The First Zionist Congress, which opened in the Grosse Musiksaal of Basle’s elegant municipal casino on 29 August 1897, was a high and solemn occasion attended by 196 delegates from sixteen countries. They had been brought together from four continents by the ancient dream of a return to Zion. The visionary who inspired this founding act and brilliantly orchestrated the Congress was an Austro-Hungarian journalist and playwright, Theodor Herzl, whose revolutionary tract, Der Judenstaat, had been published eighteen months earlier in Vienna. As he walked to the tribune, he was greeted by several minutes of stormy rejoicing and applause, punctuated by cries of “Long live the King!” The Russian Zionist journalist, Mordechai Ben-Ami, who was present at the proceedings, observed:

That is no longer the elegant Dr. Herzl of Vienna, it is a royal descendant of David risen from the grave who appears before us in the grandeur and beauty with which legend surrounded him. Everyone is gripped as if a historical miracle had occurred.... It was as if the Messiah, the son of David, stood before us.¹

Like most delegates, Ben-Ami was dazzled by Herzl’s physical presence—the regal bearing, his dignity and poise, the soft black beard and penetrating eyes—not to mention the impressive mise-en-scène of the Congress. Herzl, with his Wagnerian sense of drama, costume, and spectacle, not only succeeded in moving peo-

people but made them part of the action—in the words of Ernst Pawel “he had in-

21

instinctively hit upon the alchemy of mass manipulation and successfully transmuted

fantasy into power.” It was no small achievement to have welded together a rather

random and motley army of schnorrers, beggars, and shmucks (as Herzl unflatter-

ing described them in his diary) and made them conscious of their historic role as a

national assembly of the Jewish people.

On 24 August 1897, just five days before the opening of the Zionist Congress,

Herzl described some of the problems of stage-management and maneuvering be-

tween the divergent interests he had to contend with, as an egg-dance—“with the

eggs invisible.” There were seven eggs he had to balance: the Neue Freie Presse, which

he could not antagonize, for fear of losing his job as its literary editor; the

Orthodox Jews; the Modernists; the egg of Austrian patriotism; Turkey; the Sultan;

and the Russian government “against whom nothing disagreeable may be said,

although the deplorable position of the Russian Jews will have to be mentioned.”

Then, there were the Christian denominations, sensitive about the Holy Places,

Edmond de Rothschild (who had icily rejected his overtures), the Hovevei Zion in

Russia who were suspicious of Herzl as a Westernized outsider and unstable adven-

turer or even a false prophet; at the end of the list came the Palestine settlers,

“whose help from Rothschild must not be endangered, tout en considérant leur

misères [while taking proper account of their troubles]. Nor did Herzl forget the

egg of personal differences, of jealousy and envy. Summing up his Herculean task,

Herzl concluded with a sentence that captured his own leadership style in a nut-

shell. “I must conduct the movement impersonally, and yet not allow the reins to

slip from my hands.”

Despite the tremendous difficulties, Herzl’s egg-dance would in fact succeed

beyond all expectations. At Basle the spectacular display of Jewish national solidar-

ity certainly caught the imagination of the Jewish world and helped to persuade

influential Gentiles that Zionism was a political factor. In Basle, a Jewish national

assembly was established for the first time in 2,000 years; the foundation stone was

laid for what fifty years later would become the sovereign parliament of Israel, the

Knesset in Jerusalem. With characteristic boldness and even chutzpa, Herzl con-

fided to his diaries on 3 September 1897, what must be one of the most astonish-

   1897, 220 (hereafter Abridged Diaries).
5. Ibid., 222.
ing prophecies of modern history:

If I were to sum up the Congress in a word—which I shall take care not to publish—it would be this: At Bäle I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it.6

Such a statement could only have been made by an individual wholly convinced of his own providential mission and committed to the inextricable blending of dream and deed in human action. In the same entry where Herzl makes his remarkable “prophecy” he also reveals the great importance he attached to seemingly small details and aesthetic effects.7 He had insisted the delegates at the First Zionist Congress must have swallow-tails and white ties in order to establish the appropriate mood for creating a National Assembly of the Jewish people.

