

Giving Herzl His Due

In June 2004, Israel's parliament voted to create a national day in honor of the founder of modern political Zionism, Theodor Herzl. The law, introduced by Shinui MK Ilan Shalgi and drafted with assistance from the Shalem Center (which publishes *AZURE*), aims to "instill in future generations the vision and heritage of Theodor Herzl, to commemorate his life's work, and to shape the State of Israel and its institutions, objectives, and character in accordance with his Zionist vision." To that end, the Knesset designated the tenth day of the Hebrew month of Iyar, Herzl's birthday, as a day of observance and study. And so, on May 19 of this year, accompanied by official ceremonies and a great deal of public discussion, the Jewish state paid its due for the first time to the country's founding visionary.

To citizens of many other countries, the passage of the Herzl Law will not seem unusual. The United States, for example, has a long tradition of honoring its own national heroes, with Presidents' Day in February commemorating the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in January celebrating the achievements of America's greatest civil rights activist. India, too, celebrates a national holiday in honor of Mohandas Gandhi, who played a crucial role in securing Indian independence from the British Empire; and Argentina honors General José de San Martín, hero of its national independence from Spain. These days of observance aim to instill an appreciation for the achievements

of great individuals who shaped the character of their countries, and a loyalty to the principles that guided them.

Israel, in contrast, has had no such tradition with respect to Herzl—nor, judging by the mixed reactions that greeted the announcement of the law’s passage by the Knesset, did it seem particularly eager to take one up. *Haaretz*, Israel’s highbrow daily, complained that Israel is already overloaded with national holidays in Iyar—Israel’s Memorial Day and Independence Day—and questioned the need for another. Nir Baram, in a column for the daily *Maariv* online, made no effort to hide his discomfort. In an article entitled “Who Needs That Bearded Guy, Anyway?” Baram—whose father and grandfather were Knesset members and ministers in the government—asserted that Herzl’s legacy has nothing to offer twenty-first-century Jews. “This romantic nostalgia for the days of Zionist hawkishness,” he wrote, “is pointless.” Much of the public debate, moreover, focused on perceived lapses in Herzl’s character: His lack of a thorough Jewish education, the way he raised his children, and so forth. Others pointed to the fact that Herzl was not the first Jew, nor even the first modern European Jew, to advocate a Jewish state. Some of this sentiment has clearly had an impact on public opinion concerning the value of Herzl’s contribution: Astonishingly, 62 percent of Israelis polled recently claimed that Israel would have been established even without Herzl, and an additional 15 percent were unsure.

True, it is generally more fashionable to belittle the qualities of founding heroes than to revere them. Thus David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Dayan, Golda Meir, and other Israeli leaders have become the subject of much derision in the Israeli public discourse in recent years. Yet the recent deflation of Herzl’s image among Israelis is especially surprising given the status he once held: It was Herzl’s portrait, and none other, that hung on the wall behind David Ben-Gurion during the latter’s famous proclamation of Israel’s independence on May 14, 1948; it was Herzl, and no other Zionist leader, who had a major Israeli city named after him—the city of Herzliya; and when the Bank of Israel first started putting the portraits of national heroes

on Israeli currency in 1969, the first such note—the 100-lira bill—featured the image of Herzl.

There were very good reasons for this degree of attention. For Herzl's contribution to the creation of the Jewish state was not just important. It was decisive. Herzl was certainly not the only leader of his day to work for the settlement of Jews in Palestine, or to encourage a Jewish cultural renaissance in their ancestral homeland; but in hindsight it is difficult to imagine how a beleaguered, divided, and strategically impotent people could have mustered the political, economic, or intellectual resources necessary to create a sovereign homeland without the contribution of this singular man.

