

IF YOU WILL IT...

a dramatization of Zionist issues by

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"If you will it, it is no dream."

- Theodor Herzl

"After being forcibly expelled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom...which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully-privileged member of the comity of nations...This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign state."

- David Ben-Gurion

a publication of

MERCAZ, U.S.A.

The Zionist Organization of the Conservative Movement

155 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

Nisan 5757/ April 1997

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Scene: A lecture hall in a university or adult education forum. A speaker drones on at the front of the hall. BENNY, a university student, has been taking some notes but is gradually dozing off. Several of the audience, sitting in close proximity to BENNY, are similarly disinterested.

SPEAKER: And in the final analysis, we find that the diversity of opinion on this issue has created a dichotomy of reaction on the part of the activists, so that concrete action cannot be taken until such time as the theoretical underpinnings of the movement are decisively formulated. This leads us to anticipate that...

BENNY: Hmmmm.....zzzzzzzz.....

1ST SPECTATOR: *(A gentleman in a black suit, with long black beard and fiery eyes, nudges BENNY and asks:)* What's he talking about?

BENNY: Huh?

1st SPECTATOR: The professor up there... What's he talking about?

BENNY: Well, I think he's trying to explain the difference between Herzl's "political Zionism" and Ahad Ha'am's philosophy of "cultural Zionism."

1st SPECTATOR: As if he knows what he's talking about!

BENNY: They say he's a highly qualified specialist in this area, from the Hebrew University...

1st SPECTATOR: I meant Ahad Ha'am! Or Asher Ginsburg, as I knew him.

2nd SPECTATOR: *(Nudging BENNY on the other side.)* I just want you to know that the Hebrew University was my idea.

BENNY: It was?

2nd SPECTATOR: Of course. A university whose language is Hebrew is a primary instrument for the national resurrection of Israel. One university in the land of Israel brings us much closer to our goals than one hundred agricultural settlements.

1st SPECTATOR: The Baron looked after the agricultural settlements, and look where that led us! Besides, they have *four* universities in Israel these days.

BENNY: Do you two know each other? *(To 1st SPECTATOR.)* I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before. Did we meet in Israel two summers ago?

1st SPECTATOR: I highly doubt it. I haven't been in the country since '98.

BENNY: But that's next year! (*Alternatively: But that's this year!*)

1st SPECTATOR: I meant the last century.

BENNY: Huh?

2nd SPECTATOR: You probably saw his face on a hundred posters, or possibly on an old banknote. Permit me to introduce you: this is Theodor Herzl.

BENNY: Herzl?! The first Zionist?

HERZL: How do you do?

2nd SPECTATOR: Let's not exaggerate; there were plenty of Zionists before Herzl came along.

HERZL: They were mere romanticists! I gave Zionism the momentum to become a political movement!

2nd SPECTATOR: There you go in politics again! How many times do I have to tell you that the realization of Jewish aspirations is...

BENNY: Wait a minute! (*To 2nd SPECTATOR*) Who are you?

2nd SPECTATOR: Just think of me as "one of the people."

BENNY: *Ahad Ha'am?* Where am I, at a Zionist Congress?

AHAD HA'AM: Not really, this is more like a Zionist "heaven," except I see a few faces here that I really didn't think would make it in.

BENNY: Hold on there; what's your definition of a "Zionist"?

HERZL: That's precisely what we came to this lecture to learn. A Zionist is one who favors the establishment of an independent Jewish state.

AHAD HA'AM: In the land of Israel!

HERZL: Well, of course.

AHAD HA'AM: Not "of course;" the last time we met you were promoting a scheme to settle Jews in Uganda!

HERZL: It was a noble, albeit desperate, plan that had British backing!

AHAD HA'AM: A lot of good that did us!

HERZL: Didn't you live in London at one time?

AHAD HA'AM: Only when I was preparing to settle in *Eretz Yisrael*.

HERZL: Did you ever make it?

AHAD HA'AM: I certainly did - in 1921, which is more than you ever did!

HERZL: I would have, in time... had I been granted more time...

BENNY: Look, we don't have to argue here...

AHAD HA'AM: Ah, but that's where you're wrong! Argument is at the very heart of Zionist debate and the clarification of our respective positions.

BENNY: I'm sorry I mentioned it. *(To HERZL.)* What is your position?

HERZL: First and foremost, the solution of the Jewish problem.

BENNY: Problem? Who's got a problem?

HERZL: The Jewish people has a problem! We are the only nation without a country!

BENNY: But isn't Israel a Jewish state, a member of the United Nations?

HERZL: Thanks to me... In Basle I created the Jewish state. Fifty years later, it came into being.

AHAD HA'AM: Please don't take all the credit...

HERZL: You must understand that a century ago, Jews were despised and persecuted everywhere. Anti-Semitism was rife, even in modern nations...

