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### Modern Israeli identity and the Mediterranean cultural theme: an exploration into the visual representations of Tel Aviv and the sea\*\*

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## Modern Israeli identity and the Mediterranean cultural theme: an exploration into the visual representations of Tel Aviv and the sea\*\*

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This article is twofold: the first part discusses the emergence and manifestations of Mediterraneanism in Israel. Deploying the tools and methodology of cultural studies it argues that the perception of the Mediterranean as a cultural–political entity in Israel underwent a massive transformation: today, after years of marginalization, the sea is more and more becoming an important element in the formation of *Israeliness*, a specific Israeli identity. The second part turns to the evolvement of the city of Tel Aviv, which was founded some 100 years ago on the shores of the Mediterranean. A collection of images from the archives of renowned photographers like Boris Carmi, Shimon Korbman, Rudi Weissenstein, Micha Bar-Am and others, who discovered Tel Aviv through the lenses of their cameras, help to visualize the role the Mediterranean played for Israeli consciousness in the formative years. Those visual representations of Tel Aviv and the sea are evaluated within the framework of the contemporary discussion on *Yam Tikhoniut* (Mediterraneanism) in Israel. The scope of the city’s inner link to the sea is still subject to heated debates among architects, urban planners, historians and journalists. Drawing on extensive field research conducted in Israel it is shown that this discussion of Tel Aviv’s bond to the sea is interconnected with the evolving phenomenon of *Yam Tikhoniut* in present-day Israel, which centres around the longing to find a ‘natural’ place in order that Israel be accommodated in the region, both culturally and politically.

**Keywords:** Israel; Mediterranean sea; Israeli national and cultural identity; public discourse; Mediterraneanism; Tel Aviv; photography

In February 2012 I visited the newly built wing of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art for the first time. Despite all the criticism denouncing this underground addition to the museum as too monumental and confusing, a ‘waste of space’ or an ‘architectonical fetish’, in my eyes the concrete experiment was successful: even though the house lacks a clear structure and signs for basic orientation are rare, finding one’s way through the different storeys of the museum crisscrossing its space is a dazzling experience itself. It takes the visitor on an eclectic journey through the fascinating faces of the development of art and culture in Israel through the decades, always mirroring the challenge of constructing a collective identity in Israel. In fact, the parameters describing Israel’s national and cultural identity continue to be the subject of heated debate: Israel is a part of Europe; its histories and cultures are deeply interwoven with those of central and eastern Europe. But modern Israel is, geographically speaking, located in

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Asia. Thus it incorporates elements from both Orient and Occident. Questions of belonging to Orient or Occident, to Europe or the Levant, are crucial in the debate on Israeli culture and identity and the diverse concepts of society are in constant collision.

In the basement of this five-storey extension to the Tel Aviv Museum, one finds a stunning temporary exhibition, devoted to Jewish subjects and myths in the works of the German artist Anselm Kiefer. The monumental installation *West-Östlicher Diwan* (West-Eastern Divan) draws a connection between Islamic poets of the Middle Ages and Jewish Kabbalists. It includes the names of Muslim and Jewish spiritual figures whose lives and writings represent a complex synthesis of East and West. The handwritten names of philosophers and writers placed within an installation of large panels bring to mind of what can easily be forgotten in the region's grim political reality of today: the link between Judaism and Islam and the existence of a rich common cultural heritage between Islamic and Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages.

This historical background of dialogue and exchange takes me to the main subject of this article – the discourse on *Yam Tikhoniut* (Mediterraneanism) in contemporary Israel. This article is twofold: in the first part I will discuss the emergence and manifestations of Mediterraneanism in Israel. Then I turn to the evolution of the city of Tel Aviv, which was founded some 100 years ago on the shores of the Mediterranean. A collection of images from archives of renowned Israeli photographers will help to visualize the role the Mediterranean played for the Israeli consciousness in the formative years. Those visual representations of Tel Aviv and the sea will be evaluated within the framework of the contemporary discussion on *Yam Tikhoniut* in Israel.

After centuries of Diasporic existence, the state of Israel was established in 1948, thus enabling Jews to return to and settle their 'ancient Jewish homeland'. Upon the arrival of immigrants to *Erez Israel*,<sup>1</sup> the discrepancy between imagined place – the idealized heavenly Jerusalem – and the actual place – the realities in the land of Israel – surfaced, resulting in numerous rifts within an already heterogeneous society. As a consequence, public discourse over the past decades has repeatedly dealt with the questions of collective identity and belonging, as well as with the search for a shared Israeli culture among a population comprising a wide diversity of immigrants. Since the 1980s and 1990s, the state of Israel has undergone extensive changes that have had significant effects in the political, demographical, cultural and economic domains. Many aspects of Israeli identity are being deconstructed and reconsidered. The idealized Zionist image of one single Israeli culture and identity is being replaced by the perception of Israel as a pluralistic and, as some have put it, even multicultural society. The influence of the founding generation and pioneer elite is slowly fading, and new currents are undermining the core values of Zionism, values that had functioned as social glue for many decades. These shifts have resulted in a deconstruction of the hegemonic, secular, Zionist national identity, and the emerging Israeli identity is confronted with increasing individualization and privatization in all sectors of daily life.

Within this discussion the evolving phenomenon of *Yam Tikhoniut* is referred to with increasing frequency in academic and public discourse on new definitions of identity. It centres around the longing to find a 'natural' place in order that Israel be accommodated in the region, both culturally and politically. As an abstraction, the idea of *Yam Tikhoniut* suggests the reconsideration of the role of place and space in the Israeli context and – as a viable cultural framework – it offers promising future directions involving inner-Israeli conciliation and, in the long run, regional coexistence.

