

**“Israel: The Reality”**  
**Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 5765 (2004)**  
**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

Israel Friedlaender was a young, brilliant scholar at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America at the turn of the twentieth century. His field was Semitics, his chair was in Bible, yet he was equally at home in Arabic and modern Jewish studies. He was not just an ivory tower academic. He was a committed cultural Zionist who cared deeply about the condition of Jews in Eastern Europe and the state of Judaism in America and worked tirelessly on their behalf. He was also, in the summer of 1904, a bachelor.

While doing research at Oxford, Friedlaender was befriended by Herbert Bentwich, a prominent British Zionist, who invited him to his home for afternoon tea. Bentwich was the father of eleven children, the eldest of whom, Lilian, just happened to be bright, attractive, 23-years old and unmarried.

On the day that Friedlaender was invited to the Bentwich home, the entire family, but especially Lilian, was eager to meet him. The appointed hour arrived, ... but not Friedlaender. The family waited and waited. Finally, convinced that he was not going to show up, they sat down to tea. Just then, the doorbell rang. Lilian ran to the door, curious to catch sight of the ill-mannered American stranger.

What she saw astounded her. Friedlaender was at the door, disheveled and agitated. As soon as he saw her, he cried out, “A telegram has just arrived from Vienna. Herzl is dead!” Lilian later reported that then and there she secretly pledged to marry that “very emotional gentleman.” Indeed, a courtship ensued and within fourteen months they were married.

What was it about Theodor Herzl that aroused such an intense reaction? What is it about him that still captures the imagination? This past summer in Israel it seemed as though every evening there was yet another special program examining Herzl’s life and work in honor of his 100th *yahrzeit*.

Think what the shock of his death must have been like: Herzl had burst onto the Jewish scene only nine years earlier. He had convinced Jews from across the world



to gather together and organize themselves to create a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. With tremendous vigor he had lobbied Jews, he had met with foreign dignitaries trying to elicit their support, he had traveled to the Land of Israel to take a look at colonization efforts, he had written essays and pamphlets—even a novel—to promote his dream. And now, at the age of 44, he was dead.

It would have been quite reasonable to despair. For our people's charismatic and dynamic leader to die so young, without an obvious successor—one could very well have believed that we were going to have to wait another thousand years or so before returning to our homeland.

Who was Herzl? He was a dreamer, a prophet, and a doer. In many ways, it is useful to compare him to Moses. [See "Moses and Herzl," by Rabbi David Golinkin, *Insight Israel: The Schechter View* (Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem), Vol. 4, #10 (June 2004) to which I am indebted for the fascinating comparisons between Moses and Herzl that follow.] Indeed, many of his contemporaries saw him as a modern day Moses, and he did himself. Think of the similarities:

Moses was brought up in the House of Pharaoh. He had an Egyptian name. He looked Egyptian. Herzl, too, grew up in a highly assimilated home in which German culture was far more significant than Jewish culture.

Moses intervened when an Egyptian was beating a Hebrew; and that started him on the road to confronting Pharaoh in his palace. Herzl's righteous indignation was ignited by the public degradation of Captain Albert Dreyfus, the French military officer who had been falsely accused of treason. When Herzl heard the mob shout "*A mort les Juifs*"—"Death to the Jews!" he knew he had to act.

Each had a simple plan. Moses told Pharaoh, "Let My People Go!" And Herzl told people that he was trying to do the same thing, to lead his people to the Promised Land.

Both Moses and Herzl experienced rejection and contempt on the part of their co-religionists. "The people wouldn't listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by bondage." (Exodus 6:9). And Herzl, too, was sharply criticized, derided and dismissed by one Jewish leader after another. As he put it in 1899, "Anyone who wants to work on behalf of the Jews needs a strong stomach."

Both leaders died before their dreams were realized. Like Moses, Herzl was allowed to see the Promised Land (he visited there briefly in 1898), but not, as it

were, to enter it. (After all, the Jewish State didn't come into being for another fifty years.) Upon his death, his body was laid to rest in the Jewish cemetery of Vienna with instructions that it was to be exhumed and re-interred should a Jewish state ever be established. And so it was, that in 1949, Herzl's remains were re-interred on Har Herzl in Jerusalem, and the anniversary of his death, the 20th of Tammuz on the Jewish calendar, declared a national memorial day.

