Young Tel Aviv: A Tale of Two Cities

ANAT HELMAN
The Schusterman Series in Israel Studies

Editors
S. Ilan Troen
Jehuda Reinharz
Sylvia Fuks Fried

The Schusterman Series in Israel Studies publishes original scholarship of exceptional significance on the history of Zionism and the State of Israel. It draws on disciplines across the academy, from anthropology, sociology, political science, and international relations to the arts, history, and literature. It seeks to further an understanding of Israel within the context of the modern Middle East and the modern Jewish experience. There is special interest in developing publications that enrich the university curriculum and enlighten the public at large. The series is published under the auspices of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University.

For a complete list of books in this series, please see www.upne.com

Anat Helman
Young Tel Aviv: A Tale of Two Cities

Nili Scharf Gold
Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel’s National Poet

Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, editors
Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society,
Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii
Introduction 1

CHAPTER ONE

Portrait of a City 11

CHAPTER TWO

Public Events 45

CHAPTER THREE

Tel Aviv’s Consumer Culture 77

CHAPTER FOUR

Entertainment and Leisure 105

CHAPTER FIVE

Subcultures in the First Hebrew City 131
Conclusion 155
Notes 165
References 185
Index 207
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is based on a PhD dissertation submitted to the Hebrew University ten years ago. I wish to express my gratitude to my teachers, Emmanuel Sivan and Hagit Lavsky, for their inspiring supervision.

The primary sources were collected in the Central Zionist Archive, the poster collection at the National Library, the Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research, the Jabotinsky Institute, Bialik House, Kibbutz Afikim library, the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archives, the Jerusalem Cinematheque, Ahad Haam Library and Beit Ariela’s journal collection, the Eliasaf Robinson Collection at Stanford University, and the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town. Thanks are due to all the librarians, archivists, and workers in these institutions. Special thanks to Zonia Raz, Nellie Verzerevsky, and Rivka Pershel-Gershon of the Tel Aviv–Yafo Municipal Historical Archive.

I wish to thank Atalia Helman, Ada Schein, Yael Reshef, Elchanan Reiner, Yael Zerubavel, and Orit Rozin, who read earlier drafts of the book, for all their helpful comments; the staff of the Haifa University Press, which published the Hebrew edition in 2007; the Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Institute and the Association of Israel Studies, for awarding it the Ben-Shalom prize and the Shapiro prize in 2008. Thanks are also due to Danny Helman for the book’s title.

Preparing a book for the Schusterman Series in Israel Studies was a delightful experience. I wish to thank Sylvia Fuks Fried of the Brandeis University Press and Phyllis Deutsch of the University Press of New England, as well as Ilan Troen and Jehuda Reinharz, Jason Warshof, Amanda Dupuis, and Katy Grabill. I am very grateful to Haim Watzman for his attentive and creative translation.
INTRODUCTION

In 1933, a young South African Zionist named Marcia Gitlin wrote up her impressions of her first visit to Palestine for the South African Jewish Chronicle. The first installment, devoted to Tel Aviv, opened with these words:

When I look back now on the days before I visited Palestine and try to recall the conception I had of Tel Aviv I find myself at a loss. I do not really know what I expected to find. This I do remember, that I felt I knew a great deal about this first hundred percent Jewish town. I had fed on the reports of numerous people who had visited it, on the statements of Zionist propagandists and on various photographs that had come my way. From these, no doubt, a picture had been built up in my mind, but whatever it may have been its outlines have become blurred and faded in the live dynamic thing which is the Tel Aviv I have seen that I would scarce recognize it if I saw it today.¹

The city Gitlin visited dated back to 1906, when an association of Zionist Jewish merchants and professionals purchased 120 dunams (30 acres) of land northeast of Jaffa. A predominantly Arab city, Jaffa had a number of Jewish neighborhoods, built at the end of the nineteenth century. The members of the association wanted to escape Jaffa’s crowded and substandard housing by creating a garden suburb. Construction commenced in 1909, and before the year was out the association members had decided to call their neighborhood Tel Aviv. The name, literally “ancient mound of spring,” was the Hebrew translation of the title of Theodor Herzl’s Zionist novel Altneuland (Old-New Land).²

Tel Aviv grew rapidly, but its growth halted suddenly at the outbreak of World War I in 1917. When the fighting approached Palestine, the country’s Turkish rulers expelled the city’s inhabitants. After the British conquest, the exiles returned to their homes and a new era of Tel Aviv’s history began. From a small garden suburb, it quickly turned into a commercial and manufacturing urban center. In 1921, Palestine’s Arabs carried out a series of
attacks on the Yishuv, as the Jewish community in Palestine called itself. Jewish refugees from Jaffa settled in Tel Aviv. That same year, the Mandate administration granted Tel Aviv independent municipal status, and soon thereafter attached Jaffa’s old Jewish neighborhoods to the new city. During the period of the British Mandate, 40 percent of the Jewish immigrants who arrived in Palestine settled in Tel Aviv. Most of the Yishuv’s political, economic, and cultural institutions were located there. The city became the territorial, demographic, and economic center of the Yishuv.³

Tel Aviv’s population, about 2,000 in 1919, swelled during the 1920s, reaching 40,000. By the end of the 1930s, it had quadrupled to 160,000. The municipality estimated that about a quarter of this population growth was due to natural increase, with the rest attributable to immigration into the city. At the beginning of the 1920s, Tel Aviv’s territory totaled 1,400 dunams — slightly more than half a square mile. By the end of the 1930s, it encompassed about two and a half square miles. Its geographical expansion to the east and southeast was blocked by the Arab neighborhoods of Sumil, Salameh, and Sarona, the last a neighborhood built by the German Templar sect. With land in limited supply and demand burgeoning, real estate prices soared upward. The high price of land encouraged intensive, dense construction, including the addition of wings, rooms, and upper stories to existing structures.⁴

Prior to World War I, Tel Aviv’s only manufacturing took place in small workshops. But during the Mandate, with the arrival of new waves of immigrants and the resulting construction boom, the first factories were built, and existing facilities were enlarged. During the 1920s and 1930s, about half the country’s industrial plants were in Tel Aviv, but most of these engaged in small manufacturing enterprises. The city’s location next to the Jaffa port and to a convenient road network allowed it to become a regional and national center for wholesale trade. Retail business also grew rapidly, at an even faster rate than the population. The city’s diverse economy eased the absorption of immigrants, because middle-class Jewish newcomers could often find employment in the professions and occupations they had held in their countries of origin. Since the construction industry was one of the central sources of livelihood in Tel Aviv, the city was especially hard-hit by the recessions of 1923 and 1926–1927, and by the economic crisis of 1936–1941.⁵

From its founding until World War I, Tel Aviv’s affairs were managed by committees elected at general meetings of all the neighborhood’s resi-
dents. In 1921, the British high commissioner declared Tel Aviv an independent town with its own local council. Its affairs remained under the supervision of the British district administration, but the city’s development inevitably led to an expansion of local self-governing powers. During the 1920s, the local council functioned as a full-fledged municipal administration, even though the British authorities officially granted it the status of a “township” only in 1934. Until that date the British insisted on referring to the leadership as a “local council,” a term that implies limited authority, but from the start the local Jewish government called itself the Tel Aviv municipality, and this book will follow that usage.6

