

## Young Zionist

### How Effective Is History?

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TAKE A MOMENT to think of yourself in the past. Take yourself back a hundred years. Come with me to the shtetl where your grandparents or great-grandparents came from. Think of the conditions, the weather, the smells and the poverty. Could you possibly imagine that a hundred years later, your ancestors would be prosperous members of British society? Probably not. Yet, we take the process of history for granted. We rarely consider that our own stories could have turned out differently.

History is a fragile concept, twisting and turning its way through time. We can never be sure quite which way it will take our nation.

#### 'Turning Points'

Dr Niall Ferguson, a third generation immigrant, who wrote 'Virtual History', speculated what would have happened if crucial events in history had turned out differently. What if Hitler had won the Second World War? Although I'm not sure if this is real historical study, or if it is merely 'pseudo-history', it raises interesting questions about our past and our future.

In a similar vein, people often talk of 'turning points' in history - events that seemed to drastically alter the course of history, certainly in terms of leadership. The Norman invasion of 1066 seems to have been a 'turning point' in British history - altering British society and culture as a result.

#### We could all be very different people

In Jewish history, we could point to the Destruction of the Second Temple as a turning point, sending our nation into a 2000 year exile. How different would our history have been, had the exile not begun? Would we have simply been a sovereign nation for the last 2000 years? Would anti-Semitism have been seriously reduced as a result? Or, would the nation have dispersed anyway? Would another force have exiled us, even if the Romans had been defeated by zealots such as Bar Kochba?

There is a problem with 'turning points'. They conjure up an assumption that history was on a definite path and a certain event 'turned' history away from it - to a different route altogether. But if we imagine history as a motorway on a road map, we see that even if it takes a wrong turn off the motorway, we still return to a worthy path.

#### What if there was no Zionism?

Legend tells us that the Dreyfus Affair inspired Herzl to consider the idea of Jewish sovereignty, leading to a frenzy of activity culminating in the Zionist movement and the Jewish state itself. Had the Jewish French general not been framed, do we conclude that Zionism would never have emerged?

Instead, I think that Herzl or another group of Jews, with different inspiration, would have led us back on the motorway of the Zionist dream.

Had the bomb plot by Nazi generals to kill Hitler have succeeded, would Germany have taken a turning off the Nazi road of destruction, as commonly assumed? Not necessarily. There are many potential 'turning points' in history and nothing is inevitable.

Sometimes 'turning points' fail to turn as well, as in our personal stories too. What would have happened if our ancestors stayed on Eastern European ships all the way to America, rather than stopping off in Britain?

### **So, what is the relevance of all this to us today?**

History is fragile and things could have been very different. Had Bar Kochba defeated the Romans like the Maccabees beat the Greeks, two thousand years of our nation's suffering could be avoided.

History is a continuous process. Yesterday's present is today's history. Yesterday's influences can still be felt today.

Where do we find ourselves today? Before September 2000, it seemed as if the Arab-Israeli conflict would be consigned to the annals of history and the future would be spent deciding on our own, Jewish future. However, once again history has 'turned' in a different direction. The chapter of the Middle East conflict sadly looks as if it has a few more pages to be written. Some would say that the assassination of Rabin was an event that 'turned' history. But, who is to say that he would have been any more successful at bringing peace had he lived?

### **People make the ultimate decisions**

The beauty of history is that it is always there to be made. We are the ones who create the next chapters, and we are the ones who decide which roads we shall travel. There is certainly an element of chance in deciding the future, but when all is said and done, it is people who vote, it is people who teach, and ultimately, it is people who make the decisions. The future is in our hands. But, we must have a vision of the future, of what we want history to record - without which we can have little impact on the world. That is the challenge that we face as a nation and as a movement.

What do we want the world to look like and what will the role of the Jewish nation be? As FZY nears the end of her first century, it is up to us to answer these questions. If we learn continuously from the

past and have a vision of the future, history will surely record that we chose the path along which we led the Jewish nation.