

## Herzl's Vision: Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State

**Shlomo Avineri**

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*In Herzl, readers meet a visionary driven by a desire to preserve human life and dignity, not only for Jews, but for those with whom he hoped they could share a land.*

From Israel Prize recipient Shlomo Avineri comes *Herzl's Vision*, a timely, revealing, and immensely readable new biography of Theodor Herzl, who is credited with conceptualizing modern Zionism.

Opening chapters find Herzl rubbing elbows with Kaiser Wilhelm II in Jerusalem, a mere year after first convening the Zionist Congress. The grandeur of this alliance, and the meteoric nature of his rise toward it, help Avineri cast Herzl as a bold, imaginative, and persuasive thinker. Later meetings with other world leaders, including the pope, cement the perception, while the reactions of diplomats to him—often cold and riddled with prejudice—highlight the necessity of his project.

Affection and admiration dominate Avineri's narrative. Herzl, the reader finds, sometimes flirted with Icarus-level aspirations. He dreamed of a politically expedient mass conversion before the pope and imagined that he could persuade European leaders to his side with singular and effective arguments. Of the Holy Land, he waxed poetic: "We shall convert the sandy deserts of our country into beautiful meadows."

Yet, there was a practical edge to Herzl's visions, too, and without them, modern Israel may not have been possible. Avineri sets the scene by detailing 19th-century shifts away from religious antisemitism into insidious nationalist antisemitism, and approaching disasters are foreshadowed with eerie effect.

Avineri poises Herzl amongst such changes as a man of incredible foresight: "Blood libels ... have been replaced ... by stories about Christian property being robbed by Jewish capital," he writes, and he anticipates pogroms on grand scales. Avineri's text also bears witness to the evolution of Herzl's Zionism, from a means of guaranteeing autonomy and protection via a protectorate, to an independent nation of its own. British Palestine, as the dream location, looms.

A dynamic and thoughtful presentation of an extremely important 20th-century figure, Avineri's *Herzl's Vision* is essential reading for all those who wish to have nuanced conversations about Zionism. Compelling prose is strengthened by careful research, and the resultant biography stands to inform and engage.

*Herzl's Vision*, by thoughtfully tracing Zionism to its roots in the imagination of one brilliant and compassionate thinker, contributes invaluable to ongoing conversations about Jewish nationality and Israel's beginnings.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Winter 2015)

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