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Tel-Aviv's Birthdays: Anniversary Celebrations of the First Hebrew City 1929–1959

ABSTRACT

The article explores three successive anniversary celebrations of Tel-Aviv—1929, 1934, and 1959—as an aspect of the cultural and political history of the city. The three anniversaries examined in this paper were celebrated in the “First Hebrew City” phase of the cultural history of Tel-Aviv and, accordingly, their major theme was Tel-Aviv as a Zionist success story. The historical analysis of three successive anniversaries affords an opportunity to discern continuities in the form of festive patterns and recurrent ideological themes. It also highlights period-specific concerns and political contingencies underlying particular anniversary celebrations.

ON 2 MAY 1929, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ITS HISTORY, TEL-AVIV celebrated the anniversary of its founding in 1909. In 1934 it commemorated its silver jubilee, and in 1959 its golden jubilee. As civic celebrations, anniversaries commemorate significant events in the history of a nation, a political regime, a religion, an institution, or culture in general. Unlike national holidays that celebrate the founding of states and regimes, the anniversaries of the founding of cities are not celebrated annually, but rather in association with outstanding years. Jubilees, centennials, and bi-centennials are common, though not an obligatory norm.

As with a birthday, a city anniversary commemorates the beginning of the city and provides a calendric framework for the celebration of historical continuity that culminates in the present. Potentially shrouded with pathos and notions of destiny, the celebration of a city anniversary is saturated by the rhetoric of commitment to the city, pride in its history and optimism

about its future. Anniversary celebrations are not spontaneous. They are officially sponsored cultural productions. Promoted and produced by local elites, birthday parties of cities evince specific political priorities, ideological agendas, economic interests, and cultural conventions that underlie the form and content of the commemorative fabric and festive texture of the anniversary celebration.

The article explores three successive anniversary celebrations of Tel-Aviv as an aspect of the cultural and political history of the city. The underlying premise is that an anniversary celebration is a cultural production of the city that accords with notions about the city and its history prevailing among local political and cultural elites. The three anniversaries examined here were celebrated in the “First Hebrew City” phase of the cultural history of Tel-Aviv; accordingly, their major theme was Tel-Aviv as a Zionist success story. The historical analysis of three successive anniversaries affords an opportunity to discern continuities in the form of ceremonial patterns and recurrent themes that belonged to the ideational make-up of the city. It also highlights period-specific concerns and political contingencies that underlay particular anniversary celebrations.

1929—THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY

In a letter he wrote a few days after Passover 5689 (late April–early May 1929), Chaim Nahman Bialik reported:

The festivals (sic!) were full of much noise and ado, perhaps a little too much. Pessach is becoming a vessel filled with quite a few celebrations that together fill our world to capacity.¹

For the Yishuv, Passover of that year was a chain of commemorative festivals. First was Passover, the tradition-laden paradigmatic festival of Jewish memory. On the third day, Sunday, a mass event held in Petach-Tikva marked the silver jubilee of the Second Aliya. Produced by the central committee of the *Histadrut*, this anniversary was a celebration of the Zionist labor movement. Wednesday, May 1, was the last day of Passover. A public event at *Beit Ha'am* in Tel-Aviv attracted some 4,000 people. Leaders of the Labor movement, among them David Ben-Gurion and Eliezer Kaplan, addressed the assembled audience.

The day after Passover, Thursday, May 2 (22 Nissan) Tel-Aviv celebrated the twentieth anniversary in a series of festive events.² “Tel-Aviv’s

Day” was extensively reported in the Hebrew press. The entire city was decorated with flags. The celebration consisted of three successive events. The opening event took place at the central hall of the Exhibition and Fair of Palestine and the Near East in the area of the future central bus station. Attended by the founders of the city, members of the municipal council, dignitaries of the Yishuv, representatives of Zionist organizations and of Jewish agricultural settlements, and the British governor of the district, the event consisted of a series of speeches by Mayor Meir Dizengoff and guests who praised and complimented the First Hebrew City.³ As a symbolic gesture, the mayor gave the first child born in Tel-Aviv a special certificate proclaiming him “the first natural citizen of the city of Tel-Aviv”.⁴

The opening ceremony concluded by sunset. Thereafter a parade of Tel-Aviv's children and the founders, followed by the police orchestra, marched from the fairgrounds to the municipality building lit with a crown positioned on its top. While arriving at the municipality building, the children filled the street, whereas the founders stood on the balcony facing Bialik Street. After a short speech by Dizengoff and the singing of *Ha'tikva*, the crowd dispersed. The last leg was the jubilee ball at the exhibition hall. Dizengoff shared his reminiscences of Tel-Aviv's early years with the audience. The artistic part of the evening included music, dance, and actor Rafael Klachkin reciting Tel-Aviv poems by Zalman Shneur and Yehuda Karni.

