

Haaretz

## Science, Technology and the New Jew'

Was Herzl's conception of a Jewish state indeed born of the 'great mind' of Herbert Spencer, the intellectual whose name is associated mainly with social Darwinism and natural selection?



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On March 12, 1897, Theodor Herzl sent a copy of the English translation of "The Jewish State" to the elderly British philosopher Herbert Spencer along with a letter, the last paragraph of which he inscribed in his diary entry for that day: "We are guests upon the earth at the same time. In the natural course of events you may depart sooner than I, the 37-year-old. Therefore, since I am even today convinced that the Jewish state will materialize, in one form or another, so beyond the limits of my life, that I should like to know and determine how the beginnings of this undertaking was [sic] reflected in the great mind of Herbert Spencer."



We shall never know what else Herzl wrote in the letter; its full version was not published in the various editions of his correspondence and the search in Spencer's papers has been fruitless. All that is known is that Spencer's secretary replied politely to Herzl that because of the frail state of his health, the philosopher would not be able to answer, even though the question of the Jews interests him. In any case, no importance has been attributed to this letter, and it has been seen as evidence of Herzl's desire to receive courteous words of encouragement. However, Herzl did not send copies of "The Jewish State" to "the best philosophers of his day" (as Yaakov Golomb claimed in his article on Nietzsche's influence on Herzl), but only to the Jewish critic and writer Georg Brandes, who reacted scornfully to it, and to Herbert Spencer, the formulator of "synthetic philosophy."

On the surface, it is possible to understand Herzl's choice of Spencer: Though Nietzsche defined him as a respectable albeit mediocre Englishman, the influence wielded by Spencer on the European intellectual world in the last third of the 19th century was no less than Nietzsche's. As literary evidence of this, there is Anton Chekhov's novella "The Duel." When the hero of the novella, Ivan Andreitch Laevsky, tells about his love affair, he says: "My God! ... How distorted we all are by civilization. I fell in love with a married woman and she with me ... To begin with, we had kisses, and calm evenings, and vows, and Spencer ..."

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When the young zoologist Van Koren lambastes Laevsky's pessimistic mood, he says that he treats Spencer like "a small boy": "Well, what do you say, old Spencer?' He has not read Spencer, of course ... and no one cares to understand that this charlatan has not the right to kiss the sole of Spencer's foot, let alone speak about him in that tone! Sapping the foundations of civilization, of authority, of other people's altars, spattering them with filth, winking jocosely at them only to justify and conceal one's own rottenness and moral poverty is only possible for a very vain, base and nasty creature" [translation from Russian by Constance Garnett].

Pause for thought is given by Herzl's words to the effect that "The Jewish State" was born of the "great mind" of a thinker whose name is associated mostly with the view called "social Darwinism," in the philosophy of the man who posited the principle of "natural selection" as the mechanism that brings about progress. If Herzl indeed meant anything more than flattery, is this not sufficient to cast a stain on the founder of political Zionism and his utopian vision? I think not. For Herzl, as for the radical intelligentsia - both Jewish and non-Jewish - in Central and Eastern Europe, Spencer was the formulator of the idea of the inevitable development and improvement of society. His scientific-biological positivism was an important weapon in the struggle against the rule of autarchy and religion, which appeared to be responsible for the backwardness of the societies in that part of Europe.

As evidence of Spencer's influence on Jewish thinking and polemics, I shall confine myself here to four "witnesses": In an article marking the occasion of Spencer's 82nd birthday, Nahum Sokolow described him as the guide for all those who seek "the intelligent development, the greater profundity and the sophistication of the human and the Jewish spirit (which are one) among the Jews. If we aspire to encourage the nation by its rebirth, its development and its perfection - we stand on the basis of the law of development."



Max Nordau saw Spencer as an important opponent of Nietzsche's popular "nihilistic pessimism" and saw in his philosophy an antithesis to theology and metaphysics. In an acute critique of *Ahad Ha'am*, Yosef Haim Brenner wondered: "What kind of method is it to invoke Spencer's name and his system and at the same time to talk about the eternity of Judaism and its morality, which will not change and will not be replaced?"

