

The Place of the Mediterranean in  
Modern Israeli Identity

# Jewish Identities in a Changing World

*Edited by*

Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yosef Gorny

VOLUME 11

# The Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Identity

*By*  
Alexandra Nocke



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To Tilda Aviva  
who makes my world go round



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## FOREWORD

David Ohana

Societies in their early stages pass through a dynamic phase of molding their cultural identity. This process has always provided a fascinating scientific basis for sociological, anthropological and cultural research. Alexandra Nocke identifies Israel as a Mediterranean society-in-the-making. In this detailed and comprehensive work she reviews the origins of Israel's Mediterranean identity, starting with its Zionist ideological origins, and taking us up to the present, as Israel struggles with what it means to be a post-ideological Mediterranean country. How do Israelis define their collective identity in the region? Do they belong to the Middle East? to Europe? to the global village? Or perhaps they do not have to choose between the local and the global? Many of them could easily identify with a Mediterranean consciousness and represent a complex synthesis of east and west.

The establishment and consolidation of a coherent and distinctive Israeli identity has been a remarkable historical feat. It would have been virtually impossible without the ability to harness such potent 'myths' as the in-gathering of the exiles, the up-building of Zion as a model society, the creation of a new Hebrew or "Jewish" type and an over-arching vision of national redemption. Even without the devastating blow of the Holocaust and the wall of Arab-Muslim hostility that confronted the new Israeli state, the challenge of constructing a collective identity in Israel would have been formidable. To convert an urban-based diasporic people whose cohesion had already been significantly eroded by cultural assimilation into a "normal" nation rooted in its own land with Hebrew as its language was a huge task even under the most favorable circumstances. The ideological synthesis of socialist Zionism and the myths that shaped Israeli society in its early years reflected many of these imperatives, constraints and challenges. The emphasis on national security, unity, rootedness, pioneering settlement and military virtues as well as the priority given to the ideology of the "melting pot," seemed appropriate to the pressing imperatives of survival under adverse conditions.

Israelis can promote a geopolitical and cultural dialogue that will involve the eastern and the southern shores of the Mediterranean. The conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis today is part of a situation in which the Mediterranean region is engulfed in national, political, ethnic, and religious conflicts that have contributed to a destabilization not only in the area but even in Europe and beyond. Against this backdrop, the Mediterranean option can play a key cultural and political role in re-stabilizing this tense environment and creating a new geo-strategic alignment.

The idea of the Mediterranean as a cultural-political entity that holds together a multiplicity of ethnic, religious-cultural and economic units predates late twentieth-century proposals and programs of the type issuing from Brussels, Barcelona, Malta or Paris. Earlier ideas of the Mediterranean were informed by realities of trade, conquest, migration and subtler geographical affinities that were conducive to a regional unity though never to uniformity or to political unification. Whether or not this collective regional identity was disturbed (as is argued in Henri Pirenne's famous thesis) by the Moslem conquest is an important historiographical issue for investigation. But, whether as the result of this conquest, of early modern imperialism, or of other social forces—both prior to and following the Enlightenment in Europe—it is clear that the older idea of the Mediterranean gave way to a more parochial, nationalist *mare nostrum* conception.

In contrast with other contentious images such as the Zionist-Crusader analogy, "Mediterraneanism" has the reputation of being a source of dialogue between the East and West. It is true that the annals of the Mediterranean Basin record an ongoing conflict for political hegemony, cultural control and economic imperialism. Yet, despite these historical confrontations, the Mediterranean includes both the Levant and the West, and out of this synthesis it created a space which did not give rise to a hegemonic and all-inclusive culture with a single, homogenous character. Instead it created a variety of historical models of cultural meetings and intellectual exchanges. The Mediterranean, without being a homogenous cultural unit, has historically been a region with an intense mixture of Eastern and Western cultures. Shelomo Dov Goitein claimed that Jews were Mediterranean people—open, free, mobile, not isolated in their corner of Southern Asia but dwelling in countries which inherited classical culture and assimilated it to Islamic culture. In his monumental five-volume study, *A Mediterranean Society*, Goitein

described the medieval Jewish society living within the Mediterranean geographical and cultural framework.

