

## **“On Herzl” (1919) by Rabbi Avraham Eliyahu Kaplan**

Translated and introduction by: NATHANIEL HELFGOT

### **Translator’s Introduction**

R. Avraham Eliyahu (Elya) Kaplan (1890–1924) was a prominent Lithuanian Orthodox rabbi, Talmudist, communal activist, thinker, and devotee of both the Mussar movement and the traditional Lithuanian Talmudic analysis and its integration with modern academic methods. He was born in Kedainai, in the Kaunas region (Kovno in Yiddish) of Lithuania. Orphaned of his father, who died one month before his birth, R. Avraham Elya studied for several years in his youth at the renowned Telshe yeshivah. Already as a teenager, he was known for his poetic and passionate soul and was drawn to the Mussar movement, leaving Telshe to study at the Talmud Torah in Kelm founded by R. Simchah Zissel of Kelm, a prominent student of Rabbi Israel of Salant. After a short period of study at Kelm, he left for the famed Mussar yeshivah of Slabodka where he studied intensively for seven years under the close tutelage of his mentors, R. Nosson Zvi Finkel, famously known as the “Alter of Slabodka” and the rosh yeshivah, R. Moshe Mordechai Epstein. With the outbreak of World War I, he was stranded in his mother’s house in Telshe and became close to the leaders of the Telshe yeshivah of the time.

After the war, he was highly active in developing programs, youth movements, and educational institutions for religious youngsters in Lithuania. He also became a highly respected essayist and writer in the Hebrew and Yiddish press in Lithuania. In 1920, upon the demise of Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, he answered the call to teach Talmud and become head of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, bringing with him the celebrated Lithuanian analytic method of Talmud study and attempting to integrate it into the learning and methods of Orthodox academic Talmud study. He became a leading Orthodox leader and halakhic decisor in Germany, but tragically died at the age of 34 before he could finish many projects on his agenda.

Below is my translation of a fascinating and passionate speech delivered in Yiddish in 1919 in celebration of the life and work of Theodore Herzl, not a common find in

---

Nathaniel Helfgot is Chair of the Department of Torah SheBaal Peh at SAR High School in New York City and rabbi of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Teaneck, NJ. He is editor of *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Public Communications of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Ktav Publishing, 2005) and the author of *Mikra and Meaning: Studies in Bible and Its Interpretation* (Maggid Books, 2012).

*the writings of Orthodox leaders that were and continue to be respected in the Lithuanian yeshivah world. The speech was originally delivered in Yiddish and translated into Hebrew by his son, Zvi Kaplan, who published it in a posthumous collection of his father's writings titled Be-Ikvot Ha-Yirah (In the Footsteps of Reverence), pp. 85-91 (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1988).*

### **“On Herzl”**

He did not teach us the Torah of Moshe. He did not teach us Jewish law or Aggadah. He did not teach us scientific Judaism or Jewish ethics. He had never been taught any of these. He was raised in an environment bereft of these. He did, however, teach us to say two words, which until his time we dared not and could not say: “*Ivri Anokhi!* (I am a Jew!).” Indeed, in the study hall, near the lectern, we could say this. We could even write and read these words in our books and essays, in our newspapers and monographs. We could declare in any place we wanted that we were a nation, except in one place, in the place where all the nations of the world are forcefully represented—in world politics!

In that sphere, we were like lost sheep. As a native of Telshe once said: “Not a people, not a community, but a herd” (Yehuda Leib Gordon). And we were not like those sheep who are caressed and well fed, but rather like those whose wool is sheared or who are led to slaughter. Did it ever occur that a Jew could appear before a European ruler, and to the question “Who are you?” answer with two words, and nothing more: “*Ivri Anokhi!* (I am a Jew!)” without any additions, without any side explanations: A Jew—but also a German; a Jew—but also a Frenchman; a Jew—but also an Englishman, etc. Indeed, many have written about this. They awakened our national pride, teaching us to recognize ourselves. This was done by Moshe Hess, Dr. [Leon] Pinsker, and others of a similar bent. In truth, however, this was nothing new.

Throughout the generations we were taught—in great detail and with warmth—by our Torah giants, *geonim* and *roshei yeshivot* to know ourselves, to believe in ourselves, and to live a Jewish life. They taught us to internalize this and to think about it. We were taught to speak about it quietly, amongst ourselves. No one until Herzl, however, taught us to declare this openly in the universal political arena that serves as a think tank for the nations of the world. To present it at the place in which all the ideas and national yearnings are presented to all, loudly, openly, and clearly—their demands of humanity, their goals and aspirations, their plans and their efforts to achieve their goals.