Six rounds of municipal elections were held in Tel Aviv during the 1920s and 1930s. The elections were contested by slates, which were awarded seats in proportion to the votes they received. The slates represented the middle classes (called the center or civic factions), the left (workers), the right, and religious and ethnic groups. Following the balloting for the third council, in 1926, the workers’ faction was able to form a governing coalition—not because it had received a plurality, but because of paralyzing dissension among the middle-class factions. But the “Civic Circles,” as the centrists were called, won all the other elections, even if only by a small margin. Meir Dizengoff (1861–1936), a Zionist activist and businessman who had been among the founders of Tel Aviv and who was elected the first chairman of its neighborhood committee in 1911, headed these middle-class coalitions, and with the exception of the interregnum of 1926–1928, he served as mayor continuously until his death.7

Over time, the municipality established a number of departments—a general secretariat, a technical staff, water and lighting, cleaning and sanitation, gardening, education and culture, child care, finance, licensing, and legal. Health affairs were overseen by a health department, encompassing a city hospital, veterinary division, and a medical service for the indigent. The city’s budget required annual approval by the Mandate government, while the laws and regulations it promulgated were enforced by a local police force and municipal court. Many Zionists viewed Tel Aviv, “the first Hebrew city,” as a test case for the viability of Jewish self-government in Palestine. But the Zionist movement generally glorified the agricultural settlements and gave them priority in its planning and budgets. These settlements were perceived as vital for the creation of a territorial base and as a means of transforming the Jews into a “normal” nation of manual laborers. Even though most immigrants preferred to settle in the cities and to
make their livelihoods in commerce and industry, the Yishuv’s ruling ideology viewed city life in Palestine as a continuation of Jewish life in the Diaspora and as inferior to agricultural settlement.

Much has been written about Tel Aviv under the Mandate. This book’s contribution to existing scholarship lies in its reconstruction, description, and analysis of the origins of Tel Aviv’s urban culture. It differs from other works in that it focuses on daily life in the city over the course of two formative decades, the 1920s and 1930s.

The word “culture” was long used to refer narrowly to the acme of the intellectual and esthetic output of the architects, painters, musicians, writers, philosophers, theologians, and scientists of a given society. In other words, only those forms of creativity that were labeled as worthy and desirable were called culture, a classification whereby norms were established for what should be and in which culture was produced by and for a small coterie of respected connoisseurs. But the concept took on a broader meaning when, in 1878, the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor argued that culture includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and all other learned social capabilities or practices. Culture does not include in-

born, biological-genetic human traits. It is restricted to what is acquired by a given social group at a particular place and time.\textsuperscript{10}

In the mid-twentieth century, the literary and cultural critic Raymond Williams proposed integrating the limited concept of culture as intellectual and artistic creativity with the anthropological and sociological concept of culture, which addresses it as a complete way of life. He expanded the traditional sense of the term to include language, media, fashion, advertising, and other fields. In doing so, he widened and democratized the concept of culture, which was no longer constrained to “the best” that was said and done. Williams stressed the importance of social customs and the active relationship they have with culture. In his view, culture was not a particular practice or isolated area of activity, but rather those elements that run through all social practices and amount to the sum total of their interrelationships. To decipher the culture of a given society in a particular time, one must thus examine the entire range of social practices and the institutions in which they are manifested.\textsuperscript{11}

Most scholars see culture as a factor that grants meaning to daily life. Despite the autonomous status of culture as a theoretical entity, in practice it is composed of layers of meaning that can be revealed only through manifestations in social practices. Cultural analysis examines the symbolic-expressive aspects of social behavior, identifying recurring traits, categories, and models that give culture its form and content. Culture serves as society’s adhesive, but it cannot exist independently of human activity. It does not dwell only in the mind; it is rooted in material and social life.\textsuperscript{12}

Ernest Gellner sees culture as a conceptual system according to which a given population thinks about, enacts, and preserves its unique contours. In his view, human beings cannot live devoid of a culture that prepares the ground for social activity and for the constitution of rights and obligations. Even modern society, which is less tightly organized than traditional societies, requires ceremonies and social symbols. It still needs to establish the boundaries of what it considers acceptable behavior. Gellner distinguishes between scientific knowledge and culture, the latter of which includes concepts that are held not entirely consciously. He stresses the cultural system and maintains that even if a society is inconsistent or not cohesive, its cultural concepts are linked to and dependent on each other.\textsuperscript{13} The concept of culture as a system does not necessarily lead to the search for an exhaustive account of its history. On the contrary, cultural historians try to avoid ascribing a single, stable meaning to symbols, texts, and myths. They
assume that a number of different meanings coexist within every system, and that these meanings themselves change constantly. Scholars examine the complex relationships and conflicts among social groups, subcultures, and competing foci of power within the overarching cultural system.\textsuperscript{14}

In contrast with historians of ideas, historians of culture do not focus on the activities of individuals. Instead, they look at types and categories of activity carried out by groups. They assume that people located in identical or similar places, of similar socioeconomic status, belonging to the same gender and ethnic and national groups often have similar experiences and memories. These find expression in myriad everyday pursuits, and may be reconstructed through tracking and analysis. The transition from “intellectual” to “cultural” not only broadens the social range of investigation, but also changes the object of historical research while placing two ideas in doubt: the concept that it is possible to deduce behavior in practice from the discourse that seeks to authorize or justify it, and the idea that all hidden meanings of a social apparatus receive direct ideological expression. Since culture is defined as the sum total of assumptions expressed in social practices, cultural history diverts its emphasis from ideology alone to include the material and behavioral, examining the relationship among these different strata.\textsuperscript{15}

The unconscious beliefs and doctrines that are part of a culture are not equivalent to an “ideology.” Ideology is the sum total of conscious and official beliefs of a social class or group, including general principles, theoretical positions, and dogmas. While ideological judgment is shaped by a clear and explicit “line” of thinking, humans absorb their ethos unconsciously from their material and cultural surroundings. Ideology is direct, whereas culture is indirect.\textsuperscript{16} Cultural history, thus, touches not only on the conscious and explicit, but encompasses also that which is unformulated and undefined because those who share a certain culture (perhaps not consciously) sometimes perceive it as “natural” or take it for granted. The discussion of conscious ideas formulated by elites tends to be based on written words and intellectual discourse, while cultural historians assess unconscious fundamental assumptions that manifest themselves in the words and practices of all individuals in a given society. As such, the work of cultural historians is based on a broad range of sources, verifying and confronting what is written and spoken with what is done.

In the past, culture and society were discussed as if they were separate, but today the economic and social layers of society are not conceived of as
preceding and determining culture. Rather, they are examined as areas of cultural activity and production. Cultural categorization is seen, in every group and intellectual circle, as a real social institution, while forms of social organization are shaped under the influence of collective cultural categories. Large abstract changes are reflected in the details of everyday life, while on the other hand concrete and mundane activities influence abstract structures, as well as politics and economics.17

Just as the study of culture should not be subordinated to the socio-economic and political, we should take care not to neglect these latter areas and retreat into a purely theoretical discussion. Reductionist portrayals of social reality as a world created solely by language run counter to the definition of culture as a provider of meaning that finds actual expression in social practices. Scholars must overcome their logocentric inclinations and reconstruct the actions and activities that occur alongside the creation of the society’s doctrine. They should treat with skepticism the motivations that lie behind the society’s “official” formulations—i.e., those promoted by its leaders but embraced by most other members as well—and examine the incompatibility and even contradiction between what is said and what is done.

