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# From Dublin to Jerusalem: Sermons of Rabbi Isaac Herzog

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**Rabbi Isaac Herzog: From Dublin to Jerusalem –  
Conference September 6, 2019  
Marc Saperstein**

Some of you may be aware that I have recently published a rather large book (1160 pages, including all the various indices), entitled *Agony in the Pulpit: Jewish Preaching in Response to Nazi Persecution and Mass Murder, 1933-1945* (Hebrew Union College Press, October 2018). I referred to this project two years ago in West Virginia, when it was still in process, but at that time I did not imagine that the final production would be as long as it turned out to be. It's not the kind of book that needs to be read cover to cover – one can choose years or dates of interest, or the countries or rabbis of interest, and select the texts that seem to be most compelling.

Ever since I finished my final responsibilities with that book, I have been working on another collection of clearly dated rabbinic texts presented in chronological order. This collection, covering the years 1947 to 1949, focuses on rabbinic sermons responding to Zionism and the State of Israel during this period. This material is a bit broader, as it includes not only passages from sermons, but also from rabbinic lectures and addresses delivered at gatherings outside the synagogue, and occasionally even magazine articles that strike me as if they may indeed have been based on a sermon. Here the second largest group of rabbis represented is not the UK (as it was in the previous book), but rather Palestine/Israel, and that has required a lot more translation of Hebrew texts on my part. What the books have in common is that they are intended to illustrate the importance of sermons, and the texts in which they have been preserved, as historical sources.

But because this session is entitled “Sermons in an Age of Holocaust,” I will say no more about the current project; perhaps I will have an opportunity to speak about this at another conference. I therefore turn to *one major figure* whom I have chosen for obvious reasons, linked with our location and environment, beginning with a brief biography.

Isaac Herzog was born in Lomza, Poland, on December 1, 1888, to a rabbinic family. As part of the large wave of relocation both to England and to the United States following the anti-Jewish riots in eastern Europe beginning in 1881, his family moved to Leeds in 1898, when he was 10 years old. In addition to his traditional Talmudic training, Herzog earned an MA at the Sorbonne, and received a PhD in literature from the University of London. Having been ordained as a rabbi in 1910, he served as rabbi in Belfast, northern Ireland, from 1916-1919, where also became one of the founders of the Mizrahi Religious Zionist movement in 1917. He then moved to Dublin, where he supported the movement for Irish Independence, becoming known as “the *Sinn Fein* Rabbi.” In 1922, he was honored with the position as Chief Rabbi of Ireland, a position he held until moving to Palestine in 1936, where he served as Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi until his death in 1959. His son and grandson have held significant political positions in the Israel Government.

I begin now with passages from sermons delivered by Herzog in Dublin between 1933 and 1936. In the introduction to my book I devoted several pages to the issue of the sermon as usually a one-time act of oral communication from preacher to listeners, perhaps analogous to the first public performance by Beethoven of a new sonata, a unique one-time event that can never be precisely replicated. What the listeners heard and saw and remembered may be as important evidence for the sermon as any written text. And of course there are various kinds of written texts: pages written or typed by the preacher before delivery and preserved in archival collections; books published by the rabbi—or by an academic—in which written

texts appear (though perhaps some editorial changes); articles in newspapers, some of which include considerable direct quotations, and reveal not necessarily what the rabbi deemed most important but what the editor thought; occasionally stenographical transcriptions of the spoken word written by a professional and then printed and made available by the following to those interested. My citations from sermons delivered by Rabbi Herzog in Dublin are all taken from the *Irish Press*.

Obviously, what follows are passages from much longer discourses that reflect what I myself thought to be most important. I warn you in advance that most of what follows will be the texts; I am of course very interested in hearing your reactions and analyses in the discussion to follow.