Nocke's work on Israeli society can be read as a modern adaptation of the Goitein thesis. Nocke's book is an excellent illustration of the most recent and influential study, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell. Their book sees the Mediterranean as a network of "micro" regions, each of them representing a Mediterranean microcosm. In this context, Nocke displays a sharp insight into the tensions between Jerusalem on the mountain and Tel Aviv on the shore, characterized as a "micro" region as well as a case study for the Horden and Purcell thesis. The cultural survey that Nocke conducts of the contemporary visual arts, popular music, literature, architecture, etc., in Israel reveals the young Israeli society as a vividly Mediterranean one.

Professor Goitein's notion of a Mediterranean society, depicting the collective identity and structure of Jewish existence during the middle Ages, described Mediterranean life without proposing a political program or a recommendation. Similarly, Fernand Braudel's study of 16th century Mediterranean life as a single cultural, geographic and economic unit represented a bold historiographic innovation that did not constitute a political recommendation either. Nevertheless, Braudel's analysis has created a changed perception of the Mediterranean which has been used increasingly since the 1980's by political leaders and regional visionaries as the basis of a program of socio-cultural change not envisioned by either of these scholars.

The Mediterranean dialogue has three facets: creating a new agenda that will confront the most threatening dangers currently at hand; revealing and examining the common heritage of the peoples of the region; and creating new channels of communication based on their reciprocal influences and interactions.

The time has come to examine and evaluate the Mediterranean option for Israel, an Israeli geopolitical and cultural policy for peace in the Middle East. The Mediterranean cultural discourse seeks to detach the region from conflict and to fashion a broader cultural framework in which Israelis and their Arab neighbors are not alone with each other, but work together in a broader context and partnership. In other words, it is an attempt to create a dialogue that has a different perspective and focus. Such a broad perspective, with its strategic orientation, has been missing from the scholarly literature on the Mediterranean

basin. The contribution of Alexandra Nocke is to take the emerging Mediterranean identity of the Israelis—a multi-cultural, heterogenic, mixed society, situated between east and west—as a point of departure. What lessons can be learned from examining its characteristics? Can this Mediterranean model be projected onto the entire region in order to develop strategies for evolving a unified but polycentric Mediterranean civil society?

The idea that Israel is a Mediterranean society in the making has been encouraged by three historical processes. The first process was the frequent fluctuations in the peace process between Israel and its neighbors in the last decade, and the state of confrontation culminating in the current conflict with the Palestinians that erupted in October 2000. The conflict raised questions concerning the dynamics of Israeli collective identity and what may be called the “Israeli spatial identity”. Many Israelis have thus started to think in terms of “Mediterraneanism” rather than in terms of “Middle Eastern” culture. Such thinking was assisted by Israeli accessibility to the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea—i.e., Turkey and the Maghreb in the 1990s.

The second process was the transition of Israeli society from a mobilized and ideological society to a civil, sectorial society, one that is in constant search for its own identity while it tries to maintain an internal dialogue among its various sociological components, and, in addition, an external dialogue with other people and cultures in the Mediterranean geopolitical region. The ideology of the “new man” gave way to the old-new idea of a non-ideological Mediterranean melting pot blending together immigrants from east and west, from the Christian countries and the Muslim countries. Zionism sprang up against the background of the rise of nationalism, the spread of secularism and the dominance of Eurocentricity. One of the chief cultural ambitions of the Zionist movement was to create a “new man”. But this ideological myth, when finally fulfilled, was applied to a nation which was made up of people of flesh and blood: people who, for sixty years now, have constituted a society on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Their new identity is not ideologically based; it is constructed out of geography and culture.

The third process was the revolutionary opportunity for dialogue in the Oslo Accords (1993), the Barcelona Process (1995) and Nicolas Sarkozy’s Union of the Mediterranean (2008). The Oslo Accords were in principle based on two parallel channels: the immediate bilateral channel which focused on resolving the disputes of the past and end-



ing the war between Israel and its Arab neighbors; and the multilateral channel. The latter provided a basis for (and strengthened) the bilateral channel by creating a safety net together with other actors and by developing common interests and coping with common problems such as water supply, economic growth, disarmament and environmental issues. The new initiative of the French president Sarkozy, based on a plan for the political, economic and cultural union of the states bordering the Mediterranean, was launched at the Paris Conference on July 14, 2008. The invitation to Israel to participate in the Mediterranean Union represents another chance of dialogue between Israel and its Arab neighbors, this time under the Mediterranean umbrella.