Herzl was the first to come to the court of the nations, to the seat of world justice. He declared openly and as a free person, without any hesitation or flourish, “*Ivri Anokhi*.” Moreover, “I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews, and here too I did no wrong, and was put in prison” [Genesis 40:15].

The Hebrew nation is a distinct people like all other nations on earth and is even more special than the other nations. It has a life force, to live as a unified and unique nation that does not allow itself, in any circumstance, to be destroyed by different types of Pharaohs, and does not let itself be consumed, or to disappear from history. Even when it is stepped on like a worm, generation after generation, for many centuries, the “worm of Jacob” [Isaiah 41:14] slips away from the tyrannical attempts to crush it and moves forward on its path, in the name of God. Dr. Herzl explained this, not to us, but to the whole world, to all its rulers. The [Zionist] congress was the vehicle for his declaration to the entire world.

This thing we call a “congress” is simple, and yet, how much greatness was necessary to create it! Why did no one before Herzl ever consider calling and gathering Jewish delegates from the four corners of the earth to present the question, What about us? What is our place in the world? What shall we do? At first blush, this is a simple thing, and yet, why did no one do it until him? Do you know why? I will respond with a question, as is the manner of the Jew. When hundreds of prisoners are in a prison camp and suffering, why do they not call for a mass gathering amongst themselves to discuss their bitter fate? It is because they believe in their hearts “What will our gathering accomplish? Do we rule ourselves? We are prisoners!”

Thus, the Jewish people believed in their hearts throughout the years of the exile: Do we rule ourselves? We are prisoners here in the exile, and what will our gatherings and consultations gain us? Suddenly, Herzl came and declared, “Prisoners, go out. Those in darkness come out and be revealed!” [Isaiah 49:9] Where are your shackles and chains? Your chains have been rusty for hundreds of years. Move your hands and your chains will fall away! Your shackles too will open! The nation of Nebuchadnezzar who bound you, the nation of Titus who placed you in ghettos, the nation of [Pope] Innocent III who put on your clothing the yellow badge of shame, have all lost their uncontested rule over the world. “For all those who sought to kill you, have perished” [Exodus 4:19], but you remain lying in your exilic bed that has been powered for centuries, and continues to move on the basis of these old forces, and does not want to stop. Place your hands against this force and it will stop. Will it, and it is not a dream. Come down from it and you will find stable ground beneath your feet. Afterwards—when you stop seeing yourself as a worm that must be

stepped upon, whose only concern is to continue its existence—after your self-awareness as a people will enable you to avoid being crushed, not only internally, but also externally—you will then gather up the courage to raise a voice [and plead]. Not that the nations of the world should pity us [*midat ha-rahamim*] and give us equal rights to let us live in the world. No, not there at all, but in a different place entirely: Before the judicial authority [*midat ha-din*] of the nations, in the court of law, in the world political sphere, where the Jewish people will stride as the nation of Israel to demand their rights for their freedom and their home.

It is unfortunate that Herzl was not able to appear before such a court, such as the one that recently opened, after the Great War (World War I), fifteen years after his untimely passing. What he was not able to complete, however, he taught us to accomplish when the opportunity arises. Our representatives in Paris now say what is clear and obvious to all—that the Jewish people demand the return of the Land of Israel. It did not cease being theirs because of the injustice of its having been stolen for 1,800 years (and not just for a number of centuries, as is the case with other nations whose lands were stolen from them). These strands of thought, which until recently, with the first steps of Herzl, were only a dream, a utopia, are now recognized in the court of world politics by the majority of eminent statesmen as a realistic, legal assumption. This assumption has been expressed explicitly in the treaty with Turkey [Treaty of Versailles], i.e., that the Land of Israel is restored—not as a gift of kindness, but rather it is restored to our people like a lost object—for the purpose of being a national homeland. If such an event has happened in our day before our eyes, and we knew, with God’s help, to present our general issues on this level, in a naturalistic way, without miracles and wonders, if Herzl had not taught us the path of his thoughts, then what has occurred to us, to the Jewish people, would never have transpired. Did we not have, for example, many distinguished Jews who attended the Berlin Peace Conference [Treaty of Berlin, 1878] a number of decades ago as we now had at the current Paris Peace Conference? There we also had a great man, there too we had a “Benjamin” who could have been the equal, if not greater, than Benjamin Herzl in his diplomatic and professional skills—this was Benjamin Disraeli. Do you hear? An excellent nationalistic Jewish name better than all others, perhaps even more than “Theodor Herzl.” His name was Benjamin the Israelite. What more could we have wanted? However, he had one small addition to his Hebrew name. His name was also Lord Beaconsfield, and he was an English government minister, and he had great influence on the court of world politics. His efforts on behalf of his people, Israel, at that peace congress, was no more and no less than the well-known commitment on paper from the merciful Romanian government,

