The 1897 First Zionist Conference was a major step toward establishing the modern State of Israel.

By Rabbi Ken Spiro

We cannot study Zionism without studying Theodor Benyamin Ze’ev Herzl (1860-1904).

As we already saw in class #59, as a correspondent during the Alfred Dreyfus affair, Herzl was shocked to hear the civilized French screaming: “Death to the Jews!” He determined then and there that the solution to anti-Semitism was the establishment of a Jewish national state.

Although Zionism was not his invention, Herzl became the driving force of the movement. There were several factors that made him the ideal leader:

- he was from Western Europe (as opposed to Eastern Europe) – a part of the world considered to be more enlightened
• he was very well educated (he had a Ph.D. in law from the University of Vienna)

• he was a well-known journalist who could write and speak well

• he was financially well-off and politically well connected (he had married into a prominent Austrian-Jewish family)

• he had a charismatic presence and a striking appearance

Even though he was raised as an assimilated Jew and was woefully ignorant of the religion of his forefathers, the anti-Semitism of Vienna and the Dreyfus affair had had a powerful impact on him. He became obsessed with Zionism and relentlessly traveled throughout Europe, meeting many heads of state, in his attempt to gain support for a Jewish state.

In 1896, he published a book titled *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question* (*Der Judenstaat*) which gained him much notoriety and transformed him into a leading personality in the Zionist movement. In 1897, on August 29th, Herzl convened the First Zionist Conference in Basle, Switzerland. Present were 197 delegates from 16 countries who formed the initial Zionist policy. This gathering proved a major event in the establishment of the modern State of Israel. Afterward, Herzl wrote in his diary:

"Were I to sum up the Basle Congress in one word, which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly, it would be this: at Basel I founded the Jewish State. Perhaps in five years, but certainly in 50, everyone will know it."

On May 14, 1948, 50 years and nine months later, the State of Israel was founded.

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1 *The Siege: The Story of Israel and Zionism*, p.80.
Unfortunately, Herzl did not see it happen. He died at age 44 of a heart attack following the stormy controversy involving the proposal that the Jewish people make their home in Uganda. Herzl, who had provisionally supported the idea, settled the controversy by convincing his detractors that he had remained faithful to Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel. Thus, he safeguarded the unity of the Zionist movement, but his weak heart gave out in the process.

Herzl’s story is tragic. He died having given his life for the cause, and he died bankrupt having spent all his money on it and leaving his family life in turmoil. He left no descendants to carry on after him. His wife Julia, from whom he was estranged, died at age 35. His three children – Pauline, Hans and Trude – all suffered untimely deaths. Pauline became a drug addict and died in France. Hans, after becoming a Catholic, shot himself on the day of Pauline’s funeral. Trude, who was mentally ill, died at Theresienstadt at the hands of the Nazis. Herzl’s only grandchild, Stephen Theodor (Trude’s son), changed his name to Norman and committed suicide by jumping from a bridge in Washington D.C. in 1946.

Herzl was buried in Europe, but in 1949, after the State of Israel was founded, his body was disinterred and brought to Jerusalem. He is buried in a cemetery now known as Mount Herzl, where various heads of state and military heroes are also buried.

**Key Personalities**

Of the many key personalities at this time, we must mention three:

- Chaim Weizmann (1874 to 1952)
- David Ben-Gurion (1886 to 1973)
- Asher Hersh Ginsberg (1856 to 1927)

Weizmann was a Russian-born chemist who, early on in his youth, became associated with the group Hovevei Zion (“Lovers of Zion”). After Herzl’s death in 1904, he became the *de facto* leader of the Zionist Movement.
Interestingly, Weizmann invented artificial acetone – the chief ingredient in cordite, or smokeless gunpowder – in 1915 in the middle of World War I. His invention enabled the British to mass-produce gunpowder for the war effort.

Because of this, he became friendly with Arthur Balfour, the foreign secretary of England. Balfour, who in 1917 promised British support for a national homeland for Jews in Palestine, said that acetone converted him to Zionism. (We will discuss the Balfour Declaration in the next class.)

David Ben-Gurion was born David Gruen in Plonsk, Poland. A very significant personality, he was small in stature but a real powerhouse. Although he came from a religious family which was fervently Zionistic, early on he, like most of the movement’s leaders, abandoned his religious roots.²

Ben-Gurion arrived in Israel in 1906 at age 20, working in the orange groves and in the wine cellars of the early settlements. He was active in the Poalei Zion (“Workers of Zion”), but he took some controversial positions in his party – such as that immigrants and settlers have the right to manage their own affairs without interference from the Diaspora, that immigrating to Israel was the obligation of every party member, and that Hebrew be the sole language of his party. At that time, Israel was still under the control of the Ottoman Empire and Ben-Gurion, who studied law in Constantinople for a while, favored loyalty to Turkey and adoption of Ottoman citizenship for Jews. However, when World War I broke out and the Turks began to persecute Zionists, he ran into trouble with the authorities and was exiled. He went to New York where he founded the Ahdut ha-Avodah (“United Labor”) Party.