**Isaac Herzog, Address at Morning Service including appeal for funds for the relief of German Jews, Adelaide Road Synagogue, Dublin (opened 1892, closed in 1999); *Irish Press*, June 1, 1933, p. 7 (5 months after Hitler came to power).**

*“Before Germany can speak of wrongs inflicted upon her [referring to the Treaty of Versailles], before she can speak of justice, she must first and foremost cease to trample under foot 600,000 of her most faithful and creditable citizens.*

*A veritable hurricane of criminal madness, of savage race-hatred, of internal anti-Semitism, or rather anti-humanism, unparalleled in any modern State, is sweeping over Germany and is working the destruction of German Jewry, of the intellect, the flower and pride of world-Jewry, of that part of the German citizen-body which, although forming barely one percent of the population, has actually contributed more than forty percent of Germany’s cultural wealth in medicine, science, mathematics, philosophy, literature, art, music, etc.*

*The position is going from bad to worse. Numerous measures of anti-Jewish persecution are springing up daily and are being put vigorously into force by the German Government. The Jew is being brand-marked by the ruling powers, and is thus made a ready target for cruel hatred and savage brutality.*

*The Irish race, whose record even in the Middle Ages is free from anti-Jewish persecution—that ancient historically venerable race whose soul seems specifically attuned, by racial temperament, by historic trial and tribulation, to respond to the cry of a helpless, down-trodden people—[the Irish race] will assuredly join the mighty chorus of protest in the name of the most sacred cause of religion, of justice, of humanity!”*

What seems so striking here is the power of the rhetoric, given our knowledge of how relatively moderate were the anti-Jewish policies 5 months of the regime. But a far larger number of German Communists had been imprisoned than Jews. A one-day boycott of Jewish businesses had been imposed on April 1, and Jews were excluded from the Civil Service a few days later, and of course there was the public book burnings of May, but there was as yet no organized anti-Jewish violence. It makes one wonder: With rhetoric like what we have heard at the outset, how could Herzog and other rabbinic preachers possibly do justice to what was to come?

**Isaac Herzog, Sermon at Adelaide Road Synagogue, Dublin. *Irish Press*, Monday, April 2, 1934, p. 14 (Nazis in power for 14 months)**

In an appeal for the relief of German Jewish refugees, Herzog referred to attempts made to associate Jews with Communism – which was certainly still a greater threat to Germany than were Jews.

*“This is one of the most groundless and most outrageous libels ever invented by human wickedness. Its sole object is to discredit the Jewish community and pave the way for anti-Semitism. There are men and women born of Jewish parents who happen to be Communists, or who are sympathetic towards that dangerous atheistic creed, but their Communism or Communistic sympathy has as much to do with the fact of their Jewish birth as the Communism or Communistic sympathy of the members of other races has to do with the fact that they were born into the Christian faith of Russian, English, American, French or Irish parents.*”

*The Jewish religion, in fact, is suffering in Soviet Russia as much persecution as Christianity, and even more, and the future of Judaism in Communist Russia is a matter of the gravest concern to Jews all over the world. Judaism in that part of the globe is, alas! threatened with utter extinction. To associate the Jewish name with Communism or Communist sympathies is the height of falsehood and wickedness!”*

**Isaac Herzog, Adelaide Road Synagogue, Dublin. *Irish Press*, Friday September 18, 1936, p. 2**

*“Think of Germany, think of Poland, and think of a country nearer home. Could it have ever entered into our minds that in free, democratic England there would arise a tide of anti-Semitism, which threatens to widen and deepen and which gives our brethren over there cause for very grave anxiety?*

*And what is the position in the land of Israel—in that little land of ours, thousands of miles away, for which we have been praying and hoping and shedding torrents of tears for nearly two thousand years?*

*The Israelite has lived by his faith for thousands of years, and he will continue to live in that faith to the end of his days.”*

Note the very different kind of rhetoric than that in the earlier sermons.

**Isaac Herzog, Sermon at Adelaide Road Synagogue, Dublin (Kol Nidre) and New Synagogue, Dolphin's Barn, Dublin (Yom Kippur morning). *Irish Press*, Sept. 28, 1936, p. 3**

A week later, on September 25 and 26, Herzog delivered a powerful sermon on the evening of the Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in his own synagogue; then on the following morning he walked to another large synagogue to deliver the same sermon there. This is the final sermon I will cite that was delivered in Dublin.

