



Millstone Scholars Sample Curriculum

*The Millstone Scholars Program is an educational initiative of Tikvah.
This program is part of Tikvah's broader commitment to educating
exceptional middle-school students, which is generously
supported by the Millstone Family.*



© Tikvah 2025
The Founding of Modern Israel and Zionism
Fourth Edition | December 2025

Tikvah
165 East 56th Street, 4th Floor
New York, New York 10022
(212) 796-1672 | info@tikvah.org
Tikvah.org

Political Zionism: Theodor Herzl

Part A	Part B	Part C	Part D	Part E
Orientation	Introduction and Historical Spotlights	Key Texts	Final Thoughts	For the Family Table

Orientation

Most Jews today love and support Israel, but do we understand the founding vision of the Zionist project? Or the great debates that shaped the emergence of the Jewish state?

Over the next few classes we will return to some of Israel's founding figures to explore the many meanings of Zionism: Is Zionism meant to save the Jews from physical destruction or to renew the Jewish spirit? What is the relationship between Zionism and Judaism? How has the meaning of Zionism changed from the first Zionist Congress to the present day?

Through essays and speeches by key Zionist thinkers such as Theodor Herzl, Ahad Ha'am, and Rav Abraham Isaac Kook we will seek to understand how different views of Zionism shape the past, present, and future of Israel.



Theodore Herzl (1860-1904)

Introduction

Zionism - Tzionut (ציונות) is a modern nationalist movement that began in the late 19th century with the goal of creating a homeland for the Jewish people in *Eretz Yisrael* (אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל) – the Land of Israel. It arose as a response to centuries of antisemitism and persecution in Europe, when many Jews believed they could only live safely and freely in a country of their own. Theodor Herzl, often called the father of modern Zionism, helped organize the movement, which eventually led to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

At its core, Zionism is based on the idea that Jews, like other nations, have the right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland. Over time, different forms of Zionism developed—political, cultural, and religious—but all shared the vision of a secure Jewish state - *medina* (מְדִינָה).

In this unit we start by unpacking Zionism as a broad idea and identifying the distinct movements that form it. We then dive into learning about the founder of contemporary political Zionism: Theodor Herzl. One of the most important Jews of the modern era, Herzl reintroduced Zionism to the Jewish people and began a political movement which culminated in a Jewish State less than fifty years after his passing. His achievements in less than ten years of active political campaigning echo to this day, and he occupies a significant place in the current Israeli and Jewish consciousness.

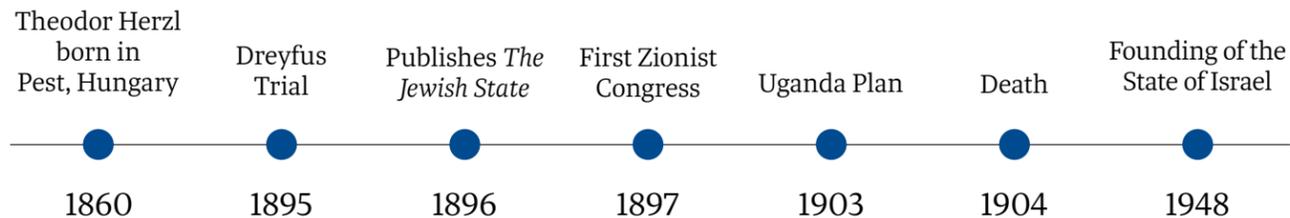
Vocabulary

English	Hebrew
Am (עַם)	Nation
Medina (מְדִינָה)	State (Country)
Tzionut (צִיּוֹנוּת)	Zionism
Eretz Yisrael (אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל)	Land of Israel

Guiding Questions:

1. What values and aims shaped Herzl's Zionist vision?
2. What was his strategy toward realizing the dream of a Jewish state?
3. What were his successes and his failures?
4. What is Herzl's legacy as one of the greatest Jewish leaders in history?