The present work takes an integrated cultural and social approach. As such, it examines the ways in which cultural models are manifested in institutions and in social and economic structures, and how institutions and structures themselves create, articulate, and reinforce the cultural meaning of their society. Quantitative data can be very useful in reconstructing past cultures. But cultural research focuses on the ways in which social experience is created and the ways in which it is granted meaning. Such research thus requires primarily qualitative methods, which focus on processes and meanings that cannot always be examined only through notions of quantity, extent, and frequency.18

The examination of the cultural principles at the foundation of social organization in a broad range of areas requires that traditional historiography be supplemented by the methods and theories of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, philosophy, art history, literary criticism, geography, and cultural studies. Cultural historians use concepts and tools from these other disciplines eclectically. Yet theories and models do not stand at the center of these historians’ research or direct it, with the historical case under discussion being used to reinforce or disprove these theories and models. Rather, the specific historical case
lies at the core of the investigation, and theories and models serve only as tools to help decipher it. Historians are not eager to give up the wealth and complexity of the specific case under study in order to force it into a broad, comprehensive model, as elegant a model as it might be.\(^{19}\)

The anthropological definition of culture embraces all acquired social phenomena, so that a large part of what people did, thought, and even felt in Tel Aviv in the 1920s and 1930s was part of their culture. Since writing total history is an impossible task, there is no way to avoid choosing a number of representative areas of activity. The ones chosen here for examination, for the purpose of uncovering concrete expressions of Tel Aviv’s evolving culture, are the physical form of the city, its public events, patterns of consumption and entertainment, and urban subcultures. These areas of activity did not in and of themselves constitute Tel Aviv culture. Rather, culture in Tel Aviv as elsewhere consists of the models, patterns, and categories that reappear in different forms in all these areas.

This study centers on daily life and popular culture. This plane, while the province of the city’s entire population, has been less studied than the production of high culture.\(^{20}\) Politics, encompassing both policy and party politics, has been and remains the center of historiographic work on Mandate era Palestine. In opposition to the proclivity among historians of this place and era to project from the political sphere and its ideological categories onto all other areas of life, this study, even though it does not ignore politics and its implications, gives precedence and autonomy to culture.

Culture also dictates the range of historical sources used here: books and pamphlets published in the twenties and thirties, newspapers of all types, commercial leaflets and advertisements, the minutes and correspondence of individuals, institutions, and organizations, economic and statistical reports, posters and broadsides, maps, photographs, and films. Archives and libraries contain a wealth of hugely informative documents, but since culture includes unconscious perceptions and practices that are taken for granted by contemporaries, who see them as matters of no consequence, not many historical sources address Mandate era Tel Aviv’s daily culture in a direct or official way. Most information about this subject can be found between the lines or in the margins of sources that address other technical, administrative, and institutional issues. Ferreting out such information requires long, meticulous, and patient work. Paradoxically, however, this process makes the sources more reliable, since items mentioned in passing and considered of no ideological consequence are less likely to have been
subject to tendentious formulation by their authors. Little use is made of sources that have undergone artistic reworking; literature and art, as high culture, have already been examined in many studies, and such sources would merely distract from this study’s intentional focus on the conventional and the seemingly banal.21

Even though Tel Aviv was founded in 1909 and the Mandate ended in 1948, this book focuses only on the 1920s and 1930s. The period between the two World Wars constitutes, in certain ways, a single era and can serve as a framework for examining the dynamic of social and cultural development in the city. World War I was a turning point; only afterward did Tel Aviv’s urban phase fully begin. World War II changed the extent and nature of immigration to the Land of Israel, the rate of construction in Tel Aviv, the city’s economic character, and the political structure of the Yishuv. Approaches to the Hebrew-culture-in-the-making in the country also underwent extensive changes beginning in the 1940s.22

Urban space has not, since the 1980s, been presented by historians and geographers as a neutral background for the activity of groups and classes. Instead, it is seen as an active factor in the construction of social identities, which are shaped through discussions and confrontations over the place’s boundaries, ownership, and meanings. A city is a convenient arena for examining a society’s economic, social, political, and cultural processes because it constitutes a single geographical unit, both in its boundaries and in its administration by a single municipal authority, which provides basic services to inhabitants. The urban culture can be explained as the way in which the system of concepts and assumptions that grant meaning are expressed in the city on the behavioral level. The city is both the product of the different cultures that exist within it and a space in which those cultures are created.23

In cultural studies, the city, despite its complexity, is understood as a document to be deciphered. It reveals different things about the values and aspirations of its leaders, shapers, builders, and inhabitants.24 If a city has a central, prominent ethos, it is reasonable to assume that that ethos will engender different forms of recurring behavior that can be discovered and interpreted. In order to do justice to a city’s complexity, it is worth examining it from several vantage points. Urban historians suggest composing a municipal portrait through the choice of specific areas that represent the whole. They advocate taking a holistic approach that addresses the mutual relationship between the city’s various components—economic, social,
administrative, spatial, and conceptual. Studies that address the past and present cultures of different cities can serve as a useful model and point of comparison for the examination of Tel Aviv’s culture during the 1920s and 1930s.

This book addresses only Tel Aviv, even though this city of immigrants did not exist in a vacuum. It was influenced by the cities from which most of its inhabitants came (in particular those of Eastern Europe), as well as the cities it sought to emulate (in particular those of Western Europe). Even though Tel Aviv and Jaffa were separate geographical and municipal entities, Jaffa nevertheless abutted Tel Aviv and influenced it. Some writers have compared Tel Aviv’s culture and image to that of Jerusalem. While these studies are not addressed directly in the book, they help clarify which aspects of Tel Aviv typified urban settlement in Palestine as a whole, and which were particular to the first Hebrew city.

Roger Chartier, the French historian, maintains that cultural history should encompass both practices and representations, because the relationship between practice and image is what molds the cultural system as a whole. Tel Aviv indeed is a sum total of geographic, demographic, economic, and political data. It is also a set of images fashioned from the Mandate period onward that granted the city a mythical halo. Both these aspects have been discussed in previous studies. Yet Tel Aviv’s culture cannot be reduced to one or the other. Rather, it incorporates the stories of two cities: Tel Aviv as it was and Tel Aviv as it seemed. Sometimes the stories of Tel Aviv’s practices and representations fit together and blended; sometimes they clashed to the point of implicit or explicit contradiction. This book examines the ways in which the city was animated by its leaders and inhabitants, and investigates the tension between the idea of Tel Aviv and its day-to-day life.
Nature granted it a sandy beach, dazzling light and blue skies, winter rains and humid summer heat. But human beings and their culture constructed Tel Aviv. The city’s form and ambience express the social, political, and cultural concepts of the people who built and lived in it. But the track runs both ways. Just as culture is reflected in the city’s physical structure, so does urban form affect the culture that develops within it.