Despite the harsh realities and the current political deadlock in the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, this poetic installation by artist Anselm Kiefer reminds us that the Mediterranean region in the past has been a source of dialogue between East and West and over the decades created a historical model of shared culture and intellectual exchange.<sup>2</sup> This is an important historical experience and forms the base for the contemporary discussion on

Israel's place in the region and its location within the geo-cultural space of the Mediterranean. In this context the notion of the *longue durée*, a term coined by French historian Fernand Braudel, had a deep impact on the current discussion around the notion of *Yam Tikhoniut*, which can increasingly be found in Israeli public discourse dating from the early 1980s. However, at that time the appearance of the Mediterranean discourse was sporadic and not yet accompanied by a broader public discussion in the media and the academy. This situation had noticeably changed by the mid-1990s, which can partly be explained by developments related to the Barcelona Process and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Program. It was a time when Israelis and Arabs sat together in regional forums discussing environmental issues and common problems. The discourse on *Yam Tikhoniut* reached its peak with the advancing peace process in the Middle East and while the first steps of a Euro-Mediterranean policy were implemented. Empirical evidence shows that openness toward and curiosity about the Arab world reached an all-time high, especially among young Israelis, during the period when the peace process was raising expectations for a better future. A popular slogan from the late 1990s that embodied this shift is *Hummus be-Damesek*, referring to a longing for open borders and the possibility of travelling to Damascus in order to eat Hummus.<sup>3</sup>

However, the optimistic *Barcelona Process*, with the objective of bringing the people of the different shores of the Mediterranean closer together, experienced major drawbacks with the outbreak of the Al Aksa Intifada (2000), the Second Lebanon War (2006), the war in Gaza (2009) and the overall changes in a post-9/11 world. Today – in view of the continuous harsh political confrontations, this desire to integrate into the region has faded and feels totally out of reach. Moreover, the inner-Israeli dialogue and the discussion whether or not Israel is a Mediterranean society-in-the-making, which was in full bloom during the peace talks of the mid-1990s, addressing questions of belonging, civil society and identity, is currently overshadowed by security issues, the conflict with Iran and the inner-Israeli discussion on social justice. Today, the perception of the Mediterranean ranges from the depiction of the Mediterranean as a sea of cooperation to a sea of confrontation. The consequent collapse of the peace process as a severe factor of destabilization made the often promoted emergence of a Mediterranean identity as a vehicle for region building seem unattainable, and hopes for peace in the region (or illusions as many argue today) evaporated. Notwithstanding this bleak scenario, I argue that it is premature to judge the Mediterranean Idea only in the context of the developments in day-to-day politics.

One of the most important advocates of *Yam Tikhoniut* in Israel, the historian David Ohana, stresses Israel's vital interest in the Mediterranean Idea and points out what it eventually has to offer. He expects an interplay of neighbourhood, openness and self-assertion that would ideally contribute to the formation of a cultural identity, and – in the long run – to peace and stability in the region. In his newest book on the Mediterranean Identity, which beautifully combines the different positions he has developed over the years, he points out:

Because the Middle East is perceived as a political rather than a cultural milieu, and because political dialogue is much more effective when preceded by cultural and sociological discourse, Israelis need to look for partners – and, if they do not exist, to create them among social and cultural actors and institutions, in order to conduct this cultural discourse. This is one of the classic roles of civil society: to promote collaboration among institutions and create common themes and messages based on shared problems and interests.<sup>4</sup>

As pointed out, in the last decade the political realities left little space for discourse on the Mediterranean Option. However, during this time its appeal for the arts, academia and culture did not fully disappear – on the contrary, in specific fields the discourse on Mediterraneanism

has actually been revived over the past several years, as evident in a series of more recent Israeli ‘Mediterranean projects’ like the translation of Mediterranean authors into Hebrew, academic conferences dealing with the Mediterranean theme or artistic projects (mostly architecture and music) that evidence the mode of fusing different cultural traditions and embracing the Mediterranean topos. The *Succot* supplement 2007 of the Israeli daily *Haaretz* with the title *Ha-yam shelanu: me Atlit ad Gibraltar. Mabat al ha-yam ha-Tikhon haiom* (Our sea: from Atlit to Gibraltar. A view of the Mediterranean today), serves as an example of this trend. This supplement, printed only in the newspaper’s Hebrew version, contains a potpourri of articles that are all somehow linked to the sea, but are not necessarily limited to the Israeli Mediterranean. Also, the academic discussion on whether *Yam Tikhoniut* is real, artificial, desirable or even dangerous is pursued and revived by critical contributions like the one by Gil Z. Hochberg (in 2011) who sees in this concept a mere charade: ‘In the name of cultural pluralism, Mediterraneanism seeks to become a new authoritative standard for evaluating Israeli culture and identity, and this, most significantly, in direct opposition to anything Middle Eastern. ... [It is an] ideology paraded as “non-ideological”.’<sup>5</sup>

The on-going debate shows that the Mediterranean has been a viable cultural framework for some, as well as a cultural utopia for others, and one in which Israeli society continues to work to position itself. The inner-Israeli discussion on *Yam Tikhoniut* is often linked to an open conflict over the meaning of *Israeliness*, of a specific Israeli identity. In this context the Mediterranean Option is referred to time and again in various ways. Analyses of the public debate and the content of interviews I have conducted since the mid-1990s<sup>6</sup> demonstrate that the increasing use of the term in numerous fields in the public sphere are indicative of a growing awareness of the region and sense among the Israeli public as to the conception of the Israeli place. My research shows that the discourse has moved beyond the boundaries of academia, then entered real-life activities and started to shape daily life as well as cultural practices. That *Yam Tikhoniut* has already become an integral part of *Israeliness* and everyday life in Israel confirms many aspects of its existence. It is vital, therefore, to look at the present and future prospects that an emerging Mediterranean identity, one comprising shared values and common interests, might hold. I argue that Israel can eventually promote a cultural dialogue that will involve the eastern and the southern shores of the Mediterranean. In the long run, the soothing Mediterranean Option seeks to replace Israel’s isolated position in the region with a model of economic, political and cultural integration. Historian Irad Malkin aptly explains the future significance of this concept:

I expect that the Mediterranean Idea will surface again, but without its ideological need to resurrect (and invent) the past. It will re-emerge as a result of mundane realities such as lifestyles and cultural contacts. ... I expect that Israel’s ‘Mediterraneaness’ will be conceptualized from the reality of cultural and economic contacts with Mediterranean countries. Concept will emerge out of reality.<sup>7</sup>

Let us turn to Tel Aviv, the icon of Israeli *Yam Tikhoniut*. When Tel Aviv was founded on the shores of the Mediterranean, it was not established as a coastal city and reached the shoreline only gradually. Over the decades, a certain ambiguity towards the sea remained omnipresent: on the one hand the Mediterranean was perceived as an alien and threatening body of water, on the other hand as a gateway and passageway, as most Jewish immigration to pre-state Israel took place via its waters. After turning its back on the sea for many years, today a rediscovery of the sea is taking place, as the extension of the promenade from north Tel Aviv to Herzlyia, or the massive gentrification process at the formerly dilapidated harbour in north Tel Aviv demonstrate. The city’s beaches play an especially important role in the manifestation of Tel Aviv’s image as a secular place for outdoor and leisure activities.

In the following some photographs will be presented that were collected over the years in my position as an exhibition curator, while conducting research in the archives of renowned Israeli photographers like Boris Carmi, Micha Bar-Am, Paul Goldman, Shimon Korbman and others. The way those photographers discovered Tel Aviv through the lenses of their cameras help to visualize the role the Mediterranean played for Israeli consciousness in the formative years. Even though from different generations, these photographers were born in Europe or Russia and immigrated to Palestine during their youth. In their work and their archives one can find vivid, singular stories that not only exemplify the narrative treasure of a whole nation, but also reveal fragments of their personal reality. They all share experiences of emigration and expulsion which are fundamentally distressing experiences that can profoundly affect a person's circumstances, both emotional and physical. The process of displacement and migration raises questions of belonging and loss, taking along and leaving behind, as well as preserving memory of the 'there', while settling in the 'here'. Full of contradictions and ambivalences, their photographs tell exceptional life stories 'in-between', and often visualize the need to break with the past in order to start anew. Israeli writer Yoram Kaniuk states about the Berlin-born photographer Micha Bar-Am, who immigrated to Palestine with his family in 1936 and lives today in Ramat Gan: 'After all these years in Israel, Micha Bar-Am still knows what it means to be a refugee. He is an Israeli with a built-in sense of displacement.'<sup>8</sup> I argue that all the images discussed below show us today what it takes to create a feeling of belonging in a strange place, to be forced to leave one's home and make a new start in the unknown 'ancient homeland'.

When approaching Israel by air on a clear day today, the coastline appears suddenly, still hazy at the horizon. From the air, Israel looks like one long narrow strip along an extended shoreline, a country with a high coast-to-land ratio, cut off from its *hinterland*. The aforementioned photographers, as well as other countless immigrants, approached the land by water, and the first sight of *Erez Israel*, be it the Carmel mountains near Haifa, the port of Jaffa, or later the port in north Tel Aviv, produced excitement and anxiety simultaneously: the vision of the 'promised land' and the actual place, Israel, were about to merge.

The harbour was a gateway to a new life. Immigrants left their native lands behind and were about to arrive in an unfamiliar place, one that was supposed to become their new home. *Sha'ar Zion*, the gate to Zion, was the official name given to the main entrance of the port in Tel Aviv, which became the desired destination of each journey across the Mediterranean.<sup>9</sup> Today, the old Tel Aviv port holds attractive new boardwalks (Figure 1) and paved paths run along the seaside. Trendy seafood restaurants occupy formerly dilapidated warehouses, offering seating next to the old port basin (Figure 2). Yet black-and-white photos from the past on display on signposts all over the port area put up by the Tel Aviv municipality show heavily laden camels and dockworkers discharging loads off ships. One image taken by photographer Paul Goldman (1900–1986) in 1946 shows Arab workers wearing a *keffiyeh*, the traditional Arab headdress, accompanied by camels on an untouched stretch of the beach, where coarse sand for construction is mined and transported to the nearby building sites. With the absence of any signs of urban civilization and the picturesque camels at the shores of the vast sea, Goldman created a timeless image.

Looking back at Israel's modern history, the sea has played a less important role when compared to the land. One demonstration of this can be found in renowned Israeli graphic designer David Tartakover's impressive collection of picture postcards from the 1920s to the 1970s. In these images, it is striking that the sea, if it is present at all, only appears in the margins. The focus of the photographs is on the actual sites, with the Mediterranean, when it is visible, functioning only as background. Some of the postcards depict sites that became symbols of Tel Aviv over the years, for example, the *Reading Power Station*, the *Mugrabi*



Fig. 1. Wooden board walk, former harbor ground in North Tel Aviv, 2009, Alexandra Nocke, author's photograph, author's private collection, Berlin

and the *Eden* cinemas, the *Gymnasia Herzlyia*, the Hotel *Gat Rimon* and Tel Aviv's city hall. Each of these sites was significant during a specific period of Tel Aviv's development and demonstrated the city's openness, Westernness and modernity. Explaining the absence of the sea, Tartakover remarked in a conversation: 'They had no relation to the sea – although they came through the sea to Palestine. My intuition is that the sea is a traumatic place for them.'<sup>10</sup>

This raises a central question: what is the meaning of the Mediterranean for the Israeli consciousness? First and foremost, the sea was once an important passageway to Israel. Most of the immigrants to pre-state Israel reached *Erez Israel* by ship via the Mediterranean, yet within the Zionist narrative it was not the Mediterranean that was considered significant, but the act of crossing the sea in order to reach the longed-for territory. In a poem by Israeli writer Chaim Guri, we find the line *Between me and my father – the sea*, which addresses the dichotomy between the two different worlds, the Diaspora and a newly invented Hebrewness or Israeliness. "Between me and my father – the sea," I wrote as I turned 35. He was born in Russia. I, in Tel Aviv. But I was born in the "first Hebrew city" for my father and my mother had immigrated to the country on the ship *Ruslan* that began the third Aliya<sup>11</sup> in 1919.<sup>12</sup> After the Second World War, the sea remained the passageway of escape from the 'continent of murder' for Holocaust survivors, from persecution into freedom.

