
AHAD HAAM¹

5. The First Zionist Congress (August 1897)²

"The Congress of the Zionists"—the struggle over which filled the vacuum of our small world during the past months—is now past history.

Approximately two hundred members of the House of Israel from all lands and all countries gathered together in Basle. For three days, from morning to evening, they conducted public proceedings before all the nations concerning the establishment of a secure home for the Jewish people in the land of their fathers.

The *national*³ response to the Jewish question thus broke the barriers of "modesty" and entered into the public realm. With a loud voice, clear language and proud bearing, a message whose like had not been heard since the time of Israel's exile from its land was proclaimed to all the world.

And that was all. This assembly *could* have done no more and *should* have done no more.

For—why should we delude ourselves?—of all the great aims to which *Hibbat Zion*⁴ (or, as they say now, "Zionism") aspires, for the time being it is within our powers to draw near in a truly fitting manner to only one of them, namely the *moral* aim. We must liberate ourselves from the *inner* slavery, from the degradation of the spirit caused by assimilation, and we must strengthen our

national unity until we become capable and worthy of a future life of honor and freedom. All other aims, are still part of the world of ideas and fantasies. The opponents of the Jewish state doubt whether it will be possible to obtain the consent of the nations, especially Turkey, to the establishment of this state. It appears to me, however, that there is an even more serious question [that must be asked]. Were this consent to be given would we, in our present moral condition, be capable of seizing the opportunity? Moreover, it is also possible to question the very nature of the proposal for a Jewish state. In light of the prevailing situation of the world in general, would the establishment of the Jewish state in our times, even in the most complete form imaginable, permit us to say that "our question" has been solved in its entirety and that the national ideal has been attained? "According to the suffering—the reward." After thousands of years of unfathomable calamity and misfortune, it would be impossible for the Jewish people to be happy with their lot if in the end they would reach [merely] the level of a small and humble people, whose state is a plaything in the hands of its mighty neighbors and exists only by means of diplomatic machinations and perpetual submission to whomever fate is smiling upon. It would be

Source: *Hashiloah* 2, no. 6 (Elul 5647; August 1897), pp. 568–70. Trans. by S. Weinstein.

impossible for an ancient people, one that was a light unto the nations, to be satisfied with such an insignificant recompense for all their hardships. Many other peoples, lacking both name and culture, have been able to attain the same thing within a brief period of time without having had to suffer even the smallest part of what the Jews have suffered. It was not in vain that the prophets rose to the aid of Israel, envisioning the reign of *justice* in the world at the end of days. Their *nationalism*, their love for their people and for their land, led them to this. For even in biblical times the Jewish state was caught between two lions—Assyria or Babylonia on the one side and Egypt on the other—so that it had no hope to dwell in tranquility and develop in a suitable fashion. Accordingly, "Zionism" developed in the hearts of the prophets, giving rise to the great vision of the end of days when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and nation shall not lift up sword against nation"⁵—and when Israel shall once again safely dwell in its own land. Hence, this *human* ideal was and perforce always will be an integral part of the *national* ideal of the Jewish people. The Jewish state can only find peace when universal justice will ascend to the throne and rule the lives of the peoples and the states.

And so, we did not come to Basle to found the Jewish state today or tomorrow. Rather, we came to issue a great proclamation to all the world: the Jewish people is still alive and full of the will to live. We must repeat this proclamation day and night, not so that the world will hear and give us what we desire, but above all, in order that we ourselves will hear the echo of our voice in the depths of our soul. Perhaps in this way our soul will awaken and cleanse itself of its degradation. . . .

This indeed is what the Basle assembly accomplished at its beginning in a sublime fashion. And for this it would have deserved to have been inscribed in golden letters as a testimony to the generations, were it not for its desire to accomplish even more.

