

# That night in Basel

One evening helped us understand the depth of Israel-bashing

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Israel-bashing has become today's existential threat to Judaism. It has both populous retail components and theoretical institutional destruction mechanisms. Like antisemitism in Theodor Herzl's time, Israel-bashing is an existential threat to all Jews, including those who bash Israel themselves.

"Till recently, antisemitism in France has been something comfortable and polite; one can even say pleasant," Herzl wrote in 1892. The same can be said about today's Israel-bashing. Like then, the crux of the threat is not with the aggressive vocal elements such as Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions activists but with the "polite" Israel-basher-lites – normative people in the International Criminal Court, UN, the media, foreign offices and even governments and world leaders.

Those are not self-described anti-Zionists, but they are influenced by populous Israel-bashing sentiments. Herzl understood that even well-intentioned world leaders would be vulnerable under such circumstances: "Even if we were as near to the hearts of princes as are their other subjects, they could not protect us. They would only feel popular hatred by showing us too much favor."

With this in mind, Herzl launched the journey back home in 1895 in the Basel Municipal Casino hall. Last month, we were at the same hall to celebrate 125 years since that first Zionist Congress. Outside, European protesters yelled "free Palestine," but as if Herzl were there, we got an unexpected application of his vision right there inside the Municipal Casino hall.

It was an emotional ceremony, with moving speeches by Yaakov Hagoel, Herzl's successor as chair of the World Zionist Organization, and Isaac Herzog, president of the Jewish state that was conceived in that hall. Guy Parmelin, a former president of Switzerland and the current head of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, delivered a supportive speech, reiterating Switzerland's commitment to Zionism and acknowledging that Switzerland has repeatedly persecuted its Jews.

He is right. Although the conventional wisdom at Herzl's time was that as Europe became secular, those perceptions were over, Herzl recognized that European opposition is chronic – it would evolve as European and Jewish circumstances change. Sure enough, a new form of opposition emerged at



JURA REGION: Some residents regard themselves as under the occupation of Switzerland and Bern. (Scott Wylie/Flickr)

Herzl's time in reaction to the emancipation of Jews. It was given a name: antisemitism.

But Parmelin assured us that those cycles of European and Swiss animosities toward Jews are over; we are now friends. He is correct. The Jewish state and Switzerland are strong allies. But then, as if to reaffirm Herzl's notion of the chronic and adjusting nature of European opposition, Parmelin switched tones: "It is important for me to raise the right of self-determination of Palestinians," he stated.

No doubt, the Palestinian issue is important. As important as that of Jura, Catalonia, South-Tyrol, Sumi, Corsica and other nations in Europe seeking self-determination.

But what compels a good friend, at such a special moment, in such a special place – our modern-day Mount Sinai, where our journey home began – to "stick it a little bit" to Israel? This is an indication of how deeply entrenched Israel-bashing is in 2020s Europe.

IMAGINE IF, during the First Zionist Congress in that same hall, the Swiss president would say warm words and then switch tones: "It is important to me to raise the Jewish control of our financial markets, and the presence of Jewish beggars who we see everywhere." This would be a strong indication of how deeply entrenched antisemitism is in 1890s Europe.

Perhaps some expected the president of Israel, who spoke after Parmelin, to raise the issue of self-determination of Jura. Some in Jura view themselves under occupation by Switzerland and Bern. Unlike the Catalonians, whose quest for a separatism referendum has been denied, Switzerland was generous enough to grant such a referen-

dum. But when the separatists won, the government retroactively invalidated the referendum, making Swiss opposition to self-determination official – at least when it comes to Jura.

Incidentally, it is not clear what would be the result of a hypothetical referendum of Palestinians in the "Canton" of Area C of the West Bank. Yet, since experts believe Palestinians might vote to "secede" from the Palestinian Authority and join Israel, it is not likely to ever be allowed by Europe and the Palestinian Authority. The lessons of Jura would be applied.

*Applying Herzl, the threat to Judaism might come through our friends*

Europe is the occupier of Palestinians, having created Palestinian dependencies on both Europe and on conflict-permutation. Europe successfully reduced Palestinianism to a single issue – the occupation – and turned the Palestine Authority's budget to be dependent on conflict-related grants. Hence, the end of the conflict could mean the end of Palestinianism.

This is on top of European abuse of Palestinians, such as sabotaging Palestinian employment and mentorship in Jewish-owned companies such as SodaStream, and even residence in joint Jewish-Palestinian neighborhoods such as Givat Hamatos.

Europe denies the Palestinian the right to self-determination as an individual. So if Parmelin were truly

concerned, he should have given this part of the polite speech in Brussels rather than be the party pooper of the 125th anniversary of Zionism.

Perhaps he should also learn a lesson in etiquette and chivalry from the president of the Jewish state. President Herzog did not speak about Jura, nor did he address Swiss alleged human rights violations.

Switzerland's astonishing decision to reverse granting citizenship to a qualified Muslim woman, solely due to her refusal to have physical contact with a male Swiss official, is horrifying. Instead, President Herzog spoke about positive things, such as our mission to reclaim Zionism, which he called "the mission of our generation."

PARMELIN IS certainly a friend, but his actions as a friend demonstrate how core Israel-bashing is to today's European psyche, just as antisemitism was core to the European psyche then.

Herzl understood that dogmatic minds cannot be changed in such circumstances through public diplomacy (*hasbara*). "Above all, I recognized the emptiness and futility of efforts to 'combat antisemitism,'" he wrote. Therefore, a radical out-of-the-box solution was needed, and that was Zionism and the establishment of the Jewish state.

Applying Herzl's thinking today, combating dogmatic Israel-bashing through conventional means is not likely to be effective. Yet, a global recognition that Judaism has transformed, and Zionism is now its organizing principle, would turn Israel-bashing to Jew-bashing, and that would dramatically alter the nature of the threat.

The Israel-basher must stay in Judaism 2.0 so he can mask his opposition to Judaism as merely opposition to Zionism. Until there is a broad global consciousness that we are in Judaism 3.0, a European political leader can claim to have zero tolerance for old-style antisemitism (the existential threat to Judaism in the early 20th century) while actively engaging in Israel-bashing – the existential threat to Judaism today in the 21st century.

"We are coming home," Herzl proclaimed in Basel 125 years ago. That journey home began in that hall in 1897 with the *Shehechyanu* blessing, thanking God for bringing the Jewish people to that moment. The 125th-year celebrations in that same hall concluded with a prayer for God to preserve and protect the State of Israel. The next day, I was home in Jerusalem. ■

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