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A FEW WORDS ABOUT STEADFASTNESS

We live in an age in which Israeli politicians change their ideology with hardly a look back. The idea of steadfastness has given way to political convenience. The age of greatness may be behind us. But does it not lie in the eye of the beholder? I went, therefore, to the comments of some beholders who saw greatness in Ze'ev Jabotinsky.

As a very young man, 22 or 23 years old, he was already regarded as a literary giant by the famous Russian writers of the day - Gorky, Andreyev, Kuprin. When he turned his back on a Russian literary career to devote himself to the troubles and dreams of the Jewish people, the Russians accused the Zionists of 'stealing' Jabotinsky from Russian literature.

Jabotinsky took his first major step in the Zionist arena by joining the brilliant coterie of writers on the weekly journal *Rasswyet*. One of them, Shlomo Gepstein, recalled many years later that he had seen in Jabotinsky's writing something of Heinrich Heine.

Col. John Henry Patterson, the Irish-born first commander of the Jewish Legion, described Jabotinsky as a Jewish Churchill.

When the history of the Jewish Legion and its exploits became public knowledge, Jabotinsky was dubbed in the American and British Press as the Jewish Garibaldi.

He was, of course, neither a Pushkin nor a Heine, neither a Churchill nor a Garibaldi. He was Jabotinsky, a unique amalgam of talents and qualities.

When on August 8, 1940 Arthur Koestler, one of the great literary figures of the 20th century, heard that Jabotinsky had died, he wrote in his diary: 'Jabo is dead... Exit one of the great tragic figures of the century, unnoticed ... Adored hero of the Jewish masses in Russia and Poland ... Most fascinating orator I ever heard ... One great friend less...'

Precisely the multiplicity of his talents and the variety of his accomplishments tend to complicate the assessment of a man who navigated comfortably in some 20 languages, who translated great poetry; who was hailed as one of the great orators of his day, who captivated young actors by sportingly teaching them Hebrew diction and declamation; who wrote what was described as one of the great biblical novels *Samson the Nazarite*.

As a stripling in his early twenties, he manifested a mature vision. With waves of revolutionary ideas swirling over the Russian intelligentsia he stood out against the stream, warning the socialist devotees against their utopian illusions. His forecast 10 years before of the Bolshevik Revolution proved a precise description of what happened in Soviet Russia under Lenin and Stalin.

There was no mysticism in his forecasts. They reflected in rational terms a deep analysis of facts and trends that led a logical and intuitive mind to an inevitable conclusion.

This was equally true of his firm assertion, the moment Turkey entered the war in November 1914, that the Ottoman Empire would be overthrown. That foresight prompted

Jabotinsky to action - the creation of the Jewish Legion - which, it may be soberly said, changed the face of Jewish history and helped shape the modern Middle East.

NO LESS significant for Jabotinsky was the straightening of the bent back of the Diaspora Jew - with all the potential implications for the future struggle for national independence of the Jewish people, and its relations with the world around it.

The striving for Jewish self-respect and dignity occupied Jabotinsky's attention for much of his life. The squalor of what he had seen on his first encounter with Jewish life in Poland moved him to decide to bring about a change in the behavior, indeed in the mindset, of the people - beginning with the youth.

When years later he founded the Betar youth movement it was permeated by the new spirit which he injected - a metamorphosis from the ugliness of ghetto life.

When, not long after the war, the British began to retreat from the purpose of the 1917 Balfour Declaration, it was Jabotinsky who became the outstanding opponent of British policy. As the British retreat gathered momentum, Jabotinsky was indeed the only Zionist leader who stood firm and unbending against accommodation with that retreat.

The centerpiece of Zionist political history in the 1920s was thus the great confrontation between the erstwhile colleagues: Jabotinsky versus Weizmann.

To Jabotinsky as to Herzl, Zionism was to be the cure for Jewish homelessness. That cure meant an independent Jewish state. Jabotinsky never wavered from the idea of the Jewish state and his demand for a policy that would lead to its consummation.

His unique published writing and riveting oratory becoming ever more popular particularly among the youth, were recognized by the British as a danger to their rule. Seizing the convenient opportunity of his absence on a lecture tour, the Palestine government barred his return to the country. In the last 11 years of his life, he lived in exile.

The British government provided the proof of Jabotinsky's insight. In 1939 they formally abandoned the promise they had made in the Balfour Declaration. Then, in the end, it was the resistance movement which Jabotinsky inspired that became the central force in the breakdown of British rule.

As the American Zionist leader Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver cautiously put it: 'The Irgun was a factor without which the Jewish state would not have arisen.'

The ultimate vindication of Jabotinsky, however - the rise of the Jewish state eight years after his death - encapsulates the great tragedy of his time.

His vision haunted him throughout his life, and added intensity to the passion of his Zionism. And so when, in the mid 1930s, Jews' distress in Europe reached a climax with the doors of succor throughout the world all but hermetically closed against them, Jabotinsky headed the organization for bringing Jewish refugees 'illegally' from Europe to Palestine.

That was his last campaign in Europe before the dying days of peace in 1939. It was in the United States that he died on August 4, 1940 - leading a campaign for the formation of a separate Jewish army to fight the Nazis.

Jabotinsky certainly crammed the content of several lifetimes into his own brief span (he died at 59). He left a huge and catholic body of writing which provides a constant counterpoint to his political day-by-day activities: essays on art, literature and on social and economic issues.

Inter alia, he preceded Beveridge in laying down ground-lines for a welfare state. He was the creator of the Hebrew day school for the Diaspora, an idea for which he was attacked from all sides.

He was the first Hebrew poet to use the Sephardi pronunciation - also, at first, widely opposed by the Ashkenazi establishment. He was a forthright pro-feminist and a passionate individualist.

Pragmatism was not alien to Jabotinsky. It was simply reinforced by a coherent world view and personal honor.

One of his lifelong admirers, the famous actor Shimon Finkel, once said: 'Jabotinsky was an ocean.'