Here, too, rashness—this curse which lies over us and sabotages all our actions—appeared in full force. Had the initiators of the assembly armed themselves with patience and explicitly declared from the beginning that the traces of the messiah are not yet visible and that for the time being our strength lies only in our mouths and hearts—to revive our national spirit and spread the tidings of this renewal among the public at large—then without doubt the list of delegates would have been much smaller. Instead of three days the assembly could have finished its work in one day, but this day would have been the equivalent of entire generations. Those delegates, the elect of our people—for only the elect would have been attracted to an assembly of this kind—would then return, each to his own country, with hearts full of life, will and new energy, to instil this life and energy into the hearts of all the people.

But now . . .

The initiators of this movement are "Europeans." They are expert in the rules of diplomacy and in the customs of the political sects of our day, and they are bringing these rules and customs with them to the "Jewish state." . . . Emissaries were dispatched prior to the assembly and various "hints" were distributed orally and in writing in order to awaken among the masses an exaggerated hope for imminent salvation. Hearts were inflamed by an idolatrous fire, a febrile passion, which brought to the Basle assembly a motley crowd of youths, immature both in years and in wisdom. This mob robbed the assembly of its splendor and through their great foolishness turned it into a laughing stock.

Large and small committees, endless commissions, a multitude of imaginary "proposals" concerning the "national treasury" and the rest of the "exalted politics" of the Jewish state—these are the "practical" results of the assembly. How could it have been otherwise? The majority of the delegates, the emissaries of the wretched members of our people waiting for redemption,

were sent solely for the purpose of bringing redemption with them upon their return. How, then, could they return home without bearing the tidings that the administration of the "state," in all its various branches, had been placed in trustworthy hands, and that all the important questions concerning the "state" had been examined and solved? . . .

The delegates will return [from Basle] with the message that redeemers have arisen in Israel and that all we have to do is to wait for "diplomacy" to finish its task. [But] the eyes of the people will quickly be opened and they will realize that they have been led astray. The sudden fire which ignited the hope in their hearts will once again be extinguished, perhaps even to the final spark. . . .

If only I could enter into a pact with the angel of oblivion I would make him vow to obliterate from the hearts of the delegates all

traces of what they saw and heard at Basle, leaving them with only one memory. [I am referring to] the memory of that great and sacred hour when they all stood together as brothers—these forlorn men of Israel who came from all corners of the earth—their hearts full of feelings of holiness and their eyes lovingly and proudly directed to their noble brother standing on the platform preaching wonders to his people, like one of the prophets of days of yore. The memory of this hour, had it not been followed by many other hours which deprived the first impression of its purity, could have turned this assembly into one of the most distinguished events in the history of our people.

The deliverance of Israel will come at the hands of "prophets," not at the hands of "diplomats." . . .

NOTES

1. Ahad Haam, pen name of Asher Hirsch Ginsberg (1856–1927), Russian Jew, Hebrew essayist and leader of Hibbat Zion. He was critical of both political and practical Zionism, the latter because he felt that the mass resettlement of Jewry in Palestine was unfeasible, the former because he held a profound skepticism regarding the efficacy of its diplomatic program and its neglect of Jewish cultural reconstruction, which he held to be of paramount import. Properly considered, he maintained, Zionism could not solve the "problem of the Jews"—their economic, social and political plight—but it could solve "the problem of Judaism," i.e., assimilation. With the eclipse of religion in the modern period, he observed, Jews were increasingly defecting to non-Jewish secular cultures. Zionist settlement in Palestine should therefore concentrate on fostering a secular Jewish

culture based on Jewish national consciousness and the renewal of Hebrew as a means of ensuring the continuity of Jewish creativity. Palestine Jewry would thereby serve as a "spiritual center" nourishing Jewish life in the Diaspora, where most of the Jewish people undoubtedly would continue to exist.

2. The First Zionist Congress was held in Basle on August 29–31, 1897.

3. All emphases are in the original.

4. Hibbat Zion (Love of Zion), a movement that came into being in 1882 as a direct reaction to the widespread pogroms in Russia in 1881, for the purpose of encouraging Jewish settlement in Palestine and achieving a Jewish national revival there.

5. Isa. 2:4, 6.