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SCHOLARS

THE FOUNDING OF MODERN ISRAEL: LEADERS WHO BUILT THE JEWISH STATE





The Founding Father: Herzl's Vision of a Jewish State

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Dateline: Paris, 1895

It is early January 1895, in Paris, France. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army, is falsely accused of spying for Germany. He is publicly stripped of his rank and his sword is broken in an act of public shaming. Just outside the gates of the military school, a mob is howling “A bas les Juifs!”—“down with the Jews!”

Witnessing this spectacle is a 34-year-old journalist and playwright named Theodor Herzl. At the time, Herzl was not very involved in Jewish life, politics, or religion. He had encountered anti-Semitism as a student at the University of Vienna, and he was becoming increasingly aware of the threat facing Jews in modern Europe. Mugged by the harsh reality of Jew-hatred, Herzl now believed that the only possible solution to “the Jewish question” was the creation of an independent Jewish state. A new Zionist movement—led by Herzl, who pledged the rest of his life to this noble cause—was about to be born.

In Class 1, we will consider the unlikely story of Herzl’s emergence as a Zionist founder. A man with no background in political activism or diplomacy, he turned the historic dream of restoring the Jewish nation into a global Jewish movement. What values and aims shaped Herzl’s Zionist vision? What was his strategy? What were his successes and his failures? And what is his legacy as one of the greatest Jewish leaders in history?

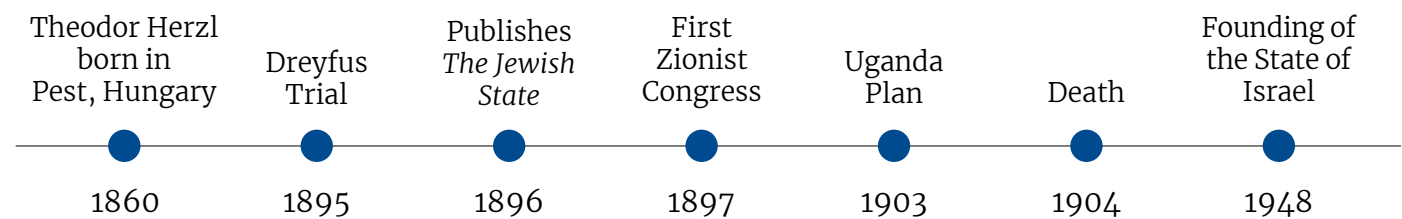


A French magazine cover from 1895 depicting Captain Alfred Dreyfus being stripped of his rank



A photograph of Theodor Herzl

Historical Spotlights



1878 | Herzl Encounters Anti-Semitism at the University of Vienna



As a young man, Herzl made his way into the elite institutions of European life—including the law faculty at the University of Vienna and the fraternity culture of high society. Once there, he faced the indignity of anti-Jewish prejudice. Herzl was particularly concerned by Eugen Dühring’s book *The Jewish Problem as a Problem of Race, Morals and Culture*. Dühring argued that if Jews gained greater freedoms, they would poison the rest of European society. How, Herzl wondered, could a highly educated scholar promote such horrible anti-Semitic ideas? As he wrote: “If Dühring, with undeniable intelligence and knowledge, can write like this, what are we to expect from the ignorant masses?”

1896 | Herzl Publishes *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*)



Awakened by his exposure to anti-Semitism at the university and in the Dreyfus trial, Herzl believed Jews needed to mobilize around the creation of a new Jewish state. “I have the solution to the Jewish question,” he wrote. “I know it sounds mad; and at the beginning I shall be called mad more than once—until the truth of what I am saying is recognized in all its shattering force.” Herzl found a publisher, and his manifesto, *The Jewish State*, was published in February 1896.