Like culture, the built landscape is subject to continual change. A city is not created by a single person or in a single moment. It is erected one stone after another and is the outcome of the decisions and actions of many people through different periods. Usually a city’s outline is discussed from the point of view of professional elites—architects, planners, and engineers—but these shapers determine only part of its form. No less than these professionals, a city’s inhabitants change the city through the way they live and conduct their daily activity. A city’s space contains permanent elements that change only slowly, such as buildings and roads, but it also includes semipermanent features like trees, signs, and placards, along with transitory elements, such as people on its streets and their mores and behaviors, as well as animals, vehicles, sounds, and scents.

With the use of photographs and films, verbal descriptions and technical reports, Tel Aviv’s urban space of the 1920s and 1930s can be reconstructed, complete with the sights, voices, aromas, and actions that together created the sensual, emotional, and cognitive urban experience.

**Changing Architectural Styles**

The leading style in Tel Aviv of the 1920s was the Eclectic style of its “dream houses,” whereas in the 1930s modernism took over. Each of these styles expressed wider cultural currents of its time.
At the beginning of the 1920s, most of Tel Aviv’s homes were one- or two-story structures. While their ornamentation varied, these simply shaped houses with sloping tiled roofs maintained the style of the city’s pre–World War I nucleus, which its residents called “Little Tel Aviv.” These buildings were much like the houses in Jewish farming villages in Palestine (moshavot), and their modest, pastoral appearance was compatible with the original concept of Tel Aviv as a green garden neighborhood on the edge of Jaffa.4

When the neighborhood developed into a commercial and industrial city, architectural styles changed. It is true that simple, low-lying houses continued to be built at the city’s margins but, beginning in the mid-1920s, dream houses began to spring up on the city’s central thoroughfares. Many of these homes rose three stories high, and the level, more or less uniform, and vaguely rural landscape gave way to a taller, more varied urban look.5

In 1921, Aharon Ze’ev Ben-Yishai, a writer who lived in the city, opined that “Tel Aviv’s destiny is to accommodate the beauty of Europe in Asia’s tents. Some say its destiny is to elevate Oriental civilization and properly style the abandoned beauty of the East.”6 The Eclectic design of Tel Aviv’s homes of the 1920s was aimed at realizing these ambitions in practice. It blended the elements of different styles without adopting any one of them completely. Tel Aviv’s dream houses integrated Oriental, neoclassical, and neogothic styles with the undulating decorative motifs of Art Nouveau and Eastern European touches. Oriental and biblical elements were meant to represent continuity with the land’s historical Hebrew past, in keeping with the dream of restoring the Jewish nation to its ancestral place. At the same time, the European elements expressed the middle-class dream of building a European city in the Middle East.7

But the Oriental current in Tel Aviv Eclecticism was also European in origin—it was not a reproduction of authentic Middle Eastern construction but rather a fashioning of “the Orient” as seen through European eyes. The Middle Eastern style was one of an inventory of historical and regional styles that found expression in Eclectic Western architecture. But in the context of Zionist settlement in the Land of Israel, Oriental motifs took on particular political-national significance. Architects sought to use them not only to “recreate” but actually to invent a unique national style that would express the heritage of the Hebrew nation’s past in its ancient homeland. Another influence on architects was the artist and collector Boris Schatz and the school that formed around the Bezalel art academy, which he
founded in Jerusalem. Particular stylistic details embraced by this school included the use of pointed and rounded arches, serrated parapets, towers, and colorful geometric ornaments. The Tel Aviv municipal architect at the time, David Hershkowitz, deplored the failure to use local styles to evoke the past; he sought to ensure that new homes built in Tel Aviv would preserve the historic countenance of “our Land.” But his call went unheeded, and toward the end of the 1920s the trend of using Oriental motifs faded and European elements came to the fore. The abandonment of the “exotic East” was evident at the end of the decade in the other plastic arts as well; one cause seems to have been worsening relations between Jews and Arabs. The attempt to create a national architectural identity through quasi-Oriental construction was jettisoned, and Eclectic exoticism generally found inspiration in other geographical areas and historical times.

The European current in Tel Aviv Eclecticism included baroque elements such as domes and curves, neoclassical motifs such as columns and pediments, and neogothic items like turrets and pointed arches. Some buildings were influenced by Russian Orthodox architecture, with its onion domes. The Casino Café was inspired by Odessa’s music halls; the Pagoda House was not a direct copy of a Far Eastern pagoda but rather was built in imitation of an American café. Unlike Tel Aviv’s first houses, which were usually white, the dream houses came in a spectrum—red, pink, ocher, green, and blue—and some of the domes that crowned these buildings were painted silver.

Eclecticism was fundamentally a European style, and its use expressed Zionism’s Eurocentrism as well as Tel Aviv’s ambition of becoming a vacation resort. The multicolored dream houses indeed gave Tel Aviv the jolly, fairy-tale appearance of a toy city.

One visitor wrote that the homes built in the 1920s were part castles, part palaces that sprang from the imaginations of every Jew. Another visitor commented that every house in Tel Aviv had an individual touch—a unique balcony, a painted window, or an original façade. This medley encouraged difference, conspicuousness, and extravagance. Some called for imposing a uniform, mandatory municipal style, but the variety just increased through the second half of the 1920s. Ironically, this diversity itself produced a kind of overall unity and coherence, because dissimilarity was what every house had in common.

From the start, opinions about the Eclectic style varied. During the 1920s, some described Tel Aviv as having the look of a large European city
and lauded the beauty of its buildings, whereas others excoriated what they saw as the vulgarity of its patchwork of styles. Most of the disparaging comments were made in the 1930s by modernist architects, whose manifesto included fierce denunciation of all preceding styles, the Eclectic one in particular.

The International style, which came to the fore in Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, remained the leading Western school of design until midcentury. Its most salient characteristics were straight lines; clean, clear surfaces devoid of any ornamentation or elaboration; and open internal spaces. Glass, steel, and reinforced concrete were the principal materials. The International style drew its energy from the dissatisfaction of architects with the application, by Eclectic architects, of style without regard to a structure’s function. Innovators in the International school sought to create a purposeful, economical, and utilitarian way of building; mechanization and modern technology provided not only a technical foundation for the new style, but were in fact displayed prominently. The esthetic was severe and disciplined, with its practitioners striving to integrate artistic expression with functionality. Le Corbusier, the Swiss architect and urban
planner who was one of the founders of the International style, aimed to create a new visual universe that would reflect present and future aspirations rather than reverence for the past.12

The Bauhaus, the school of design and architecture that operated in Germany from 1919–1933, was one of the most important promoters and disseminators of the new esthetic, and created its own unique substyle. Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, argued that art should express the rational order of modern society through geometrical forms, smooth surfaces, clean contours, primary colors, and modern materials. The functional, austere vision promulgated at the Bauhaus spread and was imitated throughout the world, including in Tel Aviv. The city underwent a construction boom between 1933 and 1936 with the arrival of a new and large wave of immigration. During this period, many architects who had trained in central and Western Europe arrived in or returned to Palestine. They brought with them improved construction methods and the International style, which they adapted to Tel Aviv’s climate. House designs took into account the directions of prevailing air currents, and the glass panels beloved by the European Bauhaus architects were replaced with smaller windows. The flat roofs that Le Corbusier advocated were adopted, and buildings were built on columns.13