Until the past few years, the Mediterranean option had almost disappeared from the debate surrounding Israeliness. Hebrew literary historiographies, for example, which are widely considered to be exercises in canonization, defined the boundaries of a virtual ‘republic of letters’, a formulation that contributed greatly to the shaping of Israeli society. The writers, poets, and essayists within this virtual territory were given their due share of attention, and those who were excluded from it were regarded as “others”. The voice of many of these others—such as Arabs and Israeli Jews of oriental descent—was not heard directly but only via the citizens of the said “republic”. The citizens spoke, and the “others” were heard. The Mediterraneans, however, were not even recognized as “others”, but were instead excluded from the discourse altogether. Any dominant or hegemonic culture invariably generates some form of “other”, a necessary contrast or opposition by which it defines itself. It also results in a disappearance or an absence. A classic example of this historiographical absence is the author and essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff (1917–1979) and her relation to the Mediterranean option.

Kahanoff played an active role in the debate on Israel’s Mediterranean identity. As a precursor or as an intellectual personality, she may still become a yardstick for an understanding of the different forms of identity in Israel’s culture-in-the-making, of questions of East and West and the intermediate areas, and of the place of Israel in the Mediterranean geo-cultural space. Could it be that we needed Kahanoff then and Nocke today in order to learn how to transform masculine Zionism into a Mediterranean Israeliness which is pluralistic and moderate? In the book *Jewish Topographies, Visions of Space, Traditions of Space* (2008), which Nocke co-edited, the following questions were raised: How have the Jews experienced their environments and how have they related

to specific places? How do Jewish spaces emerge, how are they used and contested? In *Yam Tikhoniut: the Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Identity*, Nocke goes even further and asks what the Israeli space is. In so doing, she focuses on the Israeli “places” and sheds light on the Israeli-Mediterranean *habitus*.

Indeed, when Alexandra Nocke came from the banks of the Rhine to the Eastern Mediterranean in order to investigate the living reality of the Mediterranean Israeli society for her doctoral dissertation, co-supervised by the Historian Irad Malkin, she wrote: “My thesis is that the life between these two worlds (East and West) in the Mediterranean region offers many opportunities for Israel to become integrated into the Middle East without being cut off from the West. The Mediterranean option, which still appears unfocussed today, is based on common cultural roots, on consensus instead of divergence, on dialogue instead of cultural conflict. As a foreign observer of Israel’s quest for identity and consensus, I believe that Israel’s future is linked to the Mediterranean dimension that embraces the East *and* the West, while offering a chance for acculturation and dialogue and mutual nurturing.”

The Mediterranean option offers a dialogue, not a cultural war. It proposes a voyage, a slow and reflective voyage, a journey between shores and not a cultural war in which, as in all wars, there are only losers. It is a journey within the space of our own consciousness, to our cultural and intellectual origins, to the landscape of our own sea. It is a journey, not a flight from our immediate neighborhood, the Arabs and the Palestinians. We are traveling to the space where everything was born: western and eastern civilization, monotheism and Hellenism, the polis and the Renaissance, the Old and the New Testament. The Mediterranean option for Israeli society represents a philosophical challenge, a socio-cultural identity and a political program. Nocke’s pioneering book takes us on this journey.

David Ohana  
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

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research group of dedicated scholars, and I offer my thanks to all of them.

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I am grateful for having had the opportunity to immerse myself in this research on Yam Tikhoniut, walk the seaside promenade in Tel Aviv, sit in coffee houses, and trace Israel's *Lived Yam Tikhoniut*. Along the way, I met wonderful people and heard many captivating stories that have remained with me ever since. My greatest thanks however are due to the people closest to me. Without their love and understanding I would not have been able to complete this project: my husband Olaf Aue, who patiently waited for me to return from my manifold field trips and always ensured the right balance in my life, as well as Karin and Wolfgang Nocke, who are always at my side and support me in every conceivable way.