regarding the rights of the Jews. When later, the Romanian government did not fulfill its commitment, he did not dare say even a single word. Why? Because he was not a "National Jew"? No! He felt and understood the national Jewish aspirations for freedom. He created an elevated work where he wrote with such warmth and intimacy the ballad of the movement of Jewish liberation that was cut off before its time—which arose in the 13<sup>th</sup> century through the efforts of David Alroy [*The Wondrous Tale of Alroy*, 1833]. What, oh gentlemen, was he lacking? Why did he not demand, together with others from the important figures of his country, and together with all the assembled multitudes—as Herzl did—at least cultural freedom for the Jews in all their lands of exile? What was the weak link here? It was what I mentioned at the outset. He appeared in all his glory and stature, not with his own name, Benjamin Disraeli, but with an addition to his name, Lord Beaconsfield, the English minister, and not as a leader of the Jews. He threw a clinking coin into the Jewish charity box on behalf of his Jews: a promise from Romania that it would act with kindness towards them, and with this he fulfilled his obligation. The real Benjamin Disraeli was Benjamin Herzl! He taught us what we know today: to stand tall and proud in the courts of worldly nations as a Jewish nation which demands the return of their Jewish home, and which is recognized as such after many drawn out years of our work, to openly demonstrate through the [Zionist] congresses, through the organizing of multitudes of people; through the ceaseless work of settling the Land of Israel—the truth and the realism of our demands, to the point that it has entered and has come to dominate the hearts and minds of the vast world. If we were able to accomplish this, with God's help, it is because we attended the school of Herzl and knew what to study there.

There is still, however, a question which can be posed. He [Herzl] paved a path but is there perhaps another path for the Jewish people to adopt, one that is better and more truthful and better than his? Or in clearer words: should we (on the one hand) turn to Zionism to solve the Jewish problem or is it better (on the other hand) to exist without [Zionism], to find another universal ideal, or perhaps with no universal ideal and survive nevertheless as our forefathers did until now?

In arguing for the first case, for those who find the solution in a universal ideal, I say to them, the hatred of the nations towards the Jews, which has merited a special word in the lexicon of European nations, "antisemitism," has taken root in all strata of humanity. It became part of the psychology of the nations, almost a natural instinct, and it could not have been different. For generations upon generations, clear facts proved to

any non-Jew, of any nation, that the Jews are a unique race amongst humanity, more downtrodden, of lower stature, like blacks before whites, like Africans before Europeans. Do not forget that for hundreds of years in all of Europe and Africa we wore the badge of shame for being Jews: the yellow star. When a Christian or Muslim mother wanted to quiet her son, she would say, “Be quiet! If not, the Satan with the yellow star will grab you! ...,” while pointing through the window at the Jew walking on the street. When that boy grows a bit, he sees that the yellow Satan is not as scary as his mother had described. When he sees that the yellow-starred Jew playing in the street moves aside with a frightened look and a bent back, the simple lad concludes correctly that he could lift a rock and throw it at the head of the Satan. Why not? He is a demon. What purpose does he serve in the world? This logic was so accepted in the entire gentile world (of course, with a few exceptions) that when Rome needed to declare that Jews should not be murdered, they needed to add the important rationale that Jews must remain alive so that the well-known promise will be fulfilled, that they will one day return to the true faith ...

To this was added the well-known fact that Jews have no land under their feet, in the literal sense of the idea. That is, they have no land [to cultivate]. Instead, they survive from ephemeral mercantilism. As a result, they absorb many negative characteristics that lead to economic intrigues. The hatred towards the Jews thus continued to grow.

As a result, antisemitism has taken root in the psyche of the nations. Hate and fury became lodged in their souls: caused by our exile, by being downtrodden and by being without land. Facts can only be fought with facts, not with ideas and theories. There is a profound Talmudic dictum [*Kiddushin* 59b] that is spot on in relation to the problem before us. “Actions undo other actions, but thoughts do not undo actions.”<sup>1</sup> All the new world arrangements, which the great universal ideals profess, are only thoughts. Humanity needs leaders. A leader, however, should not simply believe whatever comes to his mind, but rather should think in accordance with what universal justice demands. Every Jew should consider his local enemies, the ones he recognizes and knows by name, who hate him because he is a Jew. Will they change their hatred towards him when the regime changes in their city? No! Here is a short parable: The Beilis trial under the Tsarists, the Dreyfus trial under the republicans—what is the difference? The hate towards us is a result of the historical facts that entered deeply into the hearts, the psyche of the nations of the world. The

