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Book Review

“Herzl’ Vision: Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State
Shlomo Avineri, BlueBridge, \$22.95, 275 pp.

The man who envisioned a Jewish state

by Jonathan Kirsch

The propaganda that originates with some of the fiercest adversaries of Israel harks all the way back to the Crusades, making Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) seem almost modern. Yet Herzl remains one of the foundational figures in both Zionism and the state of Israel. Indeed, the flesh-and-blood Herzl has almost disappeared under the weight of his place in history. That’s why Shlomo Avineri aspires in “Herzl’s Vision” to “transform the canonical image of a larger-than-life person — the ‘Visionary of the State’ in common Israeli parlance — into a real, living human being,” as he puts it, “and thus extricate him from the mythological qualities connected with his name.”

"...[a] fine new biography...immensely readable..."—*FINANCIAL TIMES*

HERZL'S VISION

Theodor Herzl
and the Foundation
of the Jewish State

Shlomo
Avineri

Avineri is himself a commanding figure, not only in scholarship but also in the politics and government of Israel. A professor of political science at Hebrew University, he served in the Foreign Ministry under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and he has been active in the movement

to make an equitable peace between Arabs and Jews. For that reason, it is no surprise that Avineri seeks to remind his readers of Herzl's "insistence that in the future Jewish commonwealth, the Arab population of Palestine should enjoy equal rights and participate in the political life of the country."

Avineri's book is the biography of an idea as much as of the man who championed the idea on the world stage. Herzl, as he points out, was a highly assimilated Viennese Jew, a disappointed playwright and a rather more successful journalist when he was drawn to the notion of solving the so-called Jewish Problem by creating a Jewish homeland somewhere in the world. He did not speak Hebrew: "Who amongst us," he mused, "has a sufficient acquaintance with Hebrew to ask for a railway-ticket in that language?" With the publication of "The Jewish State" in 1896, however, Herzl rose to the international leadership of political Zionism, thereby transforming the movement "from an esoteric, if not cranky, idea into a player on the international scene."

Unlike other founding fathers and mothers of Zionism, Herzl was not one of the *chalutzim*, the pioneers who, starting in the late 19th century, traveled to Palestine to turn the soil of the Promised Land with their own hands. Rather, his approach to Zionism was typical of the traditional survival strategies of the Diaspora — that is, he sought out the rich, powerful and wealthy in the hope of enlisting their support for the Zionist project. Thus, for example, Avineri opens his narrative with the momentous tour of the Middle East during which Herzl won an audience with the kaiser of imperial Germany in 1898.

The notion that Herzl carried into that meeting strikes the modern reader as purely quixotic — a Jewish homeland in Palestine under the sovereignty of the sultan of the Ottoman Empire and the diplomatic protection of Kaiser Wilhelm. For Herzl, however, it all seemed to be within his grasp: "The brief audience will be preserved forever in the annals of Jewish history," he wrote, "and it is not beyond possibility that it will have historic consequences as well."

Yet as Avineri points out, Herzl was not entirely wrong. "Even if the idea was rejected, this was the first time the world's major movers and shakers had considered it and taken a stand about it — even if to negate it," he explains. "The Zionist idea was on the world's map and would from this point onward be a factor in international relations." Although Herzl would not live to see it, the Balfour Declaration in 1917 was essentially the same package wrapped in the colors of the British Empire. Avineri credits Herzl with the "phenomenal achievement" of transforming the idea of a Jewish state "from one bandied about by a small coterie of educated but marginal Jews to an item on the international political agenda, a position which it keeps to this day."

Avineri sees the profound irony in Herzl's vision. He lived in an era that Avineri characterizes as "one of the best times ever for European Jews," a time and place that afforded remarkable new opportunities to Jewish communities that had long been confined to the ghettos and burdened with legal disabilities. Yet Herzl was famously awakened to the dangerous undercurrent of anti-Semitism in Europe (although, as Avineri insists, not only by the Dreyfus Affair in France), and Avineri allows us to see it as something new and deadly: "The Jews would find no salvation in the gentile world, as liberal and enlightened as it may be," he writes. "It was the insight that would eventually lead him to the Zionist idea."

Although the point is moot nowadays, Herzl was willing to entertain the idea that a Jewish homeland did not necessarily require a foothold in Palestine: “Argentina or Palestine” was one of the questions he pondered in “The Jewish State,” and he was open to talking about Uganda, too, if only as a place of refuge in the wake of a wave of pogroms in Russia — “his biggest political blunder,” according to the author. Yet he was astute enough to realize that only Palestine resonated in the hearts of his readers: “Palestine is our never-to-be-forgotten homeland.” At the same time, however, Avineri wants us to know that Herzl recognized that a Jewish homeland in Palestine would not be exclusively Jewish. It is certainly not the whole point of “Herzl’s Vision,” but it is one that should not be overlooked.

“And if it should occur that men of other creeds and nationalities come to live among us, we should accord them honorable protection and equality before the law,” Herzl wrote. “We learned toleration in Europe. This is not said sarcastically.”

Jonathan Kirsch is the book editor of the Jewish Journal and the author of, most recently “The Short, Strange Life of Herschel Grynszpan: A Boy Avenger, a Nazi Diplomat and a Murder in Paris.”

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