

# Theodor Herzl: A Zionist Pioneer

A Monologue, Scene, and Activities designed by Gabrielle S. Kaplan  
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**Commissioned by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation  
of Metropolitan New York's Israel Education Project**

(The play and activities have been designed for use with students in fourth through seventh grades.)

## 1. Monologue

### Costume

Herzl was a distinguished looking man; actor should wear a dark suit, preferably with a bow tie to reflect the times. Actor should also wear a dark beard (available at costume or novelty shops).

### Props

Herzl might carry a portfolio with manuscript.

### Background

The year is 1895 and the setting is Paris. French society has been bitterly divided by the Dreyfus case, in which a Jewish military officer was accused of treason. Later, he was proved innocent, but at the time of his arrest, the Dreyfus case led to many anti-Semitic incidents. Theodor Herzl, a Jewish reporter originally from Vienna, Austria, has been very moved during the case and has written the manuscript of a book that calls for a Jewish national state.

*Herzl enters classroom, as if he's going to meet with a group of potential publishers.*

Good morning. Thank you so much for inviting me to come to your publishing house to meet with you this morning. I'm Theodor Herzl. You may recognize my name. I've been a journalist here in Paris for several years. This is my first manuscript for a book. If I may say so, in all modesty, I think my manuscript has the potential to become a very important book. That's why I believe you should publish it.

What's the book about? Well, you see, it covers many topics. I call it *The Jewish State*. It began just as my diary entries—written, rather furiously, over a period of just five days. It all started last fall, in October 1894, when Captain Alfred Dreyfus was arrested on charges of high treason. As a reporter, I was assigned to cover the story for our newspaper...and once I began investigating Captain Dreyfus' case...I became, well, for lack of better words, obsessed with the story. Here it was, a military officer in the French army...clearly being framed on charges of treason because he

was Jewish! There was no doubt in my mind that Dreyfus was being framed by anti-Semites. If such unfairness, such a clearly unjust trial could take place in France—the home of “liberté, égalité, fraternité”—it can clearly occur anywhere in the world. A Jewish person—no matter how noble—can be put on trial, just because he or she is Jewish.

The book? Yes, I’m getting to that. The Dreyfus affair—as it’s been called—has cemented something in my mind. Something I’ve been thinking about for some time now. The Jewish people—they need a homeland of their own. It’s clear to me. In Western Europe, Jews have been “emancipated” from the laws that used to keep them in the ghettos, unable to mix with Gentile society. Now Jewish people are free to mix with other Europeans, free to attend Gentile schools, work amongst Gentiles in the marketplace. But this so-called freedom has only created resentment towards the Jew. That is what is truly at the root of the Dreyfus affair. I will give you a personal example, my dear friends, of how anti-Semitism can rear its ugly head. When I was at university, I was a member of a fraternity. The fraternity brothers were among my dearest friends, even though most of them weren’t Jewish. We ate together, we studied together...we had our share of fun together. Until one day. A group of them decided they didn’t like Jews. They passed a new ruling. No Jews in the fraternity. That was the last I spoke to those “friends.”

The situation is worse in Eastern Europe. The Jews of Russia, most of them so poor, are at the mercy of the Czar. If he wants to call for a pogrom, he does! Soldiers enter Jewish villages, light fires, steal property, kill men and women, children, babies. This torture cannot go on. It is clear that there is a “Jewish problem”—that we need a country of our own where we can be safe...and productive...and create a society based on Jewish values. It will be good for the Gentiles, too...they will no longer have to feel threatened by the Jewish people living in their midst.

Am I a religious man? Actually, it’s funny that you ask. I grew up in Budapest, in a well-off family. We were what you call “assimilated.” My parents wanted us to have the best education, have the best opportunities in life. We spent little time studying anything about Judaism or living with Jewish practices. It is only now, as an adult, that I am moved to speak in defense of the Jewish people...that I am learning anything about what it means to be a Jew! And so you see, I am discovering a beautiful culture, a strong people...that have survived exile from the land of Israel for nearly two thousand years. If we Jews have survived this long in countries that didn’t welcome us, imagine how we could thrive in a homeland of our own!