Full dress has a way of making most men feel rather stiff. The stiffness induces a measured, deliberate tone—one not so readily come by in light summer suits or travel wear—and I had spared nothing to heighten this tone to the pitch of solemnity.”8

Carl Schorske, in an influential essay first published nearly forty years ago, regarded Herzl’s aesthetic concerns as essentially irrational, part of the fin-de-siècle revolt against liberalism and an expression of the new mass politics.9 This is, in my view, misleading, even if we accept the element of Wagnerian histrionics in Herzl’s personality and politics, his readiness to summon up unconscious forces from the deep, and his ability to arouse messianic longings. Herzl rejected conventional assimilationist assumptions, but even Schorske admits that his vision of Zion “reincarnated the culture of modern liberal Europe.”10 Both Der Judenstaat and Herzl’s utopian novel Altneuland bear witness to this commitment to tolerance, Menschheit (humanity), and respect for the rights of the individual. However, such values—with which Herzl profoundly identified—were no longer applied to Jews in an

6. Ibid., entry of 3 Sept. 1897, 224.
10. Ibid., 173.

22
increasingly antisemitic Europe.\textsuperscript{11}

The events of his own day—the pogroms in Russia, Karl Lueger’s antisemitic triumph in fin-de-siècle Vienna, and the Dreyfus Affair in France—were warning signs to Herzl which he grasped with impressive lucidity. This helps to explain the burning urgency of his Zionist program—the dramatic call for mass emigration, the demand for a new exodus from Europe—and the imperative of finding a “national home”—guaranteed by the Great Powers and under international law.

The “visionary” Herzl saw the explosive antisemitic potential, deeply rooted in European society, more realistically than his opponents or most of his followers in the Zionist movement.\textsuperscript{12} At the same time, he coolly regarded the antisemitic movements of his time “without fear or hatred,” as a complex reality compounded of the social effects of Jewish emancipation, the ghetto legacy, Gentile economic envy, inherited prejudice and religious intolerance, nourished by popular folklore.\textsuperscript{13} More daringly, Herzl believed that antisemitism could successfully be channeled for Zionist purposes, that it would become the engine, driving the train towards Zion. His working assumption was that \textit{Judennot} (Jewish distress) might be strong enough to push Jews out of Europe, but in a basically liberal world, it would not break “the ultimate bonds of decency.” Arthur Hertzberg argued that this analysis of antisemitism was paradoxically “one of the great acts of faith in liberalism that was produced by the nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{14} However, Herzl mistakenly assumed that antisemites were ultimately rational in their aims and that the Zionist movement would enable Jews to deal with them on a basis of equality and enlightened self-interest. This was at best a half-truth. Thirty years later, it would lead some Zionists into dubious associations with fascists and Jew-baiters. Above all, it underestimated the genocidal logic of antisemitism—a failure of perception shared by all of Herzl’s contemporaries.

It has been suggested that Herzl’s thinking was messianic, even though it was

\textsuperscript{12} Israel Eldad, “Herzlaniut be-Yamenu, Ma-hi?” (What is Herzlianism in our times?), Ha-Umma 76 (1984): 165-74.
\textsuperscript{13} Theodor Herzl, “A Solution of the Jewish Question,” Jewish Chronicle, 17 Jan. 1896.
expressed in terms that were entirely secular and political. It is certainly possible to view Zionism as the heir of messianic impulses and emotions derived from Jewish tradition. However, it is perhaps more pertinent to see it as

"the most radical attempt in Jewish history to break out of the parochial molds of Jewish life in order to become part of the general history of man in the modern world." 16

Zionism, understood in this sense as a secular messianism, aimed to transform the collective position of the Jews as a people in the Gentile world. Whether it looked to enlightened liberalism, integral nationalism, or socialism to help it accomplish this end (within a Jewish national framework), Zionism still sought a reconciliation of Jewry with the peoples of the world once Jews had acquired their own nation-state.

From the Orthodox Jewish religious standpoint, the problem was less the return to Zion (prayers for Jewish restoration to the Holy Land were an integral part of Judaism) than the secular nature of the movement and its insistence on the primacy of the human effort rather than the divine will. Political Zionism insisted that it was a doctrine of Jewish self-help—that it was not sufficient to return to Zion by prayer alone—deeds were indispensable. 17 David Litwak, the central protagonist of Herzl's *Altneuland* (1902), explains to his guests that with the national rebirth, the Jewish people realized that

"they could expect nothing from fantastic miracle workers but everything from their own strength.... "Gesta Dei per Francos," the French once said—and God's deeds through the Jews' say the truly pious today, those who do not let the partisan Rabbis incite them." 18

