- Theodor Herzl is the founder of modern Zionism.
- In his book “The Jewish State”, he developed a detailed idea for the foundation and organization of a Jewish state.
- The reason for this was the anti-Semitism in Europe, which Herzl was convinced would never disappear.
- In 1897, the first Zionist Congress took place in Basel under Herzl’s leadership. It decided to create a public homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine.
- This goal was realized on 14 May 1948 with the proclamation of the State of Israel.
- Theodor Herzl did not live to see the realization of his idea. He died, aged just 44, on July 3, 1904.
- With the help of artificial intelligence, FokusIsrael.ch conducted a fictitious interview with Theodor Herzl and asked him what he thinks about anti-Semitism and the state of Israel today.

Mr. Herzl, between 1941 and 1945, the then National Socialist government of Germany murdered six million Jews as part of its “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”. Did such a nightmare prompt you to call on the Jews to leave Europe and form their own state?

Theodor Herzl: I saw the danger, but not its full extent. I was convinced that we would not be left in peace. But the planned destruction of our entire people – in such a form, with such coldness – was beyond anything I could have imagined.

Anti-Semitism is once again very vocal in Europe today. Does that surprise you?

Herzl: Unfortunately not. I already recognized in my time that anti-Semitism is a persistent, changing phenomenon. The Jewish question exists everywhere where Jews live in significant numbers. Anti-Semitism is a problem of civilization. It changes its forms, but not its nature.

It does not disappear through assimilation or progress alone. It adapts to new times – and therein lies its danger.

How should European Jews counter today’s anti-Semitism?

Herzl: I have always been convinced that the Jewish question is a political one and therefore requires a political solution. The Jewish question is neither a social nor a religious question, but a national question. We are one people – one people! For me, this meant that we needed to create our own state. This need for self-determination has remained.

Are you surprised that there has been a Jewish state since 1948?

Herzl: Less surprised than pleased. As early as 1897, shortly after the First Zionist Congress, I wrote in my diary: “I founded the Jewish state in Basel. If I were to say that out loud today, I would be met with general laughter. Perhaps in five years, at least in fifty, everyone will realize it.” What seemed like a bold dream in my day was, in my eyes, a realistic political project. I said even then: “If you want it, it’s not a fairy tale.”

What do you think of the fact that this Jewish state is called Israel?

Herzl: The name “Israel” carries a deep historical and cultural meaning. In my writings I have considered various names, but the decisive factor has always been the content: a state for the Jewish people. The fact that such a traditional name was chosen seems entirely appropriate to me.

What other names were you thinking about?

Herzl: “Judah”, for example, but that was too narrow for me, because it only refers to one part of our people. Then “Zion”, but that is a poetic, almost religious term. But a state needs more than poetry, it needs clarity and secular comprehensibility.

What do you think about Israel being located in the territory of Palestine, as demanded at the first Zionist Congress?

Herzl: Palestine is our unforgettable historical homeland. Palestine was the historical goal for many Jews, but I was pragmatic in my considerations. I also considered alternatives, such as Argentina. Argentina is one of the most fertile countries in the world. However, it is not the land alone that is decisive, but the security of the

people.

Israel is a democracy. Does this correspond to your ideas?

Herzl: We wanted to create a model country. Order, justice and progress are decisive – the form is the means, not the end. A democratic order is very much in line with this ideal – as long as it is based on reason, education and responsibility.

In her book The Jewish State you were critical of democracy and preferred an aristocratic republic or even a monarchy.

Herzl: I distrusted disorder in democracy, not participation. Demagoguery, short-sightedness, passion – these were my concerns. I therefore thought of an order that would be supported by educated, responsible personalities – a kind of “aristocratic republic”, not in the sense of birth, but of ability.

But my considerations were always pragmatic, not dogmatic. The goal was a state of reason, education and responsibility. If democracy achieves this, it fulfills its purpose.

Religious leaders have great political influence in Israel. Is this in your interest?

Herzl: I always said: We will not allow theocracy. The state should be secular, religion free.

There is a strong schism between the secular and ultra-orthodox sections of Israel’s population today. How would you tackle this problem?

Herzl: Every man shall be blessed according to his own will. But there must be no special status before the law. Duties and rights must be shared. A community disintegrates when parts withdraw from it. It exists when everyone contributes to it.

So this means for you: If secular Jews do military service, then the ultra-Orthodox must also do so?

Herzl: Yes. Anyone who enjoys the protection of the community must also contribute to its preservation.

In Israel, Christians and Muslims live together with Jews on an equal footing. Does this correspond to your Zionist idea?

Herzl: In my novel “Altneuland”, I clearly stated: “It makes no difference what religion or nationality someone belongs to.” There must be no discrimination against Christians and Muslims; they should have the same rights and opportunities as Jews, politically, socially and economically.

Israel has tense relations with many neighboring Arab states. What can Israel do?

Herzl: I was always convinced that we would bring prosperity to the country. Shared benefit creates peace rather than mere words. But I was also aware that national movements create tensions. Diplomacy and fairness are therefore essential.

The coat of arms of Israel is a blue Star of David on a white background. Do you like that?

Herzl: The sign is old. But a nation does not live by signs, but by its order, its work, its future. *Note: This interview is fictitious. It was created with the help of ChatGPT on the basis of Theodor Herzl’s statements, writings and ideas. In the coming weeks, we will conduct fictitious conversations with a number of deceased personalities from different areas of life – politics, religion, science, culture – who were important for Judaism and Israel, in order to bring their ideas closer to today’s audience.*