Dr. Yehoshua Tohn wrote in his book on Spencer (Odessa, 1910) that the English philosopher taught that "man does good without imposition and force, but rather because it is pleasant (and useful) to do so," and that morality means "adjusting the deeds to the end."

### **The impact of `toys'**

Thus, Herzl's appeal to Spencer should come as no surprise. Despite his criticism of the European political culture of the second half of the 19th century, Herzl was not infected by the pessimistic mood of the *fin de siècle* and did not prophesy an incurable decline for European civilization. Rather, Herzl believed in the inevitable process of progress and in "the epoch of inventions," as H.G. Wells called the 19th century. Herzl was full of admiration for the achievements of science and technology, although in some of his articles, stories and sketches, he casts doubt on the connection between scientific and technological progress and moral behavior in the international and social arena.



In his essay on "The Guided Airship" (from the end of May 1896, of which he wrote: "It has been understood as an allegory of the Jewish state"), Herzl described the great changes that will be brought to the world by "toys" like horseless carriages and "airships" that are liable to turn into "warships" and the means for distributing pleasure to rulers and "new forms of poverty and degradation" in the future. It would seem that Herzl was ahead of H.G. Wells' prediction in his futuristic novel "When the Sleeper Wakes" (1899) with regard to the destructive use of aircraft. However, the "Parisian" narrator in this story sums up the exchange in a completely different spirit: Josef Muller, who invented the "guided airship," must think about the future, as "anything that prepares for the future must look from the present onward. The good people will certainly come."

### 'Jewish Jules Verne'

In another story, "The Automobile," from 1899, Herzl describes the influence that the car will have: "Every automobile owner has a small house in the distance, surrounded by a garden. Life on the main roads is more pleasant ... The new way of life nurtures a new type of human being, in which the culture of the farmers and the power of the city dwellers has been combined." However, he adds a reservation: "How fast our travel is already ... how slow our wisdom." But at around the same time, on June 21, 1899, after visiting an automobile show held in Paris at the Tuileries Gardens and admiring "The new American Cleveland automobile," he wrote in his diary: "Automobiles were created for us. We will have cement roads, fewer railway tracks and in advance we will set up new forms of transportation."

If H.G. Wells believed that humans created the future without thinking about its results, Herzl believed that man in his wisdom is able to foresee the results that the inventions of technology will have and to prepare himself for them. In the introduction to "The Jewish State," he wrote that machines in the service of man are "slaves of extraordinary capacity for work." No wonder there were those who called Herzl not only a utopian, or a false messiah, but also "the Jewish Jules Verne."



Apparently, then, Herzl did not believe that science and technology are a golem that could turn on its maker. There is nothing in either his "private" or his "public" writings that echoes the prevalent idea in the works of late 19th-century Jewish publicists to the effect that there is no necessary connection between civilization and moral behavior. Material progress, wrote the radical Jewish intellectual Judah Leib Levin, has not strengthened social morality, but has rather put power into the hands of immoral people who act on the principles of social Darwinism. As a visionary, Herzl could not cast doubt on the power of science and technology to create a new reality. In order to bring about a mass movement and organize immigration and modern settlement, there is a need for tools, "the entire stock of 1900" - all the achievements and assets of the 19th century.

In a "speech" before a Rothschild family council in June 1895, Herzl wrote: "The new wandering of the Jews" must be done "according to scientific principles" and it must make use of "all modern means ... You, gentlemen, know best what things are possible to accomplish with the help of money. How quickly and with how little risk we are galloping now in huge steamships over seas that we had not known previously. With safe railways we pull railway tracks to the tops of mountains which in the past were climbed fearfully on foot. One-hundred thousand minds are making the effort to think ceaselessly about how to take Nature's secrets from it ..."