Historical Spotlights



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



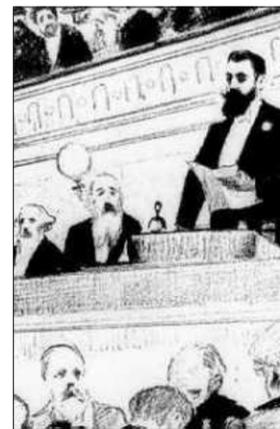
As a young man, Herzl made his way into the elite institutions of European life—including the law faculty at the University of Vienna and the fraternity culture of high society. Once there, he faced the indignity of anti-Jewish prejudice. Herzl was particularly concerned by Eugen Dühring’s book *The 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



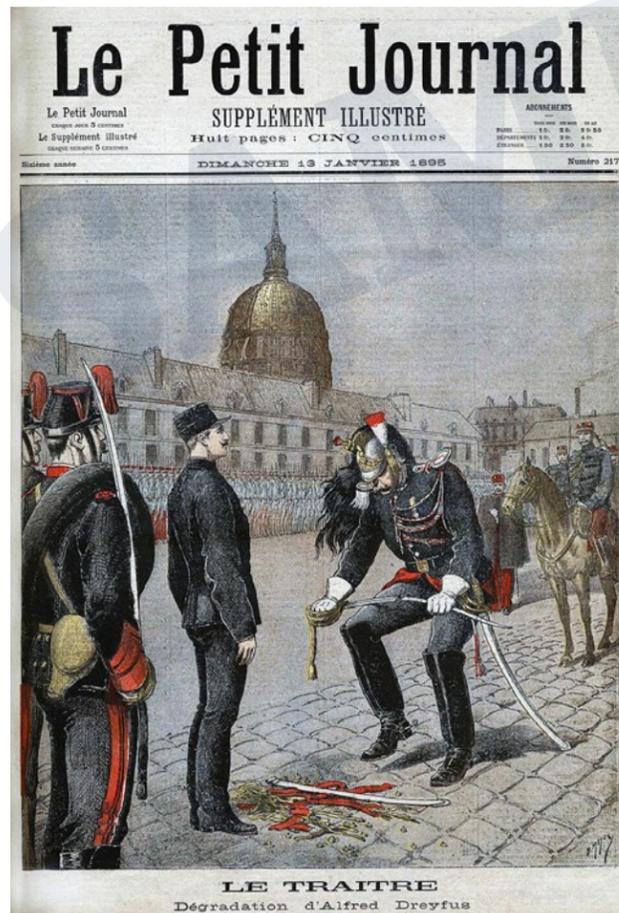
Herzl died near Vienna on July 3, 1904. He was only 44 years old. Forty-five years after his death, on August 17, an airplane flying the blue-and-white flag of the new State of Israel brought his remains to the Jewish homeland, where he is buried today on Mt. Herzl, along with other founding figures 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.

Key Texts

Zionism Beginnings | The Dreyfus Affair

In early January 1895, in Paris, France, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army, was 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 was 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.



“Le Petit Journal, January 13, 1895. The cover page of this newspaper issue shows the public humiliation of Alfred Dreyfus being stripped of his rank.”

Text 3a: Theodor Herzl, First Diary Entry. Shavuot (June) 1895

For some time past I have been occupied with a work of infinite grandeur. At the moment I do not know whether I shall carry it through. It looks like a mighty dream. But for days and weeks it has possessed me beyond the limits of consciousness; it accompanies me wherever I go, hovers behind my ordinary talk, looks over my shoulder at my comically trivial journalistic work, disturbs me and intoxicates me.

It is still too early to surmise what will come of it. But my experience tells me that even as a dream it is something remarkable, and that I ought to write it down—if not as a reminder to mankind, then at least for my own delight or reflection in later years. And perhaps as something between these two possibilities—that is, as literature. If my conception is not translated into reality, at least out of my activity can come a novel.

Title: The Promised Land

To tell the truth, I am no longer sure that it was not actually the novel that I first had in mind—although not as something “literary” for its own sake, but only as something that would serve a purpose.

And the fact that after such a short time I am no longer sure of it is the best proof of how necessary this written record is. How much I have regretted that on the day of my arrival in Paris I didn’t start a diary to preserve the experiences, the impressions and visions which cannot get into the newspaper because they have an odd way of disappearing too fast. In this way a lot has escaped me.

But what are the experiences of a newspaper correspondent compared with what I am now working on! What dreams, thoughts, letters, meetings, actions I shall have to live through— disappointments if nothing comes of it, terrible struggles if things work out. All that must be recorded.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Herzl’s big dream in this first diary entry? Is it clear?
2. Herzl notes that his dream overtook much of his every day life. Can you think of a time when something was so big that it consumed your thoughts and actions?
3. In class 1 of the previous reader, we explored the relationship between Jews and books, and the importance of Abraham’s early days in Sumer where writing was invented. How do Herzl’s feelings about journaling his dream relate to these ideas?

The Idea Forms

Herzl 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. He believed that the only solution for Jews was a political one: to create a Jewish nation - *am* (אִם) 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.

Text 3b: Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State* (1896)

On Antisemitism 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?