1897 | Herzl Convenes the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland



Herzl worked feverishly to promote his Zionist ideas. He began meeting and negotiating with world leaders—including representatives of the Sultan of Turkey, Kaiser Wilhelm, the king of Italy, and Pope Pius X. In August 1897, Herzl brought together more than 200 Jewish delegates from around the world in Basel, Switzerland for the First Zionist Congress, creating an organization dedicated to the establishment of a Jewish state. Dressed in their finest clothing, the delegates drafted and approved “the Basel Program,” which proclaimed: “Zionism seeks to secure for the Jewish people a publicly recognized, legally secured, home in Palestine.”

1903 | The Uganda Plan



In 1903, with violent assaults on Jews happening across the Russian Empire, the British government offered the Jews a large tract of land in Uganda, East Africa, for a new Jewish settlement. Herzl proposed this plan to the Sixth Zionist Congress as a “temporary haven,” one that seemed urgently needed after the brutal pogrom in Kishinev that had occurred just weeks before. The Uganda Plan caused an uproar, especially among Russian Jews. The plan was blocked, affirming the crucial importance of the Land of Israel to the modern Zionist project.

1904 | Herzl’s Death and Legacy



Herzl died near Vienna on July 3, 1904. He was only 44 years old. Forty-five years after his death, on August 17, an airplane flying the blue-and-white flag of the new State of Israel brought his remains to the Jewish homeland, where he is buried today on Mt. Herzl, along with other founding figures of the new Jewish state. When David Ben-Gurion declared the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, a portrait of Herzl hung on the wall behind him, the only picture in the room. Herzl was the only individual referenced by name in the Israeli Declaration of Independence. He was the true visionary and founder of modern Zionism.

A Scholar's View

The Most Politically Significant Meeting of Any Group of Jews in the Last 1,800 Years

The story of Theodor Herzl and the First Zionist Congress, convened 120 years ago on this date

Dr. Daniel Polisar | *Mosaic* | 8.23.17



Theodor Herzl addressing the delegates of the First Zionist Congress

This article has been excerpted for length

Today, the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul, marks the 120th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress. That three-day gathering, convened by Theodor Herzl in the Swiss city of Basel on August 29, 1897, might well be the most politically significant meeting of any group of Jews during the last 1,800 years, and it was almost certainly the most important step on the road to establishing a modern Jewish state. The event, like the state it helped create, was also the most improbable of success stories; roundly opposed by the majority of opinion leaders in the Jewish world and viewed with skepticism even by many of the prominent Jewish nationalists who chose to attend, it could easily have failed at any point from when it was announced until the end of its final session.

In his first diary entry of 1897, Herzl sized up the campaign he had begun nearly a year earlier with the February 1896 publication in German of his short, trenchant book, *Der Judenstaat*—known to English readers as *The Jewish State*. As he frankly acknowledged, the outlook was less than rosy: “I fear the best moment has passed.”

Herzl had long believed that there were two keys to bringing a Jewish state into existence, both of them involving top-down politics. Within the Jewish world, he sought the backing of the prominent businessmen-philanthropists who were viewed, by Jews and others, as the natural leaders of the Jewish people. Herzl’s call for establishing a Jewish state through negotiation with the major powers of the day, and settling masses of Jews in it, flew in the face of the century-long project of emancipation, through which the leading figures of Jewry sought to facilitate their people’s assimilation into the European countries in which most of them lived. This they would accomplish by demonstrating Jewish loyalty to these states, reducing anti-Semitism, and securing equal rights.

Some of these philanthropists were willing, on humanitarian grounds, to assist Jews seeking to flee Eastern Europe and settle in modest numbers in Palestine, which was a part of the Ottoman empire. Hence, they were willing to give qualified support to Chovevei Tzion (“Lovers of Zion”), the main organization pursuing this task—but not to the far more radical plan proposed by Herzl.