*“In Poland, the plight of three and a half millions of Jews is appalling in the extreme, from the economic standpoint, and in addition to their dire poverty, they were made to suffer from the poisonous darts of Jew-hatred and Jew-baiting. [here is something totally new: internal persecution in Poland, perhaps inspired by but not organized by Nazi Germany]*

*In Germany, the Jewish position is going from bad to worse, and systematic efforts are increasingly being made to make existence impossible for the 500,000 Jews still remaining there. About 70,000 have already emigrated, and the greater part of them are in a distressful condition. Whither should they flee? Alas! the plague of Jew-hatred, the most wicked, and at the same time the most senseless, phenomenon in this age of enlightenment, is spreading.*

*Thank God, this country [Ireland], geographically small, but morally, culturally, and historically very great, has been proof against that wicked craze. Unfortunately, in a country so near home as England, anti-Semitism is beginning to become a source of disquietude to Anglo-Jewry.*

*The position in Palestine is far from satisfactory. The prophetic cradle-land of the Jewish race, for which Israel has been shedding torrents of tears during two thousand years of exile, is still in the claws of savage terror. The fate of Zion, and with that the fate of Jewish history, is hanging in the balance. [Reference here is to anti-Jewish riots by Arab population]*

*And yet, despite all that, Yom Kippur brings a message of light and hope...”.*

In December of 1936, elections for the position of Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel were held in Jerusalem, and Herzog was invited to serve in this role. He arrived in Haifa on January 14, 1937.

### As Chief Rabbi

In his important new position, Rabbi Herzog delivered many sermons as well as addresses, speeches and joint statements with the Chief Sephardi Rabbi, Ben-Zion Uziel, all intended for various audiences on differing occasions. . I will now share some of these passages delivered in the “Promised Land.”

#### **January 1, 1939 (Sunday, Day of Prayer and Intercession throughout Palestine for Victims of Nazi Brutality). Isaac Herzog, Jeshurun Synagogue, Jerusalem. *Palestine Post*, January 2, 1939, p. 1**

Here too, as with the Irish texts, I cite not Herzog’s own text of the sermon but rather a newspaper report; in this case, however, there is much direct quotation.

*“The Chief Rabbi, Dr. Isaac Herzog, preached the sermon, taking as his text Joel 1:14 [“Solemnize a fast, proclaim an assembly, gather the elders—all the inhabitants of the land—in the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.”] He said that they had assembled to invoke divine mercy on their stricken brethren [in Europe] and to signalise the great spiritual movement of Repentance, the return to God and Divine Law and the return to the age-long hope of Israel which centres in Zion.*

*Dr. Herzog voiced the feeling of gratitude of Jewry towards the friends of Israel in Europe and America, who had raised their voices in protest against the inhuman atrocities and against destruction of the synagogues and the Scrolls of the Law [a reference to Kristallnacht, 2 months earlier]. The Chief Rabbi called on the congregation to pray to Him in whose hands are the hearts of Kings and Rulers, to incline the hearts of the Democratic countries, particularly Great Britain, in whose hands providence had placed the keeping of the Holy Land, to throw the Gates of Zion open to their German and Austrian brothers and sisters and to the young children who had no alternative left to them but migration.”*

The article reported that sermons were also delivered on this day by Chief Rabbi Amiel at the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv, and Chief Rabbi Uziel, at the *Ohel Mo’ed* in Tel Aviv. Note the very different rhetoric than we found in the sermons by Herzog in 1933, when the situation of Jews was so much *less* disastrous. It seems that as the reality becomes worse, the preacher comes to the realization that the rhetoric simply cannot keep pace, and must be transformed.

November 30, 1942 (Monday) – the significance of this date in late November is clear. Less than two weeks earlier, public announcements had been authorized by the American Government and Britain pertaining to a Nazi policy of systematic mass murder for Jews. For the first time, the reference to Nazi “concentration camps” was being changed to “death camps.”

This is no longer from a magazine; it is from Herzog’s own archival collection, published some time later. The rhetoric here is reminiscent of 1933, though the tragedy is far greater. This and the remaining texts by Herzog were sermons delivered in Hebrew, with my own translation.

