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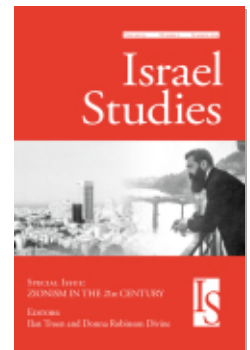
Introduction—"One of the World's Coolest Cities": Tel-Aviv at 100

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Introduction—"One of the World's Coolest Cities": Tel-Aviv at 100

ANNIVERSARIES ARE POWERFUL REMINDERS OF THE HUMAN NEED FOR signposts to mark the continuous flow of time: they are perceived as extraordinary points in time that occasion, even compel, a celebration. Importantly they offer an opportunity to evaluate the past from the privileged perspective of the present. Refracted through the prism of the always biased present, such evaluations project a sense of pride in achievements or, alternatively, prompt critical assessments. As always, hindsight is 20/20.

In the spring of 2009 Tel-Aviv celebrated its centennial with festive events and inauguration ceremonies of long due public projects, TV documentaries, academic conferences in Israel and abroad, albums, and anthologies. The idea of devoting a special issue of *Israel Studies* to Tel-Aviv on the occasion of its centennial appears self-evident: it is a truism that Tel-Aviv occupies a special place in the history and geography of modern Zionism and Israel. The anniversary is a convenient pretext, for it does not appear that 2009 represents a watershed in the political, social, economic, urban, or cultural history of Tel-Aviv.

The fact that it is celebrating its centennial is a powerful reminder that despite views to the contrary, Tel-Aviv is a success story at the center of which stands the transformation of a Zionist vision into a thriving metropolis. Although the founding of Tel-Aviv dates to 1909, the ideational constitution of the city was formulated by Akiva Arie Weiss in the prospectus he wrote in 1906. In this visionary document, the 'genetic code' of a projected and still nameless city (the name Tel-Aviv was applied to the neighborhood under construction in 1910) was formulated: a modern city that would represent the redemptive aspirations of the Jewish people. The new city to be built on the sand dunes north of the mixed, Arab-Jewish port city of Jaffa would be 'the first Hebrew city'. Moreover, his vision foresaw that "[T]he same as New York is the main entrance to America, so we have to modernize our city and one day it will become the New York of the Land of Israel." A century later, Tel-Aviv's skyline is dotted with towering high-rises. Although an eyesore for many Tel-Avivians who fear for the

traditional character of their city and the social implications of residential towers as enclaves for the rich,¹ these prominent structures suggest that the early quest to make Tel-Aviv a modern city has not lost its appeal.

At the foundational stage of its history, Tel-Aviv was not merely a rapidly developing city but a Zionist argument as well: the Hebrew city—in the 1920s and the 1930s entitled the “city of wonders”—was proof that the Zionist revolution could also be cast in modern, urban forms. In 1933 Nahum Sokolov, who coined the name Tel-Aviv as a translation of Herzl’s *Altneuland*, asserted that, “Tel Aviv is not a city, but a poem. And not a lyrical poem, but an epos—a heroic epos, and not a poem of the future, but a poem of today.”²

Conceived as a vision and driven by a sense of destiny, a fascinating aspect of Tel-Aviv is its quest to become a large city accompanied by a permanent thirst for international recognition. Tel-Aviv’s ambition to be more than merely an ordinary city is captured in the observation made by the protagonist of a play about the city’s early history: “In Tel-Aviv they will always talk about the day when the city will become a really big city.”³

The thirst for recognition as a city of world renown and in deference to metropolitan centers such as Paris, London, and New York were two complementary responses to the equivocal, sometimes marginal, position of Tel-Aviv with respect to the center(s) of world politics, economy, and culture. In the early 1930s the poet Natan Alterman maintained that although Tel-Aviv “has many signs of provincialism, [it] is nevertheless a center, a double center, of the country, and especially of the people”.⁴ Writing in 1979, the literary critic Yoram Bronovsky observed that Tel-Aviv “. . . has the power and essence of the center . . . [preserving] a measure of agitation, of energy, characteristic of only a small number of cities in the world.”⁵