Anniversary commemorations of a founding act celebrate not only the beginning as a privileged moment in history, but also the thread of historical continuity that connects the beginning with the present. Designated “Tel-Aviv's Day”, the anniversary celebration sanctified the founding of Tel-Aviv as an extraordinary event that, beyond its obvious significance for the city, also had extraordinary significance in Zionist history: “This festival we celebrate today is neither the founders' only, nor of this city alone: it is a celebration for all of us, for the entire Hebrew *Yishuv* in the land, for Zionism, and for the movement of national revival in Israel.”⁵

According to standard Zionist interpretation, the founding of Tel-Aviv was of a city created *ex-nihilo* from the sand dunes, a heroic act suffused with redemptive meanings. Dizengoff reiterated conventional notions about the vision that directed the founders of the city:

[. . .] On this day we started to fulfill a daring dream to build on sands of wilderness, on desolate seashore, an eternal edifice, a shelter for the spirit and vigor of the Jew, the first Hebrew city in the time of our new revival and redemption.⁶


עיריית תל-אביב
מודעה עירונית מס. 10
יובל העשרים ליסוד תל-אביב

עיריית תל-אביב מכריזה את יום החמשי
כ"ב ניסן תרפ"ט (2 למאי 1929)
ליום תל-אביב.

סדר החגיגות לכבוד יום זה יהיה כדלקמן:

- א. **תגית היובל** בשעה 2: אחר הצהריים תערך על מגרש התערוכה חגיגת היובל בנוכחות מיסדי העיר וראשוני בניה; ב"כ כל נאמנות הישוב העברי בארץ, ב"כ המוסדות האומיים וכי. לפוזמנים הכניסה למגרש החגיגה שבתערוכה אר ורס לפי ההזמנות המיוחדות. הכניסה לקהל למגרש התערוכה בכרטיסי כניסה כרגיל.
- ב. **תהלוכת ילדי תל-אביב** באמצע החגיגה תופיע במגרש החגיגה תהלוכת ילדי תל-אביב אשר תצא מחצר הגמנסיה בעברה דרך רחובות הרצל, לידנבלום, אלנבי והחשמל.
- ג. **תהלוכת היובל** כנמר החגיגה תצא תהלוכת היובל ממגרש החגיגה אשר בתערוכה אל העירייה החדר רחובות החשמל, אלנבי, וביאליס.
- ד. בתהלוכה זו אשר תלך בלויית לפידים ישתתפו ילדי תל-אביב מיסדי העיר, חברי המועצה הנבחרת והמומנים המיוחדים.
- ה. בהגיע תהלוכת היובל למגרש שלפני בית העירייה יבססו חתני היובל מיסדי תל-אביב ויופיעו לפני המהלך על הגומטרא.
- ו. בנגינת התזמורת תנגן החגיגה.
- ז. **נשף היובל** בערב יערך באולם הנשפים שבתערוכה נשף היובל בהשתתפות ילדי תל-אביב ותלמידי תל-אביב והאומנים העולמיים איגור ומרטו.
- ח. הכניסה לנשף רק לפי כרטיסים אשר עד מחזירים ומסומות מכירתם תתפרסם הודעה מיוחדת.
- ט. **סיכות היובל של תל-אביב** במשך כל היום תמכרנה ברחובות העיר סיכות היובל של תל-אביב והחגיגה על כל אורחי העיר להתקשט בסיכות אלה. (מחיר סיכות נחושת – 30 מיל, סיכות של כסף 50 מיל).
- י. כהל' אורחי העיר ותושבי העיר מתבקשים לשמור את כתיבתם בלילי האומיים, שטחים וכו' לכבוד היום.
- יא. כהל' אורחי העיר ותושבי העיר מתבקשים לעזוב בשמירה על הסדר וכסוד התהלוכה להתייחס רק על המרחבות לאורך הכבישים ולהשאיר את אלה פגרים למעבר החפשי של התהלוכה.

י"ח ניסן תרפ"ט
 28.4.29.

עיריית תל-אביב.

Figure 1: Public Announcement:
Tel-Aviv's twentieth anniversary celebration, 2 May 1929.

A commemoration of beginning, the celebration of Tel-Aviv's 20th anniversary was also a beginning of new tradition that culminated in the 2009 centennial celebration. Accordingly, the decisions made in preparation for the 20th anniversary were of special significance since they entailed some issues of principle that, when determined, potentially provided the "launching pad" for a new tradition. One was the shared sense that an anniversary celebration of the founding of Tel-Aviv was an appropriate and viable cultural option; others were scheduling the anniversary, which also entailed dating the beginning of Tel-Aviv; and the shaping of the festive texture of the celebration and the various themes that permeated the anniversary.