BENNY: I've seen a bit of that myself..

HERZL: The only solution was the provision of a haven for the persecuted, where Jews can be free to exercise their national survival.

AHAD HA'AM: The primary problem is not anti-Semitism, but *assimilation*, which erodes the Jewish nation and threatens to put an end to its existence. The goal of Zionism is not to save the Jews, but to save Judaism.

BENNY: Isn't Judaism thriving here in North America? We've got more kosher pizza parlors than you can count!

3rd SPECTATOR: *(Sitting next to AHAD HA'AM.)* Do you mind if I put my two cents in, or - I should say - my half-shekel?

BENNY: Go right ahead. Are you a Zionist?

3rd SPECTATOR: The best kind; I was Israel's founding prime minister. The attachment of the Jews to *Galut* is a debilitating neurosis. Despite every opportunity to live a normal, productive Jewish life in our ancestral homeland, Jews cling to the Diaspora like a dying man clutches his nurse.

BENNY: What's wrong with Diaspora?

3rd SPECTATOR: *Galut* - let's call a spade a spade; it means "exile."

BENNY: It's hardly an "exile" when Jews are living better than ever before! Besides, Jews have always lived in lands of "dispersion"...

HERZL: When they had no other choice...

AHAD HA'AM: When they had not yet experienced their national renaissance....

BENNY: We may live in North America, but we feel very attached to Israel. Don't we pray every year for rain to fall, and end every Seder with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem?"

3rd SPECTATOR: Meanwhile, it's "This year in Teaneck" (*substitute local name*).

AHAD HA'AM: That's the Zionism of the prayer book: obsolete, a relic, a fossil!

HERZL: May I remind you that you were a rabbi once?

AHAD HA'AM: "The Agnostic Rabbi," they called me; I cured that by moving to Israel.

th SPECTATOR: (*A dignified Sephardi matron, sitting next to HERZL.*) A Jackie-come-lately! My family has lived in Jerusalem for eight generations! My great-great grandfather came as a disciple of the Vilna Gaon, long before Herzl or Ahad Ha'am was even born.

AHAD HA'AM: He came to be buried on the Mount of Olives.

4th SPECTATOR: No! He came *to live*! "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." He came with his children, his grandchildren, in-laws and relatives. They wanted to see Mount Zion from their windows. This was the yearning of their souls: To be a Jew - is to be heart and soul a Jew in Zion.

HERZL: But that did not build a Jewish homeland!

4th SPECTATOR: The children settled in the Galilee. They tilled the soil and cleared the swamps!

3rd SPECTATOR: They came down with malaria, and most of them went back. In fact, ninety percent of the immigrants between 1904 and 1914 eventually

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despaired and left the country.

HERZL: Just my point! The Jewish yearning for homeland could be realized only through political activity.

3rd SPECTATOR: Political activity won't help if we don't have Jews to fill the country!

BENNY: What did you say your name was?

3rd SPECTATOR: They used to call me "the old man," but I was a young soldier in the Jewish Legion when these people were spouting their philosophies.

BENNY: You're not David Ben-Gurion?

BEN-GURION: I was; I think I still am. Look, neither Herzl's idea of Jewish liberation nor Ahad Ha'am's idea of Jewish revival is sufficient. The goal of Zionism is to bring about a change in values, to return the nation to a better path. Return to physical labor is the cure for all the ills of Exile and will transform the Jews into normal human beings!

HERZL: Our people are not laborers - they are peddlers, merchants and scholars. The ultimate aim is to take possession of the land of Israel and to give back to the Jews the political independence of which they have been deprived for 2,000 years. Do not laugh, this is not a dream!

BENNY: I'm beginning to think it is.

4th SPECTATOR (DONNA VALERO): And when we had labor, we had nothing to eat. I remember the crowds of unemployed who gathered in the streets in 1927, screaming "Give us bread!" You, David, told them, "I have no bread; I have a dream!"

AHAD HA'AM: One cannot eat dreams.

BEN-GURION: No, but dreams have sustained us throughout our history: the dreams of restoring freedom to *Eretz Yisrael*, of giving justice to the people and stability, progress, and prosperity to the Middle East...

DONNA VALERO: And of speaking Hebrew. I am, frankly, embarrassed that this discussion is being held in English. If we end our physical exile by living in Israel but continue to speak all the languages of the world, our souls will forever remain in a linguistic exile; we will not have accomplished anything. It is of primary importance for us to escape the bondage of foreign tongues and return to our one language, Hebrew - our only language in the past and our only language in the future.

BENNY: (*Somewhat embarrassed.*) I once took a summer *ulpan*, but my Hebrew's kind of rusty..

