

RECLAIMING THE ZIONIST IDEA

The **World Zionist Organization** is dedicated to engaging Jews everywhere in translating the principles of The Jerusalem Program, the official manifesto of the Zionist movement, into action. It does this through a broad range of initiatives aimed at affirming the centrality of Israel to the Jewish experience ■ David Breakstone

“So how was it?” I asked my niece upon picking her up at the end of her Birthright trip. “Really fun,” she said. With a 45-minute car ride ahead of us, I wasn’t prepared to leave it at that, and continued to probe. She pulled out her itinerary and began telling me about all the places she’d been to and the things she’d done. “And how does all this leave you feeling?” I asked. “Well, I do have one question, Uncle David,” she ventured. “I still don’t really get why we need a Jewish state, especially with all the problems it causes.”

Both as uncle and as vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization, I have come to the conclusion that the most immediate threat that the international campaign to delegitimize Israel poses is its effect on our own young people. In casting Zionism as a racist and colonialist movement that has spawned an apartheid society that bears primary responsibility for what is portrayed as the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian people, it has left even those of our children who grew up in strongly committed Jewish homes doubtful about the Zionist idea and confused in terms of their relationship to the State of Israel. And precious too little is being done to help them work that through.

Herzl’s vision

Enter the World Zionist Organization. Dedicated to promoting the Zionist vision and the Zionist enterprise as vital and compelling elements of contemporary Jewish life, the century-old body founded by Theodor Herzl in 1897 seeks to impart an understanding that Zionism has always been, and continues to be, an idealistic, value-driven movement.

The visionary of the Jewish state, who is too often mistakenly perceived as having concerned himself exclusively with seeking a political and territorial solution to the “Jewish question,” also believed passionately in the mission of fashioning a utopian society in the Land of Israel. Zionism for him was not only about ending the abnormality of the Jewish condition of homelessness, but also about giving birth to a nation characterized by social justice, equal opportunity and the fair distribution of resources.

That this vision has yet to be realized diminishes neither its pertinence nor its power to inspire. Only two months before he died, Herzl bequeathed to future generations an ethical will as compelling today as it was more than a century ago. “Even after we possess our land,” he wrote, “Zionism will not cease to be an ideal, for Zionism includes not only the yearning for a plot of promised land legally acquired for our weary people, but also the yearning for moral and spiritual fulfillment.”

Ideologically driven, the WZO is committed to conveying to Jews in Israel and the world over that this ideal has always been – and need remain – essential to the Zionist ethos. The need for a safe haven for the Jewish people may have been a primary catalyst for bringing the Zionist movement into being, but that is not an answer resonant for my niece who has never experienced anti-Semitism and who can barely fathom its dangers. Surely she needs a lesson in the perils it continues to pose, but she also needs to understand, and become excited by the possibilities that Jewish statehood holds for applying Jewish values to the public domain so that, in keeping with God’s given promise to Abraham, we might not only become a great nation in this land, but also that through us the peoples of the earth might be blessed.

“All that you have cultivated will be worthless and your fields will again be barren, unless you also cultivate freedom of thought and expression, generosity of spirit, and love for humanity. These are the things you must cherish and nurture,” wrote Herzl. His is the Zionism we need reclaim, and the Zionism we need proclaim to a new generation. ■

From ideology to action

The World Zionist Organization is dedicated to translating the principles of The Jerusalem Program, the official manifesto of the Zionist movement, into action through various projects and initiatives. In particular, the WZO seeks to affirm the centrality of Israel to the Jewish experience while fostering a bond to Jerusalem as the eternal capital of the Jewish people, advancing Hebrew as fundamental to Jewish consciousness and Jewish peoplehood, encouraging aliya, furthering Zionist education, promoting rural settlement as an expression of Zionist fulfillment, defending the national rights of the Jewish people everywhere, combatting the ever-present scourge of anti-Semitism and countering the campaign to undermine the very idea of a Jewish state.

WZO policy and objectives are determined by the Zionist Congress, comprised of democratically elected representatives hailing from 30 countries and representing the full range of political parties, religious streams and international Jewish organizations defining themselves as Zionist. As such, the organization prides itself on being the only global forum consciously seeking to address the challenges facing Israel and the Jewish people today in a manner that truly reflects its pluralistic nature.

Dr. Breakstone is the vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization.





Highlights of WZO programs and projects

■ **The Herzl Center** on Mt. Herzl, Jerusalem is the premier enterprise of the WZO. Its experiential museum features a series of engaging, multimedia vignettes revealing the life, thought and deeds of the visionary of the Jewish state. The educational center operating alongside the museum – quickly becoming the go-to address for Zionist education in Israel – features a giant, hi-tech, interactive “smart wall” comprised of touch screens and other interactive media. Together, they raise compelling questions relating to the meaning of Israel in Jewish life today, stimulating visitors to grapple with multiple issues regarding their own identity and their connection to Israel and the Jewish people.

■ **Mifgashim** (Hebrew for “encounters”) offers organizers of Israel programs the opportunity to have the Diaspora youth they bring to Israel joined by an equal number of youngsters from the Negev or Galilee for up to a week at no cost. The result is an incomparable opportunity for both populations to explore their own Jewish identities in a manner designed to lead to a deepened

appreciation of Jewish peoplehood and Zionist values.

■ **Rabbis Engaging with Israel** offers a different type of adventure, bringing together rabbis of all streams for a nuanced Israel experience that facilitates a sophisticated examination of the realities of Israel today. In addition to providing the participants with the opportunity to contemplate the meaning of Israel and Zionism in their own lives, it provides them with the tools and resources to engage their congregants in a similar exploration while also increasing the presence of Israel in the life of their communities.

■ **Morim Shlichim** (Hebrew for “teacher emissaries”) works the other way around, bringing Israel into the classroom in schools throughout the Diaspora. In addition to discharging their professional responsibilities at the highest standard, these educators also work in myriad ways to deepen the relationship between their students and the State of Israel.

■ **Habayta** (Hebrew for “Coming Home”) is for those ready to consummate that relationship, consisting of a variety of programs and

activities promoting aliyah with a focus on meeting the needs of potential olim in such critical areas as employment, housing, education, language and community.

■ **Israel's Attic** consists of a set of 21 replications of authentic posters from pre-state Israel and its early years of independence giving expression to the ideals on which the Zionist movement was founded and the remarkable achievements of its first decades. The collection provides a fascinating insight into the spirit of the times, serving as a source of inspiration to continue working for fulfillment of the Zionist dream. Each poster includes a description of its contents, enhancing appreciation of its message and associated values.

■ **Beit Ha-Am** is another resource for stimulating dialogue about the Zionist vision today. It is comprised of a series of booklets built around intriguing texts, ancient and modern, accompanied by provocative questions relating to a variety of contemporary issues concerning Israel, Zionism and Diaspora Jewish life.



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For further details about WZO resources and activities, see www.wzo.org.il or write to wzoinfo@wzo.org.il.