There was no issue as to the appropriateness of celebrating the anniversary of Tel-Aviv's founding, which suggests that this was considered a proper, even self-evident issue rather than a novelty that needed some explaining. It seems plausible to assume that the models for emulation were St. Petersburg and Odessa, which celebrated their bicentennial and centennial in 1903 and 1894, respectively. Dizengoff—mayor, producer, and master of ceremonies of the celebration—was probably acquainted with these Russian anniversary celebrations, and for him, as for others who immigrated from the Russian Empire to the Land of Israel, an anniversary celebration of the founding of the city was a proper, even warranted, option.⁷

Fascination with anniversaries is a necessary condition for commemorative celebrations. However, anniversary celebration of the founding of a city is an option rather than an obligatory norm. Moshe Glickson, the editor of *Ha'aretz*, commented that celebrating Tel-Aviv's 20th anniversary was indeed "unusual".⁸ Tel-Aviv celebrated a Vicennial, a rather uncommon anniversary in connection with a commemoration of the founding of cities. Moreover, by 1929 Tel-Aviv was not only a young, but also a small city of 40,000 residents.⁹

The official 20th anniversary preparations began in December 1928, in accordance with the understanding that Tel-Aviv was founded in 1909. A different issue was defining the founding event to be commemorated and distinguished by an anniversary celebration. Dizengoff addressed this issue in *Ha'aretz*, noting that no one could "safely say" on which day of 1909 Tel-Aviv was born.¹⁰ He enumerated different possibilities: the day of the contract between the founders and the Anglo-Palestine Bank; the day the first plot was bought; and, the day the corner stone of the first building was laid.

Dizengoff noted, "The idea to found a Hebrew city was not born in one day." The implication was that no one particular day could be singled

out unequivocally as the day on which Tel-Aviv was founded. The anniversary celebration took place on May 2 (22 Nissan)—a day after the second holiday of Passover, which coincided with May 1, the traditional workers' holiday. Notably, Tel-Aviv Day was celebrated two days after the 20th of Nissan in 1909 when the lottery for the plots of land was conducted, an event that later came to be considered as the founding of Tel-Aviv.¹¹ This event was captured in a photo that became an iconic representation of the moment when the city "began".

Dizengoff did not mention this event as Tel-Aviv's founding event. Moreover, according to his explanation, the relevant issue in regard to scheduling the anniversary celebration was that this was the day that followed Passover, a festival of national remembrance. "We have established the 22 of Nissan—the day following Passover—as a holiday, as the birthday of our city, forever. Every year on this day we will render an account of our deeds." He added another commemorative dimension to the choice of day for celebrating the city's founding by noting that on 11 May 1921, Tel-Aviv was granted municipal rights in the form of a constitution, a formal liberation from the "guardianship of Jaffa" and the beginning of the city's independence.

Beyond commemorating the city's founding, a major theme of "Tel-Aviv's" Day was the anniversary as a point of transition in the city's history. Glickson commented that the anniversary had the air of "an end of a period and a beginning of a new one, it feels both like a summary and like charting new roads for the future".¹² In this interpretation, the anniversary both commemorated the beginning and proclaimed a new start. The issue was that at this stage of its history, Tel-Aviv was recovering from the severe economic crisis that had befallen the city in 1926–1927 and produced a tremendous sense of despair.¹³ The 1929 anniversary celebration served as an occasion to proclaim a new era in the history of Tel-Aviv and to generate optimism about the city, which shortly before seemed to be a failed enterprise. In this interpretation, the anniversary celebration proclaimed the first 20 years as a "foundational phase": "In these twenty years we prepared a vast number of foundation stones, now is the time to erect the building."¹⁴

The notion that the city's first 20 years had been but a prolonged act of founding also made it possible to acknowledge mistakes and failures and to admit misgivings and self-doubt, while not losing sight of the larger picture—the city that emerged after all these trials and tribulations to celebrate its anniversary. Construed as a watershed between the past and the future, the anniversary provided an opportunity to look back with the modesty of hindsight and to look forward with measured optimism:

The twenty years that we passed were years of experimenting and searching, pains of creation, difficult beginnings and crises, a sort of childhood disease. From today on we enter a new period of systematic and gradual work, knowing the roads leading to the destination we aspire to.¹⁵

Glickson, too, was clear about the less than perfect historic record of the city: "She knew many failures, she committed many sins . . . We should not whitewash mistakes and not cover up the sins . . ." ¹⁶ Yet beyond the professed readiness to concede errors of judgment and past blunders, the celebration of the anniversary was also a vindication of the city as a Zionist project and a refutation of the notion that became popular a few years before that Tel-Aviv was a lost cause. For Glickson, "The celebration of Tel-Aviv's twentieth anniversary is a celebration of victory." In his view, "The doomsayers were proven wrong. Tel-Aviv withstood the test."

