

The Second Herzl

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ON YOM KIPPUR eve last week, when real Jews were praying for their lives, I sat on the seashore of Tel Aviv, thinking.

It was my first Yom Kippur without Rachel, and the dark water reflected my mood.

I was thinking about our state, the State of Israel, in which I have, so to speak, a founder's share.

Will it endure? Will it be here in another 100 years? Or is it a passing episode, a historic fluke?

When asked for his assessment of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai famously replied: "It's too early to tell."

The Zionist Revolution – and that's what it was – started more than a hundred years after the French one. It is certainly much too early to tell.

ONCE, IN a more cheerful mood, I told my friends: "Perhaps we are all wrong. Perhaps Israel is not really the final shape of the Zionist enterprise. Like the planners of every great project, the Zionists decided first to build a 'pilot', a prototype, in order to test their scheme. Actually, we Israelis are only guinea pigs. Sooner or later another Theodor Herzl will come by and, after analyzing the faults and mistakes of this experiment, will draw up the blueprint of the real state, which will be far superior."

Herzl 2 will start by asking: where did Herzl 1 go wrong?

Herzl 1 visited Palestine only once, and that only for the express purpose of meeting the German emperor, whom he wanted to enlist for his enterprise. The Kaiser insisted on seeing him at the gate of Jerusalem, listened patiently to what he had to say and then purportedly commented to his aides: "It's a grand idea, but you can't do it with Jews!"

He meant the Jews he knew – the members of a world-wide religious-ethnic community. Herzl intended to turn these into a modern-style nation, like the other modern nations of Europe.

Herzl was not a profound thinker, he was a journalist and dramatist. He – and his successors – saw the necessary transformation as basically a question of logistics. Get the Jews to Palestine, and everything will fall into place automatically. The Jews will become a normal people, a people ("Volk") like other peoples. A nation among nations.

BUT THE Jews of his day were neither a people nor a nation. They were something rather different.

Whilst anomalous in 19th century Europe, the Jewish Diaspora was quite normal 2000 years earlier. The large-scale social structure of that time was a network of Diasporas – autonomous religious-ethnic entities dispersed throughout the "civilized" (Mediterranean) world. The ruling empires – Persian, Alexandrine, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman – recognized them as the natural fabric of society.

Nations in the modern territorial sense were then inconceivable. A Jew in Jerusalem did not belong to the same society as a Hellenist in Caesarea, only a hundred miles away. A Christian

man in Alexandria could not marry the Jewish girl next door, but she could marry a Jewish man in far-away Antiochia.

Since then, Europe has changed many times, until the emergence of the modern nations. The Jews did not change. When Herzl looked for a solution to the "Jewish problem", they were still the same ethnic-religious Diaspora.

No problem, he thought, once I get them to Palestine, they will change.

BUT AN ethnic-religious community, living for millennia as a persecuted minority in a hostile environment, acquires a mentality of its own. It fears the "Goyish" government, the source of unending evil edicts. It sees everyone outside the community as a potential enemy, unless proven otherwise (and even then). It develops an intense sense of solidarity with members of its own community, even a thousand miles away, supporting them through thick and thin, whatever they do. In their helpless situation, the persecuted dream of a day of revenge, when they can do unto others as others have done unto them.

All this pervades their world-view, their religion and their traditions, transmitted from generation to generation. Jews have prayed to God for centuries, year after year, on Pesach eve: "Pour your wrath upon the Goyim..."

When the Zionists started to arrive and founded the new community, called the "Yishuv" (settlement), it seemed that Herzl had been right. They started to behave like the embryo of a real nation. They discarded religion and despised the Diaspora. To be called "exile Jew" was the worst possible insult. They saw themselves as "Hebrew", rather than Jewish. They started to build a new society and a new culture.

And then the awful thing happened: the Holocaust.

It brought all the old Jewish convictions back with a vengeance. Not only the Germans were the guilty, but all the nations who looked on and did not lift a finger to save the victims. So all the old beliefs were true after all: the whole world is against the Jews, we must defend ourselves whatever it takes, we can only rely on ourselves. The attitude of the Yishuv towards Jewishness and the Diaspora was a terrible mistake, we must repent and embrace everything we despised only yesterday: Jewish religion, Jewish traditions, the Jewish Shtetl.

The late Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, an observant Jew, maintained that the Jewish religion had died 200 years ago, and that the one thing that linked the Jews all over the world was the Holocaust.

Right from its founding, the State of Israel became the Holocaust-state. But we are not a helpless ghetto anymore – we have powerful armed forces, we can indeed do unto others as others have done unto us.

The old existential fears, mistrusts, suspicions, hatreds, prejudices, stereotypes, sense of victimhood, dreams of revenge, that were born in the Diaspora, have superimposed themselves

on the state, creating a very dangerous mixture of power and victimhood, brutality and masochism, militarism and the conviction that the whole world is against us. A ghetto with nuclear weapons.

CAN SUCH a state survive and flourish in the modern world?

European nation-states have fought many wars. But they never forgot that after a war comes peace, that today's enemy may well be tomorrow's ally. Nation-states remain, but they are becoming more and more interdependent, joining regional structures, giving up huge chunks of their sovereignty.

Israel cannot do that. Public opinion polls show that the vast majority of Israelis believe that there will never be peace. Not tomorrow, not in a hundred years. They are convinced that "the Arabs" are out to throw us into the sea. They see mighty Israel as the victim surrounded by enemies, while our "friends" are liable to stick a knife in our back any time. They see the eternal occupation of Palestinian territories and the setting up of belligerent settlements all over Palestine as a result of Arab intransigence, not as its cause. They are supported in blind solidarity by most of the Jews around the world.

Almost all Israeli parties, including the main opposition, insist that Israel be recognized as the "nation-state of the Jewish people". This means that Israel does not belong to the Israelis (the very concept of an "Israeli nation" is officially rejected by our government) but to the worldwide ethnic-religious Jewish Diaspora, who have never been asked whether they agree to Israel representing them. It is the very negation of a real nation-

state that can live in peace with its neighbors and join a regional union.

I HAVE never labored under any illusions about the magnitude of the task my friends and I set ourselves decades ago. It is not to change this or that aspect of Israel, but to change the fundamental nature of the state itself.

It is far more than a matter of politics, to substitute one party for another. It is even far more than making peace with the Palestinian people, ending the occupation, evacuating the settlements. It is to effect a basic change of [or "in"] the national consciousness, the consciousness of every Israeli man and woman.

It has been said that "you can get the Jews out of the ghetto, but you can't get the ghetto out of the Jews." But that is exactly what needs to be done.

Can it be done? I think so. I certainly hope so.

Perhaps we need a shock – either a positive or a negative one. The appearance here of Anwar Sadat in 1977 can serve as an example of a positive shock: by coming to Jerusalem while a state of war was still in effect, he produced an overnight change in the consciousness of Israelis. So did the Rabin-Arafat handshake on the White House lawn in 1993. So did, in a negative way, the Yom Kippur war, exactly 38 years ago, which shook Israel to the core. But these were minor, brief shocks compared to what is needed.

A Second Herzl could, perhaps, effect such a miracle, against the odds. In the words of the first Herzl: "If you want it. It is not a fairy tale."