

BE A YOU

As Herzl said, 'If you will it, it is no dream'

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OPTIMISM is an interesting concept. Research shows that young people are generally more optimistic than their parents, who are less optimistic than their parents.

In other words, it is the youngest and the oldest who are the most positive about the future and those in the middle – people like me, in middle age – are more pessimistic.

When you think about it, it makes sense. For the young, their frontal lobe is less well developed. This is the part of the brain that evaluates risk. It is why young people are most likely to take risks like bungee jumping.

And why people like me don't.

For the retired generation, our elders can see that things generally work out well. They have the benefit of experience. They have worked hard and they see that hard work, and a bit of luck, reap great rewards.

It is the ones in the middle who are the problem. We are the ones who worry about our income, health, we worry about our children. We worry about house prices, school fees and the cost of living.

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The term 'mid-life crisis' is for those in mid-life. And it is interesting that cars that we might identify with a mid-life crisis – the cool ones like the Lamborghinis or even the Mustang – cool and fast – have seats ergonomically designed not for the young roadsters, the hip 20-somethings. No, they are designed for middle-aged people like me.

Now far be it from me to put a dampener on things and say to the children of today 'you may be optimistic now, but you just wait! When life sets in, and you have a family and a job and



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responsibilities, you'll be depressed!'

Not at all!

If anything, they have every reason to be optimistic. Our community is blessed with great schools, youth movements, care facilities and synagogues. The role models of our children are great people, including grandparents and great-grandparents who faced great adversity – for some, greater adversity than we could possibly imagine – and are now smiling, proud, confident and optimistic.

This year marks 120 years since the Zionist Congress's adoption of a constitution. Convened by Theodore Herzl, the original Zionist Congress envisioned a pluralistic Jewish homeland for the Jewish people in the land of Israel. Jews throughout the world were – and still are – inspired by his famous phrase "Im tirtzu, ein zo agada – if you will it, it is no dream," in his book *Altneuland*.

Consider the nature of Herzl when he convened the congress and wrote his books. We might expect him to be a wise old man, a philosopher who wrote of wisdom in his old age. Or maybe a young revolutionary, with little concern for the challenges of middle age.

He wasn't.

Herzl was born in 1860 and died in 1904 aged 44. He was younger than me when he died.

What is incredible is that his optimism for Zionism, for a Jewish state, came in his mid-30s. This was just at the time when modern research tells us that he should have statistically become more pessimistic. After all, this was a time of raging antisemitism, show trials, pogroms, the opening act for the institutional genocidal thought that led to the Holocaust.

A Jewish man of his age, living in his era, should have been running around the room with his head in his hands, wailing in despair.

But no. Rather than descending into pessimism, he ascended into optimism. He wrote books. He founded the World Zionist Organisation. He established the World Zionist Congress. And he laid the ground for a Jewish national home that was to come just 50 years later.

His message was one of action, and optimism.

"Im tirtzu, ein zo agada – if you will it, it is no dream."

If ever there was a message for our children, and if ever there is a time of year for it, this is the message and Rosh Hashanah is the time.

We should dream when we are asleep. When we are awake, we should both dream as well as take action to make the dream a reality.

Because the alternative to Herzl's inspiration is pessimism. And negativity. And talking down. And rolling the eyes, and saying 'what can I do? I'm only me.' I remember going to school when my teachers said that you can be an Albert Einstein, or Marie Curie, or a Herzl (well maybe not a Herzl – I went to an Anglican school – but you get my drift).

The message that I am giving to the children at the school I have the privilege of leading is, this Rosh Hashanah, with an optimistic eye, do not aspire to be an Einstein, or a Marie Curie, or a Herzl. But instead, I tell them, be a you.

Work out what you stand for and be a you. Dream big, plan well, and be you.

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