For Dizengoff, the victory of Tel-Aviv was also the victory of the middle class that vindicated his view, that capitalist principles should guide the Zionist enterprise. For him, Tel-Aviv embodied a vision, which the historian Ilan Troen succinctly terms the vision of the "bourgeois city".¹⁷ Promoting commerce and industry as the economic foundations of the city, Dizengoff rejected socialist principles and raised the banner of free enterprise and firmly believed in private capital, in contrast to national capital, as the appropriate instrument for building up the land:

We pride ourselves in this city of ours, which has been entirely built with Hebrew hands, Jewish capital and Jewish will, with no distinctions of class. Tel-Aviv was founded by the initiative of private citizens . . . The up-building of our land and its revival will not be the result of the class system.¹⁸

Davar, the organ of the Histadrut [Labor Federation], offered a different perspective. The anniversary editorial noted that the doubts regarding Tel-Aviv and its prospects did not disappear even after the city's new prosperity.¹⁹ Whereas Dizengoff emphasized the middle class and free enterprise as the pillars of Tel-Aviv's success, from the perspective of labor Zionism, beyond trade and industry, Jewish workers and municipal independence were the two crucial factors that would decide the fate of the city. The 1 May mass rally in Tel-Aviv demonstrated the power of Labor as a political power in the city and as an ideological alternative to the bourgeois city.

For Dizengoff, Tel-Aviv Day served as a platform to propagate his vision of and views about the city he headed. The vision of Tel-Aviv as an aspiring center of international trade was evinced in the decision to

associate the anniversary celebration with the fourth Exhibition and Fair of Palestine and the Near East that opened at the beginning of April in Tel-Aviv.²⁰ As Dizengoff explained,

The time of the exhibition coincides with the twentieth anniversary of the city of Tel-Aviv, which is a permanent demonstration and a living exhibition of everything that Jewish pioneers can accomplish when they enjoy freedom of action while building the national home in their homeland.²¹

This was to become a tradition, as Dizengoff asserted in his opening speech of the anniversary celebration: "The exhibition and the fair will be held annually and our city will be a trading city that connects the east and the west."²²

The link between the fair and the anniversary celebration was pronounced also in terms of a ceremonial geography. The ceremonial structure of the celebration consisted of three successive parts: the opening ceremony at the fairground, a parade to City Hall, and the ball at the fairground. The parade that converged at City Hall emphasized its symbolic prominence as both a building and an institution. The fairground provided space to accommodate the many invited guests. Beyond practical considerations, the fairground was also a statement about the vision of Tel-Aviv as an aspiring center of trade for Palestine and the Near East.

The different themes of the anniversary celebration were presented in speeches and newspaper articles and were embedded into the ceremonial texture of the celebration. As a living testimony to the heroic endeavor of founding, the founders were distinguished guests of honor in the public events. The children of Tel-Aviv who took part in the parade to City Hall represented the future of the city. The staged meeting between the founders and the children at City Hall at the end of the parade was a gesture of much symbolic resonance: it signified in ritual form the obligation of future generations to the vision that underlay the founding of the city.

Significantly, the representative of Tel-Aviv's youth at the opening ceremony was the first boy born in the city in 1910. Celebrated as 'the first natural citizen of Tel-Aviv', the first-born child was emblematic of the success of Tel-Aviv: for the natural citizens born and raised in the city, Tel-Aviv was a hometown in the same way as the Land of Israel was the homeland of the *Sabra*, the native-born Jews of Palestine, and later Israel.

Unlike monuments, ceremonies are ephemeral. Their later existence is confined to personal memories of those who shared the experience, but personal memories, unless recorded in writing or in other media, are also of

limited duration. The Hebrew newspapers recorded the public events as well as the official speeches for future generations, but their public resonance was nil the day after they were printed. The municipality distributed a commemorative pin, which was small and of limited relevance once the celebration was over except for future collectors of Tel-Aviv paraphernalia. Notably the municipality initiated no major architectural project to integrate the memory of the anniversary into the architectural fabric of the city.

One exception was the anthology edited by Aharon Vardi. This literary monument was an anthology of a variety of references to Tel-Aviv, a comprehensive collection of speeches and reports about Tel-Aviv. Published at the end of 1928, the book-like monument, *The City of Wonders*,²³ recorded the city's first 20 years. The designation "city of wonders" was common in this period. It represented the enthusiasm shared by many a commentator for Tel-Aviv by virtue of its being ". . . one of the wondrous creations that our people created in this generation of the reviving Land of Israel."²⁴

Notwithstanding Vardi's anthology, one lasting effect of the 1929 anniversary celebration was that as a first of its kind, it set a precedent. It not only rendered an anniversary celebration a viable option, it also paved the way for the tradition of anniversary celebrations.

1934—THE SILVER JUBILEE

On 12 January 1934, Tel-Aviv was formally accorded city status. Since its 20th anniversary, it had transformed from a middle-size town to a large city of 100,000 residents and some 6,000 buildings. Following the immigration of German Jews, the city experienced a construction boom that affected the shape of the city and its character.²⁵ New streets, buildings, coffee shops, factories, and cars lent the city the appearance of a bustling metropolis.²⁶ Understood in terms of tradition rather than innovation, the idea to celebrate the 25th anniversary was raised on the municipal agenda in October 1933. According to the first draft of a program for the coming celebration, "All the festivities should take on the symbolic character of national revival in the homeland and demonstrate the economic and cultural accomplishments of the first Hebrew city."²⁷ The proposal also linked the festivities to the Levant Fair, ". . . which is an organic part of the Tel-Avivan creation." In its first meeting, the jubilee commission set up by the municipality decided to conduct the anniversary celebration in conjunction with the Levant Fair.²⁸ In March 1934 the municipal council pronounced that the celebrations would coincide with the fair and ". . . in the form of a big

demonstration of the accomplishments of The First Hebrew City with Mr. M. Meir Dizengoff at its head.”²⁹

