"The Jewish State", Theodor Herzl (1896)

The Jewish question still exists. It would be foolish to deny it. It is a remnant of the Middle Ages, which civilized nations do not even yet seem able to shake off, try as they will. They certainly showed a generous desire to do so when they emancipated us. The Jewish question exists wherever Jews live in perceptible numbers. Where it does not exist, it is carried by Jews in the course of their migrations. We naturally move to those places where we are not persecuted, and there our presence produces persecution. This is the case in every country, and will remain so, even in those highly civilized – for instance, France – until the Jewish question finds a solution on a political basis. The unfortunate Jews are now carrying the seeds of anti-Semitism into England; they have already introduced it into America.

I believe that I understand anti-Semitism, which is really a highly complex movement. I consider it from a Jewish standpoint, yet without fear or hatred. I believe that I can see what elements there are in it of vulgar sport, of common trade jealousy, of inherited prejudice, of religious intolerance, and also of pretended self-defense. I think the Jewish question is no more a social than a religious one, notwithstanding that it sometimes takes these and other forms. It is a national question, which can only be solved by making it a political world-question to be discussed and settled by the civilized nations of the world in council.

"The Solution of the Jewish Question", Theodor Herzl (January 17, 1896)

I am not bringing them a new idea but a very ancient one. Yes, it is a universal idea, and therein lies its power; it is as old as our people, which has never, even in times of direst misery, ceased to cherish it.

This idea is the creation of the Jewish State.

It is remarkable that we Jews should have dreamed this glorious dream all through the long night of our history. Now day is dawning. We need only rub the sleep from our eyes, stretch our strong limbs, and turn the dream into reality. The man who has come to proclaim this message does not do so as a prophet with flamboyant gestures, or even as a visionary.

I hope and believe that one day the Jewish people will be fixed with a splendid enthusiasm, but for the present I would only appeal in calm words to the common sense of men of practical judgment and of modern culture. A subsequent task will be to seek out those less favored with intellect and to instruct and inspire them. This latter task I cannot and will not undertake alone; I will merely work within the rank and file of my friends and fellow fighters upon whom I am now calling to awake and to unite for a common cause. I do not say "my adherents," for that would be making the movement a personal one, and render it absurd and contemptible from the outset. No, it is a national movement, and will be a glorious one if it remains untainted by personal desires, even if these desires only take the form of political ambition. We, who are the first to inaugurate this movement, will hardly live to see its glorious culmination; but the very inauguration is enough to bring a noble happiness into our lives.

"The Menorah", Theodor Herzl (December 31, 1897)

(Editor's Note: This is the story of how Herzl himself found his way back to Judaism.)

Once there was a man who deep in his soul felt the need to be a Jew. His material circumstances were satisfactory enough. He was making an adequate living and was fortunate enough to have a vocation in which he could create according to the impulses of his heart. You see, he was an artist. He had long ceased to trouble his head about his Jewish origin or about the faith of his fathers, when the age-old hatred reasserted itself under a fashionable slogan. Like many others, our man, too, believed that this movement would soon subside. But instead of getting better, it got worse. Although he was not personally affected by them, the attacks pained him anew each time. Gradually his soul became one bleeding wound.

This secret psychic torment had the effect of steering him to its source, namely, his Jewishness, with the result that he experienced a change that he might never have in better days because he had become so alienated: he began to love Judaism with great fervor.

In previous years he had let the festival which for centuries had illuminated the marvel of the Maccabees with the glow of candles pass by unobserved. Now, however, he used it as an occasion to provide his children with a beautiful memory for the future. An attachment to the ancient nation was to be instilled early in these young souls. A Menorah was acquired, and when he held this nine-branched candelabrum in his hands for the first time, a strange mood came over him. In his remote youth, in his father's house, such little lights had burned and there was something intimate and homelike about the holiday. This tradition did not seem chill or dead. The custom of kindling one light with another had been passed on through the ages.

The first candle was lit and the origin of the holiday was retold: the miracle of the little lamp which had burned so much longer than expected, as well as the story of the return from the Babylonian exile, of the Second Temple, of the Maccabees. Our friend told his children all he knew. It was not much but for them it was enough. When the second candle was lit, they repeated what he had told them, and although they had learned it all from him, it
seemed to him quite new and beautiful. In the days that followed he could hardly wait for the evenings, which became ever brighter. Candle after candle was lit in the Menorah, and together with his children the father mused upon the little lights. At length his reveries became more than he could or would tell them, for his dreams would have been beyond their understanding.

With such thoughtful occupation the week passed. There came the eighth day, on which the entire row of lights is kindled, including the faithful ninth candle, the shammash, which otherwise serves only to light the others. A great radiance shown forth from the Menorah. The eyes of the children sparkled. For our friend, the occasion became a parable for the enkindling of a whole nation. First one candle; it is still dark and the solitary light looks gloomy. Then it finds a companion, then another, and yet another. The darkness must retreat. The young and the poor are the first to see the light; then the others join in, all those who love justice, truth, liberty, progress, humanity and beauty. When all the candles are ablaze everyone must stop in amazement and rejoice at what has been wrought. And no office is more blessed than that of a servant of light.