Herzlían Zionism parted company with the passive track of Galut martyrdom and the quietist beliefs of traditional Jewish messianism. It was not based on belief in the miraculous intervention of Divine Providence or faith in a mystical bond with the "Holy Land," let alone an ancestral-tribal cult of the "land of the fathers." Nevertheless, it is difficult to avoid the latent messianic features in Herzl’s project,

15. Hertzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 46: "Messianism is the essence of his stance, because he proclaimed the historical inevitability of a Jewish State in a world of peaceful nations."
16. Ibid., 20.
even though he never spoke publicly in this vein. According to the account which he gave to the Hebrew writer, Reuben Brainin, less than a year before his death, Herzl was attracted to the Messiah legends of the Jews from early adolescence. At the age of twelve, he had a “wonderful dream,” which he recounted as follows

_The King-Messiah came, a glorious and majestic old man, took me in his arms and swept off with me on the wings of the wind. On one of the shining clouds we encountered the figure of Moses. The features were familiar to me out of my childhood in the statue by Michelangelo. The Messiah called to Moses: “It is for this child that I have prayed!” And to me he said: “Go and declare to the Jews that I shall come soon and perform great wonders and great deeds for my people and for the whole world!”_19

Shortly after this dream Herzl read a popular science book which presented electricity as the new King-Messiah which would liberate the nations and all mankind from servitude. At first he was indignant but then he began to wonder if electricity might not be the promised redeemer and decided to become an engineer—a childhood ambition which he never fulfilled. What is striking in this dream is the strong identification with Moses, with the Exodus from Egypt and technological advances that could totally transform the lives of humanity. It is precisely such a fusion of tradition and modernity, the idea of a new Jewish exodus and the Promethean redemption of mankind through the Zionist enterprise, that provided the _élan vital_ of Herzl’s project. The Moses leitmotif and the image of the Messiah would reappear at various intervals in Herzl’s Zionist career. In August 1895, the Chief Rabbi of Vienna, Moritz [Moses] Güdemann, after listening to Herzl’s first sketch of his Zionist plan, remarked to him: “I could think you were Moses.”20 Then, as they parted at the Munich railway station, Güdemann told him with deep fervor, “Remain as you are! Perhaps you are called of God!”21 Herzl records only that he “laughingly rejected the comparison” as incongruous. Perhaps, though, he did take it seriously. Güdemann would, however, turn against him and less than two years later, condemn Zionism as a secularist movement incompatible with historic Judaism.

Herzl again found himself compared to Moses at the mass meeting in London’s East End on 13 July 1896, where he spoke for an hour in the fearful heat.22 It was

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20. _Abridged Diaries_, entry of 18 Aug. 1895, 63.
21. Ibid., 64.
22. Ibid., 180.
an experience that first made Herzl conscious of “how my own legend is being born,” a process which he himself describes as “perhaps the most interesting thing I am recording in this book.”23 Soberly, he recognized that the people were sentimental (“the masses do not see clearly”) and that they might well have lavished the same affection on a clever demagogue, seducer, or impostor. Yet there is more than a biblical echo in his poetic observation: “A faint mist is beginning to rise and envelop me, and may perhaps become the cloud in which I shall walk.”24

As if recalling Moses in Egypt, Herzl had returned to his brethren from the “other side,” from the dazzling heights of a “refined” Central European culture which had begun to viciously stereotype and oppress the Jews. Like Moses he called to the oppressors “Let My People Go,” while showing the demoralized Israelites the way from ghetto servitude to freedom, from darkness to light. Like Moses, too, he would never see the Promised Land.25 Interestingly enough, Herzl thought at one point of writing a play about the aging Moses who had to face the constant murmurings and discontent of the people, fight against their slavish characteristics, confront the challenge of the Golden Calf, and overcome the revolt of Korah. The play was to be called Die Tragödie eines Führers, der kein Verführer ist (The tragedy of a leader who is no seducer)—a play on words in German that was indeed important to Herzl. Whenever he had to deal with a new crisis of opposition in the Zionist ranks, Herzl may well have been reminded of Moses as his Leitbild.