Following the precedent set in 1929, the anniversary celebration was linked to the fair, which in 1932 was renamed Levant Fair. In 1934 the international fair was expanded and relocated to the new fairground in the north of Tel-Aviv, at the mouth of the Yarkon River. Notably, Mayor Dizengoff was also in charge of the fair in accordance with his vision of Tel-Aviv as an international trade center. Glickson elaborated on the connection between the fair and the jubilee, “The Exhibition is a fine framework for the silver jubilee, a superb center for the celebrations. The exhibition and the Levant Fair are evidence of the power of creation and the future of Tel-Aviv . . .”³⁰ With 29 states represented and 12 national pavilions, the Levant Fair was also meant to assert the place of Tel-Aviv as “a center and key for the economic development of the Near East”. For Dizengoff, the fair was the “. . . crowning glory of Tel-Aviv’s activity and in it the entire wonderful symphony of will, faith and creation are reflected.”³¹

Notwithstanding the message it entailed about the vision of Tel-Aviv as an aspiring international center of trade, the decision to associate the anniversary celebration with the fair was at the expense of the commemorative function of the anniversary. In 1934 the anniversary celebration opened on 1 May. However, according to the Hebrew calendar that year, it coincided with the 16 of Iyar, a date that had no historical significance in connection with the founding of Tel-Aviv. A by-product of this dating was that the anniversary celebration coincided with the festival of Lag Ba’omer.

The 25th anniversary celebration was larger and lasted longer than the twentieth anniversary celebration. Dizengoff consulted some of the prominent citizens of the city regarding the upcoming anniversary celebrations.³² Bialik opined that the celebrations should be limited to three days and to be concluded at *Lag Ba’Omer*. He also favored issuing a commemorative medal and called for “the beginning of a new project”, such as a public garden.

On 26 April the Levant Fair was opened. Mayor Dizengoff and the High Commissioner gave speeches. The mayor referred to the fair as “Tel-Aviv’s silver jubilee fair”; he also noted that the fair was “the most prominent demonstration of the city’s achievements”.³³ Although not all national pavilions were opened, during the first five days some 100,000 visitors attended the fair.³⁴ On Sunday evening, 1 May, the opening ceremony of the city’s silver jubilee took place at the fair’s amphitheater. Yehuda Karni’s “Hymn to Tel-Aviv” was sung for the first and last time in public. On stage were the founders, members of the municipal council, and representatives of 35 Jewish communities from abroad. In the opening speech, Dizengoff

reiterated that Tel-Aviv was the “center of national aspirations and the national creation of the entire Israeli nation”.³⁵ The High Commissioner did not attend the ceremony in person, but in the speech read on his behalf he congratulated “the wonderful city” on its silver jubilee.

The repertoire and the duration of Tel-Aviv's silver jubilee outperformed previous public festivals in the city; to that was added the international flair exuded by the Levant Fair, where many of the public events under the rubric “today in the fair” took place: sport competitions, the Lag Ba'Omer bonfires, and a theatrical show—“Tel-Aviv a daughter city in Israel”. Written by Avigdor Hameiri and based on the original minutes of the founders' deliberations, the “Americaniada”—an allusion to the popular Purim *Adloyada*—re-created a meeting of the founders, played by leading actors of the Habimah Theater.³⁶ Notably the show exuded a sense of nostalgia to by-gone times.

The ceremonial repertoire of the silver jubilee also included elements that were first introduced in the 20th celebration. Prominent among these was the parade of Tel-Aviv's children going to City Hall and the reception there by the mayor and the founders.³⁷ In accordance with the emphasis on the symbolic significance of the first born children of Tel-Aviv, which also figured prominently in the 20th celebration, each pupil received a picture of the first son and first grandson of Tel-Aviv with Bialik's poem commemorating the birth of Tel-Aviv's first grandchild.

The founders were assigned a prominent role in the ceremonial texture of the 20th anniversary celebration. As both a founder and acting mayor, Dizengoff served in 1929 as the master of ceremonies; however, in 1934 he was elevated to a special symbolic status that resonated with his title “the city's father”. In March 1934, the city council resolved that the anniversary celebration would be “in the form of a big demonstration of the accomplishments of *The First Hebrew City* with Mr. Dizengoff at its head”.³⁸ A special honor was bestowed on him on 3 May, naming after him a newly built thoroughfare—*Rehov Dizengoff*—designed to connect the city center with the fairgrounds in the north.³⁹ Notably, the new project requested by Bialik was neither a public garden nor a museum nor a monument to the founding of the city, but a commemoration of the mayor.