There has been much discussion about the relationship between Tel Aviv and the sea, which has played many different roles in the city's urban development. When Tel Aviv was founded in 1909 north of Jaffa, the first district, called *Achusat Bayit*, was surrounded by vast sand dunes and emptiness. The contradiction between the 'first Hebrew city' being built into the legendary nothingness becomes apparent in an image taken by Avraham Soskin (1881–1963) in 1923: a photograph of footprints in the wilderness of the dunes at the Mediterranean



Fig. 2. Café on the promenade, former harbor ground in North Tel Aviv, 2009, Alexandra Nocke, author's photograph, author's private collection, Berlin



Fig. 3. Dunes in east Tel Aviv, 1923, Avraham Soskin, Avraham Soskin Collection, Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv

shoreline (Figure 3). The time when the 'city of dreams' rose out of the sand becomes alive in the childhood memories of those who grew up in 'little Tel Aviv' and who recall camels trotting across the yellow sand, bright blue sky and a burning Mediterranean sun, while a



new city is taking roots at the shoreline. Connoisseur of all things Tel Aviv, the historian Shlomo Shva, who combines his expertise and love for the city in a unique way, impressively pointed out the plain fact that Tel Aviv is built on sand: during a stroll through the city we passed road works on Dizengoff Street, where the pavement was torn open. He bent down, picked up a seashell from the coarse sand at the construction site, passed it to me and said: 'This is where we all came from'.

The delicate balancing act between the old and the new, the primordial and the modern, the 'here' and the 'there' also has been subject to many artistic articulations of Tel Aviv's early years. The contradictions are impressively documented in the paintings and drawings of Romanian-born painter Reuven Rubin (1893–1974) and Nahum Gutman (1898–1980), who immigrated to Palestine from Odessa. Both portray the country in a combination of European homeland and exotic *Erez Israel*. Gutman documented the birth of a city and shows in his drawings elements of oriental architecture, white houses of 'little Tel Aviv', camels, Sycamore trees, donkeys, and time and again the Mediterranean sea. However, his images are simplified and idealized, showing for example Tel Aviv completely detached from neighbouring Arab Jaffa and its surroundings. In the paintings by Reuven Rubin inhabitants in their traditional garments or Yemenite Jewish figures that represent primordial Judaism are used to contrast with the Hebrew pioneer, the idealized *Haluz*.<sup>13</sup> In order to deal with the new climatic and geographical influences of the new home in the Middle East as well as the discrepancy between vision and reality, Rubin created a completely new illusionary world in his oeuvre.

In the early years of Tel Aviv the sea was close, but the small settlement did not yet reach the coast. In the years that followed, the town expanded and the general direction was 'through the sand dunes to the sea'. Quoting Arthur Ruppin, the founder of the housing association *Achusat Bayit* from 1912:

Present-day Tel Aviv cannot be imagined without its sea-shore. But the Tel Aviv of the early years was separated from the sea by a strip of Arab land almost a kilometre wide. That land consisted of sand dunes. If you crossed it on foot to reach the sea, you sank up to your ankles in

Fig. 4. Shabbat on the Tel Aviv waterfront promenade, 1966, Micha Bar-Am, courtesy of Micha Bar-Am

sand. Tel Aviv residents therefore preferred to make a long detour via Jaffa to get to the beach. It was clear to me that Tel Aviv absolutely must expand as far as the shore.<sup>14</sup>

Tel Aviv has long since reached those shores, but the controversy over the city's inner link to the sea remains very much alive, with architects, urban planners, historians and journalists actively participating. There are those who believe, like a line in a popular song written by Israeli singer-songwriter Meir Ariel, *Im ha-gav la yam, im ha-rosh le sham* (With the back facing the sea, the head turned yonder), that Tel Aviv was built 'with its back to the sea' because the sea was alien and threatening to Jews from the *Shtetls* of Eastern Europe (Figure 4). This notion has been beautifully captured in a photograph by Micha Bar-Am, Israel's only Magnum photographer, which shows two elderly men dressed in suits sitting on



Fig. 5. Aerial view, 2009, Alexandra Nocke, author's photograph, author's private collection, Berlin

a bench at the seaside promenade. Based on their looks, these men obviously came from Europe, the 'land beyond the olive trees'. This bench has double sided seating – one side facing the sea and one opposite side facing inland. Those two are seated with their back to the sea, one absorbed in his reading, the other one catnapping.

