



# Reburying Herzl's grandparents reflects redemptive Zionism



CENTER FIELD  
• By GIL TROY

Bones generated hope, turning death into life. In Ezekiel 37:5, God “tells these bones: ‘Behold I breathe spirit into you, and you shall live!’”

All countries engage in what we could call monu-politics, using the dead to inspire the living. Still, idea-driven liberal democracies, like America and Israel, particularly need stories, symbols, shared memories, sacred spaces.

Jewish law usually frowns on reburials, except to come “home” to Israel. The Labor Zionist AD Gordon celebrated working the land as one of many ways of reconnecting to it.

“We come to our Homeland to be planted in our natural soil from which we have

been uprooted, to strike our roots deep into its life-giving substances...” he wrote in 1920. “Here, in Palestine, is the force attracting all the scattered cells of the people to unite into one living national organism.”

*Theodor Herzl: Zionist Writings*, the three volumes I edited to launch The Library of the Jewish People in 2022, pulsates with passages proving that Herzl agreed.

In 1895, Herzl insisted a flag was not just “a stick with a rag on it. ... For a flag, men will live and die ... the policy of an entire people – particularly when it is scattered all over the earth – can be carried out only with imponderables that float in thin air.”

From that theoretical

understanding – and psychological insight – Herzl mourned the assimilated Jews’ soul sickness and identity vertigo.

Honoring the “great strength” and “inner unity” that sustained Judaism, and writing words that sting today, he noted: “A generation which has grown up apart from Judaism does not have this unity; it can neither rely upon our past nor look to the future. That is why we shall once more retreat into Judaism and never again permit ourselves to be thrown out of this fortress.”

“National awareness must be followed by an awakening of the national will,” he preached.

HERZL’S 1896 manifesto, *The Jewish State*, written 130 years ago, imagined returning the wandering Jews to their homeland, “not by forcibly uprooting them from their soil, but by lifting them out carefully, roots and all, and transplanting them in better ground. Just as we want to create new economic and political conditions, we intend to keep sacred all emotional attachments to the past.”

Herzl danced between life and death, personally and nationally. Born in 1860, approaching his 40th birthday with heart trouble, he kept trying to outrun the Angel of Death, while “awakening” his people, “poor, tortured, bleeding from many wounds, presumed and pronounced dead, and yet unable and unwilling to die.”

And he kept insisting, “The Jews who wish for a state will have it. We shall live at last as free people on our own soil, and die peacefully in our own homes.”

Herzl died in 1904, only 44 years old. “I ask for a funeral of the most modest kind,” he wrote. “I wish to be buried in a metal coffin in a grave beside my father until the Jewish people raise my bones to Palestine, to which my father’s coffin will also be conveyed.”

On Av 22, 1949, Herzl and his wife, his parents, and his one sister were reburied in Jerusalem. Then-prime minister David Ben-Gurion situated Mount Herzl in Jerusalem to affirm Jewish sovereignty in the Jewish people’s 3,000-year capital. Subsequently, two of Herzl’s children and his only grandson were reinterred there too.

It is fitting to welcome Herzl’s beloved grandparents home. Shimon Leib Herzl regularly blew the shofar for

Rabbi Yehudah Alkali, a Sephardi early Zionist. In the 1840s, Alkali emphasized the importance of “collective return” to the Land of Israel. Many believe Shimon Leib’s Alkaline proto-Zionism inspired young Theodor.

Beyond the personal, returning “dem bones” continues the processes of national renewal and the ingathering of exiles. Bones represent the physical, the real. Herzl’s grandparents’ long-delayed skeletal aliyah means the Jewish legacy is that much less scattered outside the homeland, less cut off from its essence.

They provide more physical links in the chain of Jewish history, honoring Jews’ remarkable survival in exile, thanks to an enveloping culture of memory, and an indomitable thirst to return. Their remains will lie in a place of honor, graced by the graves of more than 3,400 Israeli soldiers who sacrificed their lives to fulfill Herzl’s and the Jewish people’s dreams.

By updating their ongoing history in that land, the Jewish people have transformed what was once the Valley of the Dry Bones into a thriving State of Israel. Breathing new life into the Jewish people and the Jewish State has been good for the Jews – and, as Herzl’s Zionism envisioned, for all of humanity too.

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Amid threats of more Iranian bombing and as the election approaches, Israel’s efforts to reinter Theodor Herzl’s paternal grandparents on Mount Herzl today may seem distracting, even macabre.

Shimon Leib and Rivka Herzl have rested in peace in Zemun, Belgrade, since 1879 and 1888, respectively. In fact, their homecoming is a profound act of Zionist faith and synthesis, mocking the anti-Zionist mania worldwide.

This latest Herzl return, 77 years after Theodor Her-

zl’s 1949 reburial, reflects Zionism’s redemptive benefits and embodies Herzl’s *Altneuland*, old-new land. It reaffirms Zionism’s epic achievement in indigeneity renewal – reassembling the once-forcibly-scattered Jewish people in Israel, their aboriginal homeland.

As kids we sang, “Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, Ezekiel connected dem dry bones.... now hear the word of the Lord.”

During the Babylonian exile following the First Temple’s destruction, Ezekiel’s Valley of the Dry



PRO-ISRAEL counter-protesters face the main protest at Edgware United Synagogue in London, earlier this year. (Denise Baker/Getty Images)