The book—yes. I have just tried to outline for you what the various essays discuss. You like it? But? The public’s reaction? You’re afraid? No...I haven’t really imagined. All I can tell you, my friends, is that the time is now. It is 1895. I predict that within fifty years, there will be a Jewish state. If we can motivate Jews to act and Gentiles to understand. Please—please. Don’t be afraid of the public’s reaction. Someone must be brave and publish this book.

### **1. A Short Scene: Stirrings of a Jewish State**

This scene begins in June, 1895. Theodor Herzl’s book, *The Jewish State*, has just been published. Reactions are severe.

## Characters

Editor

Jean, a reporter

Orthodox Rabbi One

Orthodox Rabbi Two

Reform Rabbi

University students, Rivka and David

Members of First Zionist Congress

Herzl

## Staging

A few chairs and tables can be used to set up the various locales. Set should be minimalistic, because the action moves quickly from place to place.

## Props

Book

Trash Can

Israeli Flag

## Costumes

Small costume pieces, such as prayer shawls and hats for Orthodox rabbis, will make the characters come to life. Reform rabbi would wear a suit, students could carry books, and Editor and Reporter might have pens behind their ears, glasses, etc. Herzl should have a beard.

*In the Editor's office.*

**Editor:** Jean, Jean come in here!

**Jean:** What is it, sir?

**Editor:** Herzl. Did you know he was writing a book?

**Jean:** He may have mentioned something. I don't know. I don't know mix with him much.

**Editor:** The nerve of him. He brings it in here. For me to review.

**Jean:** Sir, when any of us writers have the good fortune to publish a book, you always review it. I mean, not that I've had that experience, but I'm sure I will one day. I'm a good writer, aren't I sir? Good as Herzl?

**Editor:** He brings in this nonsense, "*The Jewish State*." Expects me to read it.

**Jean:** The Jewish state, eh? Boy, since that Dreyfus case...Herzl's changed. Always talking about a Jewish homeland. What's it about, anyway?

**Editor:** I flipped through it. Just that. Herzl thinks the governments of the world should support a national land...just for Jews! As if they don't have enough rights here in France! Enough money, enough land—

**Jean:** So what are you going to do, sir? I mean Herzl's a reporter on the staff. Don't you have to review it?

**Editor:** I'm the Editor. I don't have to do anything about it, if I don't care to. *The Jewish State*. What nonsense!

*He takes the book and throws it in the trash. They exit.*

*Two Orthodox rabbis enter.*

**Rabbi One:** You hear the news? Everyone's talking about Herzl's book, *The Jewish State*."

**Rabbi Two:** I told the people in my synagogue, throw it away! It's heresy! Pure heresy!

**Rabbi One:** To think, human beings creating a state of Israel! The arrogance! It clearly says in Scripture, only when the Mashiach comes will the Jews return to the Holy Land.

**Rabbi Two:** Perhaps Mr. Herzl thinks he himself is Mashiach!

**Rabbi One:** Heaven forbid! We have enough problems with anti-Semitism...now this book is causing more problems!

**Rabbi Two:** Mr. Herzl must be stopped. Before he hurts the Jewish people anymore.

**Rabbi One:** He's not even a religious Jew, from what I understand. What does he know about all of this? If he wants to help the Jewish people, he should go to synagogue...and pray.

**Rabbi Two:** It's Jews like Herzl...with their crazy ideas...who give the whole community a bad name.

**Rabbi One:** We can stop him. Our congregants won't listen to him. Mr. Herzl will fade away...he'll be nothing more than a footnote in history.

**Rabbi Two:** I'll try to have your faith...

*They exit. The Reform Rabbi enters, speaking to the audience.*

**Reform Rabbi:** Dear Congregants, for my Friday night sermon, I am going to address Theodor Herzl's new book, *The Jewish State*. Many of you have heard about Mr. Herzl and his work. It is

important that you understand how troubling his message is for Reform Jews—here in Western Europe and in America. We believe that we have a mission by living in the Diaspora—that we can bring Jewish ethics to the entire world. We study the words of the prophets and act in their accordance. Mr. Herzl seems to think the only value for the Jewish people is to leave the Diaspora and live in one country, a Jewish homeland. Clearly, Mr. Herzl does not understand the mission of Reform Judaism today. We can assimilate. In Paris, in Berlin, in New York City...Jewish people can live an ethical life...and can take advantage of all the educational opportunities secular society has to offer. Mr. Herzl would have the Jewish people cut off from the best of Western civilization. I trust that you, my faithful congregants, will turn away from his misguided message.