Following the precedent set when the city celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1929, the primary theme of the silver jubilee of 1934 was Tel-Aviv as a special achievement of the Jewish people and of national revival. Unlike 1929, in 1934 Tel-Aviv was not “under probation”: its meteoric development in the early 1930s indicated that the city was resilient and progress was what lay ahead. Unlike 1929, the denunciation of the city as a legitimate



עיריית תל-אביב

מודעה עירונית מס. 9

לפתיחת רחוב דיזנגוף

היום 3.5.34 בשעה 4³⁰ אחה"צ בדיוק יתקיים

טכס הפתיחה הרשמית

של רחוב דיזנגוף

הטכס יתקיים ברחבה שבמרכז תל-אביב.
הכניסה למקום הטכס עבור האורחים המוזמנים
תהיה דרך רח' ברכוכבא מצד רחוב בוגרצוב.
קהל תושבי ואזרחי העיר מוזמן בזה להשתתף בחגיגה זו
בהמוניו ולעזור להצלחתה ע"י שמירה על הסדר וציות
להוראות הסדרנים.

עיריית תל-אביב

י"ח אייר, תרצ"ד 3.5.34

Figure 2: Public announcement:
 Opening ceremony of Dizengoff Street, 3 May 1934.

Zionist endeavor was only on the margin of the public discourse of the city. In his speech at the opening ceremony, Dizengoff referred to contemporary anti-Semitic propaganda maintaining that Jews, members of an allegedly “defective race”, could be productive and that Tel-Aviv was the proof that all that was needed was will and faith.

The silver jubilee of Tel-Aviv was a celebration of triumph. Yet the obligatory rhetoric of praises and compliments was to an extent marred by concerns about the city losing its “civilized” character and becoming unruly as the result of rapid growth. Such concerns had been voiced by prominent public figures alarmed by what they perceived as the cultural and moral decay of the city following its unprecedented recent growth. Notably, Bialik warned that Tel-Aviv was facing the danger of becoming “a levantine city, like other coastal cities . . .”.⁴⁰ In his diagnosis, “Our Tel-Aviv is sick.”⁴¹

Tel-Aviv’s silver jubilee provided an opportunity to address the concerns about the alleged vices and flaws of the city. Commenting on the anniversary celebration, the editor of *Ha’poel Ha’tzair*, the ideological organ of Zionist Labor warned, “It may be a large and wonderful city, very noisy, perhaps with a shiny façade, pseudo-European, yet socially and culturally hollow and corrupt from within.”⁴² In his speech at the opening ceremony, Dizengoff maintained that the future mission of those committed to the city was to mold its cultural character. In a testament-like appeal he challenged the future leaders of the city:

You, who will be entrusted with the fate of our city after me, watch over its cultural character; not houses, streets and gardens constitute a town but the qualities of its residents; the language, the love of work and creation; equality, freedom, the belief in our power and the will to live a life of dignity and self-reliance. Uphold our national ideals, since the existence of our city is dependent on them.⁴³

The Hebrew press reported on the events included in the festive program and printed the highlights of the speeches by dignitaries, which created a sense of popular support for the city and its mayor, the notion of a common cause between leaders and residents alike predominated.

Criticism was mainly limited to the alleged failures of the city to fulfill the ideals projected unto it rather than to the festive program devised by the municipal authorities. One exception was a critical evaluation of the celebration in *Davar* two weeks later. The venue suggests ulterior political motives, though these were not spelled out in the article. In an emphatic tone, the author stated that “No. The city did not celebrate. The city elders

celebrated themselves.”⁴⁴ It also claimed that the decision to relocate the festivities to the fairground in the north of the city had the effect that the celebration had not been felt in the city itself: “The city remained mundane and dust-covered as always.” The author further argued that the celebration was provincial, like a fire-brigade celebrating the 10th anniversary of its first pump.

The reception for the representatives of the Jewish Diaspora on the last evening of festivities concluded the anniversary celebration with a statement about Tel-Aviv as a “center of the Israeli nation”. The fair lasted longer, a mixture of pleasure and business opportunities that cemented Tel-Aviv’s reputation as a center of international trade. Unlike 1929, the municipality promoted the publication of a book on Tel-Aviv. Edited by Alter Droyanov, *Sefer Tel-Aviv* was meant to be a textual monument. When the book was published it was also a commemorative token to Dizengoff who died in September 1936.

In September 1938 mayor Israel Rokach (Dizengoff’s successor) announced that, “It is not the right time to conduct celebrations in Tel-Aviv.”⁴⁵ The issue was the city’s forthcoming 30th anniversary the following year. Though laconic, the reason was clear: British mandatory Palestine was still in a state of emergency following the Arab uprising that began in April of 1936, Jews were severely persecuted in Germany and in Poland, and the clouds of an international conflict were gathering in Europe. Rokach, unlike his predecessor, was less appreciative of the festive dimension of municipal life. Dizengoff lived up to his title as the city’s father; Rokach was mainly busy with running the city he headed in a time of acute crisis.

