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## IF YOU WILL IT, IT IS NO DREAM: HERZL AND AHAD HA'AM

120 years ago, an event took place that changed the course of Jewish history. In 1897 in Basel, Switzerland, the first Zionist Congress met with close to two hundred delegates. They came in a show of solidarity that was, and is rare, in the Jewish world, to address the issue of the day...the Jewish problem. As I'll discuss later on, the conference was a huge success. By the time Herzl died at the age of 44, 6 years later, the dream of a Jewish state finally had a structure that would lead to its birth.

After the conference, almost everyone was in a state of euphoria. When Herzl travelled around Europe, he was greeted at train stations by excited followers exclaiming....Long live the King, Herzl is the Messiah. Herzl had a plan, he had funds and he had a vision.

Visually, Herzl was striking. He was described as a man with regal bearing...a dark, black beard, two piercing, dark-colored eyes, and tall. All 5"4 of him.

Herzl made the biggest impression on the Jewish people since the false messiah of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Shabtai Zvi.

Everyone was excited except for one person and that person's followers...Asher Ginzberg. Ginzberg, who went by the pen name of Ahad Ha'am...translated as "one of the people"...was anything but. He was an ideologue, a writer, an educator and a dreamer. His dream for the Jewish state was to begin with a gradual aliyah of Jewish farmers who would till the soil by day and study by night. Then, they would train a cadre of Hebrew speaking pioneers, who would then train the next generation.

He wasn't a planner, and he wasn't charismatic; he lacked the presence, the gravitas of Herzl. He was jealous of Herzl's immediate successes, and although he attended the first Zionist Congresses, he was dismayed and jealous that people were now listening to Herzl...not him.

Though Ahad Ha'am was a brilliant and articulate representative and creator of spiritual Zionism, people instinctively rallied around Herzl's ideology of political Zionism, based on the immediate need for a state. After the pogroms in Russia of 1880/81, and after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, it was clear that spiritual, gradual Zionism was not the answer. Jews were suffering from anti-Semitism, they were impoverished, marginalized...they needed an ANSWER to the Jewish problem. NOW!

Herzl was not an ideologue like Ahad Ha'am, he was a Viennese playwright and journalist. His plan was so ludicrous, so bold...it was so goyish...that Jews were taken aback. Herzl's opponents said, "shah, shtill, lets build up a state quietly, slowly. Don't rock the boat." But the Jewish people were beyond embarrassment.

Hillel Halkin describes Herzl's vision this way "A step-by-step plan for achieving this goal by means of international diplomatic agreements, well-capitalized stock companies, vast land purchases, coordinated networks of emigrant-bearing trains and steamships, and modern cities rising from the wilderness in record time to house the new arrivals could hardly be deemed the product of a rational mind." It wasn't, but there was no choice.

With all the theatricality you would expect of a playwright, Herzl staged a grand affair complete with tuxedos and top hats, and a massive blue and white flag draped across the entrance to the hall. The inspirational speeches made the 198 participants feel like they were in a dream and filled them with hope. For the first time in centuries, a Jew had posed a viable answer to the Jewish problem facing millions of Jews in Europe.

Today, Israel exists because the Jewish world threw its weight behind political Zionism. It is fairly clear that if Ahad Ha'am's vision had prevailed, there wouldn't be a Jewish state.

However, having the benefit of seeing how things actually unfolded over the last 120 years, I would like to suggest that the only problem with Ahad Ha'am's ideas was... timing. The ideas were sound and it behooves us to address them today.

He offered two central ideas that continue to dominate Zionist debate today:

- A. First, He believed that “a thriving Jewish homeland...” had to coexist with a flourishing diaspora.
- B. Second, he posited the ideal of a Hebrew culture that maintains and transmits the religious, literary, and intellectual heritage of Judaism in a secularized or semi-secularized form.

Ginsberg dreamed that Hebrew farmers would farm by day and come home at night from their fields to read and study. Their children would speak Hebrew with one another, reviving an ancient language.

He believed the goal of these pioneers to be: The creation in the Land of Israel of a national spiritual center for Jewishness...a center of knowledge, of Torah study, of the Hebrew language and its literature, of the purest of bodies and souls:

Before Herzl burst onto the scene with his ridiculous narrative of striving for a Jewish state...Ahad Ha'am had captured the hearts and minds of Eastern European Jews interested in returning to Zion. He didn't talk about a state, he didn't focus on an apparatus that would bring his ideas to fruition, rather he focused on a revival of the Jewish spirit...something we are still striving for.

2 years before he died in 1902, Herzl wrote a book called *Altneuland*, in which he envisioned what the Jewish state would look like in the future. In it he is remarkably accurate in his prediction for what the Jewish state will look like in terms of irrigation, electricity, a democratic state, and scientific advances.