The Architects’ Circle that was founded at the beginning of the 1930s further impelled the technical and esthetic transition from Eclecticism to the International style. Members of the Circle found their way into municipal institutions, where they worked to establish new and more demanding construction standards and promoted modernist doctrines. The journal the Circle began to publish in 1935 laid out clear rules for “proper” esthetic construction while condemning and rejecting most of the Tel Aviv architecture that had come before the members’ arrival on the scene. The International style quickly came to influence even those architects who had not been trained in central and Western Europe, and was evident in all buildings constructed in Tel Aviv from 1934 onward. The ideas of Le Corbusier and Gropius were accepted in Tel Aviv almost without resistance and, by and large, with great enthusiasm. Eclecticism was abandoned almost overnight in favor of an entirely contrary esthetic. Tel Aviv, a new city looking to the future, seems to have been especially fertile ground for modernist trends.14

Eclectic romanticism looked to the past, while the International style looked to the future. The swift adoption of the International style testified
to a transformation from romanticism to a technical, practical outlook. The Eclecticism of the 1920s included a current that sought integration into the East—even if it was a fictional, exotic Orient that existed only in the European imagination. The International style turned its back on the local and sought to express manifestly Western trends, although these trends had universalist pretensions. Paradoxically, the flat, modernist International style, which took into account the local climate, resembled native local styles more closely than the exotic pseudo-Arabic palaces of the 1920s, built by those who self-consciously assumed an Oriental manner.

In the new order, Eclectic elements were no longer used, and entire streets were lined with boxlike houses displaying vertical lines stretching three or four stories high, many of them with flat roofs and constructed on stilts. White, almost forgotten during the colorful 1920s, once again became the prevailing hue of the city's buildings.

Some people accepted the new look enthusiastically, extolling modern European simplicity and the end of Eclectic ornamentation. An American tourist wrote in wonder that Tel Aviv in the 1930s looked more modern than Chicago did—it reminded him of the city of the future in Fritz Lang's well-known film *Metropolis*. But other critics found the modern buildings monotonous. Many of the houses built in Tel Aviv during the 1930s were designed by engineers and contractors who created only amateurish copies of the work of the finest architects. The champions of the International style had accused the Eclectics of making unjustified, nonfunctional use of external elements, but some Tel Aviv homes were knockoffs unfaithful to the principles of the new style, displaying modern external elements that had no use and served purely ornamental functions.

Eclecticism was an expression of an almost wild creative urge. It let every architect and homeowner realize a personal fantasy. The International style, in contrast, imposed strict mathematical and functional rules on its practitioners. All artistic expression had to fit into these parameters. In Tel Aviv's new neighborhoods, the International style, with its clean lines and whiteness, produced a uniform look. But this was not the case on the city's main streets. Quite the opposite—during the 1930s two styles, the old and the new, appeared side by side, ending the Eclectic unity of the 1920s without achieving a uniform modernist look. Eclectic buildings, with their plethora of columns, arches, domes, and ornaments, clashed sharply with the new, angular, cubic structures built next to or across the street from them.
Another factor kept the city from displaying visual coherence. The Bauhaus’s disciples claimed that all human activity should be subordinated to the style’s rules. They looked forward to a world in which there would be visible coordination of architecture, furniture, clothing, and behavior. This vision was not realized in Tel Aviv, as hardly any compatibility existed between its buildings and other aspects of the city. While architecture reflected the esthetic ideals of the cultural elite, its products stood in a highly variable environment. The International style’s unity of form and color was inevitably violated if a building’s ground floor was filled by disordered shops with skewed signs and heaps of merchandise, and if the owners of the apartments did not repaint their outside walls, doors, and windowills periodically. Mayor Dizengoff lamented that “Housewives sometimes hang out their underwear to dry on balconies that face the street, and then the house really looks like a building in a sordid town where no one cares about beauty, taste, or cleanliness.” A building standing next to broken fences and vacant lots, or on a street that was not kept particularly clean, invariably looked dirtier and more disorderly than it had in the architect’s sketches. A uniform architectural style was not sufficient to achieve a coherent urban landscape. Tel Aviv’s patterns of behavior continued to produce a variegated look despite the abandonment of the individualist, playful Eclectic style and its replacement by the severe, puritanical, and disciplined International style.

Tel Aviv of the 1920s and 1930s was perpetually under construction. New buildings stood amid construction sites surrounded with scaffolding. The city seemed to be in a permanently provisional state. In its poorer neighborhoods, including the old Jewish neighborhoods of Jaffa, shanties were interspersed among small houses. In some areas, entire neighborhoods of hovels and tents sprang up as temporary solutions for homeless immigrants and refugees who fled to Tel Aviv from Jaffa during the Arab riots of 1921, 1929, and 1936. The old, tattered tents disappeared in the middle of the 1920s, but most of their inhabitants did little more than replace the tents with shacks. Some of these shantytowns turned, over the years, into neighborhoods of permanent housing, but some remained as they were until the 1940s. The rapid growth of the population and constantly rising rents increased the demand for such huts, some of which were built at night without a municipal license. The municipality did its best to remove such temporary structures from the city’s center to its margins, because their evocation of poverty was inconsistent with the look that
the city sought to project. Many of Tel Aviv’s inhabitants—in the 1920s, a fifth of the city’s population—lived in shacks because they could not afford better homes, either in Eclectic dream houses or in Bauhaus buildings.

Roads, Sidewalks, and Traffic

The Tel Aviv municipality planned and built roads, but it could not keep up with the city’s rapid expansion. By the end of the 1930s, only 60 percent of the city’s streets were paved, with Tel Aviv the first city in the Land of Israel to use concrete paving. These gray surfaces gradually replaced sandy paths and gave the streets a more ordered and “tame” appearance. No less important esthetically was the paving of sidewalks. The separation of pedestrian traffic from roads reserved for animals and vehicles is a modern municipal phenomenon. Prior to the nineteenth century, sidewalks were a rare luxury. As municipal authorities came to exert more control over roads, construction of sidewalks became more common. In keeping with this trend, the Tel Aviv municipality laid sidewalks soon after roads were paved. Before sidewalks were constructed, sandy paths ran alongside streets, giving them an unkempt appearance.
Western European cities began numbering the houses on each street at the end of the eighteenth century. An ordered set of addresses replaced traditional signs that proclaimed the name of the house and the name of its owners. If a Tel Aviv resident were asked his address at the beginning of the 1920s, he most likely would have offered the name of his house (where he might be living as a boarder or tenant)—that is, the name of its owners. At that time the city was small enough that most residents knew the names of all the well-off homeowners. When the city’s population and area grew, as well as the number of buildings, street numbers became necessary. The municipality carried out this task in a nonuniform way. In 1928, for example, the city had about five hundred unnumbered houses, “which causes great difficulty to its inhabitants and in particular to visitors from elsewhere.” Systematic numbering began only in 1934, when the municipality paid for uniform street signs, while homeowners paid to have their house numbers affixed to their façades. Over the course of the decade, the use of house names decreased as street addresses became more common. This process reflected and confirmed the loss of the intimacy of the original “Little Tel Aviv.” Streets were no longer places along which stood the well-known houses of familiar people. Instead, on each side of the road one found a line of numbered buildings.