The image of both the Messiah and his shadow (the false Messiah) would accompany Herzl throughout the seven exhausting years of his Zionist leadership. The adulation with which he was received by the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Balkans carried unmistakably messianic overtones, captured in the childhood reminiscences of David Ben-Gurion. In a broadcast on Kol Israel (Israel Broadcasting Service) on 1 July 1966, Ben-Gurion recalled that seventy years earlier, when he was about ten years old, rumors had spread in his native Plonsk in Russian Poland, that the Messiah had arrived—“a tall handsome man—a doctor, no less—Dr. Herzl.” In his recollections, published four years later, the founder of the State of Israel added:

He [Herzl] was a finely featured man whose impressive black beard flowed wide down to his chest. One glimpse of him and I was ready to follow him then and

23. Ibid., 182.
24. Ibid.
25. Abridged Diaries, entry for 7 Nov. 1902, 381.
there to the land of my ancestors.26

The attraction of Herzl was rooted in something more than his striking features and his possessing one of the most impressive beards in modern Jewish history! It lay in the receptiveness of East European Jewish youth to his activist credo, to the idea he embodied—namely that a two-thousand-year dream of the Jewish people was approaching fulfillment. “In such a sense,” Ben-Gurion added, “Herzl was indeed the Messiah since he galvanized the feeling of the youth that Eretz Israel was achievable.” But his message also emphasized that “it could only come to pass with our own hands.”27

The harassed Jews of the Russian Empire were undoubtedly ripe for a redeemer, as Herzl would discover when he visited Vilna in August 1903 and was greeted with impassioned toasts to Ha-Melekh Herzl (King Herzl). He described it as an absurdity, “yet it had an uncanny ring in that dark Russian night.”28 Similar responses came from some of the Sephardic Jews in the Balkans. In March 1895 a communication from Dr. Reuben Bierer in Sofia had enthusiastically informed Herzl that the local Chief Rabbi considered him the Messiah.29 The same day that he received this letter, Herzl was received by the Reverend William Hechler, a deeply committed Christian Zionist and chaplain to the British Embassy in Vienna. According to Hechler’s meticulous calculations based on biblical prophecy and especially the Book of Daniel, Palestine would be restored to the Jews in either 1897 or 1898. Hechler declared the new Zionist movement to be “biblical,” even though its leader believed himself to be proceeding rationally.30 In his Diaries, Herzl waxes ironic whenever he evokes Hechler’s mystical discourse about the speedy fulfillment of prophecy. But he certainly valued his counsel and above all his excellent connections to Imperial Germany, especially with the Grand Duke of Baden and the Emperor Wilhelm II.

The Reverend Hechler believed that it was God’s will that he should be living in Vienna between 1885 and 1910, “in a position which enabled me to bring to the attention of certain people of importance the Messianic vision of the Jewish leader.”31 Hechler was one of a long line of distinguished British Christians who

27. Ibid., 35.
29. Ibid., entry for 10 Mar. 1896, 103-104.
30. Ibid., 104-106, 123.
hoped to see the Jews restored to their historic homeland, a subject on which he had written ever since the Russian pogroms of the early 1880s. His fashionable flat in Vienna’s Schillerplatz was overflowing with pictures, maps, temple models, archaeological artifacts, and more than a thousand rare Bibles. It was the eccentric Anglican clergyman who most helped Herzl to obtain his long desired audience with the German Kaiser. Herzl never doubted his goodwill but he remained skeptical of Hechler’s messianic expectations and publicly avoided any hint that his movement was part of a Providential design.32

This caution did not prevent bitter critics of Herzl’s Zionism like the satirist Karl Kraus from mocking him as the “King of Zion” in his native Vienna. Stefan Zweig recalled:

When he entered the theater, a handsome bearded personage, grave and compellingly aristocratic in his demeanor, a sibilation arose on all sides: Der König von Zion, or “His Majesty has arrived.” This ironic title peered at him through every conversation, through every glance.33

Zweig adds that at the turn of the 20th century, no man was more derided in Vienna (“this sarcastic city”), unless it was Herzl’s contemporary and neighbor in the Berggasse, Sigmund Freud.

This scorn for Zionism as a pseudo-messianic movement was commonplace among many Jewish critics of Herzl, whether they were liberal, Reform, socialist, or Orthodox. It was also shared to some extent by critics of Herzl within the Zionist movement itself, like Ahad Ha-Am, who accused him of having “kindled a false fire” in the people’s hearts after the First Zionist Congress. Ahad Ha-Am was highly skeptical of the adventurous, fantastic quality of Herzl’s dreams, the haste with which he proceeded, and the illusory quality of the political solution which he proposed. Knowing the disastrous disillusion caused by earlier episodes of this kind in Jewish history, he clearly disapproved of the messianic urgency which he discerned in Herzl’s attitude.