"My socialism," he writes in his diary on June 8, 1895, "is a purely technological matter. An equal distribution of the forces of Nature by means of electricity." And in a speech in the East End on July 13, 1896, in the same spirit, he declared that Jewish immigration has an advantage that makes it historically unique: It will have at its disposal the possibility of adopting all the modern methods of settlement. This view recurs frequently in his writings: It is the declaration that opens "The Jewish State" and it is a key motif in his utopian novel "Altneuland" ("Old-New Land"). Science and technology will make it possible to produce both the framework and the economic and social mechanisms that will establish a new Jewish society and create a new Jew.



Thus, there was no obsequiousness in Herzl's statement that Spencer's "great mind" hovers over "The Jewish State." "We know what stages of development the human race has been through since Genesis ... the way leads ever upward" - a sentence like this seems to be taken straight from Spencer. Herzl believed that human society is impelled by an internal mechanism of improvement, which leads society from homogeneity to heterogeneity. At the height of the process the liberal commercial-industrial-scientific society appears; a society without coercion, which eradicates the tendency to aggression and vanquishes religious and metaphysical thinking, and is the precondition for a liberal-democratic regime, liberty, willing cooperation, equal opportunity, love of the other and happiness.

In the above-mentioned diary entry from June 1998, Herzl wrote that in the wake of the automobile show at the Tuileries, it occurred to him to develop the idea of mutualism: "Between capitalism and collectivism it seems to me that mutualism is the golden mean." Some have found the source of this idea of "mutuality" in the writings of the French utopian Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), and therefore it is inconceivable that the idea was borrowed from the proponent of the "Darwinist" idea of "the survival of the fittest." However, Spencer was not opposed to the idea of mutual aid, and in his book "The Principles of Ethics," he proposed a "scientific ethic" based on a distinction between "absolute ethics and relative ethics," and supported mutual aid that must be based on a freely entered contract for the division of labor. Herzl could therefore have written to Spencer that the society of the future that he had envisioned would conduct itself in accordance with the principles of this "ideal behavior." He could also have written that, like Spencer, he too wished to define in advance the conditions necessary for an advanced life, because they would be dependent on economic and social circumstances.

The intention is not to adopt progress only for the purpose of fulfilling pragmatic Zionist needs; progress is a situation toward the realization of which it is necessary to act because only progress offers the conditions for establishing a "moral" society, or, it would be more precise to say, a "just"



the need for the huge power that is inherent in science and technology. A power that does not crush human beings, but rather propels them forward.

### 'New morality'

Had he been asked what connection he had to the "social Darwinism" and the conservative liberalism that Spencer posits, as in the title of Spencer's book "The Man Versus the State," Herzl might have replied that he had not received from Spencer the "aristocratic" political outlook that despises the democratic political culture, but he did receive from him the enthusiasm for the cooperative movement - for the arrangement of work relations out of free will, for joint ownership of land, for industrialization and the scientific revolution. And most importantly, he may have said that it was from Spencer that he had received the idea that it is necessary to limit and restrain the state's intervention in social and economic life. He might have cited in his letter the article he wrote in August 1893, in which he compared the situation of the factory workers - "the people of the machines" - to the Jews. It is not revolutionary socialism, he wrote there, that will bring about their salvation, but rather it is the "scientific revolutionaries (who) are preparing the redemption from the familiar distress ..."

In this article there is an ambivalent attitude toward the achievements of science and technology: In it, Herzl wrote that the use of electricity will come about, but will create a new kind of distress. The (demagogic) political speech-makers, he wrote, are deceiving "the sufferers through a dark night with fairytales, promises and pleasant or blood-soaked illusions." However, in the long term it is the use of electricity - and not politics - that will bring salvation. Herzl did not view the processes of urbanization and industrialization with the anxiety and horror of the contemporary cultural spirit of pessimism, nor did he depict them as creating "a hell on earth." Sharing this view were, for example, Nahum Sokolov, who praised industrial progress that leads man to a new epoch, and Nahman Syrkin, who wrote that technology has changed the world entirely for the better.