In the last decade Tel-Aviv has increasingly been awarded international recognition as a city of fame and distinction. In 2003 UNESCO recognized the White City of Tel-Aviv and its modernist architecture as a World Heritage Site. Ironically, this city, celebrated as a creation *ex nihilo*, was invested with an aura of heritage. At another level, the “measure of agitation, of energy” that Bronovsky observed in 1979, was ‘discovered’ abroad and given an authoritative seal of international approval. In 2008 both *The Times* (London) and the *New York Times* published enthusiastic articles on Tel-Aviv. The former defined Tel-Aviv as “one of the world’s coolest cities”.⁶ According to the *New York Times*, “Tel-Aviv is the capital of Mediterranean cool.”⁷ It is revealing that shortly before the municipal election of November 11, 2008, the campaign team of the incumbent mayor used the slogan, “One of the world’s coolest cities”, translated into Hebrew,

in a leaflet distributed throughout the city. Currently, Tel-Aviv's success is in how the first Hebrew city evolved to be distinguished as one of the coolest cities in the world. Incidentally, the incumbent won the election, which also meant that he was given the honor to be the Master of Ceremonies during the celebration of Tel-Aviv's centennial.

In the beginning were the words—those written by Akiva Arie Weiss in his prospectus of 1906. The verbal construction of Tel-Aviv has continued with essays, poems, books, and albums about Tel-Aviv, in addition to academic publications. This special volume does not purport to be comprehensive; any such claims are doomed to fail.

A limited number of academic articles can only shed light on some issues and possibly direct attention to matters as yet unexplored. The articles in this volume not only represent the perspectives and concerns of their authors, but also my interests as a guest editor. Apart from Tel-Aviv as their subject matter, these articles explore issues that cluster around the cultural and urban history of Tel-Aviv. The view offered in this volume is partial rather than panoramic. However, it is my understanding that these articles offer new perspectives for better understanding Tel-Aviv and its history.

The centennial celebration belongs to a local tradition that began in 1929, when Tel-Aviv celebrated its 20th anniversary. My own article, "Tel-Aviv's Birthdays: Anniversary Celebrations of the First Hebrew City 1929–1959", offers an analysis of three successive anniversary celebrations of Tel-Aviv as an aspect of the cultural and political history of the city. It suggests that the anniversaries examined belong to the foundational phase of Tel-Aviv's history, when the conceptualization of the city in terms of a redemptive vision of national revival reigned supreme in the normative discourse of the city.

In his article "From 'European Oasis' to Downtown New York: The Image of Tel-Aviv in School Textbooks", Yoram Bar-Gal investigates the portrayal of Tel-Aviv in geography textbooks in Hebrew. He asserts that although lacking the prestige of literary works, geography textbooks provide a historical record of cultural perceptions of Tel-Aviv. In his historical analysis, he shows how well-defined ideological and cultural perspectives underlie the portrayal of Tel-Aviv in geography textbooks.

The next three articles address aspects of literary history by exploring specific literary constructions of Tel-Aviv. In her article "*Der eko fun goles*: 'The Spirit of Tel-Aviv' and the Remapping of Jewish Literary History", Barbara Mann offers an interpretive analysis of Reuben Joffe's *Tel-Aviv: Poema*, a lesser-known, book-length series of Yiddish poems published in Buenos Aires in 1937. Underlying the analysis is the suggestion that "Exile

is . . . at the center of Tel-Aviv's identity as an urban space—an identity that was deeply informed and shaped by the city's literary representation." A journey in a literary universe where genres and identities are formed, reformed, and performed, the article examines conventional assumptions about Tel-Aviv and the emergent Hebrew literary culture in the *Yishuv*.

Aminadav Dykman's article, "A Poet and a City in Search of a Myth: On Shlomo Skulsky's Tel-Aviv Poems", focuses on Shlomo Skulsky's 1947 collection of poems *Let me sing to you Tel-Aviv*. The author acquaints the reader with the poet and presents a detailed analysis of his Tel-Aviv poem. He discusses how Skulsky constructs a poetic topography of the city and renders its early history in terms of a personal memory that could not be his. He further claims that the poet was engaged in investing Tel-Aviv, the new city founded on sand dunes, with a mythic aura: "Skulsky did offer an innovative 'solution' for the problem of a non-existent mythical past: simply, Tel-Aviv's mythical aspect is to reside not in its past, but in its future. Tel-Aviv, according to him, is predestined to become a mythical city."