Herzl's dream was fulfilled 44 years after his death. But one question that was asked, again and again, during the many television programs devoted to Herzl's *yahrzeit* was, "Had Herzl lived, what would he have said about the State of Israel? Would he have recognized his dream in the reality?"

For example, Herzl imagined a state without a lot of controversy or disagreement: "Politics here," he wrote in *Altneuland*, his futuristic novel of the Jewish State, "is neither a business nor a profession . . . officials are not allowed to take part in public discussion." Could Herzl have imagined what sessions of the Knesset sound like? Could he have tolerated watching politicians on the evening news in Israel?

Herzl envisioned a modern, efficient state with beautiful roadways and no traffic jams: "Automobiles speed by noiselessly on rubber tires, with only occasional toots of warning." (I guess it depends on the meaning of the word, "occasional.")

Herzl imagined a neutral state at peace with its neighbors. "[The Jewish State] will require only a professional army, . . . to preserve order internally and externally." That also, sadly, hasn't quite turned out the way he hoped it would. Though proud and sovereign, Israel remains heavily dependent on foreign financial, political and military aid, primarily from the United States, and remains surrounded by implacable foes.

Moreover, with the creation of the Jewish State, Herzl envisioned the end of anti-Semitism. Once the Jews have a home, he reasoned, the basis for Jew-hatred in Europe would disappear. Sadly enough, this too has not come to pass.

I recently read an interview with Noam Chomsky. [See *Hebe* magazine, Vol. #6 (Summer 2004)] As so many of us know, when Israel is in the news, Noam Chomsky is often there, articulating the Jewish non-Zionist position.

What many of us don't know is that, in his youth, Chomsky was a member of several Zionist organizations. He attended Yachdav, a Zionist summer camp. I once saw a picture of him from Camp Yachdav. He was part of a pyramid of

campers, each poised on the shoulders of the next. There was a sign in front of them that read, “*Yachdav nivneh moledet*”—“Together we will build a homeland.”

Chomsky had always supported solving the “Jewish Question,” but he did not believe that creating a Jewish state was the way to go about addressing it. In the interview I read, he discussed how, until 1942, on the whole, most American Jews agreed with him. They were opposed to the creation of a Jewish state. But then the tide turned, and the organized Jewish community swung away from him in the other direction, in favor of establishing one.

Chomsky said that to make the point that he was right then and he’s right now: the state of Israel shouldn’t have been created, in his view, and in its present form it is an obstacle to peace.

I read history differently. I’m not surprised that American Jewish public opinion turned in 1942. Prior to that time, there were many legitimate, competing idealistic visions to address Jewish vulnerability. Some leaders, like Herzl, envisaged a political solution. Others shied away from pursuing political sovereignty, preferring to focus on building up a Jewish cultural center in the Land of Israel. Some favored a bi-national state with the Arabs. Some thought Hebrew should be the official Jewish language while others favored Yiddish—or even, like Herzl himself, German. Some Zionists were socialists; others were on the other end of the political spectrum.

But by 1942, most Jews woke up and realized, utopian ideas are wonderful, but we have a catastrophe on our hands. The “*am sridei harev*,” The “people who have survived the sword,” (to quote today’s *haftarah*) need a refuge. We need a real state. We need to compromise in order to address reality.

The result has been a state which, on the one hand, has been a Jewish national home, but which also, since its inception, has disappointed just about everybody at one time or another. In one respect, it has succeeded mightily: it is certainly real. It had to be real to achieve its objective. To quote Professor Ruth Wisse, “Not until we reclaimed responsibility for our political life could we provide a haven for Jews in danger.” (*I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, Judea and Ruth Pearl, editors, Woodstock: 2004, p.8)

According to the Jewish tradition, there is such a thing as the Good Inclination, the *Yetzer Tov*, and the Evil Inclination, the *Yetzer Ha-Rah*. In the Talmud (Yoma 69b), there is a midrash in which people figure, “Aha, if we only could get rid of the Evil Inclination, everything would be wonderful.” So they try to do that, but

then they realize that there's a positive side to the Evil Inclination, and if they get rid of it, they'll also be getting rid of ambition and industriousness and libido—all potentially positive aspects to the *Yetzer Ha-rah*. So they turn to God and they say, “Can you just let us have the Good Side, the Good Half of the *Yetzer Ha-rah*, ... and You can keep the Bad Side?”