Other Russian and Polish-born Zionist leaders were more sympathetic to this visionary side of Herzl. Sokolow praised his prophetic genius, designating it as ru’ah ha- Elohim (the spirit of God)—even comparing his spiritual pilgrimage from Paris to Jerusalem to that of Paul from Jerusalem to Damascus! Moreover, he added, there was something “apocalyptic” about Herzl’s Judenstaat. “Of course there is much fantasy in it; but that, precisely, is its advantage. It is the imaginative

32. Erwin Rosenberger, Herzl As I Remember Him (New York 1959), 56.
power of Messianic vision.34

Some Zionists also pointed to parallels between Herzl and earlier would-be Messiahs from the 16th and 17th centuries like Sabbatai Zvi, David Reuveni, and Solomon Molcho. From the secular Zionist viewpoint, such earlier movements, even if they were led by “false Messiahs,” still had a positive aspect if regarded as revivalist movements of “national liberation” seeking to restore the Jewish nation to its ancestral soil.

Even the great Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, despite his ideological opposition to Zionism, believed that there was a messianic element in Herzl’s sense of mission and underlined the historical analogy with Molcho. If the latter had returned to his persecuted Jewish brethren from a religious Marranism, Herzl had found his way back from the national Marranism of the 19th century. Both Molcho and Herzl had called for a national restoration, they had sought to free the Land of Israel from Turkish rule, and both had negotiated to this end with the German emperor and the Pope in Rome. The exalted 16th-century mystic had died in the fires of the Inquisition, while Herzl had burned himself out on the altar of his own political ambition.35

The Zionist Chief Rabbi of Vienna, Zevi Perez Chajes, understandably preferred the analogy with Moses. Israel’s greatest prophet (though raised as an Egyptian prince and educated at Pharaoh’s court) had been chosen by God precisely because he lived in freedom and could therefore imagine and demand complete liberation for the oppressed Jews. So, too, Herzl—as an emancipated Austro-Hungarian Jew spared the humiliations of the ghetto milieu and the material suffering of his people—sought the same liberty for his co-religionists which he had already tasted.36 Shmarya Levin, a leading Russian Zionist, emphasized a different aspect of this popular analogy. Moses and Herzl had both received an “alien” education so that when the hour of liberation sounded, they would be believed by their Jewish brethren. Had they both received a Jewish education, their message would have been seen only in the light of tradition, not of rebirth. In moments of crisis, the chosen leader must step forward as a stranger; he must come from afar to create an atmosphere of renewed faith.37

36. M. Rosenfeld, H. P. Chajes, Leben und Werk (Vienna 1933), S. 159; see also Jacob Allerhand, “Messianische Elemente im Denken und Wirken Theodor Herzls,” in Theodor Herzl und das Wien des Fin-de-Siécle (Vienna 1987), 60-75.
Jewish artists, too, in their portraits of Herzl, sometimes elevated him to the position of Moses, as the new source of hope for a people scattered in the modern Mizraim of contemporary Europe. The Galician-born Ephraim Moses Lilien, the finest graphic artist of early Zionism, whose life had been transformed when he heard Herzl speak in Basle, used the leader’s face and figure in precisely this sense. In his stained glass window design for the B’nai B’rith in Hamburg, Lilien paid tribute to the great role that he believed Herzl would play in the dreams of the Jewish people and in the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. In his striking design, Lilien shows Herzl standing like Moses on a mount, the Tables of the Law in his hand, in the silent pride of truth and conviction.38

An engraving by Boris Schatz, founder of the Bezalel School of Arts in Jerusalem, commemorated the death of Herzl by showing Moses with lifted hand looking across the hills at the land for which he has fought but will never enter. This was only one of the many portraits and likenesses in which Herzl was represented by Jewish artists as a messianic figure and the redeemer of his people.39 Especially after his death, he was canonized in countless photographs, pictures, and busts, in engravings, medals, and placards. His picture was displayed at every Zionist gathering, his likeness appeared on stamps, as an artistic motif for rugs, as a trademark on Jewish ceremonial objects, household articles, canned milk, or even cigarette boxes.

The popular iconization of Herzl represented his unique stature as the “hero” and martyr of the Zionist movement, its founder and prematurely deceased leader. His physiognomy, as Michael Berkowitz has noted, became the personification of Zionism’s self-image—one in which modernist, aesthetic, and prophetic-messianic motifs coalesced in a glowing mythology. The Herzl portraits looked both backward and forward, they recalled tradition and its messianic hopes but they also portrayed a modern culture-hero.

