Theodor Herzl Founds the Zionist Movement

Appalled by repeated outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in Eastern Europe and open discrimination against Jews elsewhere, an Austrian Jew named Theodor Herzl wrote a book in 1896 laying out a plan for resolving “the Jewish question.” Herzl’s book helped to spark a worldwide movement to create an independent Jewish state. This Jewish nationalist movement was called Zionism. (In the Old Testament, Zion was the hill in ancient Jerusalem where the Hebrews’ King David established his capital.)

Even before Herzl’s time, some Jews called themselves Zionists and left their homes in Europe to settle in the biblical land of Palestine. But it was Herzl who turned Zionism into a political movement with a specific goal—a Jewish state. In 1897, he called a world congress of Jewish delegates at Basel, Switzerland. The delegates founded the World Zionist Organization, with Herzl as its president.

The following excerpt is from Herzl’s 1896 book, The Jewish State.

No one can deny the gravity of the Jewish situation. Wherever they live in [considerable] number, Jews are persecuted in greater or lesser measure. Their equality before the law, granted by statute [or law], has become practically a dead letter. They are [prevented] from filling even moderately high offices in the army, or in any public or private institutions. And attempts are being made to thrust them out of business also: “Don’t buy from Jews!”

Attacks in parliaments, in assemblies, in the press, in the pulpit, in the street, on journeys—for example, their exclusion from certain hotels—even in places of recreation are increasing from day to day. The forms of persecutions vary according to country and social circle. In Russia, special taxes are [put] on Jewish villages; in Romania, a few persons are put to death; in Germany, they get a good beating occasionally; in Austria, anti-Semites exercise their terrorism over all public life; in Algeria, they are traveling agitators; in Paris, the Jews are shut out of the so-called best social circles and excluded from clubs…

The fact of the matter is, everything tends to one and the same conclusion, which is expressed in the classic Berlin cry: “Juden raus!” (“Out with the Jews!”)

I shall now put the question in the briefest possible form: Shouldn’t we “get out” at once, and if so, whither?

Or, may we remain, and if so, how long?

…[T]he sins of the Middle Ages are now being visited on the nations of Europe. We are what the ghetto [area of a city in which Jews were required to live] made us. We have without a doubt attained pre-eminence in finance because medieval conditions drove us to it. The same process is now being repeated. We are again being forced into money-lending—now named stock exchange—by being kept out of other occupations. But once on the stock exchange, we are again object of contempt. At the same time we continue to produce an abundance of mediocre intellectuals who find no outlet, and this endangers our social position as much as does our increasing wealth. Educated Jews without means are now rapidly becoming socialists. Hence we are certain to suffer acutely in the struggle between the classes, because we stand in the most exposed position in both the capitalist and the socialist camps….

The whole plan [of Zionism] is essentially quite simple, as it must necessarily be if it is to be comprehensible to all.

Let sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe adequate to meet our rightful national requirements; we will attend to the rest…. [Herzl describes his plan for gradual, voluntary emigration and settlement in the new homeland, and for the development of a sound economy and a modern society.]
Palestine is our unforgettable historic homeland. The very name would be a marvelously effective rallying cry. If His Majesty the Sultan [The ruler of the Ottoman Empire] were to give us Palestine, we could in return undertake the complete management of the finances of Turkey. We should there form a part of a wall of defense for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism. We should as a neutral state remain in contact with all Europe, which would have to guarantee our existence. The holy places of Christendom could be placed under some form of international extraterritoriality [an arrangement by which a place is exempted from local laws and jurisdiction]. We should form a guard of honor about these holy places, answering for the fulfillment of this duty with our existence. The guard of honor would be the great symbol of the solution of the Jewish question after what were for us eighteen centuries of affliction. We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever attempt there for our own benefit will [contribute] mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.

When Herzl died in 1904, the Zionist movement was still in its infancy. Many decades would pass before it finally achieved its goal: the creation of the state of Israel in 1949. That same year, Herzl’s remains were flown to Israel and entombed in Jerusalem on a hill now known as Mount Herzl.

Review Questions

1. How did the writings of Theodor Herzl create the Zionist movement?
2. Why did Herzl feel that Jews needed to leave the nations in which they were living?
3. Why did Herzl feel that the creation of a Jewish state would solve the problems that Jews were having?
4. Why did Herzl believe that the future Jewish state should be in Palestine?
5. Why did Herzl believe that the other nations would support the creation of a Jewish state?