

Herzl's birthday gift

On the Zionist forefather's 88th birthday, the Jewish state he envisioned was established. Herzl's gift continues to give

• By GOL KALEV

On Friday, May 14, 1948, 5 Iyar, David Ben-Gurion convened the national council and declared that effective at midnight, upon the termination of the British Mandate, the State of Israel would be established. Since the Hebrew calendar's day begins at sunset, Israel's actual birthday was on Shabbat, the 6th of Iyar. Indeed, Iyar has special meaning in Jewish history.

On 10 Iyar, May 2, 1860, a baby was born in Budapest. When that baby grew older, he dreamt that the messiah instructed him to "declare to the Jews that I shall come soon and perform great wonders and great deeds for my people and for the whole world."

On that child's 88th birthday, such a great wonder was performed: the Jewish state was born. With his photo mounted behind Ben-Gurion as he declared the establishment of the State of Israel, Theodor Herzl gave a birthday gift to the Jewish people.

But the creation of the Jewish state was not just a one-time gift. As he envisioned, it turned out to be the gift that keeps on giving.

"I believe in honesty that even after we achieve our land, the Land of Israel, it will not stop being an ideal," Herzl wrote shortly before his death in 1904.

Two aspects of Herzl's ideal come to mind at Israel's 70th birthday:

1. Herzl realized that European opposition to the Jews is not something that can be solved through a committee or a government resolution. It is ingrained in the European psyche due to historical circumstances.

2. He also recognized that often concepts are not created to address a demand. Rather, it is the availability of such new concepts that awaken latent demand. This was the case with railroads. He wrote that some argue that "it was foolish to build certain lines because there were not even sufficient passengers to fill the mail-coaches. They did not realize the truth - which now seems obvious to us - that travelers do not produce railways, but, conversely, railways produce travelers."

Herzl applied this to the Jews' propensity to move back to their ancestral homeland and center their Jewish identity around the Jewish state once it is established, but it could also be applied to his views on European hostility to the Jews. He observed that old European Jew-hatred did not disappear with the secularization of Europe and the emancipation of the Jews. Instead, it evolved. The emancipation gave rise to the antisemitic movement that swept through Europe during Herzl's time.

Some 50 years later, antisemitism led to the European genocide of the Jews. Indeed, the Nazis did not invent antisemitism. They identified a latent demand and provided a vehicle to address it - the Final Solution.

Not only Germans murdered Jews and enabled the Holocaust. Contemporary attempts to revise history and pronounce "we were all a victim of the Nazis" not only amounts to a polite version of partial Holocaust denial, but also raises yet another red-flag that might point to the ongoing European opposition to Jews.

Such multi-layered, often subconscious opposition continues to evolve. The establishment of the Jewish state 70 years ago provided a vehicle that awakened that same latent demand. It allows certain Europeans to redirect their old disdain toward the collective of



Theodor Herzl in his iconic pose in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland - site of the First Zionist Congress. (Wikimedia Commons)

the Jews, using terms and arguments that are fashionable in contemporary Europe.

But unlike in Herzl's time, on Israel's 70th birthday, such disdain is met with the extraordinary strength of the Jewish state - militarily, economically and through its technological, medical and social innovations. Equally important, it is met with broad global support for Israel.

That is primarily because the world is no longer Euro-centric, as it was at Herzl's time and during the

Holocaust. The American Revolution produced grassroots admiration for the Jewish state. It is joined with reverence for Israel and a desire to take part in its great wonders throughout the "new world" - In Africa, Asia and even the Middle East.

The Jewish state that Herzl gifted on his 88th birthday turned out to be a light to the world. Notwithstanding residual opposition in parts of Europe, at its 70th anniversary, just as he dreamt as a child, the State of Israel has become a precious gift to humanity.