Motor vehicles also changed the face of the city. Tel Aviv’s streets, now paved and bounded by sidewalks, served as arteries full of flowing—or jammed—traffic. At least a third of the motorized vehicles in the country operated in Tel Aviv, and the city’s leaders estimated that Tel Aviv had twelve and a half times more vehicles than any other city of the same size. Cars also produced employment—they needed drivers, factories to produce automobile parts, repair shops, car dealerships, and driving schools. The streets built in the 1930s in the eastern and northern parts of the city—as recommended by the Scottish urban planner Sir Patrick Geddes—were fairly wide, but commercial activity and traffic were heaviest along the city’s older and narrower streets. The construction boom and population growth, along with these narrow streets, made traffic heavy and congested along main thoroughfares.

The traffic was quite heterogeneous. The city’s streets were traveled by buses and horse-drawn carriages, wagons, taxis and private cars, trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, camels, and donkeys. Pedestrians filled the sidewalks and crossed the roads. The mixture of traditional and modern vehicles hindered the flow of traffic, which could only proceed as quickly as the slowest
conveyance. The municipality was compelled to make many of the center’s old and narrow roads into one-way streets. By the end of the 1930s, the city was already suffering from a severe shortage of parking spaces. Arguments and even fistfights over parking spots were frequent spectacles.31

In the era’s silent films we can only see Tel Aviv’s traffic, but written sources help reconstruct its impact on other senses. Marcia Gitlin related how the multiple kinds of conveyances proceeded in striking disorder, adding to the noise and the dust of the city.32 According to many inhabitants, the horns and bells of the drivers, pushcarts, and bicycles created an “infernal din.” In letters of complaint they sent to the municipality, residents wrote that cars and bicycles went by too rapidly and made a frightening and unbearable racket, day and night.33 The noise was exacerbated by the shouts of the policemen who directed traffic in both Hebrew and Yiddish.34

The municipality received complaints about the filth and stench that the traffic produced. A municipal inspector grumbled that bus and wagon stops were always full of garbage, “especially since automobile drivers, wagon drivers, and many passengers are not accustomed to cleanliness and discard without hesitation or trepidation peels, paper, and so on right into the street, on top of the horse droppings, and straw and barley that fall out of torn feedbags. These dirty stops make the whole city look like a khan [a caravan stop] of the notorious Eastern type.”35

Those who lived close to bus stops or garages had to put up with the smell of gasoline, motor oil, paint, and exhaust fumes. Motorized vehicles emitted foul-smelling vapors, but even worse was the hygienic problem produced by horses, whose stinking droppings filled city streets before the advent of cars.36 In Tel Aviv, horse-drawn wagons were used to transport loads, and well-fitted European-style horse-drawn carriages served as cabs. Automobiles were faster, more efficient, less expensive, and easier to maintain than horses, however. As the use of motorized vehicles increased, so did the number of complaints about the sanitation issues created by horse-drawn vehicles, which left in their wake odiferous droppings and filth that served as a growth medium for flies, mosquitoes, and microbes.37

Wagon and cab drivers were execrated for price-gouging—the lack of regulation allowed them to take advantage of tourists and new immigrants. In 1929, an American tourist was shocked when he was asked to pay a steep fare for a trip from the train station to his hotel, covering the ride and a 66 percent surcharge for his suitcases. He was doubly outraged when the hotel proprietor justified the price on the grounds that “that’s what you
pay in Tel Aviv.” A few years later, a Tel Aviv resident complained that wagon drivers overcharged new immigrants shamelessly, and another resident mentioned that tourists were resentful about how they were cheated by drivers: “A tourist from Germany recently told me: ‘The police director in Frankfurt was right when he said that the Jews would go to Palestine and skin each other alive.’”

The motorized bus replaced the horse-drawn one in the 1920s. At first several bus cooperatives covered the city, and two of them merged in 1928 into a single company, which operated until 1945. Service continually expanded. By the eve of World War II, the city had thirteen bus lines. The buses of the 1920s had room for ten to fourteen passengers, while the larger vehicles of the 1930s could hold twenty or more.

On hot summer days, when more than five people would squeeze onto a bus’s long bench, a trip could seem like a crowded, sweltering, dusty, and sweaty nightmare. The bus company tried to imbue its conveyances with a touch of European elegance by requiring its drivers to wear uniforms, but these could not conceal the general neglect of the fleet — apparent in broken windows, peeling paint, and doors that did not close properly. Waits at bus stops were long, and when a bus finally arrived, getting on often required some pushing and shoving. In an effort to reduce disorderliness and crowding, the police ruled that passengers must board buses from the front door and exit from the rear door. Within a month the order was rescinded, because both passengers and drivers ignored it. Many passengers complained about rude drivers.

The American-born Zionist journalist Nellie Straus-Mochenson described Tel Aviv’s buses as “ramshackle affairs held together by some mysterious force unknown to science”:

The arrangement is — theoretically — that one bus leaves the standing place as soon as another arrives. But in reality, you hum, tap your foot, or exhibit other symptoms of impatience in vain until two things have come to pass: the chauffeur, who had curled up on the front seat, finishes the chapter of “Einleitung in die Psychologie” which engrosses him, and the bus is full. Neither event in itself is a sufficient reason for starting. After all it is not the kind of literature where one can skip a page to see if the heroine escapes from her pursuer.

Obedience to traffic laws and regulations never became customary in Tel Aviv. Drivers and cyclists sped through crowded streets. During the first
half of the 1930s, bicycles were involved in between 55 and 82 percent of all road accidents, a figure that is hardly surprising given that bicycle licenses were issued without any test, and their riders, mostly children, paid no attention to the directives of traffic policemen, did not signal before turning, rode against the traffic on one-way streets, and illegally carried passengers. Pedestrians walked down the middle of streets instead of using the sidewalks and ignored warnings from drivers. They jaywalked without looking to see if the road was clear, and they sometimes stopped to chat in the middle of the street.  

**Lighting, Signs, and Gardening**

From the start, Zionist settlers in the Land of Israel considered Tel Aviv to be a leader in street lighting. In the early years, the streets of the neighborhood were illuminated by twenty kerosene lamps. Two years after Tel Aviv was founded, two gas lamps were installed, an advanced technology unknown in the rest of the country. During World War I, the Turks feared that the city’s lights would attract enemy attacks, so a blackout was ordered. The street lamps were lit again after the war, and in 1920 a small dynamo was installed on Allenby Street, which provided electricity for both homes and streetlights. The generator was transferred three years later to the Palestine Electric Company, which expanded and improved the municipal grid. The municipality’s lighting department saw to the upkeep of the system and to special lighting on holidays. It exceeded its assigned budget “because of the huge demand from all parts of the city.” In 1930, Tel Aviv’s streetlight system consisted of four hundred electric lamps and seventeen gas lamps. Deputy Mayor Israel Rokach noted approvingly that Dizengoff Street had “a greater number of lights than any city in the country.” Of course, most of these lamps were located on main streets, whereas on side streets lights were placed mainly to provide safety.