² Ben Gurion’s attitude toward religion and its place in the Jewish state could be categorized as hostile or at best ambivalent, and many of his policies regarding dealing with new immigrants and army service were designed to push observant Jews towards dropping their observance. He could also take a harsh and event violently confrontational attitude toward political rivals such as toward Menachem Begin and the Irgun (the military wing of the break-away Revisionist Zionism Movement founded by Ze’ev Jabotinsky in 1923) which culminated with Ben Gurion’s order to sink the _Altaleva_, an Irgun arms ship, off the coast of Tel Aviv on June 21, 1948. Sixteen Irgun members were killed in the incident which could have led to civil war.
The second part of Ben-Gurion’s story – when he returned to Israel from New York to become the head of the Jewish Agency in 1935 and then the first Prime Minister of Israel in 1948 – will be covered in the next class.

The third key personality was Asher Hersh Ginsberg, whose pen name was Ahad HaAm. He was originally one of the Maskilim who became disillusioned with their plan to acculturate the Jews to Eastern European society. He became the great intellectual leader of the early Zionist movement. His vision for the Jewish state was not as a refuge for the oppressed Jewry of the world, but rather a place where the modern Jew could create a new secular, progressive, “enlightened” state which would become the center of a new modern Jewish culture. In 1897, he wrote in *The Jewish State and the Jewish People*:

*This Jewish settlement... will become in course of time the center of the nation, wherein its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all its aspects to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then, from this center the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the over-all unity of our people. When our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce men in the land of itself who will be able, at a favorable moment, to establish a state there – one which will be not merely a state of Jews but really a Jewish state.*

Ginsberg personified the dominant element in the Zionist movement – enlightened Jews who started out wanting to solve the problem of anti-Semitism by helping Jews to assimilate. Only later, when they found their efforts were futile – in the face of terrible persecution which did not let up no matter how much the Jews tried to blend in – did they turn to working for a Jewish homeland. Since many had been born into Torah observant households and had consciously left religion behind in the quest to assimilate, most carried their negative attitudes toward Judaism into their new Zionist ideology.

The key factor which shaped their worldview was a nationalism based not only on the notion of creating a physical Jewish homeland, but also of
creating a new kind of Jew to build and maintain this homeland. Many of these early Zionist thinkers felt that centuries of ghettoization and persecution had robbed the Jews of their pride and strength. To build a homeland required a proud, self-sufficient Jew; a Jew who could farm, defend himself and build the land. The pious, poor, ghettoized Jew – who presented a pathetic image of a man stooped-over and always at the mercy of his persecutors – had to be done away with. To build a state required something all-together different – a “Hebrew.”

The early Zionists called themselves Hebrews and not Jews, and deliberately changed their German or Russian or Yiddish names to sound more Hebraic and nationalistic (for example, David Gruen became David Ben-Gurion. Shymon Perski became Shimon Peres, etc.). It was a deliberate attempt to create a totally new Jewish identity and rid themselves of any aspect of the old. They believed that this new Jewish state, populated by fighting, farming Hebrews would revitalize the Jewish people, restore Jewish pride and put an end to anti-Semitism once and for all.

While there is no doubt that the Jewish immigrants who created the modern Jewish state accomplished amazing feats against all odds, Zionism has not proven to be the solution to anti-Semitism and ironically, today, the number one excuse for Jew-hatred in the world is Zionism and the State of Israel. These early Zionist leaders knew that religion had preserved Jewish identity in the ghettos and shtetls of Europe, but in the modern Jewish state, they felt there would be no need for it. Of course the Bible would have to be used as a source of Jewish history and culture, but there was no room for religion or ritual in the modern Jewish state.

**Reaction to Zionism**

The strong anti-religious attitude of much of the early Zionist leadership put them at complete odds with the vast majority of the rabbinic leadership of Europe, who maintained that Torah and its commandments were the essence of what Judaism was all about, and a Jewish nation without these key ingredients would be a like a body without a soul. More than that, the Torah explicitly states over and over again that the whole ability to live and
prosper in the land is dependent on the Jewish people keeping its commandments. How could a Zionist leadership, that was largely anti-religious and bent on driving Jews away from Judaism, possibly succeed in creating a Jewish presence in the Land of Israel?