Belatedly, the founders and veteran citizens of Tel-Aviv gathered in February 1940 to mark the anniversary and decided to publish an anthology of essays, reports, memories, and photos of Tel-Aviv in its first thirty years. However, this downsized project never materialized.

1959—THE GOLDEN JUBILEE

In his introduction to an anthology published on the occasion of Tel-Aviv’s golden jubilee in 1959, Mayor Haim Levanon asserted that contemporary Tel-Aviv was proof that the project conceived by those who envisioned building a “mother city in Israel” had been crowned with success.⁴⁶ Like earlier anniversaries, the golden Jubilee was dedicated to celebrating the triumph of “The First Hebrew City” as a modern city. At this stage of its history, defining Tel-Aviv as The First Hebrew City was more a statement about

history than a declaration of allegiance to the Zionist vision underlying its founding.

However, Tel-Aviv's anniversary celebrations in 1959 were overshadowed by Israel's 10th anniversary, which had been lavishly celebrated all over the country the year before. Moreover, the approaching municipal elections cast a long shadow on the festivities.

Like former anniversary celebrations, Tel-Aviv's golden jubilee was closely linked to the fair. Unlike the former anniversary celebrations, the festive events that commemorated the founding of Tel-Aviv preceded the fair. Tel-Aviv's golden jubilee in 1959 consisted of two items that lay five months apart. The first was scheduled for March 1959 and included a sequence of commemorative and festive events. The second was the jubilee exhibition at the newly built fairground beyond the Yarkon River that was opened on 19 August 1959. Significantly, the scheduling of ceremonial events was devoid of any commemorative meaning in regard to the founding of the city. In his address at the exhibition's opening ceremony, Levanon pointed out that the opening ceremony fell on the 15 of Av, "... which in our tradition is regarded as a day of festivities."⁴⁷

The mayor proclaimed the opening of the festive events at a special meeting of the municipal council on 10 March. On the following day Tel-Aviv's schools marked the anniversary and members of the municipal council made a pilgrimage to Dizengoff's gravesite at the Trumpledor Cemetery. In a festive event held in the evening, the 22 surviving founders were given memorial pins. The culmination of the festive sequence was a grand event at the Culture Hall, with President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi as the guest of honor, who, in his address, recalled the early days of Tel-Aviv.

In his speech at the opening ceremony of the jubilee exhibition, Levanon explained that the municipality preferred not to "waste" money on ephemeral events, "which leave nothing but deficit behind".⁴⁸ Echoing Bialik's suggestion in 1934, he explained: "We thought it appropriate to celebrate our jubilee by launching cultural and economic projects that have a permanent value." The project he referred to was Tel-Aviv's new fairgrounds. Beyond planting a garden and a jubilee grove, the centerpiece of the jubilee was the historical exhibition at the new fairground.

According to the mayor, the jubilee exhibition realized Dizengoff's vision.⁴⁹ The idea was to revive the Levant Fair by building a new exhibition center. The new fairground was to serve international exhibitions and to host future Levant Fairs, the first of which was to be held in 1961. The opening of the jubilee exhibition was also the inauguration of Tel-Aviv's exhibition center.⁵⁰ The main attraction of the jubilee exhibition

was the 1,200 square meter municipality pavilion. According to those in charge, the theme of the exhibition was "Tel-Aviv from sand dunes to the economic and cultural center of the *Yishuv* and the state".⁵¹ The inauguration ceremony was held on 19 August 1959. Minister of the Interior Israel Ben-Yehuda, representing the government, congratulated the assembled 3,000 invited guests: "Those who follow the accomplishments of Tel-Aviv's 50 years stand before a miracle that only the effort of pioneers could realize."⁵²

According to the first program from December 1957, the exhibition was intended "... to reflect the development of the city from her founding through its jubilee and plans for the future."⁵³ The advisory committee was nominated by the mayor in January 1959. Its aim was to outline the program and the master plan of the exhibition in an effort "to give a constructive expression to the ideas and to visually show the dynamic development of the city, its history, patterns of life, the landscape and its future".⁵⁴ Arie Elhanani, who had been actively involved in various Zionist exhibitions since the 1930s, was the chief designer and architect.

Among the various exhibits, the wheel of Tel-Aviv's first stagecoach evoked nostalgia for the early days of the new neighborhood. A painting depicted the contemporary metropolis in an attempt to capture the dynamic character of Tel-Aviv. The municipality's plans for the future were displayed, among them eliminating the slums, developing a park along the seashore, building a highway along the Ayalon River, and cleaning up the sea from sewage. International flavor was provided in a pavilion where 30 cities from abroad were represented by emblems and large photos.

Notwithstanding official emphasis on Tel-Aviv as a modern, to an extent even a cosmopolitan, city, the most popular event of the jubilee and one that had an enduring impact on Israel's popular culture, was the show *Little Tel-Aviv*. Authored by Chaim Hefer and Dan Ben-Amotz, it was performed in the fairgrounds in conjunction with the jubilee exhibition. Whereas the exhibition was an official project meant to be informative and educative, the show was privately produced. It comprised various period reconstructions of life in Tel-Aviv in its early years.⁵⁵ It offered a nostalgic view of the past as an age of innocence and boundless optimism.

