISAAC MAYER WISE: Fuming.

the Ottoman Empire, his understanding of world economics, and finally, that this land for the Jews "would form a new outpost against Asiatic barbarians and a guard of honor to hold intact the sacred shrines of the Christians."

One person was particularly fuming when he read this item: Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, leader of Reform Judaism in the US. His son-in-law was Adolph Ochs, owner of the *Times*. As you could imagine, another story about Herzl appeared. Two weeks later, a story in the *Times* carried a headline that read, "Can Don Quixote Herzl and Sancho Panza Nordau Do It?"

The newspaper detailed all the ports of call Herzl had visited throughout the world to garner support for establishing a Jewish state in Eretz Yisrael. The pope, the sultan, the German kaiser, the writer noted "all encouraged him but did not offer Herzl actual assistance. As a Don



FOUNDING FATHER Herzl watches over David Ben-Gurion as he reads Israel's Declaration of Independence, Tel Aviv, May 14, 1948. (Kluger Zoltan/GPO/Handout/Reuters)

Quixote figure, the paper stressed – "he will merely continue to tilt against the windmills which he can never conquer."

THEODOR HERZL and Mark Twain both covered the Dreyfus trial and wrote at length about it. Most historians argue that the change in Herzl from Jewishly indifferent to a man, immersed solidly in Jewish action, was fueled by the trial and the antisemitism he witnessed within it.

In 1898, Twain believed that it was time for him to write about this devoted and charismatic individual. The first two Zionist congresses had been held, so Twain chose this as his focal point. "Speaking of concentration, Dr. Herzl has a clear insight into the value of Jews in politics," Twain wrote in *Concerning the Jews*, appearing to understand well what Herzl was all about. "Have you heard of his plan? He wishes to gather the Jews of the world together in Palestine with a government of their own under the suzerainty of the Sultan."

The following quote has been repeated time and again in a positive and negative way. "I am not the sultan and I am not objecting, but if that concentration of the cunningness brains were going to be made in a free country, I think it would be (best) to stop. It may not be well to let the race (Jews) find out its strength. If the horses knew theirs, we should not ride anymore."

When he authored these last three lines, the whole world stood up and took

notice. "All things are mortal but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

THE INTERACTIONS mentioned thus far are between Herzl and the people of his time. Let us return to August 1949 – the state was 15 months old but Herzl's remains had not been brought from Vienna to Israel.

Miriam Braver Lifshutz has written a biography of her husband, Mike, titled *The World is My Pulpit*. In that work, she describes what the chaplain did so that Herzl could have his final resting place. US Army Chaplain Oscar Mike Lifshutz entered the military in the summer of 1945 after receiving his rabbinical ordination from the Chicago Yeshiva.

Following short tours of duty in small European American bases, he was assigned to Vienna starting in May 1946. He was a legendary figure because his work with the five DP camps around Vienna not only focused on the immediate needs of the people but also on freeing them so they could escape via the Bricha underground movement and be smuggled in as *ma'apilim* (illegal immigrants to Mandatory Palestine).

In the summer of 1949, Gen. Jesmond Balmer, who was commanding officer over Lifshutz, notified the chaplain that during the summer, Herzl and his parents would be sent to Israel. Balmer assigned Lifshutz to act for the government, since Vienna was still under American juris-

diction. Balmer explained that permission had been granted to disinter the remains of Herzl and his parents so they could be transported by air to the Jewish state of Israel.

Once the official order came from the American authorities, Lifshutz handled all the details. The coffins of the three were disinterred. There was a service in the Stadttempel synagogue, with the coffins in the sanctuary so all could pay them honor.

Lifshutz then met IDF chief chaplain Rabbi Shlomo Goren, and the two of them escorted the coffins to the El Al planes by which they were transported to Israel. Numerous events were held when the remains arrived in Israel. There was a grand procession entering many towns in Israel with young and old bringing honor to the Zionist founder and pioneer.

On August 17, 1949, Herzl was laid to rest on what became known as Mt. Herzl. Today, there is a museum there retelling the entire story of this great man. The educational center there has been open for several years, and part of the complex includes a theater dedicated to Lifshutz's memory. His act will be made known to all who visit the site.

Herzl left his impact on US Jews even though he never saw many of them in person. While his words inspired them in the past, that same spirit remains alive today, reflected in the recent surge in aliyah numbers after October 7. ■