

FROM THE RIVER



TO THE SEA



**COLONIZING A LAND AND ITS
PEOPLE IS NOT INSPIRING!**

A Letter to Theodor Herzl

*The Founder of the Zionist Movement,
who died 100 years ago (July 1904)*

Dear Dr. Herzl,

Allow me to begin with a personal remark: I somehow feel close to your world since my parents came from Germany – they found their way to Palestine thanks to your efforts. Other members of my family were not as impressed by your vision of transforming Palestine into a Jewish state: some stayed in Germany and were killed in the Holocaust; others – indeed the majority – chose England, the USA, or Australia. Your prediction that Jews in Europe were heading towards a terrible disaster proved accurate. Your solution to the looming catastrophe, however, is precisely the subject of this letter.

... you were fascinated by two ideas: nationalism and colonialism. You did not just want to warn Jews that assimilation and integration (for them) in Europe would not work – you wanted to turn them into a nation like all others. However, your choice from the spectrum of nationalisms was not of the liberal-democratic kind but rather the one that circulated among your compatriots in Vienna, who refused to accept you as one of their own. It was the fanatical nationalism of race and blood. People were selected by their race and religion, not by a (personal) choice to become part of a new nation. This nationalism of Fichte and his friends eventually gave rise to Nazi madness; it also planted a wild messianism in the hearts of early Zionists and their successors – which only grew worse over the years. I write to you from Haifa – the city you visioned as a kind of Paris of the Jewish state. And I sit here in horror, contemplating what our nationalist zealots will invent next in their devastating campaign against real and imagined enemies. Alas, you also missed all the prior madness committed in the name of the fervor you instilled into the Jewish soul and existence. But you were not just a dreamer who turned his private fantasies into a powerful ideology.

You were – and you must admit this, dear Theo – also a colonialist. When your career as a playwright and journalist failed – by the way, you weren't that bad, and my Palestinian friends and I regret that you gave up so quickly – you stepped onto the real stage of high global politics. Having abandoned the prospect of reforming Europe, you joined the European imperialist effort to reform everyone except the Europeans. This was colonialism – a popular and accepted term in your time. You often used the phrase „colonizing Palestine“ when describing the overall plan of Zionism. I can tell you from personal experience: if you had written a dissertation on early Zionism at my university and used this term to describe it, you would have been immediately disqualified and expelled. You see, since your death, colonialism has lost its PR campaign. It has become synonymous with oppression, displacement, and destruction. By the way, this is precisely what Zionist colonialism imposed on the native population of Palestine. Nevertheless, this is denied and distorted in the Jewish state you helped build. Having infused zealot nationalism and colonialism into the souls of people without land coming to a land with many people, perhaps ethnic cleansing was the inevitable result, as it indeed occurred in 1948. Until that year, under the British Mandate, Zionists were a minority within the Palestinian colony – and thus unable to execute such a plan. But the leaders of the movement could wait and were (in hindsight) correct to ally with the British, as you recommended.

When the Mandate ended, our forefathers seemingly took one of your rare comments about the intended fate of the native population in coveted Zion seriously. You suggested that the natives be „gently and quietly“ removed. Publicly, however, you spoke of wanting to consider the interests of the „native population.“ Well, with that statement, you provided the Zionist actions of 1948 with duplicity. While Zionist leaders loudly proclaimed their wish to provide Palestinians with everything necessary, they ordered the Palestinians' expulsion.

You did not speak Hebrew – but you invented Zionist discourse. That is truly an achievement, believe me. For years, it has led the world by the nose, concealing the ongoing destruction of Palestine. In any case, in 1948, the Jews did not discreetly but effectively drive the Arabs into the „desert“ and cleansed Palestine of its local population. It's time to conclude, dear Herzl. The rest, as they say, is history. And what is happening now is no better – in fact, it is getting worse. If you ever want to know more, I can tell you in my next letter.

But before I close: I hope you are not offended if I ask you a question that deeply troubles me. Why you? Around you, there were outstanding Jews – humanists, intellectuals, and visionaries. None of them became Zionists, and unfortunately, none of them became role models for the Jews who established a state in Palestine (indeed, they were more admired by my late friend, the distinguished Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, than by any intellectual in modern Israel).

I await your response.

Ilan Pappé

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