*His beard and visage placed him squarely in the context of traditional Judaism while his gaze was directed towards the future. His manliness and handsome looks consciously rebuked the antisemitic stereotype of Jewish effemininity and ugliness while his dark complexion and face were perceived and extolled as the perfect face in which the Zionist movement and Jews could take great pride.*40

Berthold Feiwel, a leading Austrian cultural Zionist and early collaborator of Herzl, evoked the impact of his personality on an entire generation:

*In our earliest youth he signified the embodiment of all beauty and greatness. We, the young, had been yearning for a prophet, for a leader. We created him with our longing.*

It was indeed the psychological needs of his followers (and of the demoralized Jewish masses) which had provided the source of the Herzl legend, of his messianic aura as the modern savior of the Jewish people. For downtrodden Jews in Eastern Europe, his life had become the stuff of popular fantasy (*Volksphantasie*), as Martin Buber somewhat grudgingly recognized in a eulogy in 1904.

Herzl himself showed cool insight into this mass psychology and considerable interest in the legend of Sabbatai Zvi, the ill-starred predecessor with whom anti-Zionist rabbis and other Jewish opponents enjoyed comparing him. Significantly, in his novel *Altneuland*, an opera about Sabbatai Zvi, the false Messiah, is performed for the visitors to the New Society and the ensuing discussion permits Herzl to formulate some thoughts about the problem of messianic leadership. His hero, David Litwak, seeks to explain why would-be Messiahs and adventurers are able to deceive the people and themselves about their mission:

*I think it was not that the people believed what these charlatans told them, but the other way round—they told them what they wanted to believe. They satisfied a deep longing. That is it. The longing brings forth the Messiah. You must remember what miserable dark ages they were, the times of Sabbatai and his like. Our people were not yet able to gauge their own strength, so they were fascinated by the spell these men cast over them. Only later, at the end of the nineteenth century when all the other civilized nations had already gained their national pride and acted accordingly—only then did our people, the pariah among the nations, realize that they could expect nothing from fantastic miracle-workers, but everything from their own strength.*

Herzl was aware of the possibility that had he lived in an earlier age, he might

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41. Ibid., 26. The remark was made to the Austrian Jewish poet and dramatist, Richard Beer-Hoffmann, who was an admirer of Herzl and sympathetic to Zionism.
42. Buber was critical of Herzl while pointing to his unique role in inaugurating a new era of action in Jewish history. See “Theodor Herzl” (1904) and “Er und wir” (1910), in Martin Buber, *Die jüdische Bewegung: Gesammelte Aufsätze und Ansprachen, 1900-1914* (Berlin 1920), 146, 201.
43. *Altneuland*, 82-83.
have been burned at the stake like Solomon Molcho. As the self-proclaimed champion of enlightenment, reason, and modern science, he was, however, careful to distance himself from any suggestions that he was proceeding in the footsteps of the messiah. Yet his diaries testify that from June 1895 (when his Zionist conversion is usually dated) his curiosity and even sense of affinity with Sabbatai Zvi was growing. In March 1896 Herzl recorded the following terse observation:

*The difference between myself and Sabbatai Zvi (the way I imagine him), apart from the difference in the technical means inherent in the times, is that Sabbatai Zvi made himself great so as to be the equal of the great of the earth. I however, find the great small, as small as myself.*

A few months earlier, Herzl had been warned by Dr. Joseph Samuel Bloch, editor of the *Österreichische Wochenschrift* (and founder of the first Austrian Jewish self-defense organization) that if he were to present himself as the Messiah, he would have all Jews against him. Rabbi Bloch mentioned various messiahs in Jewish history, culminating in Sabbatai Zvi,

whose emergence had had fatal consequences for the Jews and who had themselves come to a bad end, either turning their backs on Judaism or committing suicide.

The Messiah, he told Herzl, must remain a veiled, hidden figure.

*The moment he takes on actual flesh and blood, he ceases to be the Redeemer. In a word, every Messiah was stricken with blindness and was damned and cursed by the people.*

Others saw the parallel in a more positive light. At a Passover celebration of Unitas (a Jewish student fraternity at the University of Vienna) in March 1896, attended by Herzl, university lecturer Meir Friedmann spoke to him about Sabbatai Zvi and he “winked at me in a way that seemed to say that I ought to become such a Sabbatai. Or did he mean that I already was one?”

