

Israel, Zionism and Anti-Semitism: From Then Until Now

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I want to tell you a story that began a long time ago, and continues today. And like many great stories, it is inspired by a single person, impacted by the world around him. Here is this story....

The year was 1860. The place was the city of Budapest. The world was filled with challenge and great detest.

There are trials and tribulations in all lands. Perhaps similar to the ones we read about in the Rosh Hashanah Torah portion, the famous Binding of Isaac passage. From what I can gather, God is putting Abraham through the greatest test of his life – the test of faith. Luckily for Isaac, Abraham is successful, and the miracles of the Torah hold true once again.

I am not such an avid believer. I am a dreamer. Why does the date and place matter? Well, Budapest is where I was born, on May 2nd, 1860. You see, my name is Binyamin Ze'ev Herzl, more often known in your day as Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism, and I am here to share with you my story, and perhaps help to explain how the world got to where it is today.

However, in order for you to come to understand my vision and my dream, and the challenges that seem to exist today, we need to go back to the beginning.

Growing up, I lived next door to the large liberal Reform Temple in Budapest. I attended there regularly with my father on the Sabbaths and Holy Days. And at six years old I joined the Jewish school run by the Budapest Jewish community. Of course, at thirteen, I became a Bar Mitzvah. However, our home was not one filled with Jewish rituals, but we did maintain Jewish character.

Perhaps greater than the influence of my father was the influence of my mother, with whom I developed a particularly close relationship. She was educated German through and through. On a daily basis, she could be found quoting German literature, especially the classics. Though she was familiar with the Jewish world, it was not her passion. Her life revolved around implanting the German cultural heritage in us, her children.

Now let me stray for just a moment from the personal to the communal. The world was a fascinating place during my formative years. Though there were revolutions and uprisings, by 1867, Jews were granted full emancipation and began to play a vital role in all aspects of society. Despite the growing Jewish community, Jews faced political anti-Semitism everywhere.

Though there was a trend to a strict Orthodox approach to Judaism, and the promotion of the study of Torah, many people, like myself, found their way to Jewish enlightenment, which came to Hungary in the 1830's, along with the Reform Movement, both of which countered the Orthodox trends. Zionism was also prevalent in Hungary since the early 1800's, when a great scholar recommended that his disciples move to Israel and they became part of the Ashkenazi yishuv movement.

In 1878, my life truly began to change. Our family moved to Vienna, the then main spiritual and social capital of Europe. A city known for its rich and pluralistic culture, it was the destination of leading thinkers and artists, including, Sigmund Freud. Vienna was a mixed metropolis, home to immigrants from many diverse lands. The relationship between the residents was relatively harmonious, for everyone wanted to have neighborly relations and strived to lend into a single multi-cultural Vienna. However, I would soon learn that this was merely what was seen on the surface.

While studying at the university, I belonged to a fraternity called Albia, a German Nationalist Organization that became quite anti-Semitic. That would be my first encounter with the anti-Semitism that would shape my life. In 1884 I was awarded a doctorate of law from the University of Vienna, but instead of pursuing law, I became a writer and reporter. I had the opportunity to travel to Holland, Belgium and Berlin at this time, and I quickly observed how anti-Semitism was on the rise. By the early 1890's, I had become a successful writer, a playwright and a journalist. In 1891, I actually became the Paris correspondent of the influential liberal Vienna newspaper, which at the time was still not overtly anti-Semitic. I remained in Paris until July 1895. It was during this time that I was exposed to various forms of anti-Semitism, and I began to conceive of different ways to resolve the Jews' distress.

In October 1894, an assimilated Jewish officer in the French Army, Alfred Dreyfus, is unjustly accused of treason. I was assigned to report this trial to my paper in Vienna. I was present in the courtroom when Dreyfus was found guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment, and I was also present during the public ceremony when Dreyfus had his captain's rank ripped from his uniform. With my own ears, I heard the French mobs cry out 'Death to the traitor!' and 'Death to the Jews!' "I became a Zionist following the Dreyfus trial, to which I was witness."

At this time in my life, my sole purpose was to find a solution to the problem of anti-Semitism. "For some time, I had been engaged in a project of immeasurable scope. I did not know if I would ever complete it. It was for me the form of a tremendous dream. Yet for days and weeks it filled my being to the point of insensibility. What will come of this could not yet be estimated. But my experience told me that this was something wonderful, if only as a dream, and that I must put it into writing."