Not surprisingly, Ahad Ha'am wrote a scathing review of Herzl's book saying that his Jewish utopia was not really very Jewish and merely a transplant of Europe onto the Middle East. He was right. He mocked Herzl, refused to attend his yearly congresses, and attacked him in print. He argued that the road to Zion was long and arduous, and the journey could not...should not be rushed. “Yes, my brothers. The shore we yearn for is exceedingly far off. But a people that has wandered for thousands of years will not find the longest road too long.”

Herzl's ideological successor was Ze'ev Jabotinsky. Like Herzl, he saw the need for a Jewish state NOW....but unlike Herzl, he didn't care what kind of a society the state would have...all he cared about was getting a state for the Jews. Just before Ahad Ha'am died, Jabotinsky visited him and said these painful words to him:

- If I were to know that the only way to a state was via socialism...I'd welcome it.
- Give me a religiously Orthodox state in which I would be forced to eat gefilte fish all day long I'll take it.
- Give me a state in which I am only allowed to speak Yiddish...I'll take it.
- Everything that Ahad Ha'am believed in, was unimportant to Jabotinsky as long as there was a state. Imagine the heartbreak Ahad Ha'am must have felt at the end of his life, listening to the younger Jabotinsky tell him that his focus on the spirit and culture...would never happen.

My friends....as a Jew and Zionist...I rejoice that we have a state, but I also recognize we have paid a high price. Herzl was a spectacular success as a prophet and initiator of political Zionism, but a colossal failure when it came to creating a Jewish and spiritual homeland for all Jews.

In *Altneuland*, Herzl stated "We shall keep our rabbis within the confines of their synagogues in the same way as we shall keep our professional army within the confines of their barracks. Army and rabbinate shall receive honors high as their valuable functions deserve, but they must not interfere in the administration of the State which confers distinction upon them, else they will conjure up difficulties without and within.'

Well, Mr.Herzl, I am sorry to report that Rabbis have not remained in their synagogues....there is very little division between synagogue and state...and the appetite that the religious apparatus has for power, money and coercion...is insatiable. As shocking as that sounds. The public square, in their mind, belongs to them. They set the rules for marriage; divorce, conversion, kashrut...and they believe that ultra Orthodox Judaism is the only valid, authentic Judaism.

Today, ultra-Orthodox politicians call anybody who disagrees with them...Reformim, including liberal Israeli Orthodox Rabbis. All of us are treif. We pose a dire threat to the unity of the Jewish people...Masorti and Reform Jews...we are the worst. Unwanted immigrants, an aberration from the diaspora that pervert the will of God.

If that weren't enough...the current administration has thrown its massive political weight behind those extreme views...in order to stay in power. The much hailed plan to create a common entrance to the entire Western wall, the plan to allow Reform, Conservative and other pluralistic groups to govern together how prayer issues at the Kotel are to be handled has been halted...most likely permanently.

Just after the kotel compromise was cancelled my wife received the following letter from a former president of a Conservative congregation, a woman who reads Torah, is a gabbai, davens from the bima, studies at the Conservative Yeshiva, in short...a Woman of Valor:

- I can't sleep. The awful realization about loving Israel as a non-Haredi Jew has hit me like a ton of bricks.
- More than the duplicitous announcement about the wall, I am deeply saddened and outraged by the baseless HATRED some fellow Jews have for me, a good person who worships God as a Conservative Jew.
- At first I was defiant...angry even, and wanted to see headlines in the Jewish press today that USY, Birthright, and congregations and Schecter Schools and Ramah all cancel their scheduled and future trips to Israel.
- But now I'm just sad. I never plan to live in Israel for many reasons, but now I can't think of any reason I want to visit or support organizations there.
- What exactly does Israel mean to me now? I know what it meant to my parents, and I know what it used to mean to me, but if I can't pray there as I believe I should pray, then why visit or continue to send money? Clearly the Haredim don't care and neither does the government."

Chava bat Emmanuel, we have betrayed you.

1. Ashamnu: My government has reneged on a deal that it initiated, creating the kotel controversy.

2. Bagadnu My political leaders have told you...we don't value your opinion...give us your money and shut up.
3. Gazalnu We have asked you...diaspora Jewry to enter into a partnership...and then we have told you to get lost.

I want to apologize to you on behalf of the Jewish state.  
We have betrayed you...

During the time of Herzl, and at the founding of the State, our people were in crisis, and there was no time for spiritual Zionism.

But now, even as we struggle daily with security threats, we are not on the brink of a disaster. Now is the time to enrich our Zionism...and return to the unfinished agenda of Ahad Ha'am. We have addressed issues of the body...now it is time for our soul, our Jewish soul.

You heard our friend Chava's response. What about you? What should your response be to the disrespectful behavior of the Israeli leadership?