Photographs of one of Tel Aviv’s most illuminated streets of that period show that it was still fairly dark by our present standards. But in the 1930s, such outside lighting was considered “glaring.” For those accustomed to pre-electric lighting, electric street lamps were not taken for granted and were greeted with considerable amazement. Electric lighting had a major effect on the modern city. It extended daytime into the night and created an almost fairy-tale ambience. In the interwar period, colorful neon store signs
also made an appearance, further enhancing the dreamlike nightscape. The British commander of the district police force ordered Mayor Dizengoff to prevent advertisements from being placed on the roof of the city’s cinema, on the grounds that it interfered with the work of the police — children and idlers congregated on the streets to gaze at the electric signs.46

Electric lighting reinforced Tel Aviv’s image as a modern city. When the first neon signs made their appearance, the daily newspaper Haaretz stated with pride that this form of advertising could still not be seen in many leading European cities, because of its high cost. A Western tourist was indeed impressed, and wrote that when the first lights of evening went on, while the stores were still open, Tel Aviv amazed him completely. The municipal power station itself exemplified the awe in which electric lighting was held as a symbol of progress. It looked like a modern temple — massive, even monumental, with a façade of pseudo-columns. Instead of blending modestly into the surrounding landscape, the electric plant called attention to its size and to the importance of supplying power to the city. But the continual wonderment at the marvels of modernity, and the persistent effort to make them everyday features of the young city, indirectly demonstrated that Tel Aviv was still quite provincial.47

When morning came, the streetlights went out and other urban features commanded attention on the sun-drenched streets, among them street signs and placards. These were largely text, with little if any graphics or imagery. Commercial signs were displayed prominently on main streets. They hung above the entranceways to stores and businesses, along and above display windows, vertically placed on buildings or their roofs, on store awnings, and on the façades of buildings. The signs fit in with the varied and colorful Eclectic architecture, but they stood out against the white modernist International style buildings, with their clean lines.48 In the 1920s, notices had been posted on rectangular billboards, but in the 1930s, square and round columns were placed on the sidewalks along main streets for the display of advertisements, notices, and posters. During the 1930s, the city sought to extend its control to all forms of advertising, but its efforts to ensure that people posted notices only on the columns were to no avail: posters and placards were set on every available surface — homes, fences, stores, barbershops, cafés, scaffolds, and trees.49

According to the plans for the original neighborhood that later became Tel Aviv, streets were to be lined with trees and lawns. The neighborhood’s rapid expansion and its transformation into a large city made adherence to
this program impossible, and the requirements of construction and transportation overwhelmed plans for gardens and trees. Yet even when everyone realized that Tel Aviv was not destined to be a garden suburb, its inhabitants still hoped that the city in formation would be green and well tended, and that land would be set aside for parks like those in Western European cities. Hayyim Nachman Bialik, the Zionist national poet, said that the lack of parks was detrimental to the city’s inhabitants and made a bad impression on its guests. Green spots, he said, offer favorable first impressions of a city and purify its air—and they would befit Tel Aviv, which aspired to become a vacation resort. Bialik maintained that trees had to be planted in the young city “because woe to the young girl who is bald.”

But the municipality did not have much money for landscaping in such a crowded metropolis, where land prices were zooming upward so precipitously. Bialik’s fears came to pass—at the end of the 1930s, officially designated green areas constituted only 9 percent of the city’s territory. Many visitors mentioned this lack of public parks, and the small size of the few gardens.

The municipal gardening department did its best to care for about 3,600 trees that lined the city’s avenues and streets, as well as a few groves and small municipal parks. The municipality’s chief gardener, Avigdor Meshel, noted that his diligent employees worked hard to achieve good results, even though the municipality’s gardening budget was embarrassingly low. Meshel and his staff were unable to compensate for the lack of cooperation on the part of the general public. As early as the beginning of the 1920s, the municipality appealed to residents to plant trees around their houses, for the sake of Zion as a whole and for Tel Aviv in particular. It was no use—very few took the trouble to smarten up their houses by tending gardens, plants, and trees. The public’s apathy on this point was not limited to failing to tend private gardens—Tel Aviv’s public gardens were devastated by its residents, who discarded citrus peels and paper on the grounds, trampled the lawns, stepped on seedlings, picked flowers as soon as they bloomed, and even dug up plantings. In 1921, Mayor Dizengoff himself rode his horse through the park opposite his house, in violation of the municipal law. In preparation for the Sukkot holiday, people went out at night and cut off fronds and lulavim (unopened fronds) from date palms, leaving the trees along the avenues naked and killing many of them in the process. The municipal gardener claimed that huge damage was done to the public gardens along Rothschild Avenue every Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.
tors, he said, danced on the lawns, breaking fences and killing trees, to the point that “every Sunday morning the avenue looks as if it has endured a pogrom.”

Nevertheless, the municipal gardener strove to obtain resources on a par with those of a Western European city. He proposed planting another four hundred date palms, which would give an Eastern accent and “remind both residents and tourists that Tel Aviv is not a northern city.” Just as the Eclectic architects sought to fashion a stylized Orientalism as seen through European eyes, so Meshel tried to create a landscape that was faithful to romantic European visions of the East.

---

Cleanliness and Squalor

Tel Aviv had a cleaning committee almost from the moment it was founded. In 1926, the municipality established a sanitation department that, by the end of the 1920s, employed 67 workers. A decade later, about 300 sanitation workers manned 29 garbage trucks that collected refuse from 17,600 garbage bins. The garbage was taken to a dump next to the Mikveh Yisrael agricultural school, to the city’s south. The municipal sanitation committee submitted regular reports to the city council on the cleanliness of the city’s neighborhoods and buildings, while the council enacted municipal regulations on the subject. These regulations offer information about municipal policy and the sanitation blights that it had to address.

The sanitation regulations of 1921 required residents to keep their yards clean and forbade them from throwing garbage into their yards or onto the sidewalks. New regulations issued in 1935 indicate that the public continued to pour dirty water and to dump garbage where such disposal was forbidden, as well as to scatter leaflets and shake out carpets and pillows in public places. These later bylaws addressed new sanitation problems that became starker with the city’s growing commercial and industrial activity. They offer evidence of new sensitivities — leaving a horse or donkey tied up on the street and spitting in public places were now forbidden.

Those caught violating these rules were brought before a municipal court. Sanitation violations filled most of the court’s docket at the beginning of the 1920s. Many of the accused (among them stall owners who did not observe the open-air market’s rules of hygiene and homeowners who did not keep their yards and lots clean) were convicted and received fines
Sanitation workers heading out to work on Tel Aviv’s streets, 1934.
in various amounts. During the 1930s, such cases were still a major component—sometimes more than 50 percent—of the court’s caseload. In addition to passing legislation and levying fines, the city tried to influence public behavior with public relations campaigns. At the beginning of 1925, it sponsored a health week that included free lectures on public cleanliness and hygiene. Four years later, the city sanitation inspector asked the owners of the city’s cinemas to screen, before every film, a municipal slide asking viewers to keep their city clean, and especially to refrain from discarding paper and fruit peels in public places and from pouring dirty water out on the street.  