Alexandra Nocke

Berlin, June 2008



## PROLOGUE: ISRAEL AND I

*To use a phrase coined by Fernand Braudel—I came from the lands ‘beyond the olive trees,’ to trace the Mediterranean topos and its forms of appearance. As an outside observer, growing up and living far away from the sea, I am exploring the public discourse on the Mediterranean in Israel and trying to explicate the multi-dimensional debate taking place in Israel’s present. This debate is embedded in the discussion concerning Israeli identity and national ethos and deals with an alternative concept for society. So one could call this a ‘participant observation of an outsider from within’ that comes alive in the multiplicity of descriptions and comments that will be linked with each other in this study.*

*The past is omnipresent in Israel and the traumatic memories of the Holocaust are one of the core elements of Israel’s identity. Yet, despite the load of the past (or precisely for this reason) I encountered an extreme sense of the present in Israel and was fascinated by a certain kind of energy and dynamism that infuses every aspect of life. Thus, in this study I will explicitly focus on domestic issues concerning both the present and the future of the state. In doing so, I wish to illuminate an inner-Israeli discussion related to daily life, which when compared to the media coverage of subjects related to the Holocaust or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is clearly not adequately represented. Thus, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of such domestic issues as identity formation that take place within the complex Israeli society. During my field studies I generally observed the desire among my dialogue partners to talk about Israel without the constant presence of the easily irritable subject of German-Jewish or German-Israeli relations, which encouraged me in my approach. Based on my observations, the fact that I am German seemed of minor importance: the main reactions I encountered were curiosity and sympathy, my national identity aside. During my stays in Israel I lived in Tel Aviv, the icon of Israeli Yam Tikhoniut. Tel Aviv became the home base for my explorations; for this reason many examples I discuss in this study are located there. Over the years the city witnessed a transformation of my naïve fascination with the complex structure of the Israeli narrative to a scholarly project intent on capturing an Israeli phenomenon through the eyes of an outsider. From a series of sometimes unfocused wanderings through the streets of Tel Aviv—and therefore through the different personal stories embedded in the city itself—this project on Mediterraneanism arose. Walks and strolls, and numerous other observations, experiences, and discussions I had with my Israeli friends and colleagues over the years, became an integral part of the following analysis and influenced my perception of the Israeli Makom. Much like the influence that Tel Aviv can have on a visitor, as Joachim Schlör has described, it*

also affected my observations: "(...) this city has a special way of engaging all the senses: it heightens our seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling and touching, and also our imagination."<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to Schlör's sensual approach, as the perceptions of my object of study have also been enhanced and inspired by the human and personal stories I encountered.

Back in Berlin, with an enormous amount of unorganized material, including 74 interviews, I first defined my own position within the following analysis: in this endeavor to observe Israel's public discourse on Yam Tikhoniut I will first try to structure and comment on the current discussion. All of the diverse opinions and evaluations involved in the discourse on Yam Tikhoniut in Israel are compiled in this analysis. The interviews conducted during my field studies in Israel form the main reference point of this study. These primary sources were either incorporated as direct quotations in my analysis, or were evaluated and used as background information material. All original quotations and paraphrases, which are not directly followed by a footnote giving the reference to the source, originate from interviews conducted during my field research between 2000 and 2005 in Israel.

Even in the process of choosing my interview partners, a passionate, often agitated discussion over Yam Tikhoniut's various characteristics could be observed. There is no consensus on defining the crucial terms in this discussion, and expressions like Mizrahiut,<sup>2</sup> Orientalism, Arabness, Mediterraneanism, or Levantinism are sometimes combined or even confused with each other. The only constant factor is that the Mediterranean concept is still in its formative period. Each of my interview partners represents a piece of a mosaic, the whole of which I hope this book will eventually