Herzl understood the power of ideas to move people into action, even those who had been habituated to centuries of exile, and he harnessed this power to transform the ancient idea of Jewish sovereignty in the holy land into a practical possibility. “No man is wealthy or powerful enough to move a nation,” he wrote. “Only an idea can achieve that.” While Moses Hess and Leo Pinsker had written in favor of Jewish independence, it was Herzl, the journalist and dramatist, who transformed the idea into a burning need, a real possibility, a call for action. Through his influential works, and especially *The Jewish State*, Herzl made tangible the vision of a Jewish state in the hearts and minds of Jews everywhere.

The decisive point in this revolution of ideas came with the First Zionist Congress, which Herzl convened in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. At the time a little-known Viennese writer who enjoyed little support and very few resources, Herzl invited participants to discuss issues “of supreme consequence to the Jewish nation.” When the assembly gathered in the casino hall Herzl had rented for the occasion—just eighteen months after the publication of *The Jewish State*—it was attended by hundreds, including Ahad Ha'am, Max Nordau, and Israel Zangwill—men with vastly different philosophies, yet united in a sense of mutual purpose. Herzl impressed upon them that this was no ordinary gathering of Jewish intellectuals, but

a prelude to sovereignty. He insisted that all participants appear at discussions in formal dress, and he unveiled a national flag, a precursor to what became the flag of Israel. “At Basel,” Herzl wrote in his diary, “I founded the Jewish state. If I said this out loud today, it would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, certainly in fifty, everyone will know it.” The force of Herzl’s vision and the clarity of his thinking about the state-in-the-making gained him audiences with the German kaiser, the Ottoman sultan, and the leaders of Great Britain—including David Lloyd George and Lord Balfour. The latter were sufficiently impressed that years after Herzl’s death, within months of Britain’s takeover of Palestine in 1917, they put their full weight—most famously in the Balfour Declaration—behind the project that Herzl had begun.

Herzl’s success in convincing the Jews and the powers of the world to support the idea of a Jewish state was buttressed by his unparalleled achievement in creating the institutions that laid the foundations for the Zionist revolution. Herzl founded the Zionist Organization at that first congress in 1897, and in a single year it counted some 800 chapters across Europe representing 100,000 Jews, and would become the central political body of the Zionist movement and the basis for the first government of Israel. He established the Jewish Colonial Bank, which would foster the development of the new Jewish community in the land of Israel, and the Jewish National Fund, which for a century helped finance the settlement of Jews there.

Herzl himself did not live to see statehood. At the time of his sudden death in 1904 at the age of 44, no land had yet been acquired for a Jewish state, no sovereignty granted, no army built, and no freedom won—save for the freedom that accompanies envisioning a free future. But to conclude that he should be seen as just one of many Zionist figures, or that Israel’s successful emergence from two millennia of homelessness would have happened without him, is to conclude in error.

Moving testimony to Herzl's enormous influence and the power of his vision may be found in the words of Viennese Jewish writer Stefan Zweig, who described the moving scene he witnessed at Herzl's funeral:

It was a strange day that day in July, unforgettable to everyone who witnessed it. Suddenly, from every station, from every train, day and night, from every region, from every part, they arrived and came in their thousands. Jews from western and eastern Europe, Russian and Turkish Jews, from every district and every remote hamlet, they flowed into the city, the shock of the bad news still on their faces. And the truth that had been obscured for so long by dissents and gossip was now revealed to us in all its might—that this man who is now being laid to rest was the leader of a great movement. Suddenly, Vienna is learning that it was no ordinary writer or poet who has died, but one of those people who shape ideas, the like of whom appear so rarely on the stages of history. A terrible pain has cut through the hearts of an entire nation, and for the first time I have come to realize how much courage and hope this singular man has instilled in the world by means of his vision.

This year, for the first time in its history, the Jewish state dedicated a day to honoring its founding visionary. The day offers Jews the world over the chance to reflect on the man who paved the way for a nation, and provides us with an opportunity to remember that beyond the ideological, religious, and cultural issues that divide us, it is Herzl's vision of an independent Jewish state that continues to bind the Jewish people together.

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