DONNA VALERO: It is the eternal, holy language that binds us to the eternal land, the only place on earth where a Jew does not feel like a stranger. From the moment he arrives, a kind of miracle occurs. He feels as if he has only been away a short while. This is not difficult to understand; the Jew is linked to this land through thousands of prayers, songs and stories. Every bare mountain, desolate village and dried-up stream is a spiritual experience. The Jew feels like one who has returned to the place of his birth after years of wandering.

BENNY: You speak like a poet...

HERZL: But you are missing the essential point: Zionism must be political in nature if it is to realize the Jewish revolution. There is hope only if we have a fighting Zionism; a Zionism of words alone will not stand and will not come to pass!

AHAD HA'AM: Excuse me, but we were talking about the Hebrew language. It is a tragedy to see the language held sacred by all the world, in which the Bible was composed, and which served as the depository of Israel's greatest thought, doomed to virtual obscurity and ignorance among the masses of our people. It is a tragedy to see the descendants of those who revealed revelation to the world be so little familiar with Israel's ideals and aspirations and hopes that they slavishly follow our opponents' opinions and copying their phrases.

BEN-GURION: That is an obvious result of the greatest of tragedies, namely that Jews remain in *Galut*.

BENNY: Wait a second, I don't feel as if I'm living in *Galut*, in some kind of exile! You can't tell me that North America today is the Exile of the Jews!

AHAD HA'AM: This may not be the *Galut* of the Jews, but is the *Galut* of Judaism, or - as certain mystics have expressed it - the *Galut* of the *Nefesh*, the *Galut* of the Jewish soul, wasting away before our very eyes.

BENNY: But we're not wasting away! We're living a vibrant Jewish life here...

HERZL: I could swear I heard the same argument in Germany a century ago...

DONNA VALERO: I'm glad you mentioned mystics, Asher. You remind me of Rav Kook, who was a mystic, a Zionist, a lover of Hebrew and a pioneer all in one. To hear him speak was an inspiration...

AHAD HA'AM: We returned to Israel about the same time; he to Jerusalem, and I to Tel-Aviv.

DONNA VALERO: He wrote, "*Eretz Yisrael* is not something apart from the soul of the Jewish people; it is no mere national possession, serving as a means of unifying our people and strengthening its survival. *Eretz Yisrael* is part of the very essence of our nationhood; it is bound organically to its very life and inner being. Human reason, even at its most sublime, cannot begin to understand the

unique holiness of *Eretz Yisrael*; it cannot stir the depths of love for the land that are dormant within our people.”

HERZL: That is all very well, but it won't establish national unity - or political independence.

DONNA VALERO: “To regard *Eretz Yisrael* as merely a tool for establishing our national unity - or even for sustaining our religion in the Diaspora - is a sterile notion; it is unworthy of the holiness of the land. A valid strengthening of Judaism in the Diaspora can come only from a deepened attachment to *Eretz Yisrael*. The hope for Redemption is the force that sustains Judaism in the Diaspora; the Judaism of *Eretz Yisrael* is the Redemption itself.”

BENNY: What do you mean by ‘Redemption?’ That's a word I've come across in the prayer book but never understood.

DONNA VALERO: “Redemption - *Ge'ulah* - is continuous. The Redemption from Egypt and the Final Redemption are part of the same process, ‘of the mighty hand and outstretched arm,’ which began in Egypt and is evident in all of history. Moses and Elijah belong to the same redemptive act; one represents its beginning and the other its culmination, so that together they fulfill its process. The spirit of Israel is attuned to the hum of the redemptive process, to the sound waves of its labors which will end only with the coming of the days of the Messiah.”

AHAD HA'AM: The Messiah will come only when we bring him!

BEN-GURION: You don't expect me to believe any of this; after all, I'm a Jewish secularist.

HERZL: Yet you held a weekly Bible class all the years you were prime minister!

BEN-GURION: Of course; that's part of Jewish culture.

AHAD HA'AM: So there *has* been a cultural renaissance, just as I predicted!

HERZL: *And* the establishment of a Jewish state, just as I dreamed!

DONNA VALERO: “But Jewish secular nationalism is a form of self-delusion: the spirit of Israel is so closely linked to the spirit of God that a Jewish nationalist, no matter how secularist his intention may be, must, despite himself, affirm the Divine.”

BEN-GURION: Let's leave the ‘Messiah’ and ‘the Divine’ out of this!

AHAD HA'AM: How can you say that - you, who spoke of the ancient Jewish dream of the Messianic era?

BEN-GURION: *I* spoke of that?

AHAD HA'AM: You certainly did: to a group of youth leaders in Haifa, 1944: "Ours is a tiny nation, but one possessed of a great spirit; a people that gave the world eternal moral truths. Our people rose to prophetic visions of the Unity of the Creator with His creation, of the dignity and infinite worth of the individual, and was the first to prophesy about "the end of days," the first to see the vision of a new human society.

BEN-GURION: I'll have to go back and read my notes.

