

“The Story of a Fateful Vote”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

In 1903 there was a terrible pogrom in Kishinev in the Russian empire. Many Jews were killed or wounded. Shortly after, the Zionist congress entertained a proposal of the British government to establish a state in Uganda. The imminent peril to the Jewish of Eastern Europe persuaded many delegates, including Theodore Herzl, to consider this proposal.

In his memoirs, Chaim Weizmann tells what happened when the proposal was put to a vote:

The vote was by name. My late father voted “yes.” I voted after him with “no.” The names of the two delegates from Kishinev were called, and both said (in Hebrew) “lo,” “no.” Poor Herzl grew pale, and then he became a true Zionist. He understood the depth of the tragedy and the depth of the idea, and then he resolved upon beginning practical work in the country, even if slowly, even if only symbolically, with a few hundred pounds. I can remember Herzl saying after the vote: “I do not understand; the rope is around their necks, and still they say: ‘no.’” Yes, the rope was (and still is) around our necks, and yet we said “no.”

With the advent of nuclear weapons and unabated hostility, the rope has not gone away. Neither has the determination to be a free people in our own land, a determination so powerfully proved by the vote of the Kishinev delegation more than one hundred years ago.