Furthermore, in the north–south expansion of the city the main streets are set up parallel to the shore, as if there was no waterfront (Figure 5). This particular example of urban design illustrates the aforementioned unease and even intimidation that some new immigrants felt in connection with the immense stretches of water which, coming from countries like Poland or Germany, were alien to them. Because it symbolized the unknown, some scholars argue further that there is a natural suspicion, even anxiety toward the sea. In wandering the seaside promenade today we still find concrete manifestations of the assertion that 'Tel Aviv was built with its back to the sea'. The aerial view shows the monstrous high-rise hotels near the waterfront, which not only block the sea view, but prevent the sea breeze from entering the city, resulting in heat accumulation and stifling streets during the summer. On the other hand, given Israel's long-standing encirclement by hostile Arab countries, the Mediterranean was also perceived as the only gateway to the rest of the Western world. A line written by the poet Nathan Alterman alludes to the perception of the sea as a passageway to other places: 'A national home without the sea/is like a house without a doorway.'<sup>15</sup>

But which role did the Mediterranean play as a site for outdoor and leisure activities during the city's formative years? Looking at photographic documents of the Tel Aviv seashore, we can learn a lot about the way the citizens of Tel Aviv adopted the beach as their central gathering place. There is no evidence of anxiety; quite the contrary. As early as the 1920s, photographs by German-born photographer Walter Zadek (1900–1983) show people in bathing suits sunbathing on deck chairs. In 1927, images by the photographer Shimon Korbman (1890–1978) (Figure 6) show an active beach life. People are seen swimming, strolling and sunbathing at the northern Tel Aviv shore. In the distant background we see the Arab city of Jaffa's characteristic skyline, almost detached from the scene in the foreground (Figure 7). Over and over again Korbman photographed himself throughout the country, as if he had to



Fig. 6. General view of the women's bathing area: dressing-rooms and the casino 'Galei Aviv' in the background, 1927, Shimon Korbman, by special permission of the Administrator General, the State of Israel, as the executor of the Shimon Korbman estate & the Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv



Fig. 7. Self-portrait with a water pipe at the shores of Tel Aviv, 1920s, Shimon Korbman, by special permission of the Administrator General, the State of Israel, as the executor of the Shimon Korbman estate & the Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv

reassure himself of his presence. In one of the self-portraits from the 1920s Korbman presents himself in front of Jaffa. Sitting on a small stool on the sand next to the sea, he faces the camera, dressed in his white tropical summer suit, an Arabic water pipe – *Nargila* – in his hand. Here, the contrasts between the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ become apparent once more: wearing a suit, but holding an Arabic pipe; sitting at the beach, but on a stool. This image is a fascinating document of the colonialist, with his romantic attachment to the exotic landscape and peoples, going native. The longing that Korbman shared with many other immigrants at the time becomes apparent: to preserve aspects of a Western cultural heritage, but at the same time to display the behaviour of a local and blend in, in order to feel at home in the ‘old–new’ land.

The photographs of Rudi Weissenstein (1910–1992) convey the feeling of the beach on a hot summer day. In 1949, Weissenstein photographed lifeguards dressed in fashionable bathing costumes and standing on a watchtower at Frishman beach, with a busy scene in the background and people swimming in the waves (Figure 8). In other Weissenstein photographs, as well as by other photographers of the time, we see the beach filled with rows of deck chairs, crowds of people standing in the water, playing in the sand, or just relaxing, as in a photograph by Paul Goldman (1900–1986). The artist Nahum Gutman (1898–1980), who drew everyday scenes of the city and its beaches in the 1930s, beautifully documents this period of Tel Aviv’s rapid growth. In his works, the beachfront is embraced by all generations as a place in which to enjoy the outdoors and engage in leisure pursuits. His over-simplified drawings depict children swimming, playing the famous Israeli beach ball game *matkot* (still played at the beach today), people relaxing in reclining chairs, smoking cigars or talking and in the background, somewhat disconnected from the ‘first Hebrew city’, camels and the skyline of oriental Jaffa.

The Russian-born photographer Boris Carmi (1914–2002) strolled with his camera through the streets of Tel Aviv and, for 60 years, captured changes in the city and in the life of its inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Among his favoured motifs were the River Yarkon, the old Zoo, cafés, the sea, Carmel Market, the port and the old bus station. Some of his images convey a completely different atmosphere of the seaside promenade, like that of a winter’s day in the



Fig. 8. Lifeguards at Frishman-beach, 1949, Rudi Weissenstein, photograph by Rudi Weissenstein of Pri-Or PhotoHouse, Tel Aviv, Israel. <http://www.pri-or.com/>

early 1950s (Figure 9): we see an elderly, well-dressed crowd in suits and hats, strolling with walking sticks, talking, sitting on benches and looking out over the Mediterranean. He photographed the beach promenade on a Saturday afternoon, with its crowds of *Yekkes* (Jews from Germany) who, at the sight of the Mediterranean, were overcome by nostalgia for the lakes around Berlin. However, this image expresses a sense of melancholy and longing for a far-away world, and presents a *contrapunkt* to the joyous beach scenes described above. This contrast is even more pronounced when we look at an image from 1953, *Tel Aviv seen from Jaffa*, in which Tel Aviv appears on the hazy, distant horizon (Figure 10). Carmi took this shot on an unusually stormy day, with Tel Aviv's skyline fading away into an almost surreal distance. He was especially moved to take his camera out on to the streets by the autumnal, melancholic mood of the city's rare rainy days. Precisely these days awoke in him a longing for the European winter: 'We are the rain people', he said, quoting the national poet Nathan Alterman. The sharply contrasting light in Israel bothered Carmi, and he liked most of all to take photographs in the early morning or late afternoon when the light would generate a particular atmosphere, becoming gentler and more 'European'. As Carmi remarked in a conversation with me in preparation for an exhibition: these stormy days always triggered a feeling of longing and homesickness, as he never really got used to the harsh Mediterranean light. His attachment to the 'there' and a certain sense of alienation with Israel maintained throughout his life: he never really mastered written Hebrew, continued to use Cyrillic on shopping lists and sleeves for negatives and preferred to speak to friends in Russian or German.