The response they get is, “*Palgah bi-rakia lah yehavei*”—“No!” “They don't grant half-wishes in Heaven.” When God gives you a *brachah*, you have to take the good with the bad. Freedom of choice is a *brachah*, but you have to bear the consequences that sometimes people will do the wrong thing. Having ambition, desire, purpose—that's all good. If you want these, you have to put up with some people using those impulses in the wrong way.

And so it is with everything in life. Life is inherently a mixed blessing.

You fall in love—you open yourself up to the possibility of loss.

You raise children—it isn't always as easy as you thought it would be.

You live a life—and one day, you have to say goodbye.

Nations and Peoples learn this lesson, too.

Maybe Israel didn't solve all the problems it was supposed to solve. Maybe it isn't the utopian solution its founders might have hoped it would be. Maybe too many people have died defending it. Maybe there's been too much suffering since its creation.

But would we ever wish to go back to 1942? Would we ever wish that we lacked national sovereignty?

Our challenge is to engage with the reality of Israel, with the many ways that Israel makes us proud and also the many ways we might find it exasperating.

Let's support our brothers and sisters in Israel, and try to ease their burden. (You'll get an opportunity to do just that during our Israel appeal on Yom Kippur.)

Let's not be on the sidelines. I was thrilled how many of our young people went to Israel this past year. I'm hopeful that more will go next year. I hope that more grownups will go as well. Lesli Reich is leading a congregational trip to Israel in February. Speak to her. Take part. Think of other ways that you can not only

support Israel, but make it more a part of your life. To quote that camp slogan, “*Yachdav nivneh moledet*,”—“Together, let us build our homeland.”

When we reflect back on the one hundred years since Herzl’s death, on that shocking event that rippled through the Jewish world, in ways large and small, there are some lessons we can learn.

First, we can’t stop dreaming. Had Herzl not envisaged an ideal Jewish state, the real one we’ve come to know and love would never have come to be.

Second, we can’t only dream. Dreams are wonderful but we also have to confront the reality we see when we wake up. We have to contend with the real problems of the world. And only real solutions can do that.

Finally, let’s take heart. We tend to view Israel’s problems as insurmountable: the Intifada, disengagement, the lack of Jewish religious pluralism, the intense bitterness between the opposite ends of the political spectrum. These are daunting, but if Herzl could take a people who’d been scattered all over the world for 1,800 years and in nine short years forge a national liberation movement that eventually led to the creation of the State of Israel, then surely these challenges can also be overcome.

After marrying Lilian Bentwich, Israel Friedlaender remained very active in Zionist affairs. He became the head of the Zionist Organization of America. He helped Henrietta Szold found Hadassah (in fact, he was responsible for choosing Hadassah’s Hebrew slogan, “*Arukhat bat Ami*,”—“healing for my people,” quoting Jeremiah 8:22). As a scholar of Arabic culture, he was sympathetic to Arab nationalist aspirations, and yet believed strongly that accommodating both Jewish as well as Arab strivings was possible. He was months away from visiting the Land of Israel to explore the possibility of settling there when he was killed while on a Joint Distribution Committee relief mission to the Ukraine. Just like Herzl, he died at the age of 44, and on the eve of the anniversary of Herzl’s death, the 20th of Tammuz. He left behind several children, the eldest of whom was named Herzl.

Israel is the ultimate Jewish reality show. It could be perfect—but only if it didn’t exist, which is a terrible thing to contemplate! More than anything else, Israel is a blessing which, as we’ve seen, has at least two sides to it. It’s wonderful and inspiring, and yet also, at times, complicated and, to paraphrase Daniel Gordis, “a Place that Can Make You Cry.”

Our task is to receive the blessing,

appreciate its benefits --  
and to contend with its challenges.