*Rabbi exits.*

*University students enter.*

**David:** Rivka, Rivka...you have to read this!

**Rivka:** What is it?

**David:** Herzl's new book...it's all about Jewish people from all over the world coming together...to demand their rights as a people...to develop a nation of their own.

**Rivka:** He's the writer who covered the Dreyfus case, I recognize his name. I've got to read it! We have to do something, David...the time is right. Europe is not any place to live for a Jew...anti-Semitism is everywhere. I think it's spreading.

**David:** Take it, read it. And come to a meeting tonight. A bunch of us Jewish students will be meeting at the café. To discuss the book...and related matters. I believe what Herzl says, Rivka. He wants to establish a "Society of Jews," a government of Jewish people in exile who can work together and make decisions to help the new homeland come to being.

**Rivka:** Imagine, David—it sounds like a dream. A government where Jews could serve! A government made up of Jewish people! We need that so much. We're not first-class citizens in Europe...and I don't think we will ever be.

**David:** I know...but think...if there was a Jewish homeland...not only could we have equal rights...but we could also create a whole Jewish culture...Jewish artists, writers, actors, philosophers.

**Rivka:** Our children and grandchildren would never have to know what it's like...to be in fear...just because you're Jewish.

**David:** We need you to join the cause, Rivka. We are the ones who can make this dream real. You'll come then to the meeting—tonight? At the café?

**Rivka:** I'll see you there. I'll bring some friends.

*They exit. Enter members of the First Zionist Congress. Herzl enters and addresses them.*

**Herzl:** It is hard to believe that now—in 1897—only two years after the publication of my book *The Jewish State*, we are gathered: the members of the First Zionist Congress. We have 200 Jewish people here from over twenty countries—lawyers, writers, students, physicians, businessmen, philanthropists. Today, we will create the organizations needed to fulfill our dream—the creation of a modern Israel. As a first step toward our goal, I will display the emblem of our new country (*two actors come out carrying the Israeli flag*). The inspiration for the flag for the Jewish homeland comes from a tallit—our prayer shawl. Finally, a national flag that is Jewish in every respect!

*The flag is unfurled and all members of the Congress stand and applaud.*

### 1. Activities

**Writing A:** Imagine you are Theodor Herzl. You are going to visit the Czar of Russia and try to earn his support for a Jewish state. What would you say to convince him that he should let the Russian Jews leave Russia? How can you convince him to give you money for a Jewish State?

**Writing B:** Imagine you are a member of the First Zionist Congress. What issues do you think were discussed? Did everyone always agree? Were there differences of opinions between Jews in Eastern and Western Europe? Write a short scene in which the Congress is debating over some matter.

**Values Collage:** What Jewish Values do you think Theodor Herzl possessed in order to do the kind of work he did? Define the following values and decide which ones Herzl most displayed: initiative, hard work, belief in one's dreams, chutzpah.

Pick one of these values. Cut out pictures and words from a magazine (you can also draw) that represent this value. Write the value on a piece of construction paper and create a values collage.

Choose a Biblical hero or heroine who displays this value. Think of a friend or family member and/or famous person today who also embodies this value. Consider identifying these special people on your collage or on an index card which accompanies your collage.

### Vocabulary:

The following names and terms are used in the above monologue and scene. Work with a partner to see how many of them you can define. Write a poem expressing your feelings about Herzl. Consider using some of these terms.

*Alfred Dreyfus*

*Pogrom*

*Anti-Semitism*

*Assimilation*

*Mashiach*

*Diaspora*

*“liberté, égalité, fraternité”*

*Orthodox*

*Ghetto*

*Reform*

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