The position of Rabbi Tzadik HaKohen Rabinowitz (1823 to 1900), who was known as the Tzadik of Lublin, typified this view:

_We surely know that if we were believers and truly trusted in the salvation of the Lord and were observers of the commandments of God, we would even today be dwelling in our Holy Land... Why did the land perish? “Because they abandoned My laws which I put before them.” It has already been made clear that the Zionists reject all the commandments and cleave to every manner of abomination... It may be assumed that, if the Zionists gain domination, they will seek to remove from the hearts of Israel belief in God and the truth of Torah... They have thrown off their garments of assimilation and put on a cloak of zeal, so that they appear zealous on behalf of Judaism. They are in fact digging a mine beneath our faith and are seeking to lead Israel from beneath the wings of the Shechina, the Divine Presence._

The anti-religious sentiment within Zionism was not the only problem. As with the Reform Movement in Germany in the 19th century, the Zionist leadership often took an active role in trying to “help” new arrivals to the Land of Israel assimilate into their new identity by actively seeking to separate Jews from Judaism and Torah observance. This was often achieved by deliberately placing new immigrants, often Sephardic Jews, into secular environments such as anti-religious collective farms known as _kibbutzim_. This led to the rapid secularization of a significant proportion of Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries who, having not experienced the European Enlightenment, had remained overwhelmingly observant, ironically until their arrival in Israel.

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The biggest irony in all of this is that 100 years later, secular Zionism has largely disappeared as an ideology with the vast majority of secular Israelis no longer characterizing themselves as Zionist. Religion and observance, however, are rapidly rising among the general population. The most recent survey (done in 2007) shows that 30% of Israelis describe themselves as religiously observant and another 40% say they are traditional. Totally secular Jews are now the minority and truly anti-religious Jews are a very small percentage of the population. (The core of anti-religious sentiment in Israel today rests with a small, but very powerful and influential, Ashkenazi elite who still largely control the courts, newspapers, television, radio, universities and the army.)

Back at the turn of the 20th century, while the majority of the rabbis of Europe took a decidedly anti-Zionist stance, not all Orthodox Jews shared this attitude. There were numerous religious Zionists who were some of the fiercest fighters for returning to the land. As we saw in the previous class, it was Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever, one of the first religious Zionists from Poland, who heavily influenced Baron de Rothschild in supporting early settlements.

Another key figure was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), Torah scholar and Kabbalist, who arrived in Palestine in 1904 and was one of the leading Torah authorities in pre-state days. He saw God’s hand in the foundations laid by the secular Zionists and endeavored to work with them. He wrote his famous Orot (“Lights”) about the holiness of the newborn nationalism. In 1921, he became the first chief rabbi of Palestine.

A year after the Fifth Zionist Congress met in 1901, a group of religious Zionists, in an attempt to synthesize modern Jewish national identity with the traditional Jewish identity, founded the Mizrachi Movement (an abbreviation of the words merkaz ruchani meaning, “spiritual center”). The Mizrachi manifesto stated:

*In the lands of the Diaspora the soul of our people – our Holy Torah – can no longer be preserved in its full strength, nor can the commandments, which comprise the entire spiritual life of the people,*
be kept in their original purity... The people have found one remedy for this affliction – to direct their hearts to that one place which has always been the focus of our prayers... Zion and Jerusalem... It has, therefore, been agreed by all those who love the spirit of their people and are faithful to their God’s Torah, that the reawakening of the hope of the return to Zion will provide a solid foundation as well as lend a special quality to our people. It will serve as a focus for the ingathering of our spiritual forces and as a secure fortress for our Torah and sanctity.5

Today, the Mizrachi Movement has evolved into the right-wing religious-nationalist camp in Israel. These Jews serve valiantly in the Israeli army (the IDF) and are the backbone of the settler movement. (So, while secular Zionism has for the most part disappeared, religious Zionism is alive and well.)

Among other religious groups, such as the ultra-Orthodox haredi community, the attitude today toward the State of Israel varies from pragmatic (there are several ultra-Orthodox parties in the Israeli political system) to total rejection of the system. The haredim generally do not participate in many of the institutions of State of Israel such as service in the Israeli army nor do they send their children to the state religious school system. The reason for this harks back to the conflict between the secular Zionist leadership and the rabbinic leadership in Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Back then, oddly enough, their anti-Zionist stance had placed the ultra-Orthodox and the Reform Jews of America and Germany in the same camp (albeit for different reasons). German Reform Jews said: “The hope for national restoration [to Israel] contradicts our feelings for the fatherland [Germany].” And American Reform Jews said: “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine... nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state…” (See classes #55 and #59 for more on this subject.)

Still, whatever the reaction of the Jewish world at large, Jews kept returning to Israel.

In the previous class we covered the first aliyah which brought 30,000 Jews to Israel between 1882 and 1891. The second aliyah – following the Kishinev Progrom of Easter 1903 and following the first aborted Russian Revolution of 1905 – brought another 40,000 Jews to Israel between 1904 and 1914.

The third aliyah – following World War I and the Russian Revolution – brought another 35,000 (between 1919 and 1923).

By this time, the dream of a Jewish homeland was no longer just a dream. It was becoming a reality as the victorious Allied Forces conquered the Ottoman Empire (which had picked the losing side in World War I) and the British took over control of the Middle East.