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Schlör, *Tel Aviv: From Dream to City* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 9.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Mizrahi' meaning 'East' (Mizrahiut: *Easternness*, today meaning Jewish oriental culture) generally denominates those Israeli Jews, the *Mizrahim*, who arrived from North Africa (especially Morocco) and the Arab states of the Middle East (e.g., Yemen, Ethiopia, Iraq, Syria). Leftist *Mizrahi* intellectuals coined the term in the 1980s and it has since entered the public discourse in Israel and continues to be used as a category of identity. Today the term basically refers to everything 'not-Ashkenazi' among the diverse ethnic groups in Israel, and is in fact very imprecise. Nevertheless, while using the term 'Mizrahi' in my study I am aware, that it indicates complex and multilayered ethnicities and individual identities, whose examination is beyond the scope of this analysis. *Mizrahiut* is oriental Israeliness and implies a position of ethnicity. Alternatively, the term *Sephardi* (*Sepharad* is the traditional Hebrew name for Spain, *Sepharadi* meaning *Hispanic*) is often used in Israeli public discourse to indicate the non-Ashkenazi population. I have refrained from using the term *Sepharadi* since it technically refers to the large Jewish communities who trace their lineage back to the Spanish/Iberian population and spread throughout North Africa, the Balkans, Turkey etc. Bernhard Lewis called this group of non-European Jews 'The Jews of Islam'. See Bernhard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Jews from central and East European communities are commonly called 'Ashkenazi' (*Ashkenaz* is the Hebrew name for medieval Germany).



reveal. *The approach I have taken is one of building bridges between the different statements offered in the interviews, sorting them thematically, establishing different categories based on these themes, and then commenting on the different contributions. By doing so, my main focus will be to explore the reasons behind the fierceness and intensity of this debate, one that is often personal, sometimes politically motivated, or simply economically driven.*

*Let me briefly turn to the circumstances under which this book was written. Political and security issues are an integral part of Israeli existence. They are the subjects of radio news broadcasts, and political discussions, stories and reports in the weekend newspapers, including their popular supplements. In other words, they are interwoven in everyday life, and therefore, also accompanied my fieldwork in Israel. However, the escalation of violence during my one-year stay in 2000–2001, and during my follow-up visits in 2002 and 2003, influenced my fieldwork less than one might have expected. In fact, continuing my research stay despite the increase in violence—and the outbreak of the Second Gulf War in March 2003—garnered warm responses from most of my interview partners. Some mentioned that the opportunity to discuss the ‘beautiful Mediterranean and its conciliatory potential’ was an appreciated change from the monothematic public discourse on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Yet, the deteriorating security situation, the heightened levels of fear, distrust, and hopelessness could not of course fail to deeply affect the atmosphere in which I was conducting my research as well as the ‘spirit’ of those I was close to and those with whom I talked. Escapism, fatigue, bitterness, and weariness were very apparent, resulting in increasing disillusionment and disappointment. This volume must be read within the context of these vicious cycles of violence and counterviolence. Because of the constant and rapid changes in Israeli politics, I have not engaged in any detailed analysis of present-day events. Rather, I have adopted the perspective of the *longue durée* as I examine the manifestations of the emerging Mediterranean Idea that are at the heart of this study.*

*I argue that until recently the engagement with the political and strategic entity ‘Middle East’ has been vital for Israel because the Israeli–Palestinian conflict revolves around this specific geographical unit. However, *Yam Tikhoniut*—the Mediterranean Option—to be analyzed here, allows us to take a step back from this perception of *realpolitik* and offers other perspectives on Israel’s present and future. It also suggests new approaches to the question of Israel’s political and cultural locus and provides alternatives that could eventually lead to the end of Israel’s isolation in the region. The Mediterranean Option allows Israel to perceive itself in the context of a larger regional framework that at the same time takes aspects of cultural alignment and identity formation into consideration. Even though Mediterranean regionalism is in vogue both inside and outside of Israel (in fact, awareness and popularity of the concept can be found throughout the Western world), the critical role it can play in guiding, shaping, and influencing the path to Israel’s future cannot be overestimated.*