---

<sup>1</sup> מעשה מוציא מיד מעשה ומיד מחשבה, מחשבה אין מוציאה לא מיד מעשה ולא מיד מחשבה (קידושין נט עמוד ב).

child hates us in his youth, the religious man in his religiosity, the businessman in his business, the statesman in his statesmanship, the monarchist in his monarchism, and the republican in his republicanism. Sometimes, it takes different forms, but the psychological hate is all the same. It can be eradicated only through powerful opposing historical forces, which eliminate the facts from which it derives. This is the point of Zionism. It attempts to create a counter fact to the exile, namely the ingathering of the exiles, a national homeland in the land of our forefathers. This reality will uproot the scornful legend that was created because of the exile, of the eternal Jew who finds no place of rest in the world, and wanders like a wild demon. Zionism does not rest on a human ideal. It strives rather to create the great reality of the return to the Land. The Jewish people, the bearers of the greatest Divine ideal, have been disappointed too many times by the great universal ideologues who promised it comfort, but instead sucked out its soul. For example, tell the worldly idealist who wants to abolish the use of money, that he should be the first to throw away his limited coins. He will correctly respond: The ideals are ideals, and I will work to achieve them. For now, however, I have to live, and based on the current form of living, I must have money for my sustenance. The Zionist can adhere to any ideal he wants. He will work towards it all his life. He knows, however, that his people cannot live in the exile. They cannot wait until all the nations of the world will repent and become righteous. (Anyone who studies world history knows that this will never occur unless there is a religious revolution of the autonomous human spirit for which we the Jewish people yearn. We call it the “Messianic Era” which is beyond the scope of our discussion.) We cannot wait for such far-off times. It is worthy to live in and settle the Land—which will bring an end to the horrible realities and the terrible events that preceded it and which do not allow us to live. How can we get to that point? This is answered by the first part of my remarks, by the appearance of Herzl and his Zionism as the representatives of the Jewish people in world politics.

I now come to my opponents on the other side, with whom I often find myself in their midst. They maintain that we need no special organizations to solve our Jewish problem. We need simply to be Jews and observe the Torah, and we need not involve ourselves in the solution to the problem of our exile. Some of them say—and they are a minority—that it is forbidden to do so. To them I cannot—to my great sorrow—respond today. It would require that I engage in Torah discourse and bring proofs and responses from the Torah and the Talmud. This is not the place to do so.

There are those who say that even if it is permitted, there is no need for this effort. We should simply behave as Jews as there is already Someone who worries about our existence: “Behold He neither slumbers nor sleeps, the Guardian of Israel” (Psalm 121:4). I entirely agree with the view that “there is already Someone who worries.” Not only because it is written in a verse, but because when we study Jewish history, any discerning eye will notice that we were on the precipice of destruction and hellish chasms through which we nonetheless passed and survived, though we were just one step from oblivion in both the physical and spiritual sense. How true are the words of the prophet Isaiah:

When you pass through water,  
I will be with you;  
Through streams,  
They shall not overwhelm you.  
When you walk through fire,  
You shall not be scorched;  
Through flame,  
It shall not burn you.  
For I the LORD am your God,  
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (43:2–3)

The hand that sustains us is the one that brings us salvation and performs wonders on our behalf. Is not the entirety of Zionism a wonder? A few years ago, it was nothing more than a dream, a utopia. In 1913, the noted Zionist activist, Franz Bodenheimer, already expressed this idea:

There is not one intelligent Zionist in the entire world, who will say that he sees the path to the future “State of the Jews.” In his heart, however, he knows that he must, of necessity, aspire to its [creation].

Tell me please, gentlemen! Who infused this “necessity” into our hearts? Who implanted into our spirits the exalted preparation for this period, which now flows over us? Do you not feel the movement of the hidden hand of [Divine] providence? I know that just as it was inevitable that the Jewish national spirit would be revived, so too it is inevitable, in the future, beyond which we can see, that finally, the spirit of our Torah will be revived. Clouds obscure the horizon of our Torah, and even more so the horizon of its commandments, of its life-giving laws. It is abandoned by the youth. It does not merit attention from the leaders of the modern generation. “She sits with her head covered like a barren childless woman.” Yet she will certainly give birth! We do not yet see the paths; we do not yet see the footsteps. I know, however—as Franz Bodenheimer



did in his day—that I must aspire to this. The Lord Who will return us to Zion will also return us to the Torah of Zion.

—I believe!—

As my faith in God increases, so too does my connection to Zionism.