**November 30, 1942, Isaac Herzog, Address at the Special Session for Mourning of the Assembly of Representatives (Asefat haNivharim), Jerusalem.” Masu’ah leYitzhak, pp. 131–32, translated by MS**

*“Wolves of the steppe (Zeph. 3:3), wild beasts of the forest, demons of the pit have arisen against us. They have prepared a slaughter for our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora. Almost all of Europe has turned into the valley of Tophet (cf. Isa. 3:33, Jer. 7:31).*

*Our Heavenly Father, Rock of Israel and its Savior in times of woe: are You putting an end to the remnant of Israel? Let the groans of tens of thousands of Jews come before You: Jews who have been killed with cruel modes of death: slaughtered, strangled, burned, buried alive. Let the outcries of infants and babies who have been tossed into the water in sacks come before Your throne of glory; O Father of Mercy, let there come before you the wailing of parents and children, aged and young, young men and maidens; let the scream of the surviving remnant, exposed to the danger of destruction, Heaven forbid!, reach You, so that You may say to the destroyer, **Stop!**”*

Here is a kind of rhetoric different from even the strongest language of the earlier sermons. The second paragraph raises critically important theological questions. Is God indeed aware of what is happening to the Jews? If so, “are you putting an end to the remnant of Israel?” Perhaps implied is the question, “Is God fully in control of all the events that are occurring on earth?” Obviously these are rhetorical questions, but they seem to reflect realities that were troubling not only to the listeners, but to the preacher himself. I continue:

*“O land, land: do not cover up the blood of our brothers in Poland and in the other conquered countries under the control of the wicked of the world who know no compassion. O House of Israel: proclaim a fast, with weeping and mourning; let your voice be heard on high. Rend your hearts and pierce the heavens with the sound of your wailing. All inhabitants of the world: be aroused to respond to this drama of horrors that is truly unprecedented. . . . Let heaven and earth resound with a terrifying protest against the horrible slaughter of the Jewish people, the people that has given you the principles of justice and mercy, the people that has given you the Book of Books. . . . Do not be satisfied with protests, important as they are. Do whatever you can quickly to save! Remove our children from the valley of Tophet, and not just the children alone, but whoever can be saved from there!*

**April 19, 1944, Isaac Herzog, “Address at the Meeting of Solidarity with the Fate of European Jewry, Technion, Haifa, Palestine. Masu’ah leHerzog, pp. 145–47, translated by MS**

*(145:) “We do not have the ability to bring to life the millions that have been destroyed, but we do have the ability to sustain life for those still alive. We do have the ability, for example, to sustain the lives of 55,000 who are imprisoned in the valley of the shadow of death called Transnistria, who are disintegrating in the starvation and diseases described in the biblical passages of rebuke [Lev. 26, Deut. 28], walking about like shadows, swollen with hunger, naked without clothing, covering themselves with sheets of newspapers. We have the ability to hasten the deliverance of the living refugees who are terrified day and night. We can indeed bring the refugees to the land of Israel, and as it appears in the information that was published in the newspapers yesterday, this possibility is now developing and expanding,*

*thanks to an easing in the process of transfer that will be given by the government of Turkey, the government which [once] opened its gates widely before the exiles from Spain.<sup>1</sup> [in 1492]*

Here of course the rhetoric is quite different from in the sermon delivered a year and five months earlier. God is not directly involved, there is recognition of what is beyond the control of any of those who were listening, but also a recognition that there were still elements of hope that some of the surviving Jews may be brought to the land of Israel.

In March and April 1944, more than one thousand Jewish orphans from Transnistria were permitted by the Turkish authorities to land in Istanbul, and by the British authorities to enter Palestine (Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, p. 637).<sup>2</sup> The rest of Herzog's address was a powerful fundraising appeal for contributions to facilitate this process.