Nostalgia was also the theme of Nahum Gutman's book *A Small Town with a Few People* that was also published in 1959. The combination of nostalgia for a bygone past and sense of pride regarding the modern character of the city predominated in the celebration of Tel-Aviv's golden jubilee. On the one hand there was the longing for the old Tel-Aviv, which was increasingly disappearing from the cityscape. On the other hand was a sense

of pride in the new institutions that adorned the city. These included the culture hall and the pavilion for contemporary art (the Helena Rubenstein pavilion), which represented the modern side of Tel-Aviv. The day before the official jubilee ceremony *Ma'ariv* reported that a department store, the first of its kind in Israel, was about to be opened in Tel-Aviv.⁵⁶ Purportedly, this indicated that, "Tel-Aviv, celebrating its jubilee, was receiving a mark of maturity."⁵⁷

In July 1959, only a few weeks before the opening of the jubilee exhibition and the production of *Little Tel-Aviv*, the building of the Herzliya Gymnasium (commonly known as *ha'gymnasia*) was demolished, which for many meant the erasure of history. Public anger at the demolition and the success of the *Little Tel-Aviv* show demonstrated that nostalgic attachment to the city's early history was a shared public sentiment that the official presentation at the jubilee exhibition, with its emphasis on the new and the modern, on development and progress, failed to address.

Overshadowed by the next municipal elections, the jubilee festivities served as an arena for the political struggle between the right of center General Zionists that ran the municipality, and Labor, which dominated the national government. Tel-Aviv's Workers' Council proclaimed, "Tel-Aviv's jubilee is the festival of the organized working class that constitutes fifty percent of the population of Tel-Aviv." David Ben-Gurion, prime minister and leader of *Mapai*, was invited to the Jubilee festivities, but declined to attend. The General Zionists explained why he and his ministers avoided the festivities: "Tel-Aviv, which demonstrates the achievements of productive free enterprise and its capacity to absorb multitudes of new immigrants, destroys the legend of the 'constructive' socialism."⁵⁸ They also repeated Dizengoff's argument raised on the occasion of the city's 20th anniversary, by which Tel-Aviv demonstrated the victory of the principle of free enterprise, and was thus a model for the state as a whole.⁵⁹ In the election Levanon lost to Mordechai Namir of *Mapai*, thereby ending General Zionist political hegemony in Tel-Aviv.

Beyond party politics and election propaganda, the primary theme of the celebration was the triumph of the vision of The First Hebrew City. An article in *Ha'aretz* published on the occasion of the jubilee presented the story of Tel-Aviv as a succession of key events in the history of the development of the city as a unique Zionist creation.⁶⁰ However, according to another commentator, Tel-Aviv's success lay in its becoming a normal, ordinary city that no longer needed self-assurances about its viability.⁶¹ At the current stage of its history, so the commentary said, the First Hebrew City became self-evident, even obvious.

CONCLUSION

Dizengoff's speech at the opening ceremony of Tel-Aviv's silver jubilee envisioned the city celebrating its golden jubilee in 1959. This projection was specifically dated to the next significant anniversary of the city—its golden jubilee. Jubilees are arbitrary signposts. At the same time they also possess substantial power to mentally frame historical progression.

The three anniversaries examined here belong to the First Hebrew City phase of Tel-Aviv, when the conceptualization of the city in terms of a redemptive vision of national revival reigned supreme. As an ideational and ideological construct, The First Hebrew City coincided with the foundational phase of Tel-Aviv. It can be argued that notwithstanding official rhetoric, the golden jubilee in 1959 actually signified the end of this phase in the city's history.

Scheduling the anniversary of a city entails dating its beginning in history. However, as Keith Petersen observed, "[F]ew communities can be said to have a single date when they suddenly 'began'."⁶² The celebration of the 20th anniversary of Tel-Aviv in 1929 roughly coincided with, and therefore implicitly commemorated, the lottery of plots on 11 April 1909. However, in 1929 Dizengoff also specifically noted that no one could safely say on which day of 1909 Tel-Aviv began. When Tel-Aviv marked its silver and golden jubilees in 1934 and 1959, respectively, the ceremonial events were not scheduled according to the date of this historical event. Moreover, the issue of when the city actually began was left open. In 1939 it was specifically stated that "Indeed there are different dates that can represent the beginning of the city, but there is no definite one . . . one can choose a date for convenience."⁶³

However, the notion of a birthday entails a beginning since, "[T]he mind wants to conceive a point in either time or space that marks the beginning of all things."⁶⁴ Despite earlier reservations, Tel-Aviv was later endowed with an officially sanctioned beginning: the lottery of the plots on the 20 of Nissan (11 April 1909). As explained by the official *Centennial Handbook of Tel-Aviv*, the celebration was scheduled for April 2009—"100 years after the famous land raffle",⁶⁵ which marked the birth of the First Hebrew City.

NOTES

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