Boris Carmi captured the beach and the sea in a nostalgic mood, whereas for Micha Bar-Am the beach expresses vitality and liveliness. In an image by Bar-Am we see a morning exerciser on a high bar alone on the beach. This illustrates an important aspect of the usage of the beach, which played, and still plays today, an important role as both a refuge from the crowded and stuffy city and some sort of a health spa. In fact, all year around one can see morning crowds of Yogis, senior citizens doing gymnastics, joggers, swimmers and *matkot* players gathering along the beach to do their workouts (Figure 11).



Fig. 9. Beach promenade on a Saturday afternoon, 1950s, Boris Carmi, the Boris Carmi Archive and the copyrights of his photographs in this publication are owned by Meitar Collection Ltd.

However – there is no other image that documents the recreational importance of the beach better than the one showing an old man in swimming trunks doing a headstand on the beach, the Mediterranean sea in the background, while a young man is watching him (Figure 12). This icon, today known to many Israelis, shows none other than prime minister David Ben-Gurion exercising on the beach in Herzlyia. Paul Goldman (1900–1986), however, creator of these – and other – icons of Israel’s founding years, is surprisingly little-known. He immigrated to Palestine from Hungary and when he died in 1986 his work fell into oblivion. We owe the rediscovery of this image – as well as the whole archive – to the commitment of photographer David Rubinger, Israel’s *Time-Life* contract photographer (born in Vienna in 1924). David Rubinger started his search for his elder colleague’s lost legacy and found it in 1998, stored in the attic of the house in a small suburb of Tel Aviv where Paul Goldman’s daughter, Medina Goldman,<sup>17</sup> lived. Rubinger, who is a great storyteller himself, recalls in his book *Israel through my Lens*: ‘Ben-Gurion, who practiced Feldenkrais to help with his back problems, is reputed to have said, “I am standing on my head so Israel can stand on its feet”’.<sup>18</sup> This image, taken in 1957, shows a prime minister of Israel on the beach, exercising while only one additional man, probably a bodyguard, is seen in the background. This scene is a document of a lost world and shows an unthinkable scenery by today’s standards. Shlomo Arad, photographer and curator of the first Paul Goldman exhibition in Israel in 2004, aptly describes the impact Goldman’s images have on us today and the nostalgia they evoke: ‘This is how we were. This is how we looked. Yes, we once had a prime minister who stood on his head. ... Goldman’s work makes us yearn for the



Fig. 10. Tel Aviv seen from Jaffa, 1953, Boris Carmi, the Boris Carmi Archive and the copyrights of his photographs in this publication are owned by Meitar Collection Ltd.



Fig. 11. Man hanging on bar, 1969, Michal Bar-Am, courtesy of Michal Bar-Am



Fig. 12. Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion performing a headstand, Sharon Hotel Beach Herzliya, 20 September 1957, Paul Goldman, Paul Goldman Collection, Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv

innocent, idealistic, small and optimistic Israel that it once was.<sup>19</sup> What comes to mind in this context is a photograph with a similar setting taken in the 1990s: it shows prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu posing on the beach with his wife and children. Around them stands a ring of bodyguards – large men with sunglasses and earpieces, each looking in different directions in order to spot potential attackers. A large crowd of press photographers and TV teams are surrounding this supposedly ‘private’ moment in order to preserve it and capture an occasion of alleged intimacy.

Throughout the decades, until the very present, the beach is used not only as a place of congregation but also as a site for recreation and leisure. Cultural geographer Maoz Azaryahu even argues that the beach was not just a place for leisure activities but that it was a statement on the function of the beach as a secular alternative to the synagogue. Thus, Tel Aviv’s beach became the essence of the new and free Jewish existence that was identified and associated with the city of Tel Aviv.<sup>20</sup> Even after 1948, when the municipality began diverting sewage into the sea, people still went to the beach and for a swim. In the 1960s the municipality began to invest substantial resources to clean the water and the sand and the restoration and renewed appreciation of the beach culminated with the inauguration of the famous *Taiel-let* in 1982, the ‘Shlomo Lahat promenade’ as we know it today,

Looking at the work of the photographers shown here it becomes evident that the beach and the seaside promenade were once popular places for recreation; this remains the case today. In addition it should be mentioned here that in artistic expressions of that time Tel Aviv is often represented as a city that ‘was born out of the sea’ and rose up from the vast sand dunes that flanked those waters. ‘Elik was born from the sea’, the famous phrase that



opens Moshe Shamir's novel *With his own Hands* (1951), also reflects this longing for a completely new beginning and captures the spirit of the time: the protagonist is a 'blank page', his identity emerges from the connection to the place (the land of Israel) and is no longer formed by the Diaspora existence. This often-repeated theme can be found, for example, in the famous staged photograph by Avraham Soskin of the city's founding in 1909. Here a group of people stand in a barren, sandy wasteland drawing lots for the ownership of the plots of *Achusat Bayit*, the future Tel Aviv. The angle of the photograph is carefully chosen so that neither Arab Jaffa nor the Mediterranean is visible in the background, but locates the horizon on the dunes, as if the scene had taken place in no man's land. The photograph transmits the message characteristic of the time: a new beginning.

I argue that the perception of the Mediterranean in Israel underwent a massive transformation through the decades: today, after years of marginalization, the sea is more and more becoming an important element in the formation of Israeliness. On a larger scale and looking into the spatial dimension of Jewish history I would even argue that recent rediscovery of Tel Aviv and its history – especially striking here is the appraisal of the Bauhaus legacy which has so long been neglected – form a part of a wider re-evaluation of the important role and function of 'space and place' for Jewish cultural practice.

