From Napoleon Bonaparte to Theodor Herzl (1894)

In a few days we will celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel's independence. In the next few days i would like to share with you a little about the history of modern Zionism, and how it happened that many Jews, despite not being observant, were part of the miraculous establishment of the State of Israel. As we learn more about what happened in the past, we will become more aware of our incredible privilege, and we will hopefully celebrate with greater gratitude to HaShem the miracle of the existence of the Jewish State.

NAPOLEON AND THE JEWS

To understand the impact of Zionism on modern Jewish history we must go back to the times of the French revolution in 1789. In the famous "Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens" France declared for the first time the freedom of worship, something that might seem natural to us today, but in those times it was an unprecedented event. A few years later the famous Napoleon Bonaparte designated Judaism as one of the official religions of France, and officially granted the Jews the right to French citizenship. Until then, Jews were "tolerated" as a non-grata minority, were discriminated against and had no access to education or to the exercise of the most common professions.

This great gesture of Napoleon, however, was not free of charge. Jews had to make some compromises. Jews had to commit to adopt the laws and the French constitution, as their highest authority, just as all other citizens did. To make this statement official by all Jews, Napoleon ordered the creation of a new institution, the Sanhedrin, which would become the official spokesman for the 40,000 French Jews.

THE GREAT SANHEDRIN

This Sanhedrin was com posed by 71 notable European Jews, most of them rabbis. The Sanhedrin had its first official meeting on February 9, 1807. The Sanhedrin had to make very difficult decisions to avoid any conflicts between Jewish law and French law. For example, in civil matters. A few illustrations: Polygamy, which anyways not longer applied since Rabenu Gershom, was formally prohibited. A Jewish man or woman that got divorced by a rabbinical court (get) was required to have a civil divorce in order to remarry. Civil marriages would be recognized, even mixed marriages. But most important to our subject, and to Napoleon, Jews now declared France as their only motherland, whom they would love and protect, even with arms if necessary. The Jews, now emancipated, "were no longer part of a nation" apart from France; and by accepting French citizenship "they renounced to their aspiration of a collective exodus that will take them back to the promised land".

THE LAST ANTIDOTE TO ASSIMILATION?

Rabbi and historian Berel Wein explains that Napoleon was primarily interested in seeing Jews assimilating. Napoleon's external tolerance and impartiality towards Jews was actually based on his grand plan for Jews to disappear entirely through assimilation, mixed marriages and conversion. And Napoleon's plan seemed to be working perfectly. In fact, thousands of Jews abandoned religious practice, assimilated, and in many cases converted to Catholicism. And all to be fully accepted by the Gentile society. But there was one element that Napoleon did not take into account in his plan: the depth of European anti-Semitism. For more than a thousand years Jews were accused of being the deicidal people (those who killed Yeshu); poisoning water wells to kill innocent Christians, and being parasites (since they didn't work one day a week), etc. These anti-Semitic prejudices were not erased with the French revolution. And in this sense, as Rabbi Kook explained , anti-

Semitism represented the last “Providential” barrier that avoided assimilation and the total disappearance of the people of Israel.

THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

One of the best examples of the social rejection of the Jews, however loyal they were to their homeland, is represented by the case of Captain Dreyfus. Alfred Dreyfus was a patriotic, loyal French Jew. From a young age he entered the French army where he made a great military career. In 1894 the French discovered that certain classified information was reaching the enemy side: Germany. The accused was Dreyfus. The evidence against him was very weak, but Dreyfus had already been found guilty because of his Jewish status. The French people had already condemned him in the streets shouting: Death to Dreyfus! Death to the Jews! Colonel Georges Picquart discovered that the real spy was Ferdinand Esterhazy, and that Dreyfus was innocent. But the High Command already got the “perfect culprit”, which French society easily accepted. Picquart was ordered to remain silent and upon his refusal he was sent to a military base in Tunis. Dreyfus was accused of treason, degraded militarily, humiliated and sent to the famous “Devil’s Island”, a penitentiary where prisoners were sent to die. Dreyfus was eventually exonerated. But the Dreyfus case left its mark.

It took practically a century for Western European Jews to learn the painful lesson: Abandoning Judaism or the idea of ”Jewish people”, or leaving aside the aspiration to return to the promised land, did not help Jews to be accepted as ordinary French citizens. No matter how much they did to become more French than the French, in the eyes of the Gentiles, they *did not belong*.

The Dreyfus affair had a very strong impact in a young Austrian Jewish lawyer, who realized that assimilation did not work to eliminate anti-Semitism. And he had a vision that,

while secular, was prophetic. Biblical. That young man was Theodore Herzl. And his vision: a Jewish State.

To be continued