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בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790						

: Herzls education

Herzl's education

As one walks among the burial plots of Zionist leaders on Jerusalem's Mount Herzl, one finds remarkably few rabbis. The mountain is populated by presidents, prime ministers, military commanders, and political leaders, whose decisions transformed the Zionist movement from aspiration into reality.

Wednesday's reburial of Theodor Herzl's grandparents, Shimon Leib and Rivka Herzl, beside their grandson enriches that history. Their arrival reminds us that while the institutions of the Jewish state were largely built by secular political leadership, many of the ideas that sustained Zionism were cultivated much earlier, within Jewish homes, communities and places of worship.

History often remembers the individual who stands at the center of great events, but is less generous to those who shaped the environment in which those individuals were formed. Shimon Leib occupied no prominent political office nor addressed the First Zionist Congress. He did not negotiate with emperors or draft political programs. He was a gabbai of a synagogue where Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, one of the earliest advocates of Jewish national restoration, served as rabbi.

Decades before political Zionism, Alkalai was arguing that the Jewish return to the Land of Israel should become an active national endeavor rather than remain solely the subject of prayer and messianic hope.

No historian can state with certainty how much influence those ideas exerted on the young Theodor. Intellectual history is rarely so straightforward. Yet it is equally difficult to dismiss the importance of family and upbringing, along with the transmission of values across generations. Ideas seldom appear fully formed. They are discussed at home, reinforced by example and passed, often almost imperceptibly, from grandparents to parents and from parents to children.

President Isaac Herzog captured that thought with particular eloquence during yesterday's ceremony. "Dreams are not passed down through written inheritance... they are passed around the Shabbat table..."

It was a reflection on the manner in which Jewish continuity itself has survived across centuries of exile and upheaval. As Herzog suggested, the decisive moments in history are frequently preceded by countless ordinary conversations that no historian ever records.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu approached the occasion from a similar perspective, describing "Judaism as the basis of Zionism" and saying that the home of Herzl's grandparents had provided "the roots from which the trunk, branches and fruit later grew." Whether expressed in religious or national terms, both speeches recognized that political Zionism did not emerge in isolation from the generations that preceded it.

There is a lesson to be learned, particularly for Jewish communities outside Israel. Herzl is frequently portrayed as the assimilated Viennese journalist whose encounter with the Dreyfus Affair awakened him to Jewish nationalism. There is truth in that account, but it is incomplete.

Herzl undoubtedly lived within the assimilated society of fin-de-siècle Vienna, yet assimilation did not erase family memory or inherited identity. Before he wrote *Der Judenstaat*, he was a grandson, and before he articulated a political program, he belonged to a family whose Jewish consciousness had been shaped by previous generations.

Jewish history has endured because each generation accepted responsibility for transmitting our languages, memories, and traditions. That responsibility remains no less significant today, particularly at a time when many Diaspora communities are confronting unprecedented challenges to Jewish confidence and identity.

World Zionist Organization Chairman Yaakov Hagoel told *The Jerusalem Post* that Herzl had left "two wills": one for his family, and another that "you and I fulfill every day, every hour" through the building of Israel.

This extends beyond the physical return of Herzl's grandparents. The work of Zionism was never intended to conclude with the establishment of the state but requires every generation to renew its commitment to the ideals, identity, and sense of purpose that made the state possible in the first place. It is one of the beautiful things about seeing proud, Zionist communities throughout the Diaspora.

The graves on Mount Herzl commemorate those who helped build Israel. Wednesday's ceremony reminds us that, before Zionism became a program for national revival, it was an inheritance passed from one Jewish generation to the next.