HERZL: How do you interpret "the end of days," then - religiously or politically?

SPEAKER: *(Interrupting the discussion.)* Excuse me, but everyone in the audience seems to have stopped listening to my presentation and is engaged in his or her own private conversation. I *would* like to conclude my lecture...

BENNY: Perhaps you can answer our question: what *is* the definition of Zionism?

HERZL: Tell them, Professor, exactly what I had in mind: political independence...

AHAD HA'AM: The revival of Hebrew literature, a flowering of Jewish culture...

DONNA VALERO: The Redemption of the people through its land its Torah...

BEN-GURION: The Ingathering of the Exiles to the ancestral homeland...

SPEAKER: My favorite rabbi used to say, "You've asked a good question"... I hope my answer can be as good as the question. Inasmuch as I was invited here by MERCAZ, USA, the Zionist movement of the Conservative movement, I think it would be appropriate to reflect on one of our earliest sources...

DONNA VALERO: *Moshe Rabbenu...*

HERZL: Theodor Herzl!

AHAD HA'AM: Ahad Ha'am!

SPEAKER: I refer to Dr. Solomon Schechter, the founder of the United Synagogue.

BENNY: Was he a Zionist?

HERZL: *(With a "humph.")* Never attended a Congress...

SPEAKER: He was not an activist, but he was a central figure in blending your ideas into a philosophy that made the Conservative movement the most overwhelmingly Zionist of all the North American Jewish denominations. He accepted political Zionism as the tool for his ultimate spiritual purposes, planted the roots of cultural Zionism in this country, and demystified the

essence of Rav Kook's ideas.

BENNY: What did he say?

SPEAKER: In 1906, he said, "Zionism is an ideal, and as such is indefinable. It is thus subject to various interpretations... It may appear to one as the rebirth of national Jewish consciousness, to another as a religious revival, while to a third it may present itself as a path leading to the goal of Jewish culture... By reason of this variety of aspects, Zionism has been able to unite the most heterogeneous elements, representing Jews of all countries and almost all the different types of culture and thought as only a really great and universal movement could command."

BENNY: But Zionism can't mean everything to everybody!

SPEAKER: Wait! "On one point, however, they all agree, namely, that it is not only desirable, but absolutely necessary, that *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of our fathers, should be recovered with the purpose of forming a home for at least a portion of the Jews, who would lead there an independent national life."

HERZL: That's what I said!

AHAD HA'AM: And I!

BEN-GURION: And I!

SPEAKER: "Zionism declares boldly to the world that Judaism means to preserve its life by not losing its life. It shall be a true and healthy life, with a policy of its own, a religion wholly its own, invigorated by sacred memories and sacred environments, and proving a tower of strength and of unity not only for the remnant gathered within the borders of the Holy Land, but also for those who shall, by choice or necessity, prefer what now constitutes the *Galut*."

BENNY: Then there's a place for all of us?

BEN-GURION: That's impossible! It is imperative that *all* Jews live in Israel!

AHAD HA'AM: The majority of world Jewry already live there!

DONNA VALERO: That is truly the beginning of Redemption...

HERZL: But the political goals...

SPEAKER: "The activity of Zionism must not be judged by what it has accomplished *in* Zion and Jerusalem - where it has to deal with political problems as yet not ripe for solution - but by what it has thus far achieved *for* Zion and Jerusalem, through the awakening of the national Jewish consciousness..."

AHAD HA'AM: That's what I've been saying!

HERZL: So have I!

BENNY: Wait a minute, I'm confused! I don't see how all your views could be combined in one statement by Solomon Schechter, and that made over 90 years ago!

BEN-GURION: Besides, he was *not* a Zionist - he remained in the *Galut*! We must not surrender to the *Galut*, but make an end of it!

HERZL: We'll never be able to settle *every* Jew in the land of Israel...

AHAD HA'AM: What will happen to the cultural renaissance that we have awakened in every Diaspora community?

DONNA VALERO: But they don't speak Hebrew!

BENNY: Can somebody help me out here? (*Turning to a member of the audience.*)
What do *you* think?

QUESTIONS to raise with the audience:

1. What is an appropriate definition of Zionism today and what does that mean for the future of our community? of the Jewish people?
2. Can one be a Zionist and remain in the Diaspora?
3. Is Hebrew as a national language the answer to Jewish continuity?
4. What is the allegiance or level of involvement of Israelis to the Jewish community outside of Israel? (Both those who live in Israel and those who now live in the Diaspora.)
5. What is the place of Jewish religion in contemporary Zionism?
6. Is North American Jewish support of Israel a security investment for the future, lest anti-Semitism arise at home; or it is altruistic/nostalgic/anachronistic?
7. How should the Conservative movement respond to Israel: as an integrated part of the Zionist movement or as a separate organization with a specific agenda?