From this worldly circumstance, I could only imagine the establishment of an independent state for the Jews. "We need do nothing but wipe the sleep from our eyes, stretch our strong limbs, and we can turn the dream into reality. Whoever brings this message – does not come as a prophet with bizarre expressions, nor as a dreamer."

In 1896, the stage was set to introduce the world to my book the Jewish State, which would later become the fundamental manifesto of the Zionist movement. In it, the Zionist vision was described for the first time, reinforcing the readers' faith that a Jewish state was neither a legend nor a dream. In clear, precise terms, I describe the steps to be taken in order to realize the Zionist ideal and the character of the future state.

I wrote: "The plan would seem mad enough if a single individual were to undertake it; but if many Jews simultaneously agree on it, it is entirely reasonable, and its achievement presents no difficulties worth mentioning. The idea depends only on the number of its adherents. Perhaps our ambitious young men, to whom every road of advancement is now closed, and for whom the Jewish state throws open a bright prospect of freedom, happiness and honor, perhaps they will see to it that this idea is spread..."

Though others did not agree with me on this next point, even those who were Zionists, I believed it was important to gain international and legal recognition of the rights of the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael before beginning actual settlement there.

In 1897, precisely 125 years ago, I convened the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. It was at this conference that Zionism was established as an official movement. This was the conference that set direction and definition to who we were and how we would go about accomplishing our mission. There were some 200 Jewish figures from around the world, though many Jewish leaders did not support us.

“If I were to sum up the Basle Congress in a single phrase, I would say: In Basle I created the Jewish State. Were I to say this aloud I would be greeted by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, and certainly in fifty, everyone will recognize this....”

Many have called me the truest of Statesman, but being a statesman to a people without a State can be rather disheartening. I know many who have called me an exceptional person, a kind of prince in exile or a king without a crown who had pointed out the route his people should follow. But a king without a kingdom is a challenging place to be.

I understand only that the Jewish problem was a national matter, and its solution was an “international political problem to be settled by the civilized nations of the world in council.” I knew I would need to negotiate with the world powers for purchasing the lands of Eretz Yisrael. Therefore, I understood the level of importance to obtaining a charter that would guarantee free immigration, self-defense, independence and internal autonomy for the colonists.

On October 14, 1898, I left for Eretz Yisrael. I arrived there through the port city of Jaffa two weeks later, for my first and only trip to the Promised Land. I arrived by boat, and from the minute I arrived, I felt the tangle of peoples in around me, and entanglement that remains in your world today. That trip remained with me, always.

In 1901, the first office of the Jewish Colonial Trust was founded in London, as an instrument for Zionist economic and political activity. The Jewish National Fund was also established at this time as a national fund, whose goal is to purchase land in Eretz Yisrael using money raised by the Jewish people. I believe you are all probably familiar with the many trees the now called JNF plants each year.

In 1902 I had the idea to write a utopian novel. I entitled it *Altneuland* –the Old-New Land. It was my vision of the Jewish state 21 years later, in which a socialist utopia would be established. I know it seems hard to believe, but I envisioned a new society that was to rise in the Land of Israel on a cooperative basis utilizing science and technology in the development of the land. I saw immediately the future state’s political structure, immigration, fundraising, diplomatic relations, social laws and relations between religion and the state. I was certain the Jewish state would be a pluralist, advanced society, a real light unto the nations. And it is.. And so much more....

Many have questioned Herzl’s desire to want a Jewish State. Was he insane? What right did he have? But look at Israel today. It may not be exactly the Israel that Herzl dreamed of, but it exists, and thrives, and... it has incredible challenges. And... it will never leave.

So why do I tell you this story of Herzl on THIS Rosh Hashanah? Because so often we forget the beginnings of a story, of THIS and only see the current reality. The modern State of Israel began as a dream of one man to solve the problem of world-wide anti-Semitism and hatred. The true conversation at the First Zionist Congress was about promoting the settlement of Jews of all kinds in then Palestine, now Israel. They discussed uniting all Jews, which has perhaps been one of the greatest challenges.

Now let us leap forward 125 years to today. The core values and roots of Zionism are the same – the support and commitment to a national Jewish and democratic homeland in Israel, the birthplace of Judaism. And like every other modern country, there are challenges. First, Herzl’s concept that all Jews of all backgrounds should come together in support of the State of Israel never came to fruition. We Jews are known for our opinions, and when it comes to Israel, there are many, of all varieties.

