

What would Herzl have us read today?



by Geoffrey Clarfield

At the end of this past August, delegates from Israel and a wide range of Jewish and non-Jewish organizations met in Basel Switzerland, to celebrate the first Zionist conference that was held there, 125 years ago. The conference was attended by Israelis and citizens of many countries, Jews and non-Jews and delegates of all ages.

The recent event stimulated the usual protests from left leaning and Islamic groups who believe that Israel has no legal right to exist, and is some sort of “blot on the landscape” of an otherwise imagined, peaceful Arab World and wider middle east. But it also stimulated wide media coverage and discussion in Israel, the Diaspora and around the world. Having followed the news I asked myself, “What would Herzl have us read today?”

125 years ago, at the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Hungarian born Theodore Herzl believed that he had given birth to a future and real, independent Jewish state. Fifty-one years later, long after his death, his dream came true, but also after many brave Jewish men and women were killed by invading Arab armies from all sides, mightily armed by the allies, who ironically had just defeated Hitler and the Japanese. Herzl had written that Israel would need a professional army and during its war of independence in 1948 it got one quickly, by necessity.

If Herzl did not invent Zionism, he certainly designed the software that created the Jewish State in his marvelous book or pamphlet of the same name. In it he outlined the ways and means by which the Jewish people could become a state. In his time Herzl was called, "The Jules Verne" of the Jewish people; for to the educated men and women of Europe and the Americas at the end of the 19th century, a reconstituted, independent Jewish state in the land of the Bible was thought of as a piece of what eventually came to be known as "science fiction."

If Herzl were alive today, he would have ticked off all the boxes and concluded that his independent state was fully functional and had weathered the storms of the new anti-Semitism, that is to say, anti-Zionism.

Herzl desired that Israel would have its own set of laws, a strong economy both rural and urban, a professional army that can defend its territory, a majority of Jews, a parliament, tolerance for religious minorities, scientific excellence, as well as national styles in the arts, music and theatre. Israel today has all that and more. It is open to the world and receives millions of tourists each year. Israel is a fully functional democracy, with many accomplishments to its name as well as problems, challenges.

Had Herzl lived a long, long life (he died in his forties) he

would have witnessed the formation of the Jewish Legion which fought for the allied cause in Israel during WWI. He would have read the Balfour Declaration, studied the San Remo Declaration and no doubt, as a lawyer, read the Mandate for Palestine with the eye of a legal expert.

He would have been delighted to know that the soon to be created State of Israel was mandated by the League of Nations (and later confirmed by the United Nations) as an entity whose borders include Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the Golan Heights.

During the 1920s and thirties, as the British systematically betrayed the letter and spirit of the Mandate for Palestine, they began the salami tactics which still afflict modern Israel today, the mantra being, "If you only give up a little more of the land of Israel to your enemies, self-declared Arab and Islamic entities from as far away as Afghanistan and Iran, then and only then will you have peace." This has not worked as the latest attacks from Hamas in Gaza have proven.

I believe that if Herzl were alive today, he would lament the fact that Jews and Israelis in and outside of the land of Israel are largely unaware that Israel's land rights are guaranteed and have been guaranteed by international law for almost a century. If Herzl were alive today, he would not only take credit for his own remarkable pamphlet but exhort us to read something similar. And what could that book be?

I asked Goldi Steiner co-founder of Canadians for Israel's Legal Rights. She told me, " I think Herzl would have recommended that we read the late Salomon Benzimra's book, The Jewish People's Right to the Land of Israel." Here is how the book is described on Amazon:



The Jewish People's Rights to the Land of Israel (JPRLI) takes the reader through a journey spanning over three millennia: the historical connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel; the revival of their national aspirations in the modern Zionist movement; the recognition of their collective, national rights in international law; and the insidious violation of these rights during the British Mandate period, up to the proclamation of the State of Israel. In conclusion, we offer some thoughts on the myth- fact dichotomy that continues to plague the political reality of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and on the path to a just and lasting peace in the region. (<https://www.amazon.ca/Jewish-Peoples-Rights-Land-Israel/dp/109236742X>)

The book, like Herzl's own, is used by an organization called "Canadians for Israel's Legal Rights" jointly founded by Goldi and the late Benzimra. They organize lectures, events, seminars and webinars to teach anyone interested, both in and outside of Israel, just why Israel is the owner, not the occupier of the Land of Israel.

During a telephone interview Goldi told me, "Recently, I watched with great satisfaction how Israelis and Zionists around the world converged in Basel to celebrate the results

of the first Zionist conference organized by Theodore Herzl, one hundred and twenty-five years ago. It was a success as it gave birth to the State of Israel, sadly long after Herzl died.

We must remember that Herzl was a Hungarian Jew who first considered assimilation and the disappearance of the Jews from the face of the world's nations as a solution to Jewish persecution. But something inside him, some mystical Jewish spark, made him a world historical figure who founded a world historical movement. He was a modern secular Moses like figure who would lead his people back to the promised land but, who could not join them."

She continued, "Herzl was a lawyer who studied and worked in Vienna. Even Freud corresponded with him. If he were alive today, he would ask Israel's friends and enemies to read Benzimra's book. I have no doubt in my mind. Readers would then be reminded of the rightness and goodness of that far away place that lives in all of just people's hearts. Simply put, Herzl would have argued that Israel exists by right not just by might alone."

I believe that Goldi is right. And, as she is a Jewish survivor born in Hungary, the land of Herzl's birth, I trust her judgement.

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