Both Mann and Dykman expand on literary genres; interestingly, both refer to Russian literature and to Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*, which is iconic of the myth of Saint Petersburg. In her article "Decay and Death: *Urban Topoi in Literary Depictions of Tel-Aviv*", Rachel Harris examines four literary works *that share the centrality of Tel-Aviv in the narrative and the suicide of one or more protagonists*: Ya'akov Shabtai's *Past Continuous* (1977), Binyamin Tammuz's *Requiem for Na'aman* (1978), Yehudit Katzir's *Closing the Sea* (1990), and Etgar Keret's *Kneller's Happy Campers* (2000). Harris claims that *though the urban topoi employed in these literary works seem to challenge the traditional Zionist narrative of Tel-Aviv, the literary depiction of Tel-Aviv "as a modern metropolis signifies the city's ultimate success"*.

Following the exploration of literary constructions and poetic spaces are four articles that deal with various aspects of Tel-Aviv's urban environment and its history. In his "The 1925 Master Plan for Tel-Aviv by Patrick Geddes", Volker M. Welter sheds new light on the relationship between Tel-Aviv and modernity. His article examines the ideas about the modern city that Patrick Geddes, the Scottish natural scientist and town planner, had to offer and which fascinated prominent Zionists of the period. Welter's contention is that in connection with the Zionist settlement project, "The attraction of Geddes rested on his ideas about cities and their planning into a synergistic concept of large-scale regional planning . . . and the integration of "urban and rural ways of life into a regional civilization or region-city". In particular, as the article shows, Geddes's town-plan for Tel-Aviv espoused the idea that Jaffa and Tel-Aviv, the old town and the modern township

to the north, must work and grow together. Moreover, Welter argues that Geddes's plan for an extension for Balrampur in India, and the plan for historic Edinburgh, Geddes' Scottish hometown, are two crucial precursors for the master plan of modern Tel-Aviv.

In his article 'Soundscapes of Urban Development: Tel-Aviv in the 1920s and 1930s', Arnon Golan's point of departure is that with the growth of Tel-Aviv, noise and complaints about noise belonged to the experience of life in the city: "Debates and conflicts over regulation and control of urban soundscapes were an aspect of urban growth." As the article shows, complaints of residents about noise tell us not only about aspects of everyday- and night-life in the city, but also about social norms and cultural conventions shared and contested by residents and enforced by the authorities in charge of public order—with partial success only.

In their article "Preserving Urban Heritage: From Old Jaffa to Modern Tel-Aviv", Nurit Alfassi and Roy Fabian write about the processes leading to the preservation of urban heritage in Tel-Aviv. As they compare the preservation of Old Jaffa in the early 1960s with the White City in the 1990s, they highlight the role of *Ideological Developers* in promoting the idea of preservation in general and specific preservation policies in particular. Ideological developers consist of small groups of unorganized and unaffiliated individuals who advocate an idea. As the authors show in detail, the preservation of Old Jaffa and the White City owe much to the efforts of such ideological developers committed to preservation of segments of Tel-Aviv–Yafo urban fabric threatened by demolition or decay.

In the final article, "The Balconies of Tel-Aviv: Urban Politics and Cultural History", by Carolin Aronis-Reinherz, the notion of closure is pertinent: the 'closed' balconies of Tel-Aviv belong to a public discourse of the city's aesthetic appearance and social well-being. Underlying her analysis is an understanding that a balcony is a hybrid, belonging to both the domestic sphere and the public realm; its liminal character renders it susceptible to different uses and interpretations. Aronis-Reinherz employs historical perspective to document not only the different architectural styles of various periods, but also the diverse tactics used by residents of Tel-Aviv to 'domesticate' the balcony and the counter-measures of the authorities in charge. In this sense, balconies are not only a visual aspect of the physical city, but also an authentic statement made by individuals who make the city their home.

NOTES

1. *The Marker*, no. 93, October 2008 [Hebrew].
2. *Davar*, 25 April 1934 [Hebrew].
3. David Avidan, *Tel-Aviv's Nights with David Avidan* (Tel-Aviv, 1983) [Hebrew].
4. Natan Alterman, *Little Tel-Aviv* (Tel-Aviv, 1979) [Hebrew].
5. Yoram Bronovsky, "On the origins of mythos Tel-Aviv", *Ha'aretz*, 31 August 1979 [Hebrew].
6. *The Times*, 16 February 2008.
7. *New York Times*, 20 July 2008.