1897 was the year of the First Zionist Congress, and the ensuing wave of enthusiasm that swept through the Jewish world generated more explicitly messianic emotions. Mordechai Ben-Ami

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(whom we have already quoted), recalling the mood at the Basle Congress, described the voice of Herzl “as the shofar of the Messiah, summoning to the Congress all those who in their hearts were still aware of the ties that bound them to their people.”

In the flood of letters of support and veneration that Herzl received after the Congress, there were many messianic allusions, including some that greeted the Zionist leader as the “anointed of the Lord.” At the synagogue of Sofia, when Herzl stood on the platform, unsure how to face the congregation without turning his back to the Holy of Holies, a voice cried out: “It’s all right for you to turn your back to the Ark: you are holier than the Torah!” Such response could only have reinforced the fears of the Orthodox rabbis that Herzl might indeed proclaim himself as the Messiah or act like one. This was indeed a major reason for the bitter opposition of the “Protest Rabbis” in Germany and also of East European haredi Orthodoxy, to his Zionist program. Despite Herzl’s strenuous efforts to present his Zionism as purely political, the frequent comparison with Sabbatai Zvi made by Orthodox rabbis was damaging to the cause.

Herzl’s visit to Palestine in October 1898 raised another kind of fear in his own mind: that like Sabbatai Zvi over two centuries earlier, he might be arrested by the Turkish authorities. In an entry in his Diaries dated Jerusalem, 31 October 1898 (the day the German Kaiser attended the consecration of the Church of the Redeemer in the Old City), Herzl comments on his own visit to the Tower of David: “At the entrance I said to my friends: ‘It would be a good idea on the Sultan’s part if he had me arrested here.’” The same entry records his shock at the dilapidated state of Jerusalem and his modernist vision of its future:

When I remember thee in days to come, O Jerusalem, it will not be with delight. The musty deposits of two thousand years of inhumanity, intolerance, and foulness lie in your reeking alleys. The one man who has been present here all this while, the lovable dreamer of Nazareth, has done nothing but help increase the hate. If Jerusalem is ever ours, and if I were still able to do anything about it, I would begin by cleaning it up. I would clear out everything that is not sacred, set up workers’ houses beyond the city, empty and tear down the filthy rat holes, burn all the non-sacred ruins, and put the bazaars elsewhere. Then, retaining as

47. See Leib Jaffe, ed., Herzl ve-ha-Kongress ha-Rishon (Herzl and the first Congress) (Jerusalem 1923), 134.
49. Shalom Ben-Horin, Hamishim Shnat Ziyounut: Max Bodenheimer (Fifty years of Zionism) (Jerusalem 1946), 102-10.
much of the old architectural style as possible, I would build an airy, comfortable, properly sewered, brand new city around the Holy Places.50

Herzl was appalled by the misery and squalor, the superstition and fanaticism, which he found on all sides and among all the religious denominations. But his visionary eye saw the possibilities of a splendid new Jerusalem—the center of a restored Israel—being built outside the old city walls, one that could rival Rome itself.

It was indeed to be in Rome, in January 1904, during an interview with King Victor Emmanuel III, that the subject of Sabbatai Zvi came up one final time. The king of Italy told Herzl that one of his more eccentric distant ancestors had conspired with Sabbatai, and then unexpectedly he asked if there were still Jews who expected the messiah. Herzl’s reply is revealing: “Naturally, Your Majesty, among religious circles. In our own, the university-trained and enlightened classes, no such thought exists.... [O]ur movement has a purely national character.” To the king’s amusement, Herzl informed him “how in Palestine I had avoided using a white horse or a white ass, so that no one would embarrass me with messianic confusions.”51

Herzl liked to see himself as a Realpolitiker who also had the vision to inspire a national movement that would restore sovereignty and freedom to the Jewish people. As a good Central European liberal, he believed in the separation of church and state, though he greatly respected Jewish tradition and tried hard to avoid alienating Orthodox rabbis. The core of his activity was clearly diplomatic—the effort to secure a legally recognized and binding charter that would guarantee a national home for the Jews in Palestine. To achieve his end he needed to mobilize and organize a completely scattered, disunited, and politically leaderless Jewish people in the Diaspora.

It was Herzl’s achievement to give the Jews a national assembly for the first time in two millennia, to create the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Colonial Trust, the Jewish National Fund and to tirelessly propagandize for the Zionist cause in his newspaper, Die Welt.52 These were not the actions of a utopian dreamer, a coffee-house littérateur, a deracinated secular “post-Zionist” Jew, let

51. Ibid., entry of 23 Jan. 1904, 283-84.
alone a “false messiah.” They involved careful planning, organizational skill, diplomatic finesse, a coherent program, and above all, a profound belief in the continuity, the distinctiveness, and special vocation of the Jewish nation.

