

Herzl's State

by Dan Ben-David

Theodore Herzl's comparative advantage was in what President Bush (senior) once referred to as "the vision thing". The many details and minutiae that Herzl provided on how to reach the objective are quite reflective of the times in which he lived, and while they may be the source of substantial discussion and debate, they are not his real contribution.

Herzl's greatness was in his ability to see the big picture – the same big picture that is so missing today. He not only discerned the importance of a State for the Jewish people, he also understood what it would take for this country to ascend to a viable and sustainable plateau that would ensure its continued existence and enable it to thrive – an insight that does not appear to have been in much supply among the country's recent generations of leaders.

While our leaders have mastered the ability to talk the talk, their inexplicable and inexcusable shallowness of thought has beached us on a socio-economic and diplomatic reef that has severely impaired our ability to maneuver and is putting Herzl's, and our, dream in peril. The big picture that Herzl saw over a century ago – the one that could enable the unique attributes inherent here not only to survive until eternity but to also shine as a beacon for all of humanity – is nowhere on the radar monitors of our recent and current leadership.

Decades before the contemporary terms came into being, Theodore Herzl understood the importance of technological change and globalization. In a quote from 1899, he wrote "how wonderful are these times in which we live! ... distances have nearly evaporated ... with regard to science and technology, all borders have been removed ... public opinion is no longer limited to one place, one city, one country."

Instead of fearing industrialization, Herzl made it clear that in order for the future Jewish State to thrive, it would need to maximize its use of the latest scientific and technological advancements. He believed that it should be the country's duty to heavily invest in infrastructure in the wider sense of the word – with special attention to what we refer to today as human capital infrastructure.

One example of his view on the importance of technology comes from his manuscript, *The Jewish State*: "The word 'impossible' has ceased to exist in the vocabulary of technical science. Were a man who lived in the last century to return to the earth, he would find the life of today [i.e. in 1896] full of incomprehensible magic ... To build a city takes in our time as many years as it formerly required centuries ... The spirit of our age has gathered fabulous treasures into its storehouse. Every day this wealth increases. A hundred thousand heads are occupied with speculations and research at every point of the globe, and what any one discovers belongs the next moment to the whole world. We ourselves will use and carry on every new attempt in our Jewish land ... making the new land a land of experiments and a model State."

The implementation process that he encouraged involved some very modern concepts: "individual enterprise must never be checked by the Company [which in today's terms, is essentially embodied by the State of Israel] with its superior force ... we shall, wherever possible, scrupulously respect the rights of the individual. Private property, which is the economic basis of independence, shall be developed freely and be respected by us ... The spirit of enterprise must, indeed, be encouraged in every possible way."

The canvas upon which Herzl painted these vivid hues yields one very powerful message: that "Jews come of their own volition. This must be their country of choice." If we put Herzl's words in the perspective of the State of Israel 100 hundred years after his death, then it should be clear that it is not enough that our shores serve as a sanctuary for the Jewish people – since after the refuge is provided for the parents, what will keep their children here? Public internalization of this bottom line has major ramifications for the national priorities that we choose today, which determine the kind of country that we'll have tomorrow.

In a country whose standards of living are steadily falling farther and farther behind the leading western countries for over three straight decades, in which rates of unemployment, poverty and inequality have been progressively rising for decades, surpassing most of the industrialized world, we deserve leaders who are able to see today what Herzl understood over a century ago.