Some Israelis are urging you to stop flying EL AL, to stop inviting Knesset members into their synagogues, JCC's, federation board rooms, and worst of all, to stop visiting. Those are very sensitive issues.

I would like to suggest a different response:

- First of all, I want you to go home...look in the mirror...and see an authentic Jew. We are not destroying Judaism, we are not contaminating the kotel...we are not a curse...we are a blessing. You are a blessing, Temple Israel is a blessing to the Jewish people.
- Then, I want you to care for the soul of Israel, not just the body.
- I want you to care about our spiritual well being, not just our safety.
- I want you to think creatively, and find ways to convince others that we are not just immigrants...we are Israelis, Jews with a great deal to contribute.
- I want you to learn everything you can about The Masorti movement, and other Conservative organizations in Israel that are creating important, vital, crucial options for secular Israelis

who have grown up hating their Judaism that was hijacked and stolen by the Ultra Orthodox.

Here are but a few things to feel proud of: (expand on if time)

1. We have a law committee; we have a commitment to tradition, to halacha.
2. We care for lone soldiers...Joan Kedem.
3. We provide B'nai Mitzvah for children with special needs, children ignored and cast aside by the rabbinate. Special siddur.
4. We provide our own hechsher for a winery in Israel that produces excellent wine.
5. Kibbutz Hannaton, once a floundering kibbutz, now has a thriving educational center, a pre-army program, an egalitarian synagogue and a waiting list for people to build their homes on communal land.
6. The movement has published its own siddur, and just before I left, ~~the~~ just published machzorim for RH and YK, in a decent sized print, with commentary, that are flying off the shelves in book stores around the country.
7. We reach out to ignored and unrecognized Jews in Uganda and Venezeuela, and Ethiopia.
8. We convert Jews who have been turned away by the rabbinate.
9. And, we marry Jews who refuse to have anything to do with the rabbinate.

I want you to know that we are successful in lighting sparks of yiddishkeit, we are meeting a need, and we are creating the next generation of Jews.

And there is more good news...

A few years ago, a large platform was built at Robinson's Arch and formally named-Ezrat Yisrael. This platform that we call the Masorti Kotel, where men and women can pray side by side, has a waiting list on some days for B'nai Mitzvah. The word is out, and my colleagues and I are busier than ever before, not just with Jews from overseas, but with Israelis as well. We are walking with Jews who are on a personal journey, who want to tread on holy space, who want to feel the presence of the shechina at holy times in their lives.

Rabbi Michael Friedland, a talented young Conservative rabbi writes

*"sometimes when our dreams are fulfilled they are not fulfilled the way we expected. Sometimes, because they are not perfect we become overly disappointed. The value of a holy and good dream though is that you always have the dream to measure the future."* Our dream of egalitarian Judaism has not been fully realized, and the road ahead is full of struggle, but we have made significant progress.

Back to our friend Chava who wrote to me a few days later and said the first e-mail was written in a moment of anger...she was not ending her support of the Masorti movement, or the Conservative Yeshiva, and she'll be visiting Israel in January on a congregational trip.

What should YOU do?

I don't have a panacea, but I would consider the following:

- Meet with your CJP representatives and ask them what they are doing to address this problem. Tell them you do not want your gifts going to organizations that do not believe we are authentic Jews.
- Write an e-mail to Jerry Silverman, the CEO of the JFNA.
- Speak to your AIPAC representative and let them know what you think.
- Write a letter to the Prime Minister of Israel.
- Make specific gifts to Israeli organizations fighting for religious freedom and pluralism.
- And most of all support the Masorti Movement in Israel. You may wish to continue giving to organizations like MADA...charities that save lives...but we can't ignore the soul any longer.

I want to conclude by telling you a brief story:

- In March, on Rosh Chodesh, I conducted a Bar Mitzvah at Robinson's Arch for committed members of a shul whose rabbi is my classmate. The boy put on tefillin, led the service and read Torah flawlessly. At the beginning of the service a member of the radical, messianic group, Ateret Kohanim, came to harass our service. He stood in the middle of minyan and shouted psalms at the top of his lungs. The guards refused to remove him, and so we walked downstairs from the RA platform to the Herodian street,



to complete our service in quiet.

- Last month the Bar Mitzvah boy, wrote to me and reassured me that the terrible actions of this young man have not affected Noah's love for Israel. He was determined to have his Bar Mitzvah at the kotel...nowhere else. His mother wrote: "While it was shocking and ....disheartening, it also established a resolve in me and drove home the importance to maintain our identity and that it is important to assert our values and traditions as Conservative Jews. That we are Jewish, that we belong and that no one has the right to take that away from me or my family."
- My friends, I hope you share her resolve.

G'mar chatima tovah...may you all be inscribed  
well...very well...in the book of life.