Zionism was an activist doctrine, a movement for the restoration of Jewish honor and independence, a revolt against the traditional passivity of the Galut (exile). It was a determined drive for collective dignity and self-respect, predicated on the need for Jews to transform and remake themselves, to awaken from the nightmare of their history and construct the materials for their redemption through their own labor. In that Nietzschean sense, it was a movement of self-overcoming and auto-emancipation. Herzl’s life embodied a powerful ingredient of self-transcendence and the conviction that the road to redemption lay through the deed. The Jews, Herzl warned, counted for nothing politically and their paralysis would continue until they created their own center for organized action.

Herzl was convinced that the Jewish state must come into existence because it fulfilled an objective Jewish need. His understanding of antisemitism enabled him to foresee that the “Jewish Question” would not disappear. It would only be exacerbated over time, thus making a sovereign Jewish State into a world necessity. At the same time, he envisaged this new society as standing at the cutting edge of modern science and technology. The New Exodus of the Jews would not only bring the salvation of Jewry but also be a light to the Gentiles—part of a universal movement towards material progress and moral improvement.

Herzl’s goals were radical, but by no means inconsistent with Jewish tradition. Though his program aroused much opposition, his untimely death in 1904 reinforced the messianic halo which surrounded his activity among many Jews—including those circles who had traditionally opposed him. A striking illustration is the eulogy for Herzl given in Jaffa, Palestine by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. The man who would eventually become the Chief Rabbi of Eretz Israel under the British Mandate, was, not unexpectedly, ambivalent about Herzl. Yet he awarded him the title “Messiah, son of Joseph,” the fallen redeemer, who was paving the way for a future messianic era. In ancient Jewish tradition, the Messiah ben-Joseph was indeed a tragic figure who helps his people towards worldly salvation, but also embodies the inevitability of crisis and defeat. He is in fact a doomed redeemer, whose suffering belongs to the birth pangs of final salvation that can only be brought about by the Messiah ben-David. For Rabbi Kook, Herzl and the Zionist movement represented “the footsteps of the Messiah,” but it was still a limited “material” messianism, a quest for physical strength, that would inevitably lead to setbacks and crises.
The fight for material improvement was necessary, but it lacked the spiritual dimension, the light of Torah, the knowledge of God.

Because its preparation is lacking [in the other dimension], the forces are not united...until in the end the [Zionist] leader fell victim to the reign of evil and sorrow....this man, whom we may consider to have been the harbinger.53

In Rabbi Kook’s double-edged and somewhat self-serving interpretation, Herzl’s early death was tragic testimony to the split between the worldly and the spiritual, the political and the religious sides of the Judenstaat. Secular Zionism heralded the worldly salvation of the Jews through national rebirth but it was still a vision borne aloft on clipped wings.54 Herzlian Zionism was a mixture of light and darkness, not the higher, complete synthesis. As long as adherents of the Judenstaat declared that they had nothing to do with religion, Zionism would remain a body without a soul. The task was to broaden “the narrow circle of the late lamented Dr. Herzl’s dream, despite all its beauty and strength.” Herzl, as the Messiah ben-Joseph, was thereby transmuted by Rabbi Kook into a necessary forerunner of the true Davidic messianism, with its vision of the “revealed End.”55

Not only Orthodox Judaism of the national-religious stamp found a way to integrate Herzl as a messianic figure. The great German-Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (himself a non-Zionist), favorably compared Herzl in one of his letters, to two of his severest Zionist critics, Martin Buber and Ahad Ha-Am. “With Herzl alone,” he wrote, “one feels Jewish Antiquity, with Buber and Ahad Ha-Am at most the Jewish Middle Ages (Talmud and Kabbalah). Herzl is “Moses and the Prophets.” That he was naïve enough to plan only from the present, out of Jewish distress, that is precisely his greatness....”56

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53. See Abraham Isaac Kook, “Ha-Misped bi-Yerushalayim” (The eulogy in Jerusalem), Ma’amarei ha-Ra’aya (Articles of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook), (Jerusalem 1984), 94-99; the quote is from p. 97. For an illuminating discussion, see Aviezer Ravitzky, Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism (Chicago 1996), 99.


55. Ravitzky, Messianism, 99.