## TOWARD THE SEA: AN APPROACH

Deep blue water. On a clear day the plane approaches Israel and suddenly the coastline appears, hazy at the horizon. Still too far away, it is hard to spot any familiar sights along the coast. From up here, Israel looks like one long narrow strip along an extended shoreline, a country with a high coast-to-land ratio, cutoff from its *hinterland*. In those minutes during the landing approach, the stories of those who came long before in order to stay for good become visible to the mind's eye. Countless immigrants approached the land by air or 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 anxiousness simultaneously: the vision of the 'promised land' and the actual place, Israel, were about to merge. The harbor 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. Now, the coastline becomes more differentiated and the old harbor of Tel Aviv, *Sha'ar Zion*, the gate to Zion, the desired destination of each journey across the Mediterranean, can be spotted. Today, the old Tel Aviv port is undergoing a process of gentrification. Attractive new boardwalks and paved paths run along the seaside, and trendy seafood restaurants occupy formerly dilapidated warehouses, offering seating next to the old port basin. Yet, the black and white photos lining the hallway leading to the restrooms in the restaurant *Yama* show heavily-laden camels and dockworkers discharging loads off ships, a reminder of times past. The camels carry heavy building materials to be used in constructing the nearby *Reading Power Station*, a steam-driven turbine built in 1938. A prominent Tel Aviv landmark, today it serves in part as an art exhibition space. As the point of touchdown draws closer, the circular *Kikar ha-Medinah* and *Dizengoff Street*, running in a neat parallel to the sea, become visible. It seems that Tel Aviv, with its coffeehouses and its wonderful people, with its countless stories, eager to be told and written down, is waiting for some focused attention.

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* 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 remarks: "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."

What is the meaning of the Mediterranean for the Israeli consciousness?<sup>1</sup> First and foremost, the sea was once an important passageway to Israel. Most Jewish immigration to pre-state Israel took place via its waters. In a poem by 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 in 1919."<sup>2</sup> After the Second World War, the sea remained the passageway of escape from the ‘continent of murder’ for Holocaust survivors. The so-called illegal immigration during British Mandatory Palestine comes alive in the impressive memories of the commander of those immigration ships, Yossi Harel. Writer Yoram Kaniuk gathered Harel's recollections into a book, *The Commander of the Exodus*, which poetically tells the story of the emergence of the state of Israel.

There has been much academic and public discussion about the relationship between ‘Tel Avivers’ 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*,

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<sup>1</sup> For a longer discussion of this question, see Alexandra Nocke, "Looking at the Sea: An Exploration into the Representations of the Sea," in *Back to the Sea*, ed. Sigal Barnir and Yael Moria-Klain (Venice: Israeli Pavilion 9th Biennale of Architecture Venice, 2004), 40–50.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

was surrounded by vast sand dunes and emptiness. In the years that followed, the town expanded and the general direction was ‘through the sand dunes to the sea,’ as Joachim Schlör has shown. 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 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>3</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 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. This notion has been captured in a photograph by Micha Bar-Am, which shows two elderly men dressed in suits, who based on their looks, obviously came from Europe, the ‘land beyond the olive trees’ (fig. 1). Connoisseur of all things Tel Aviv, the historian Shlomo Shwa, who combines his expertise and love for the city in a unique way, pointed out the fact that in the north-south expansion of the city the main streets are set up parallel to the shore, as if there was no waterfront. This particular example of urban design, he explains, illustrates the 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.’ Monstrous hotel high-rises not only block the seaview, but prevent the sea breeze from entering the city, resulting in heat accumulation and stifling inland streets during the summer.

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Ruppin, quoted in Schlör, *Tel Aviv*, 58.



Fig. 1: Shabbat on the Tel Aviv waterfront promenade, 1966, Micha Bar-Am

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>4</sup>

But which role did the Mediterranean play as a site for outdoor and leisure activities during the city's formative years? If we look at some early art and 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. And here there is no evidence of anxiety, rather 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 (1887–1978) show active beach life.

<sup>4</sup> 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 harbour city)" (unpublished paper, Tel Aviv 2000), 4.