My final example returns to the media, this time not a newspaper but a "Radio Appeal to the Nations of the World on the eve of the Fast. It was delivered by Rabbi Herzog on **March 14, 1945** (Wednesday, Day of Fast and Mourning for Victims of Nazi Mass Murder in Europe); Jewish Telegraphic Agency, March 15, 1945

*"Deploring the serious cleavages **within** the nation which are weakening the Jewish position just now when the day of decision is rapidly approaching, the Chief Rabbi declared that the present tragedy is far more grievous than the destruction of the Temple [by the Romans in 70 CE].*

*Speaking of the miracle which saved Palestine from the ravages of war and destruction [by Germans under Rommel], Dr. Herzog said: "By the mercy of Providence we have been left with the foundation on which we may rebuild our national life." He appealed to the nations of the world to "repair a two thousand-year-old wrong" by returning to [the people of] Israel the land of its fathers, so that it may establish therein its national life."*

*The Chief Rabbi then addressed a message of comfort to the Jews in the Diaspora emerging from the crucible of affliction, and called upon the remnants of the people to pray to God and have faith in their redemption, which will come soon, when they will be brought to the land of their fathers. He concluded by appealing to Jewry all over the world to "return to our sacred religion, which alone can give us inspiration and strength to march forward to our redemption."*

I doubt that any of us here can imagine the challenges confronting even an ordinary rabbi, or for that matter, a Christian clergyman, during this period of mass annihilation of innocent people, and to have been expected to present a message to congregants week after week, first as things continued to get worse, and then as the full reality of the devastation became known. How does one continue to believe in a God who is both loving and powerful, yet allows such atrocities to occur, especially atrocities devastating the people of the Bible? How

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<sup>1</sup> The newspaper report was apparently the announcement by an American official, Ira A. Hirschmann, that arrangements had been made for a Turkish passenger ship to take 1600 refugees from a Romanian port to Haifa. Herzog himself had been sent by the Yishuv to Turkey, together with Isaac Ben-Zvi, to help arrange for Jewish refugees from the Balkans (*American Jewish Year Book 5705*, vol. 46 (1944–1945), pp. 271–72; Shulamit Eliash, *The Harp and the Shield of David*, pp. 66–67).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, p. 637.



does a preacher continue to try to convince congregants that faith is justified? Studying the texts of these sermons, we learn something more about the historical realities of the times, as well as the unimaginable challenges faced by those who stood in the pulpit.

[I did not include the following in my address:]

I conclude with a sermon relevant to my current project, in order to follow a very traditional homiletical principle—that no matter how painful and even appalling the subject of a sermon may be, the preacher—and one might say the academic as well—should conclude his address with a positive message.

**December 6, 1947, Isaac Herzog, sermon delivered at Yeshurun Synagogue, Jerusalem, in Shaul Mayzlish, *The Rabbinate in Stormy Days*, pp. 160-61, transl. by Tanhum Yoreh Situation: response to UN decision (November ... ..) supporting establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine**

*“This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24). Today is a great day, a day in which all Jews, from one end of the world to the next, are rejoicing and offering praise and thanksgiving. Today is the day on which the collective heart of Jews from all generations, from the day we were exiled from Israel until this day, beats as one, overwhelmed by reverence and rejoicing, in preparation for the imminent redemption of Israel. In the language of the rabbis, today is considered to be “the beginning of redemption;” all of Israel is rejoicing and the land is rejoicing as well.*

*The souls of six million of our best and brightest, among them one and a quarter million children and infants, who were martyred with cries of “Hashem echad” [God is one] and “Ani ma’amin be-vi’at hamashiach” [I believe in the coming of the messiah], cries that rose to the very gates of heaven, to God’s throne, rejoice with us today. And the earth in which tens of thousands of pure souls were buried is shaking to its foundations. The earth which refused to hide the blood, she too is rejoicing today.*

*My brothers and sisters, we are called upon to recognize the Hand of God, and His munificent acts on our behalf. We are called upon to establish a Jewish state in Zion, based upon the firm foundations of the Torah. The Jewish state will be democratic and adhere to the just laws of our Torah, which many great nations have drawn upon.*

*And now, with steadfast faith in the Rock and Redeemer of Israel, and by uniting under the triple flag of Torah, of Israel, and of Zion, graced by the spirit of God, we will joyously march toward a complete redemption. Amen and amen.*