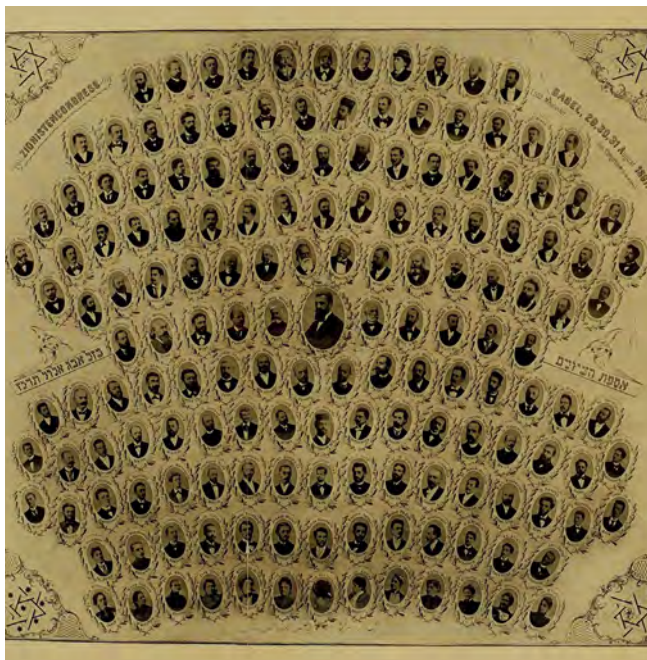
In parallel, Herzl had sought to use the prestige he gained from *Der Judenstaat*—which within its first year was translated into English, French, Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Romanian, and Bulgarian—to negotiate with the Ottoman sultan a deal whereby Herzl would secure from Jewish bankers a loan enabling the Ottomans to refinance their crippling debt in exchange for the sultan’s giving Jews the right to move to Palestine and begin creating a homeland there. Despite some nibbles by prominent members of the sultan’s court in Constantinople during Herzl’s two-week visit there in June 1896, this approach failed to bear fruit. The sultan himself balked at meeting Herzl, let alone acquiescing in handing control to the Jews of a land that had been under Islamic sway for more than a millennium.

Herzl’s Leadership and the Convening of the Congress

It was against this background that Herzl decided, in January 1897, to take the risk of convening a national assembly of the Zionists. In this one stroke, he sought to accomplish several aims: gain support from the Jewish masses by doing an end-run

around the Jewish philanthropists; establish an organization that would help achieve his aims; and gain the credibility for himself and for that organization to negotiate with the Ottomans and other powers of the day.

The move, however, was extraordinarily risky. At this stage Herzl had few reliable and effective allies; his opponents were better-recognized, better-funded, and better-organized; and any failure to attract an impressive group of participants and hold a dignified and productive conference would destroy his recently-won prestige and credibility, thus dooming to oblivion both him and those who stood with him.



Portraits of the founding members of the Zionist Congress

Yet, in January 1897, Herzl began writing to colleagues and potential allies about his plan to convene a “general assembly of Zionists,” and soon let it be known that it would take place in Zurich. In early March, he

met with a group of German Zionists led by Willy Bambus, and agreed to partner with them in calling for a congress, but with the location moved to Munich because, as he explained in his diary, its location was more convenient for eastern—that is, Russian—Jews, who “would not dare to come to Switzerland, which is suspected of nihilism [thus arousing the suspicions of the Russian Tsar’s justly feared secret police], and because there are kosher restaurants in Munich.”

Within a week, Herzl began sending out official notices of the conference, reading:

I am desired to announce that preparations are being made for the holding of a representative Zionist Congress at Munich, on August 25th next. . . In order to give the conference a thoroughly representative character, delegates will be invited from all Zionist movements, political or philanthropic, local or general, in their aims.

From that point forward, Herzl willed the Congress into being through a remarkable set of traits and actions: single-mindedness, the willingness to invest all his resources, and the rapid making and acting on decisions.

Alongside his boundless dedication, Herzl demonstrated absolute resolve that the Congress would take place. On March 29, he noted in his diary that he had received a disappointing letter from Colonel Albert Goldsmid of England, one of his first and seemingly most stalwart allies, urging Herzl to unite forces with Chovevei Tzion and not run his own congress.