Herzl parted ways with Spencer in his views of the planning of immigration





differed with the philosopher in his view of the need for planning the society – a view he drew from radical liberalism, from Bismarck and certainly from the extensive utopian literature of his time. However, the principles that are at the basis of the society that is described in "Old-New Land" are Spencerian: ideas about a society that affords the individual full creative freedom in every area and the establishment of a model society.

And what about the connection between progress and morality? The contemporary criticism of positivist philosophy casts doubt on the claim that there is a connection between the project of civilization and social (and international) morality. The critics contended that technology and science put new strength into the hands of those who had political and economic power, which would only augment acts of injustice. In Herzl's writings it is possible to find echoes of this dilemma, which disturbed many people, but he did not deal with questions that touch upon "the area of pure morality" or moral behavior in the private realm, but with questions about the construction of a society and its social nature. He did not discuss morality as a philosophical question, but rather in terms of the establishment of a just society as a political and social problem. This is the "new morality" that Herzl intended.

Like Spencer, Herzl believed that it is impossible to legislate moral laws on abstract principles and therefore, the rehabilitation of an authentic Jewish personality can be realized only in a social and economic setting that will be guided by rational considerations in the spirit of intelligence and with optimistic confidence in its power. These will create a place where "at long last we will be able to live as free men on our own land ... the place where we too shall earn respect for great deed. A place where we shall live in peace with the entire world."

In a 1940 article entitled "If Herzl Were Alive," Martin Buber wrote that Herzl saw technological progress as a renaissance and a cultural revival, and believed that the solution to the social question depends only on technical means. According to Buber, Herzl believed that technology is not merely a



Buber was off the mark. Herzl certainly did not see technology as "the spirit," but rather as the means to create the conditions necessary for "the renewal of the spirit," to revive Jewish vitality and to create an "authentic life" that will repair the "immanent flaws" in "the Jewish soul." However, Herzl believed that "morality" and "happiness" are the product of a political, economic and social order. In Spencer's terms, what is good in the moral sense is good for both the life of the individual and the life of the society.

## Boundless belief

Herzl's utopia dealt with the possibility of implementing European ideas of progress in the Land of Israel and establishing a just society, the moral dimension of which would be manifested in its social behavior. Herzl's "new Jew" was productive thanks to intelligence and imagination, technology and science, and lived in a sophisticated society that succeeds in overcoming the internal tensions between capital and labor, between technological and material progress and social behavior - tensions whose existence and effects in European society were described very sharply by Herzl. The old-new land, says Herzl's character Friedrich, in the book of that name, "is something more - it must be something more - than a fusion of the elements of social and technical progress." The official at the health ministry explains: "Our New Society is thoroughly opposed, however, to any leveling process. We have not abolished competition. Conditions are alike for all, as in a race or prize competition. All must be equal at the beginning, but not at the end" [translation from the German by Lotta Levensohn].

Thus, this is a revolutionary Jewish and human project that can be carried out by means in which not only Nietzsche but also Spencer did not believe: by social planning in advance. "Everything will be determined in advance according to a well-made plan," writes Herzl in "The Jewish State." Once this plan is implemented, he might have explained in his letter to Spencer, there will no longer be any need for state involvement, which the philosopher saw as the main factor in the decline of society and the deviation



Herzl's belief in modern man's ability to create – even out of nothing – a "new environment" is therefore a boundless belief, and in his writings there is no hint that he believed that immanent human characteristics could also lead the future society to a moral retreat, which would mean that doubt must be cast on the possibility of realizing a utopia. In "Old-New Land," he describes a conversation that takes place in the living room of the home of the artist Isaacs in Jerusalem. One of the speakers strenuously rejects the pessimistic worldview of Ecclesiastes and argues that this view has gone "off the rails"; that is, it has disappeared from the world as a result of the invention of the train – one of the most important tools of modernization and progress. Those responsible for spreading the pessimistic view, he adds, are the socialist tribunes, but it is only a myth and an illusion, as positive values are eternal values. However, Herzl did not explain how his model society would exploit science and technology only for the good of society and man, and in this respect he was no different from other utopians of his day.

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