

Dear Herr Herzl,

I know you were a formal guy who loved the pomp and circumstance of dignified, post-Emancipation, European elite, intellectual gatherings in full dress regalia; I'm just not that kind of woman so I am going to call you Theodor. You see Theodor, you had this idea, and this dream that you were able to set into motion called the State of Israel. You were not the first Zionist, nor, thank God, are you the last. However, you were "the first person to understand that the Zionist goal could not be achieved without the establishment of a recognized institutional authority that could claim to speak publicly on behalf of the Jewish people."ⁱ The organizations and agencies that you had the foresight to establish; the World Zionist Congress, and the Jewish National Fund each played a role in the establishment of the State of Israel. While you never got to know the State's existence in your life, Israel's 67-years has changed the Jewish people and the world for the better.

Theodor, you lived in a rapidly changing Europe. Emancipation and the establishment of the newly emerging nation-states changed the reality for much of the continent's Jews. Before you, Jews were peasants and farmers. You and your family and the Jews of Europe were the first generation who lived in the newly industrialized and emancipated Europe. Many nations of Europe were still debating whether or not their Jews could be citizens.

Theodor, you grew up in the midst of all of this. You were born in Budapest, Hungary in 1860 and raised in a well to do home where you received a basic Jewish education. Your secular, German-Jewish education was characteristic of this enlightenment period and a Jew of your class, it should of course be noted that the emphasis in your family was on your secular studies

and while you identified and knew that you were a Jew, later in your life when you were given the honor of an *aliya* to the Torah, you did not even know the blessing. That would never happen here at Temple Beth Hillel where I am one of the rabbis. You and your parents moved to Vienna where you attended university and were awarded a doctorate of law. While you did work as a lawyer for a brief time, your professional dream was to become a playwright and you pursued writing full-time as a journalist and editor.

You wouldn't begin to believe the world I live in today in the United States. Jews enjoy full equality and all of the rights of citizenship. We've built extraordinary Jewish communities and know a kind of freedom and ability to participate in the larger society that was your calling. Anti-semitism is frowned upon by the government and Jews are protected from it, though it continues to be present in the world. Assimilation though, as you predicted, is tearing us apart. Whether or not people want to admit it, we Jews still need one another because we are a people.

They say that timing is everything. You were alive at the right moment and had the right life-experiences that led you to enter into the growing community of Zionists and found political Zionism. You astutely noticed the ideological changes around you. While others thought the anti-Semitic incidents were minor events, lurking in emancipated Europe you recognized anti-Semitism and deep theological, social and cultural roots as a threat. Therefore, you worked tirelessly to secure your goal; to unite the Jews of the world under a common platform—Zionism, the movement that supports the establishment of the Jewish State in the Land of Israel.ⁱⁱ You were completely mission-driven. As you made your way throughout Europe garnering

support for the Jewish State you taught the inheritors, like me and my congregation to pursue dreams tirelessly.

Even as you began to make strides in political Europe, you understood the shifting politics of your day and the need for the European nations to grant an allotment of land for the Jewish State. You met with officials, Jewish and Christian, royal family member or elected or appointed government official, and presented them with your clear directive. And to your utter delight sometimes they listened. When an emissary of Kaiser Wilhelm II informed you that the Kaiser would present the Zionist program to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and would also grant a meeting with the Zionist delegation in Jerusalem should you lead it, you were on the next boat with a few other leaders of the World Zionist Congress.ⁱⁱⁱ

Let's not embellish your experience in the Land of Israel. You were sick with fever, you met with some of the Zionist settlers who were already living the dream, and you did have your meeting following all of the appropriate protocols. While the Kaiser was not as enthusiastic as you might have hoped, the meeting was overall a success. You did get to the Land of Israel in your life.

I know that you did not live long enough to see your dream come true. But let me tell you, your dream is more than alive and well. The State of Israel is a wonder to behold.

This summer I had the opportunity to travel to Israel. This was my 7th or 8th trip, I've started to lose track and every time I visit I come away changed for having made the pilgrimage. This summer, I encountered a thriving, bustling Israel fully recovered, at least on the surface, from the painful Gaza war the previous summer. Restaurants were full, tourists were everywhere, and the somewhat frenetic pace of the Israeli lifestyle was moving at full speed.

Theodor, you articulated your vision for the Jewish State in your book, *Alteneuland*, you capitalized on the popular genre of the utopian novel and combined your ideas for the Jewish state in a volume that the entire public of Europe could enjoy. *Alteneuland* was translated into many languages, and the book's Hebrew translator selected the title *Tel Aviv*. Tel Aviv, your Alteneuland, is a vibrant, world-class city like Vienna or Paris that you knew.

This summer I sat in Café Bialik and drank a *cafe hafuch*, an upside down coffee, the cappuccino's better tasting younger sibling, and could feel the spirit of the Chaim Nachman Bialik, the first poet laureate of the Jewish State, Reuven Rubin, one of the founders of the Eretz-Yisrael style of art, both of whom lived just up the street and are buried in the neighborhood cemetery. Surrounded by the Tel Aviv Bauhaus architecture, I watched young soldiers relaxing on weekend leave from army service; couples of all ages and stages walking hand-in-hand, and heard the language of the state, Modern Hebrew fill my ears. Alteneuland, Tel Aviv is better than you could have possibly imagined. This is the Israel that I love, and that you dreamed Theodor.

After Tel Aviv I traveled north where I rode in an open-air jeep in the Golan Heights and saw remnants of the 1967 war and saw plumes of smoke where the ongoing Syrian Civil War

continues. Hundreds of injured Syrians have made their way to the closed Israeli border; Israel does not have formal diplomatic relations with Syria. At Ziv hospital in Tzfat, children with shrapnel wounds are receiving the multiple surgeries, physical therapies, and medications that they need at the expense of the Israeli Government. This is the Israel that I love, and that you dreamed.