Other prominent individuals were also turning against Herzl and the congress—including the chief rabbi of his home town of Vienna, who wrote an anti-Zionist pamphlet that was snapped up in multiple copies by the Rothschilds, and the chief rabbi of France, where Herzl had written *The Jewish State* and launched his Zionist career. In April, the Berlin group under Bambus withdrew their support in turn, claiming they had never agreed to a public event aimed at establishing a Jewish state. Indeed, the most prominent German Jews increasingly began to suspect the Congress would reflect negatively on their patriotic attachment to their Fatherland.

Herzl refused to be swayed. In his diary entry of April 24, after noting that “Bambus gives as a pretext that the Munich Jews are beside themselves and are protesting against the holding of the Congress in Munich,” he wrote: “If they give us trouble in Munich, I

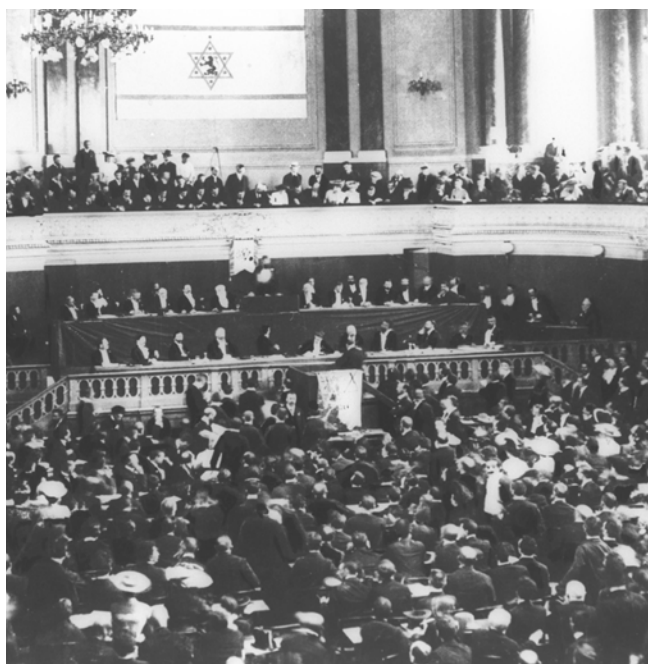


Herzl standing before the delegates of the Zionist Congress

shall take the Congress to Zurich.” As the blows continued to rain down, he continued to act without hesitation, writing on June 17: “Since the Munich Jewish community is protesting against holding the Congress, we decided in the Actions Committee today to transfer the Congress to Basel, possibly to Zurich.”

Yet alongside his steadfast refusal to be moved from his goal, Herzl also demonstrated pragmatism and flexibility. Most significantly, seeing that large numbers of the notable Western Jews on whom he had counted were not responding favorably to his invitation, he turned to the hinterlands of Russian Jewry. To this end, he had official invitations printed in Hebrew and sent to the leading figures in the Russian Chovevei Tzion movement. To secure their participation, Herzl promised that nothing would be said at the Congress that would bring about the ire of the Russian authorities or the Ottoman sultan; nor would anything be said against Baron Rothschild, the leading backer of Chovevei Tzion.

This policy paid off. Russian Jews began signing up in large numbers, thus assuring at least the initial appearance of a successful convocation and, in addition, stimulating others to follow suit. On August 14, two weeks before the scheduled opening date, Herzl noted that “The Zionists of business and philanthropy are coming ’round to me again, having realized that they cannot frustrate the Congress.”



Herzl delivering the opening remarks at the First Zionist Congress

Yet on the eve of the Congress, it was still far from clear it would be a success. Writing from the train to Basel on August 23, Herzl took stock:

Fact is—which I conceal from everyone—that I have only an army of shnorrers. I am in command only of boys, beggars, and prigs. Nevertheless, this army would be entirely sufficient if only success were in sight. Then it would quickly become a well-conditioned, regular army.

During the next week, it was Herzl’s task to conceal the weakness of his “army” while doing everything possible to show that success was in sight.