People are seen swimming, strolling, and sunbathing at the northern Tel Aviv shore (fig. 2). In the distant background we see the Arabic city of Jaffa's characteristic skyline, almost detached from the scene in the foreground. In a self-portrait from the 1920s Korbman presents himself in front of Jaffa (fig. 3). 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. In this image 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 behavior 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 (fig. 4). 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, like in this photograph by Paul Goldman (1900–1986) (fig. 5). The artist Nahum Gutman (1898–1980), who drew everyday life scenes of the city and its



Fig. 2: General view of the women's bathing area: dressing-rooms and the casino 'Galei Aviv' in the background, 1927, Shimon Korbman



Fig. 3: Self-portrait with water pipe at the shores of Tel Aviv, 1920s, Shimon Korbman



Fig. 4: Lifeguards at Frishman-beach, 1949, Rudi Weissenstein





Fig. 5: Tel Aviv Beach, July 1949, Paul Goldman

beaches in the 1930s, beautifully documents this period of Tel Aviv's rapid growth. In his work, the beachfront is embraced by all generations as a place in which to enjoy the outdoors and engage in leisure time pursuits. His over-simplified drawings depict children swimming, playing the famous Israeli beach ball game *matkot*, people relaxing in reclining chairs, smoking cigars, or talking (fig. 6), and in the background, as in Zadek's photographs, and similarly disconnected from the 'first Hebrew city,' camels and the skyline of oriental Jaffa.

The Russian-born photographer Boris Carmi (1914–2002) conveys a completely different atmosphere of a seaside promenade, that of a winter's day in the early 1950s: 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 (fig. 7). 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,

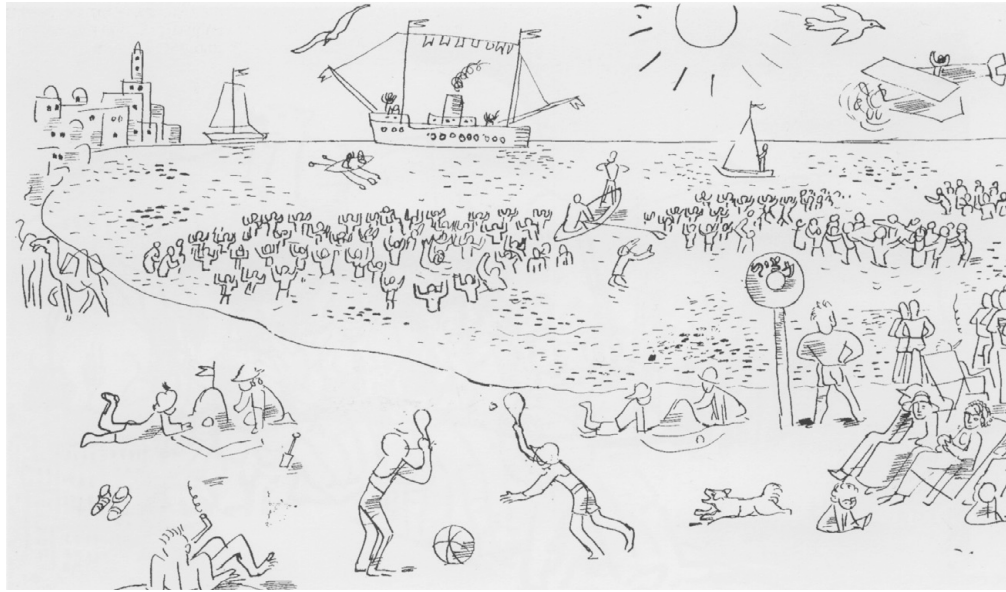


Fig. 6: Seashore in Tel Aviv, 1931, Nahum Gutman



Fig. 7: Beach promenade on a Saturday afternoon, 1950s, Boris Carmi

distant horizon. Carmi took this shot on an unusually stormy day, with Tel Aviv's skyline fading away into an almost surreal distance (fig. 8). For Carmi, these stormy days always triggered a feeling of longing and homesickness, because, as he has remarked, he never really got used to the harsh Mediterranean light.<sup>5</sup>

From the work of these artists 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 Abraham 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 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 (Fig. 9).

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<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Nocke, ed., *Boris Carmi: Photographs from Israel* (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 6–9.



Fig. 8: Tel Aviv, seen from Jaffa, 1953, Boris Carmi



Fig. 9: Lottery of Achusat Bayit housing plots, Tel Aviv, 1909, Avraham Soskin