I visited the Yitzhak Rabin Center. While by no means a perfect person, Prime Minister Rabin, of blessed memory, made me and millions of other Jews and Palestinians alike believe that peace is possible.

The Center's mission is to ensure that the vital lessons from this story are actively remembered and used to shape an Israeli society and leadership dedicated to open dialogue, democratic value, Zionism and social cohesion. The Center promotes activities and programs that inspire cultured, engaged and civil exchanges among the different sectors that make up the complex mosaic of Israeli society.^{iv}

Theodor, you would have loved Rabin and this center that stands in his memory. He fought for the formation of the State and became a savvy and astute politician. At a time of great potential for peace in the Middle East, Rabin signed the Declaration of Principles with Yasser Arafat, won the Nobel Peace Prize, and signed a peace treaty with King Hussein of Jordan. As much as Rabin collected fans that supported his efforts to create an abiding peace with Israel and her neighbors, Rabin had many enemies. As you would know Theodor, being a visionary leader can come with a mortifying price and Yitzhak Rabin paid the ultimate price. It is hard to believe that it was

nearly 20 years ago that Rabin was assassinated but his tragic death made Israel mourn and repent. And still this is the Israel that I love and that you dreamed.

My group arrived in Jerusalem on Thursday night and planned for a full day of touring in the Old City before a break before Shabbat services and dinner together. How does that phrase go, “rabbis plan and God laughs?” This Friday coincided with the first Friday of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Israel created an opportunity for more than 100,000 Muslim pilgrims to come to the Old City to worship. Jerusalem, a city of about 800,000 people, and these additional 100,000 pilgrims was a recipe for traffic jams the likes of which I have never seen, and I grew up here in Los Angeles. It took 10 changes of a traffic signal to cross some streets. Denise, the tour guide and I quickly brainstormed to come up with alternative plans that would still give our group members the experience they desired for Shabbat and made sense given the terrible gridlock. While mildly annoying and inconvenient for me and the group I traveled with, this too was the Israel that I love and you dreamed, a place where Jews and Muslims can celebrate Shabbat and Ramadan peacefully.

Former member of Knesset, Einat Wilf writes,

The modern state of Israel ... was an idea, a story, and a drama long before it became the physical reality that it is today. Before it could be staged before a live audience, the story of a resurrected Jewish state had to be told and retold; and it is only through this storytelling that Israel became a reality. Those who founded Israel, built it, fought and

sacrificed for it, did so because they were inspired by a grand idea and a magnificent story. They were the writers of their own epic drama.

From the beginning, the success of Zionism and Israel depended on the ability to tell a great story. The drama of the return of the biblical people to the biblical land moved Christians in Britain and across Europe to support the nascent Zionist movement. The story of constructing a perfect society from scratch sustained young pioneers in the difficult land of Israel, and attracted socialists and utopian thinkers of all kinds. The icon of the phoenix, of a nearly extinguished people reborn into new life of self-rule, inspired nations and peoples to rally to the cause of the newly established Jewish state.

These stories sustained Israel and Zionism over a century of struggle unparalleled in the history of any nation.^v

Theodor, I think you and I might understand one another. The challenge for me is to translate your dream and the reality of the Israel that I know and love into a vital part of the life of my congregants. I get it. Sometimes Israel can be infuriating. When politicians win elections and support ideals that challenge what we think is right, it can be hard to love Israel yet we must. When our Reform Jewish values like equality and egalitarianism are tested at our tradition's holiest sites, it hurts. And still my congregation and I must continue to dream, plan for and build the Israel that we envision. And we must kvell for Israel. When the technologies in our smart phones and in the medications that keep us alive are improved upon and reimagined altogether by Israelis we must take immense pride. Theodor, if only I could bring my entire congregation to

Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and all of the glorious cities in the beautiful land, warts and all perhaps they would understand this love. While I am not going to be buying plane fare, this year I will try to bring Israel to TBH. My congregation is part of a special lecture series from the Shalom Hartman Institute. Six phenomenal speakers will travel to my San Fernando Valley and present on the ethical agenda of the Jewish people. I know my people will show up on November 15th to hear former member of Knesset and celebrated Talmud scholar Dr. Ruth Calderon speak from the TBH bima. It will be inspiring! It is my hope that these lectures will spark interest and conversation and maybe even some travel plans. As much as Israel needs our unwavering support, we too need Israel as a focal point of our Jewish selves.

Theodor, Israel, your country that you dreamed of is the dawning of redemption, the hope for the future of the Jewish people. It is the story that you began and generations after you continue to write. Israel remains a complex and beautiful reality and will, God-willing, continue with strength. Thank you, Theodor for being willing to dream and for reimaging a nation for the Jewish people, for taking our ancient longing and translating it into action. You taught us, “im tirzu ayn’zo aggadah, if you will it, it no dream, no story, no legend.”

With more gratitude than words can express,

Rabbi Eleanor Steinman

ⁱ Avineri, Shlomo. *Herzl's Vision*, p. 142.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.herzl.org/english/Article.aspx?Item=519&Section=491>. I edited this selection so that it was in the second person to follow the grammar of the sermon.

ⁱⁱⁱ Avineri, Shlomo. *Herzl's Vision*, p. 4.

^{iv} <http://www.rabincenter.org.il/Web/En/AbouttheCenter/Default.aspx>

^v Wilf, Einat. <http://www.thetower.org/article/the-search-for-a-single-zionist-story/>