What Happened in Basel

Herzl arrived in Basel on August 25 and went to the office the city had placed at his disposal. Upon seeing it was “a vacant tailor’s shop,” he immediately had “the name of the firm covered over with a cloth, in order to forestall any bad jokes.” He also discovered that the local organizer tasked with finding an appropriate location for the assembly had chosen a beer hall, “a large but unsuitable place with a music-hall stage.” Herzl quickly rented instead the concert hall of the Basel Municipal Casino. At the entrance, he arranged for a large sign displaying the Star of David and the simple title, “Zionist Congress.” His ally, the traditionalist David Wolffsohn, had designed a flag consisting of a white field and two blue stripes, modeled on the *tallit*, or prayer shawl, and also with a Star of David.



A group of Eastern European delegates to the First Zionist Conference

While choreographing the scene—as was only to be expected, given his experience not only as a playwright but also as a keen observer of the high drama of French politics during four years as Paris correspondent for the leading Viennese paper—Herzl saw to it that the participants were appropriately dressed, both to inject them with a heightened sense of decorum and to make the requisite impression on observers. All delegates were informed that they had to wear formal European attire: for the men, black trousers, tails, and white tie. ...

There were somewhere between 196 and 246 delegates; it is impossible to know the exact number, in part because some delegates had their names removed from the official lists lest the Russian secret police learn they had been there in an official capacity. ...

Of the delegates in Basel, it appears that only 69 represented communities or organizations, while the others were chosen, mostly by Herzl, because of their interest in Zionism. They hailed from 20 countries, ranging from Algeria to the U.S., with the largest group being from Russia (63), followed by Austria and Germany. Jews of Russian origin also predominated in many of the nominally Western delegations, which means that their real numbers were greater than the figures show. Roughly 60 were engaged in business or finance and 38 were students; they were joined by 24 lawyers, 21 writers, 15 physicians, 13 journalists, and 11 rabbis.

As mentioned earlier, the Congress began on Sunday morning, August 29, the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul—which marks the start of the period of repentance leading

to the High Holy Days and was therefore a particularly propitious time to hold an event dedicated to national return. At Herzl's request, Karpel Lippe, the oldest delegate present, a long-time veteran of Chovevei Tzion, and the beneficiary of rabbinic training, opened the Congress and offered the blessing of *shehechiyanu*, thanking G-d for having "granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment."

When it was time for Herzl to give his welcoming speech, the delegates, evidently overwhelmed by genuine emotion, began cheering. One of them, an author from Odessa who wrote under the pseudonym Ben Ami ("Son of my people"), described the scene:

This was not the Dr. Herzl I had seen hitherto, and with whom I was in discussion as recently as last night. Before us rose a marvelous and exalted figure, kingly in bearing and stature, with deep eyes in which could be read quiet majesty and unuttered sorrow. It is no longer the elegant Dr. Herzl of Vienna; it is a royal scion of the House of David, risen from among the dead, clothed in legend and fantasy and beauty. Everyone sat breathless, as if in the presence of a miracle. And in truth, was it not a miracle which we beheld? And then wild applause broke out; for fifteen minutes the delegates clapped, shouted, and waved their handkerchiefs. The dream of two-thousand years was on the point of realization.

Herzl spoke briefly and quickly got to his central point: "We want to lay the cornerstone for the edifice which is one day to house the Jewish nation." . . . Subsequent delegates presented reports on the condition of Jewry around the world, on the economic position of the Jews, on the importance of Jewish national life, and the like. At the end of the first day, Herzl, who had been elected as president of the Congress and elegantly but firmly chaired virtually all of its sessions, announced that more than 550 congratulatory telegrams had been received, together with petitions of support bearing more than 50,000 signatures.

