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PERSPECTIVES

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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the nineteenth issue of Perspectives.

Is There Anything Else?

Herzl Failed to Answer One Question. It Still Haunts Us

Uriya Shavit

The Sofia Synagogue seats almost 1,200 visitors and is one of the most beautiful in the world. Beauty has all sorts of expressions; the most compelling is that which does not require explanation.

No more than several dozen Jews attend this Sephardic temple regularly, but many tourists do. On a sunny winter day, there is a long, patient line at the gates. As in other large and small Western synagogues today, you must pass tight security checks to enter. Security regulations have become particularly strict here since the Burgas terror attack a decade ago.

The equally enchanting Church of St. Paraskeva and the impressive Banya Bashi Mosque are within short walking distance. Few cities in the world bring together the

three monotheistic religions in such glory and proximity. There are no security checks at the church and at the mosque.

I was in Sofia to attend a conference on combating antisemitism and preserving Jewish heritage, organized meticulously by the Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute. It was just a day before the elections in Israel revealed to the blind, silent majority of the country that a religious civil war is raging.

I told the Israeli ambassador, Yoram Elrom, how surprised I was to learn that Sofia has so much to offer, historically and culturally. He said this was often the comment of first-time Israeli visitors.

Flying back home to vote, I could not help but think about Herzl's lacuna.

Sofia was a crucial stop for Herzl on his way to and from Istanbul, where, tilting between greatness and ridiculousness, he offered the Ottoman Empire an offer it could refuse.

It was here, on a summer day, at the train station, that hundreds of Jews enthusiastically welcomed the author of the State of the Jews. They cheered the Zionist leader, calling him their savior, crying "Next year in Jerusalem," "Long live Herzl," and "Long Live the Jewish People."

It was here that the young, ambitious author of *Der Judenstaat* found out how eagerly awaited his mission was. Here, the intellectual became a leader of people.

The State of the Jews – the erroneous translation of the book's title into English is more than a misfortune – described Jews as a people, one people.

Yet Herzl did not systematically explain what makes a person part of that people and what makes the Jews a nation in the modern sense of the word.

The answers are scattered in the book. One is that nothing but the faith of the forefathers unites the Jews, making them an odd people.

Another is that antisemites are what brings Jews together, whether they want to or not.

In historical perspective, the first answer is not convincing. If it were true, Herzl would not have become the leader of Zionism, and atheists and secularists would not have pioneered the movement to triumph and continue to dominate it today.

Sadly, there is more truth in the second answer Herzl offered.

It is a fact that Herzl's prophetic sense of urgency developed in direct response to the rise of antisemitism. Several decades into the establishment of political Zionism, antisemitism (and the closure of the gates of America) played a significant role in encouraging the more massive waves of migration to mandatory Palestine that made Zionist ambitions plausible.

More than 120 years have passed, and Herzl's question and answers remain relevant: Is there anything that makes the Jews one nation other than antisemitism?

Speakers at the Sofia conference presented an inspiring depth of activities taking place in Bulgaria and other European countries. Fighting antisemitism decidedly on the legal and educational fronts. Advancing the remembrance of the Holocaust and sharing its universal moral lessons, including through creative, even if controversial, usages of social media. Preserving Jewish heritage sites and bringing back life to Jewish presences.

Indeed, as our Center's soon-to-be-released annual For a Righteous Cause report will show, across the world, Holocaust remembrance and the fight against antisemitism are more intensive than ever before.

None of this would have been possible had it not been for the efforts of Jewish organizations and Israeli ministries and agencies, and most of it is laudable.

Yet as I was reflecting on the proceedings of the Sofia conference – and other similar events – I could not help but think that the passion demonstrated in recent years by Israel and by Jewish organizations in fighting antisemitism has another and more profound motivation.

There is nothing else.

Nothing else that, currently, Jews from different orientations can passionately unite about. Nothing else that, currently, Jews from different orientations feel deeply just about.

Nothing else that brings Jews together as a nation.

So synagogues are renovated and cemeteries are restored as part of the fight against antisemitism, family histories are narrated in response to antisemitic propaganda, addressing antisemitism is the main sphere through which Jewish organizations interact with other organizations, whether Jewish or not, and antisemitism is what forges moral and political alliances and breaks them.

All sorts of vicious cycles are opened in the process and reduce Jewish identity to no more than a rejection of bigots.

With synagogues becoming fortresses because of security threats, there is a greater chance that a young European will visit Auschwitz than see the inside of a temple. The implication is that non-Jews see Jewish history as no more than a tragedy.

At the same time, the fight against antisemitism becomes an excuse for cooperating with all sorts of fascists or keeping silent about their doings, as if such a choice is morally justifiable or strategically sane (It is not: fascists, being fascists, are never reliable allies).

Now that Trump hosted a Holocaust denier and refused to apologize, his (former?) Jewish allies renounce him. In what kind of self-righteous bubble have these people been living to not have understood earlier that politics that thrive on conspiracy theories and prejudices would, at some point, turn dangerous also for Jews?

The kind that exists when people only see themselves.

The fight against antisemitism is a matter of security and honor. It should not be allowed to be the sun around which Jewish existence orbits in the 21st century.

The teaching of Jewish and Zionist history in Israeli high schools has disturbingly largely narrowed down to the teaching of the Holocaust. Hundreds of years of intellectual and social richness have been reduced to a precursor to the Holocaust. Everything that happened after the Holocaust has been reduced to a belated response (Remarkably, pupils remain ignorant even about the Holocaust. But that's another issue).

Some on the Israeli left say the reason for the focus on Holocaust studies is that the system wants to cultivate a “the whole world is against us” mentality.

They are wrong.

The real reason is that the Holocaust is the one and only topic on which there is still consensus among Israelis. Any other aspect of Jewish and Zionist history imposes questions that teachers seek to avoid: What makes someone a Jew in this day and age? What are the origins and what are the moral objectives of Zionism?

Herzl sought to relieve Jews from the specter of antisemitism. The specter is still with us, and in more than one way.

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