Text 3c: Theodore Herzl, *The Jewish State* (1896)

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. . .

Discussion Questions:



1. 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?
2. 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?

Text 3d: Theodore Herzl, The Jewish State (1896)

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.

Discussion Questions:



1. Why does Herzl refer to the “Maccabeans rising again” in his Zionist call to action?
2. Does Jewish “freedom” and Jewish “greatness” require a Jewish state?
3. 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?

The First Zionist Congress

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.



Flag used in the First Zionist Congress.

Text 3e: Proceedings of the First Zionist Congress (1897)

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 is it important the Basel program emphasize “Jewish farmers, artisans, and manufacturers”? What other types of Jewish settlers were essential to building a Jewish nation?
3. What kinds of actions would it take to strengthen “Jewish national sentiment and national consciousness”?

Herzl's Reflections

As we saw earlier, 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.

Text 3f: Herzl's Diary – September 3, 1897

“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.

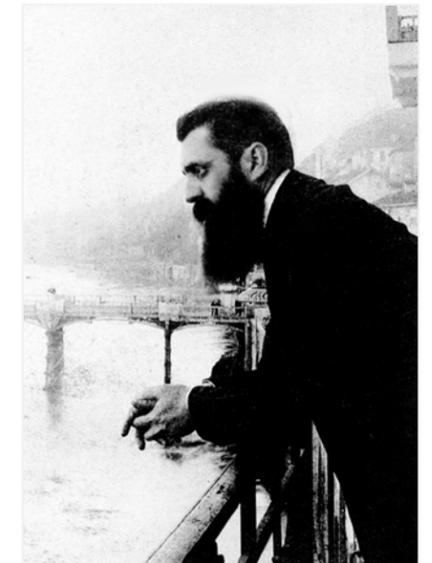
Discussion Questions:



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/>

For the Family Table

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

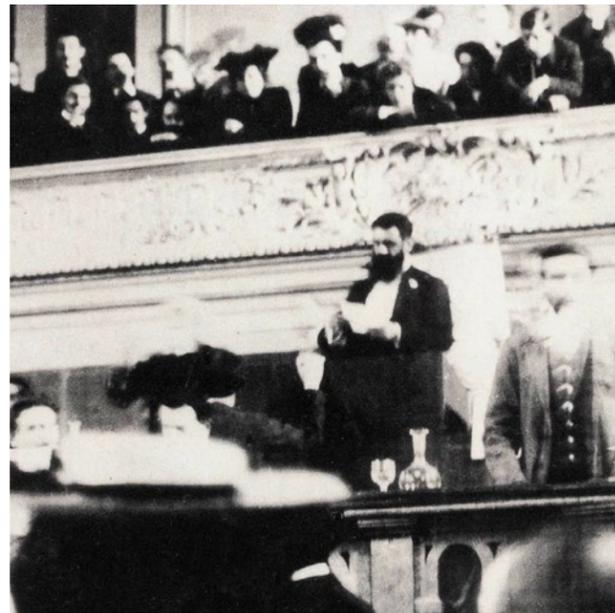
Dr. Daniel Polisar | Mosaic | 8.23.17

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



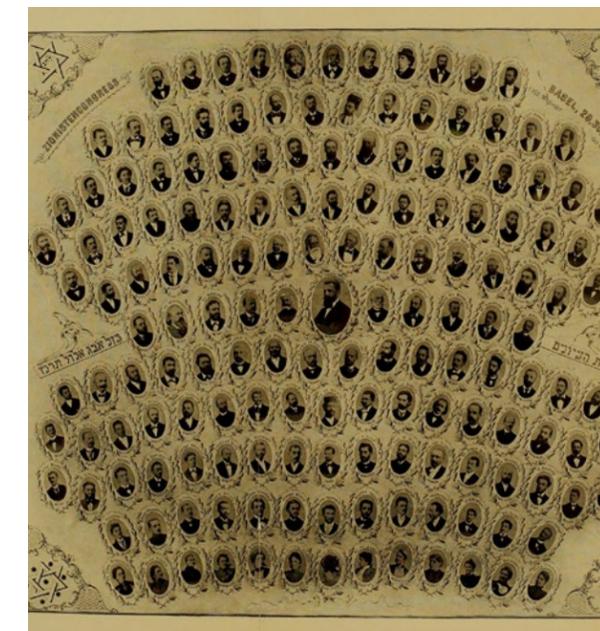
Theodor Herzl addressing the delegates of the First Zionist Congress

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



Portraits of the founding members of the Zionist 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.