The most important event on the second day was discussion of the draft of a



The symbol of the First Zionist Congress

programmatic statement presented for discussion by Max Nordau as the head of a seven-man committee. Known subsequently as the Basel Program, it opened with a general declaration that initially read: "Zionism seeks to establish a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under law." This phrase, although toned down from Herzl's earlier, explicit call for establishing a Jewish state, was attacked by advocates of the Chovevei Tzion approach who feared it would be too provocative for the sultan. It was also criticized by idealistic supporters of Herzl's vision on the grounds that it was too watered down; they preferred to speak of a Jewish national home

secured under international law. In response to the latter, Herzl proposed the term “public law,” which hinted at, without explicitly calling for, international involvement of the kind that would likely be needed for bringing about a Jewish state.

The remainder of the Basel Program spelled out the means for bringing about the desired end, and it, too, showed the facility of Herzl and his allies for sticking to principle while being pragmatic enough to build a consensus. Among the chosen means were “fostering the settlement of Palestine with farmers, laborers, and artisans”; “organizing the whole of Jewry in suitable local and general bodies, in accordance with the laws of their respective countries”; “strengthening the national Jewish feeling and national consciousness”; and “taking preparatory steps to attain any governmental consent which may be necessary to reach the aim of Zionism.” After a heated debate, the program passed with overwhelming support.



The final version of the Zionist flag designed during the First Zionist Congress

At the end of the Congress, Max Mandelstamm, a Russian who was among the oldest participants, asked for the floor. He concluded by saying:

I plead with our honored president not to be discouraged by the hard work which he has performed and which still lies before him and by the discomforts which he has met and which are still to be met. May he bring to a successful conclusion the difficult work he has done, with the same spirit and the same self-sacrifice. Long live the president of the First Zionist Congress, Dr. Theodor Herzl!

After thunderous applause, Herzl declared: “The First Zionist Congress is now closed.” His loyal lieutenant, Jacob de Haas, described what followed:

The Congress was on its feet, the correspondents mounted the tables, and the audience in the gallery grew equally excited. It was not a question of cheering, but of ventilating hearts full of emotion. I have seen bigger crowds and have heard more vociferous outbursts, but the like of this mass of waving handkerchiefs . . . the like of this I have never seen.

Writing for public consumption a week later in *Die Welt*, a Zionist weekly he had founded in May of that year to serve as a platform for the polemics accompanying the decision to hold the Congress, Herzl spelled out the meaning of the event for the participants’ sense of nationhood:

Anyone who was in Basel during those three days of awakening Jewish history will indignantly reject the carping of malicious men. A number of people did go there to have a good laugh, but they lost their desire to laugh when the Jewish nation—poor, tortured, bleeding from many wounds, presumed and pronounced dead, yet unable and unwilling to die—suddenly arose before them in all the majesty of its suffering and with the gleam of hope in its eye. We are an unfortunate people, but a people, one people. . . The brothers have found each other.



A poster celebrating the 50th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress

For Herzl himself, the Congress was a huge success, transforming him from a playwright and journalist who had written a book arguing for a Jewish state into a political leader possessing the credibility born of having acted decisively, worked tirelessly, refused to bow to pressure to drop the idea of holding a Congress in the first place, combined firm commitment to principle with the ability to compromise on tactical issues, managed the proceedings masterfully, and proceeded immediately in its aftermath to consolidate and build on its gains until the day of his death a mere seven years later.

Today, 120 years after the First Zionist Congress convened in Basel, it is appropriate to remember this extraordinary event and the extraordinary leader who stood behind it.

Words that Shaped Jewish Destiny

Key Texts and Discussion Questions

Source 1: From Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State* (1896)

Introduction

*After witnessing firsthand the plague of anti-Semitism, Theodor Herzl was moved to action. He believed that the so-called "Jewish Question"—whether Jews could live with freedom and dignity in the other nations of the world—could never be resolved by staying in Europe. As long as Jews remained a minority within other countries, anti-Semitism would never disappear. Herzl believed that the only solution for Jews was a political one: to create a Jewish nation of their own. In his 1896 manifesto *The Jewish State*, Herzl offers a call to action for Jews everywhere and a detailed vision for what an independent Jewish nation could look like.*

On Anti-Semitism in Europe

We have honestly endeavored everywhere to merge ourselves into the social life of surrounding communities and to preserve the faith of our fathers. We are not permitted to do so. In vain are we loyal patriots, our loyalty in some places running to extremes; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow-citizens. . . In countries where we have lived for centuries we are still denounced as strangers...