The question 'where is Israel located?' is still at the centre of discussion about the concept of Israeliness. For centuries, Israel existed not on the shores of the Mediterranean, but in Vilna, Toledo, Odessa, Berlin, Czernowitz, or indeed Babylon, and most of all in the hearts of the Jewish people. The longing 'eastwards' for 'heavenly Jerusalem' was incorporated into Jewish tradition, prayers and literature for over 3000 years. The dream of 'returning to Zion', the far-away ancient homeland between the desert and the sea, was a spiritual longing. With the rise of Zionism at the end of the nineteenth century, and the international political movement promulgating the return of the Jewish people to their homeland, a new era began. Zionist ideologues dreamed of putting an end to the state of physical and spiritual alienation of the Diaspora by establishing an exemplary society that would be a light to other nations. The Zionist vision of establishing Israel as an 'old–new homeland' on the shores of the Mediterranean brought the Mediterranean back into the centre of Jewish consciousness.

Israel continues to be shaped by the multiplicity of cultures of those who have come to reside within its boundaries. The two poles within Israeli culture – to merge into the East and become part of it on the one hand, while simultaneously remaining distinct from it on the other – are still at the centre of discussions about the concept of Israeliness. The emerging culture in *Erez Israel* and Israel was and still is driven by the urge to express a new locality without being completely cut off from the Western European cultural repertoire.

*Makom* is the term central to the discussion of a specific Israeli place. In Hebrew, the word *Makom* means place and its significance is twofold: on one hand *Makom* refers to the concrete physical place, and on the other hand it is equivalent with God's name, and therefore refers to a metaphysical place. After 2000 years of exile and yearning for Zion, the Zionist project gave life to an actual Jewish entity in the 'old–new homeland'. Zionist ideology propagated the process of normalization as an ideal for the future Jewish state, and linked this desired state of normality to the concrete land. Since gaining statehood, the metaphysical concept of place, which was valid for two millennia, has been confronted with the actual geographical place, the Israeli state, and Israel as a country has thus been on a non-stop search for a social model that works. The gaps resulting from the discrepancy between these two perceptions of the Israeli place are reflected in creative expressions on diverse levels.

Essential questions are still not sufficiently answered, and the debate over who Israelis are and what they want to be is in full swing. In the seventh decade of Israel's existence conflicting intellectual currents give evidence to the deep schism within Israeli society over the ques-

tion of the meaning and future of Zionism. The question, if the above-mentioned Mediterranean Idea can eventually become an implementable frame of reference, with the potential to actually bring the alienated sides closer together, remains open. The Mediterranean paradigm suggests that life in the Mediterranean region – between East and West – offers many chances for Israel to become integrated within the Middle East without being cut off from the West. The challenge is to take the emerging Mediterranean identity of Israeli culture and society as a point of departure. Especially in these days of violent confrontation, while the Israeli–Arab conflict remains unresolved, the Mediterranean track is a realistic path for Israel to follow in order to move closer to the Middle East, and could eventually be a vehicle for Israel’s acceptance in the region.

Nicolas Sarkozy’s call for a ‘Mediterranean Union’, which was established as the ‘Union for the Mediterranean’ in July 2008, is also based on the assumption that common traits unite the Mediterranean countries, which in the long run – if further developed – could lead to a supranational Mediterranean entity.

Even if Mediterranean culture is perceived as some sort of a common ground in the countries of the northern Mediterranean, the importance the idea of *Yam Tikhoniut* has for inner-Israeli issues is of particular relevance. In Israel the discussion of Mediterranean culture and Mediterraneanism is closely intertwined with Israel’s present and future, and therefore the *Yam Tikhoniut* discourse is of vital – even existential – significance for Israel. It is embedded in discussions concerning national culture, collective identity and regional affiliation, the intentions of which are to locate Israel’s position within a broader Mediterranean framework. It was exactly this special relevance of the Mediterranean for the Israeli consciousness that Gilbert Herbert discussed in this very apt commentary:

Here the view of the sea is much more complex. Jews in Israel certainly share a worldview of the sea as a source of pleasure, whether active, passive, or social. But for Israelis the sea has added dimensions. In a land restricted in area, narrow (less than ten miles between Netanya and Tulkarem), hemmed in, and predominantly arid, the sea has a psychological value beyond measure. It is an unspoiled natural resource, akin to the wilderness, a breaching of claustrophobic boundaries, a widening of the horizon. It is no accident that the majority of Israelis have settled on the coastal plain, nor that proximity to the sea, whether physical or visual, has considerable real-estate value. In addition, the sea, ever since the reclamation of the Haifa foreshore in the 1930s, has also been regarded as a potential source of additional land, with artificial islands featuring in many visionary architectural projects. One such project is an off-shore international airport, currently under consideration, recently advocated by then-Vice-Premier Shimon Peres in a conference on ‘The Sea as an Economic Resource,’ as compensation for the abandonment of the West Bank, a political policy of which he has been a long-time proponent.<sup>21</sup>

Herbert also pointed out that the orientation to the sea has a stark political and economic impact and, in this context, the natural gas resources found off the Israeli shore with their great potential come to mind. Herbert further quotes Israeli president Shimon Peres (then Israeli deputy premier) from a conference sponsored by the Ruppin Academic Center in April 2007: instead of investing in the territories ‘we must invest in the sea, and stretch our western border in that direction by building artificial islands’. Here Peres uses the sea as a specific alternative solution for addressing the issues of peace-making policies. In fact, proposals and fantasy planning for artificial offshore islands have a long history and have, since the founding of Tel Aviv, inspired writers and artists, as well as architects and politicians. The goals of redeeming land from the sea were to expand Israeli territory westwards and to build a safe haven for Jews, one devoid of constant threats and the complex chains of past and present. These examples demonstrate that the Mediterranean Idea also offers a political

vision, adding a new dimension to the prevailing fatigue, bitterness and disenchantment with politics that can generally be found in contemporary Israel.