There are many narratives that are told about Zionism, the modern State of Israel and the Jewish people. It is our duty to unfold them, to understand them, and to correct the narrative, which today, in America, will be challenging at best. Here are a few of my basic perspectives on this matter, and here is my formal invitation to join me in a year of discussion and study about Zionism, Israel, Anti-Semitism, the BDS movement and beyond.

1. **Israel is an amazing place.** It is my home away from home. I love the language, the people, the places, the history, the technology, and so much more. I love just being there, celebrating Shabbat there, and bringing people to Israel, to see the incredible place it has become. Join me in February as Makom heads to Israel once again... you will see what I mean – because it is hard to explain in words!
2. **Israel has challenges.** Great challenges. Due in large part to the political nature of the region, Israel is always needing to defend herself, and so security of Israel remains one of the driving forces and conversations for Israelis. There are great tensions between the desire to protect Israel from others and the desire to focus on important domestic matters. Domestic issues bring real challenges to Israel, which is a discussion for another day.

I don’t agree with every decision Israel makes, but I also don’t agree with every decision America makes. Or England. Or South Africa. Or Germany.

3. **Anti-Semitism is on the rise.** In the United States, and around the world. Herzl was right to create a place for Jews in response to the hatred that was growing in Europe at the time. But today’s solution cannot be to create another place – we have a place. Today’s response to Anti-Semitism must be to fight it – in the political arena, in the media, in the schools and beyond. The ADL reports that 2021 had more incidents of anti-Semitism than they have ever reported before. And it cannot be someone else’s problem – there is no Herzl who is going to swoop down and save us – we must each rise up to fight this hatred, and other hatreds, in our community and in our land.
3. **America does overall support Israel.** The relationship between the United States and Israel is primarily a strong one, but it takes work. Many of you know that I support AIPAC. I do so because I believe unequivocally in the need for Israel and the United States to always maintain a strong relationship, and that is the mission of AIPAC.

This does not mean that I agree with every tactic, nor do I share similar political positions to all members of AIPAC, but I believe them to be the best organization today to continue to educate and maintain America's unfaltering commitment to Israel, regardless of the blue, red and purple map, and for that reason, and that reason alone, I support AIPAC. I invite you to join me in conversation about AIPAC and its new philosophy in the coming weeks and months.

4. **The BDS movement is horrible.** Period. It is a Palestinian-led movement promoting boycotts, divestments and economic sanctions against Israel. Though its leaders try hard to portray themselves as peace activists who are using non-violent means to force Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and make way for a Palestinian State, their real purpose is to eliminate Israel as a Jewish state.

And the greatest challenge, perhaps, is the growing influence the BDS movement has on college campuses. Many young, impressionable college students are being swayed to believe the rhetoric of the BDS movement, without understanding that it is an anti-Israel movement. Period.

5. **Anti-Israel IS Anti-Semitism.** Israel is a Jewish state. The state Herzl dreamed up because of Anti-Semitism. To blanketly oppose Israel, and boycott Israel, and denounce Israel, the JEWISH STATE, IS to be against Jews, the definition of Anti-Semitism. There are many who claim that one has nothing to do with the other. I disagree. I believe the two are completely intertwined, and we must understand that.
6. **The left and the right are equally responsible.** American politics is much more complicated than it once was. We are in a season of repenting for our sins, and as my colleague Rabbi Eric Yoffie points out, Jews on the left and the right both have what to atone for.

For Jews of the left, we should say: we have sinned against you by minimizing Israel's virtues, blaming Israel for the sins of others, and expecting too little from Israel's adversaries. For Jews of the right, we should say: we have sinned against you by denying Palestinians basic rights, ignoring their suffering, encouraging hatred and forgetting what the Torah teaches about relations with the stranger.

7. **Some good has happened.** Two years ago, the Abraham Accords was a major step in making Israel's long-held dream of being accepted in the world, specifically in the Middle East, a reality. The normalization of relations between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco allows Israel to really belong in the region. Two years later, new flights, embassies and relationships exist that we could never have imagined. We can only hope that this conversation continues, and grows. Who knows if Theodore Herzl could have imagined the UAE foreign minister visiting Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Or maybe we **should** have imagined this. And we should dream. And vision. Just like Herzl did. Dream of a place and a time where anti-Semitism is no more. Where people support, and challenge Israel, as we do any and every other country in the world, AND also embrace, support and celebrate the incredible successes.

I hope you will join me in a year of study and understanding, questioning and debate, around Israel, Zionism, anti-Semitism and much more. "Im tirtzu, ain zo agada. If you will it, it is no dream!"