No human being is wealthy or powerful enough to transplant a nation from one habitat to another. An idea alone can achieve that and this idea of a state may have the requisite power to do so. The Jews have dreamt this kingly dream all through the long nights of their history. "Next year in Jerusalem" is our old phrase. It is now a question of showing that the dream can be converted into a living reality. . .

Discussion Questions



1. Why does Herzl believe that the Jews in Europe would never be able to eradicate European anti-Semitism?
2. What is the idea that can fuel the dream of a Jewish state? Why can "an idea alone" inspire the rebirth of Jewish nationalism? What other ingredients are necessary?

On the Need for a Jewish State

We are one people—our enemies have made us one without our consent, as repeatedly happens in history. Distress binds us together, and, thus united, we suddenly discover our strength. Yes, we are strong enough to form a state, and, indeed, a model state. We possess all human and material resources necessary for the purpose. . .

Let sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation; the rest we shall manage for ourselves. The creation of a new state is neither ridiculous nor impossible. We have in our day witnessed the process in connection with nations which were not largely members of the middle class, but poorer, less educated, and consequently weaker than ourselves. The governments of all countries blighted by antisemitism will be keenly interested in assisting us to obtain the sovereignty we want. . .

3. What does Herzl mean when he says that “our enemies have made us one [people] without our consent”? Can you think of other forces or factors that unite the Jewish people?

4. Why does Herzl believe that “the governments of all countries blighted by anti-Semitism” will be interested in helping the Jews create their own Jewish state? Would the creation of a Jewish state be good for Europe itself?

Herzl’s Call to Action—Palestine!

Palestine is our ever-memorable historic home. The very name of Palestine would attract our people with a force of marvelous potency. . . Here it is, fellow Jews! Neither fable nor deception! . . .

Therefore I believe that a wondrous generation of Jews will spring into existence. The Maccabeans will rise again. Let me repeat once more my opening words: 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. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there to accomplish for our own welfare, will react powerfully and beneficially for the good of humanity.

5. Why does Herzl refer to the “Maccabeans rising again” in his Zionist call to action?

6. Does Jewish “freedom” and Jewish “greatness” require a Jewish state?

7. After centuries of exile, Herzl declares: “The Jews who wish for a state will have it.” Do you think Herzl’s readers found these words inspiring? Did they find them believable?

Source 2: "Proceedings of the First Zionist Congress" (1897)

Introduction

Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in August 1897. He wanted to create a new Jewish parliament—a formal governing body of the Jewish people—to articulate and pursue the goals of the Zionist movement. Approximately 200 delegates from seventeen countries attended the Congress, dressed in formal attire. Herzl ensured that the Congress had a festive atmosphere—a celebration of Jewish national rebirth. The discussions focused on the practical challenges of creating a Jewish state, the establishment of a new World Zionist Organization to mobilize Jews around the world, and the declaration of Zionism's goals. The core vision and guiding principles were ratified in a statement known as the Basel Program.

The Basel Program

Zionism seeks to establish a home for the Jewish people in Eretz Israel secured under public law. The Congress contemplates the following means to the attainment of this end:

1. The promotion by appropriate means of the settlement in Eretz-Israel of Jewish farmers, artisans, and manufacturers.
2. The organization and uniting of the whole of Jewry by means of appropriate institutions, both local and international, in accordance with the laws of each country.
3. The strengthening and fostering of Jewish national sentiment and national consciousness.
4. Preparatory steps toward obtaining the consent of governments, where necessary, in order to reach the goals of Zionism.