I argue that a situation like the one described by Malkin above, has already become reality: as a motor for regional stabilisation and eventually cooperation the large natural gas fields found in December 2012 in the Eastern Mediterranean, off the shores of Israel and Cyprus, have to be mentioned here briefly. Especially in the light of the increasing border conflict between Egypt and Israel and attacks on the gas pipelines carrying gas from Egypt to Israel, this discovery has enormous political, geopolitical and economic consequences. International conferences have already discussed the implications of this discovery,<sup>22</sup> as its exploration and development pose challenges in terms of international investment, infrastructure, environmental issues as well as political relations. Without international investment these resources cannot be developed, and regional stability is a basic requirement for investment. Thus, by developing common interests and coping with mutual challenges the natural gas resources and the implications for their development are another factor that has the potential to strengthen regional cooperation in the Mediterranean.

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### Notes on contributor

Alexandra Nocke is an independent scholar, curator, and researcher in cultural studies. Her major fields of interest include the development of identity in contemporary Israeli society, and art and culture in Israel, with a special focus on photography. She completed her dissertation, published as *The Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Identity* (2009) at the University of Potsdam, in association with the Center for Mediterranean Civilizations Project at Tel Aviv University. She has worked as a curator of diverse exhibitions and is the author of *Insight: Micha Bar-Am's Israel* (2011), *Boris Carmi: Photographs from Israel* (2004) and *Israel heute: Ein Selbstbild im Wandel* (Israel today: A changing self-image, 1998). She is also the co-editor of *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place* (2008) and lives with her family in Berlin.

### Notes

1. (Heb. Land of Israel): until the foundation of the state of Israel, the term *Erez Israel* was the official Hebrew expression to refer to the territory under British Mandate in Palestine.
2. The classic study of the historico-cultural space of the Mediterranean in the second half of the sixteenth century by Fernand Braudel represents an impressive account of contacts among the Mediterranean states, the interlinking of European and Mediterranean history, and the complicated processes of change in terms of geography, social structures and political systems. The sea itself shifts to the centre of attention and becomes the protagonist of this monumental work. Like no one else before, Braudel turned the Mediterranean into a historical concept and saw in it a broad arena of cultures with the far-reaching impact of 'the long duration' or 'the long term' – *la longue durée*, the slow rhythms of human transformations, and social and urban behaviour patterns beyond the short-term developments in history and society. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 1 (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1986).
3. A traditionally Arab dish consisting of cooked chickpeas pounded into a creamy paste with garlic and lemon juice, which is popular all over the Middle East. However, in view of the continuous fighting in Syria while writing this essay in August 2012, especially in Damascus and Aleppo, this slogan is barely conceivable.
4. David Ohana, *Israel and its Mediterranean Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 175.

5. Gil Z. Hochberg, "'The Mediterranean Option': On the Politics of Regional Affiliation in Current Israeli Cultural Imagination," *Journal of Levantine Studies*, no. 1 (2011): 52, 57.
6. For an in-depth discussion of the subject see: Alexandra Nocke, *The Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).
7. Irad Malkin, "The Mediterranean and Contemporary Israel," *Technopolis Méditerranée*, no. 1 (1996).
8. Alexandra Nocke, ed., *Insight: Micha Bar-Am's Israel* (Cologne: König Books, 2011), 224.
9. For the development of the city of Tel Aviv and its port see Joachim Schlör, *Tel Aviv: From Dream to City* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).
10. Personal interview with David Tartakover, July 9, 2001, Neve Zedek.
11. (Heb. going up, ascent): term used for the Jewish migration to the land of Israel, reflects the fundamental principle of Zionist ideology: the immigration to *Erez Israel* as the fulfilment of an ideal.
12. Chaim Guri, quoted in Avraham Shapira, "Spiritual Rootlessness and Circumscription on the 'Here and Now' in the Sabra World View," *Israel Affairs* 4, no. 3–4 (1998): 124.
13. *Haluz, Haluzim* (Heb. pioneer): the idea behind the *Haluz* movement was the revival and renewal of the Jew through manual work and a strong physical bond with the soil. The *Haluz* represents a counter-image to all anti-Semite Jewish clichés.
14. Arthur Ruppin, quoted in Schlör, *Tel Aviv*, 58.
15. Natan Alterman, *Yom ha-yam ba-ta'arukhah: Sefer rishon* [Day of the sea at the fair: first book] (Ha-Kibbutz ha-meuhad). Quoted after manuscript, kindly obtained from Yaacov Shavit, "Tel Aviv al ha-yam ha-Tikhon: Be'in ir hof le'ir namal" [Tel Aviv on the shore of the Mediterranean: between coastal city and harbor city] (unpublished paper, Tel Aviv, 2000), 4.
16. For more details on Boris Carmi see Alexandra Nocke, *Boris Carmi: Photographs from Israel* (Munich: Prestel, 2004).
17. A woman by the name of Medina (Heb. state) is fairly uncommon in Israel. As David Rubinger told me on several occasions, this unusual name was the key for him to locate the lost archive. 'She was born on the day the UN resolved that the Jewish state be established, and Ben-Gurion told Goldman that this was the most appropriate name he could give the new baby.' See David Rubinger with Ruth Corman, *Israel through my Lens. Sixty Years as a Photojournalist* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2007), 314.
18. *Ibid.*, 313.
19. Curator Shlomo Arad in the catalogue, published with the exhibition: *Paul Goldman. Press Photographer, 1943–1961* (Tel Aviv: Erez Israel Museum, 2004), 7.
20. Maoz Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv. Mythography of a City* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 194.
21. Gilbert Herbert, "A View of the Sea: Jews and the Maritime Tradition," in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke, Heritage, Culture and Identity (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 196.
22. See e.g. the international conference organized by the IEPN (Israeli European Policy network) in Tel Aviv, July 2012: *Natural Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean: Casus Belli or Chance for Regional Cooperation?*, <http://www.iepn.org>.