



A Jew from the Orient

IN MARCH 1899, TWO GIANTS OF ZIONISM MET IN Vienna, for the first and only time. One of them was Theodor Herzl, a worldly Diaspora Jew. He was cultured, assimilated and secular, much like his dazzling contemporaries Sigmund Freud and Gustav Mahler. This trio couldn't order a *felafel* in Hebrew; but they, and scores of like-minded Jews, endured the odor of Austrian anti-Semitism and brilliantly led the cultural flowering of fin-de-siècle Vienna.

The second Zionist was a fellow journalist by trade, a Lithuanian-born Jew who had made *aliyah* to Jerusalem back in 1881, at age 23, while Herzl was drinking and dueling with his German blueblood college mates. Not only did this Jew speak Hebrew, but today, for that very reason, main streets in Israel are named after him: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the fanatical lexicographer who spearheaded the revival of Hebrew as a living language. Herzl didn't much care for his intense little visitor. "The journalist Ben-Yehuda from Jerusalem came to see me," he wrote in his diary. "A short red-haired Jew from the Orient. I am beginning to become acquainted with the various Jewish types. He is long-winded in his narratives and seems to have some ulterior motive." But Herzl did pick up some useful political intelligence: "The American Ambassador [to Turkey], Straus, is said to be secretly well-disposed toward Zion-ism, Ben-Yehuda assures me."

Now this was a scoop. Oscar Straus, born in Bavaria in 1850, was brought to America at age 4, grew up in small-town Georgia, and moved at 16 to New York, where his family later owned Macy's department store. Appointed secretary of labor and commerce in 1906 by Teddy Roosevelt, he was the first Jew to hold a U.S. cabinet post. As the "huddled masses" of Eastern European Jews — *Ostjuden*, in German — poured into New York, many Jews of Straus's station grew insecure. In the early 1890s, he commissioned a historian named Mayer Kayserling to write a little book entitled "Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries," which showed that Marrano financiers, navigators and mapmakers were instrumental to the discovery of the New World, proving thereby that Jews were part and parcel of America from the first. Zionism was a way of saying that Jews belonged elsewhere, a dreadful heresy among upstanding German-American Jews. If Straus was a Zionist, no wonder he kept it under his hat.

I rehearse all this because in 1906, Oscar Straus was among the founders of the American Jewish Committee, the group lately scandalized by A.B. Yehoshua. Nowadays, you cannot be a Major Jewish Organization and be non-Zionist, unless, of course, you count Chabad. But Yehoshua, one of Israel's leading novelists and public intellectuals, had the bad manners to remind the celebrants at the AJC's hundredth birthday party that most American Jews and their leaders had been asleep at the switch when history screamed out, years before Hitler, for a Zionist solution to the Jewish Question. *ABY*, an intense visitor from the Orient, was as abrasive as his ideological forbear, *EBY*. Yehoshua long-windedly insisted that

handling the day-to-day business of life, in Hebrew, in a sovereign Jewish state — in other words, full-time, full-strength Jewishness — is a thicker identity than the part-time Judaism of Diaspora Jews. "It's my skin, not my jacket," he said. "You are changing countries like changing jackets. I have my skin, the smell of the territory, the smell of the language." American Jews who focus on texts and spirituality are "playing" with Jewishness. "The problem is not text, it's life," he said. "You are living in myth, not history. This is what annoys me, why I speak with anger."

A sheaf of indignant op-eds ensued, and Yehoshua duly apologized for his "tone and imprecise formulation," while noting correctly that he'd been singing this same Diaspora-bashing song — a staple of the classical Zionist repertoire — for decades. As I watched, online, the video of the AJC panel — titled "The Future of the Past: What Will Become of the Jewish People?" — I frankly thought that apologies were no less incumbent upon the ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who led off by impishly declaring that Jews are "obnoxious"; or author Cynthia Ozick, who surely unsettled many patriotic Jews in the room by her public confession

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of "dual loyalty" to Israel and America; and certainly the inappropriate moderator, Ted Koppel, whose tone-deafness to the nuances and ironies of Jewish discourse was apparent at every turn. Listening to

Koppel, I was reminded of a line Herzl confided to his diary in 1898: "Everyone who comes in contact with me must get the opposite impression of the proverbial Jew."

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who supported Herzl's stopgap plan to found a Jewish refuge in Uganda, would applaud Yehoshua's brass-tacks conception of Israel — a Hebrew-speaking Denmark, demystified and secular. I can surely understand Yehoshua's invidious contrast of texts and real life, in light of the voguish notion that Judaism's noblest quality is its ethereal portability. As the cosmopolitan Jewish critic George Steiner wrote, in his seminal essay of 1985, "Our Homeland, the Text": "The man or woman at home in the text is, by definition, a conscientious objector: to the vulgar mystique of the flag and the anthem, to the sleep of reason which proclaims 'my country, right or wrong.'"

What the AJC flap demonstrates is that today, it is the Homeland — the State of Israel — that has become the Text, the page of Talmud that Jews scrutinize and argue about. The "various Jewish types" that Herzl noted are, as ever, in evidence: brash, outspoken Jews of the East — today we call them Israelis — versus polished Jewish patricians of the West, each taking inevitable umbrage at the other even as they recognize their elemental kinship. It was, in large measure, a spirit of noblesse oblige toward the Jews of the East that motivated the founding of the American Jewish Committee, and the subsequent conversion to Zionism of the American Jewish establishment. What many still don't realize, though, is that we uppity neo-*Ostjuden*, by rooting mundane Jewish life in sovereign soil, actually empower our brethren everywhere. ●