Discussion Questions



1. Did the Basel Program lay out a clear roadmap for the future of Zionism? Was anything missing?

2. Why does the Basel program emphasize “Jewish farmers, artisans, and manufacturers”? What other types of Jewish settlers were essential to building a Jewish nation?

3. Why did the Basel Program focus on strengthening “Jewish national sentiment and national consciousness”?

Source 3: Herzl's Diary – September 3, 1897

Introduction

In key periods of his life, Herzl kept extensive diaries in which he recorded the highs and lows of his experiences as a Zionist leader. In the diaries, he recounts conversations with world leaders, wealthy donors, and Jews from across Europe. He describes his plans and activities within the World Zionist Organization, as he worked tirelessly to make the dream of a Jewish state a reality.

Herzl's life was not easy. He experienced personal hardship, illness, and countless setbacks. At times, his diaries capture his sadness and despair. Yet what stands out is Herzl's confidence, hopefulness, and exhilaration over the achievements of the Zionist movement. These private reflections are a crucial window into the mind and personality of a man who was at once a passionate Jewish leader, a political visionary, and a great Zionist statesman.

“At Basel I Founded the Jewish State”

Were I to sum up the Basel Congress in a word—which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly—it would be this: At Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it.

Discussion Questions



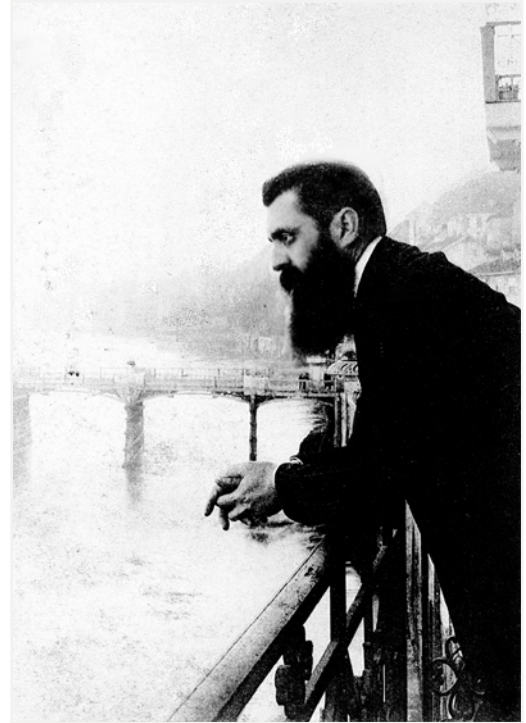
1. What did Herzl mean when he declared: “At Basel I *founded* the Jewish state”? How do you explain his prediction that “in five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it”? (Note: Herzl wrote these words in 1897; the state of Israel was born in 1948, almost exactly 50 years later.)

2. Why did Herzl believe he would be “greeted by universal laughter” if his view of the Basel Congress became public?

3. Was Herzl the ideal candidate to lead the Zionist movement? Why or why not?

Final Thoughts

Theodor Herzl was an outsider who rose to lead the most significant political movement in modern Jewish history. His ideas mobilized Jews around the world to pursue the “old-new” dream of an independent Jewish nation. His leadership paved the way for the rebirth of Israel in 1948. Looking back, was Herzl’s vision of political Zionism a success? What lessons does Herzl’s life teach us about Jewish leadership? And how did the dream of Israel survive centuries of Jewish exile in other lands?



Theodor Herzl leaning out of the window in his hotel in Basel, Switzerland

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- “The Mystery of Theodor Herzl” by Rick Richman in *Mosaic* | <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/israel-zionism/2021/01/the-mystery-of-theodor-herzl/>
- “Theodor Herzl: The Birth of Political Zionism” – 7-part video course by Dr. Daniel Polisar | <https://tikvahfund.org/course/theodor-herzl-birth-political-zionism/>
- “The Menorah” by Theodor Herzl in *Die Welt* | <https://herzlinstitute.org/en/theodor-herzl/the-menorah/>