Tel Aviv was founded and grew at a time when the West began to view cleanliness as an ideal. It was seen not just as practical but also as esthetic. The Tel Aviv municipality was influenced by this trend and worked to improve its sanitation services. Still, hygienic standards became ever more demanding and thus practice kept lagging behind intention. The improvements and upgrades instituted by the sanitation department were not always well received by the city’s inhabitants. For example, they complained that a new street sweeper was so noisy that they could not sleep at night.

The city’s leaders and some visitors compared clean and beautiful Tel Aviv to what they saw as dirty and primitive Jaffa, but the sanitary situation was at odds with the image the city sought to project. In 1923, the British deputy district governor actually praised Jaffa’s sanitary services in comparison with those of Tel Aviv. He claimed that Tel Aviv, exemplary in many other ways, actually lagged behind its older neighbor in cleanliness—to the point that disease raged. Indeed, epidemics broke out from time to time in the city, especially during the hot summers. Bubonic plague appeared at the beginning of the 1920s, as did dysentery, typhus, and tuberculosis, the last of which became more prevalent in the 1930s. Malaria, which in Israeli collective memory is associated particularly with farming settlements, frequently struck hot, humid Tel Aviv. Epidemics spread because of bad sanitary conditions and were a constant and painful reminder that the city remained, in some respects, a backwater. The spread of diseases also worked against the original purpose of founding a green and healthy garden suburb of Jaffa, and undermined the hope that Tel Aviv would become a popular vacation resort. Furthermore, the health setbacks clashed with Tel Aviv’s image of itself as a modern and advanced urban center.

One might think that the aspiration to make Tel Aviv a modern Western city would have prompted the municipality to take systematic action to
improve sanitation, but the city at times addressed the situation in a superficial way, aiming to provide an appearance of cleanliness, especially in the city’s central areas, which were seen most often by visitors and tourists. At the approach of holiday seasons, for example, residents were urged to keep the fronts of their houses clean. The municipality did not ask them to clean all around their houses, just those parts that could be seen by tourists. Nevertheless, the city managers deplored bad sanitation, a condition that contradicted their view of the city as a paragon of Jewish progress in Palestine. Tel Aviv even fared poorly when compared to other Jewish settlements: “An immigrant, tourist, or traveler who comes to the Land of Israel, who takes a look and compares Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, concludes that while Tel Aviv may be the country’s most vibrant city, it’s also the least clean one,” wrote a visitor in 1933.

The construction of a municipal sewage system began only in the 1940s. Previously waste was funneled into septic pits beside each house. During the 1930s, concerns grew that the pits were poisoning the ground and the city’s drinking water. Sanitation standards were scrupulously observed in the construction of the city’s new neighborhoods from the 1920s onward, and many of the new houses were equipped with indoor plumbing. But most of the houses in pre–World War I neighborhoods did not have indoor toilets, and their absence was especially severe in the shantytowns. The residents of houses without indoor toilets used crates or dug holes in their yards, creating a horrible stench. Outhouses could sometimes become serious sanitary hazards. In the mid-1920s, a policeman reported that an entire major street reeked as the result of two outhouses that had been dug right along the road. The sand around the outhouses, he wrote, was soaked with excrement, disgusting passersby and causing some to actually vomit. The municipality wanted to replace all the outhouses with toilets “of a European type.” This goal was gradually achieved on most of the city’s streets, but poor residents had a hard time finding the money to install flush toilets and to pay for the regular emptying of septic pits. Some viewed the demand for modern plumbing as a foreign and arbitrary encumbrance that ran against their established customs. One resident protested that “We are natives who go outside and take a bottle of water with them . . . and in any case all the filth in the pit is washed away.”

A tourist wrote that the only problem with Tel Aviv, a city as modern and beautiful as those in the largest countries on earth, was the lack of public toilets. On a visit to the city, he was “saved” by a local resident who
allowed him to use the facilities in his house. The walls of the few public toilets available were covered with drawings and other graffiti. Many of these anonymous scribblers participated in political debates on controversial subjects, such as the growing strength of the labor party, Mapai, and the proposal to partition the land into separate Arab and Jewish states.62

In the absence of a municipal sewage system, sewage was siphoned out of the septic pits into barrels and containers, which were then emptied into the sea. The containers were not always entirely sealed and clean, as the law required. Since taking the sewage all the way to the shore was costly for the private contractors, they sometimes dumped it in closer locations, such as vacant lots, to the chagrin of those who lived nearby. The pits were supposed to be emptied only at night, but the ordure was sometimes carried out during the day, scandalizing pedestrians and others in the area.63

The wagons that hauled away garbage also carried unpleasant smells. In 1922, the British district engineer noticed that open garbage wagons drove slowly through the city, filled to the top with refuse. The wagons, he wrote, gave off a nauseating stench and were surrounded with clouds of flies and other insects, which were disease vectors and thus a danger to city inhabitants. Other kinds of disgusting odors emanated from a leather-processing factory, a storehouse full of mildewed grain and straw, and the smoking chimneys of bakeries and eateries. At the end of the 1930s, Ashkenazi neighbors (the term “Ashkenazi” refers to Jews of central and Eastern European descent) complained about the stink of shishlik, an Eastern grill specialty, coming from the home of a nearby resident. They claimed that the exotic odor was suffocating and gave them headaches and nausea. In the spring, the citrus groves around Tel Aviv bloomed and filled the city with their fragrance, but this could not cover up the less agreeable smells emitted by the chicken coops and stables that stood on farmland within and around the city.64

Constant construction made street cleaning difficult. Hauling building materials raised dust and sand, and iron rods and bags of cement piled up on construction sites. One practice dating “from the days of the Turks,” as the local saying had it, was that of tossing slop water—from laundry and floor mopping, as well as sewage water—onto the street or in yards, on occasion soaking passersby and mailmen in the process. Some women did their laundry outside on an open fire, and neighbors complained that this was “appropriate for Arabs but not for Jews in a modern city.” People tossed pieces of paper, orange peels, and cigarette butts on the ground without a second thought.65
Despite its efforts, then, the municipality was unable to turn Tel Aviv into a city as clean as the Western models it admired. Some sanitation problems were the municipality’s fault, but in most cases the cause was the behavior of the city’s inhabitants. The mayor and sanitation inspector repeatedly griped that Tel Avivians lacked good citizenship. City residents demanded that the municipality clean up the city and complained about the behavior of others, but did not observe sanitation laws themselves. The hundreds of sanitation-related complaints sent by citizens to the municipality indicate that many people wanted to live in a clean community but also that a good part of the city’s filth was caused directly by the daily actions of its residents. These habits were inconsistent with the city’s Western aspirations and modern self-image, thus creating a disparity between the level of cleanliness that people wanted and the actual squalor of Tel Aviv’s public space.

The Urban Soundscape

“Tel Aviv produces enough noise and racket for all England’s cities together,” wrote the Yiddish author Shalom Asch. The Tel Aviv municipality received scores of complaints about the noise made by workshops and factories, about the loud, dissonant shouts of hawkers and peddlers in the city’s markets and streets, about the braying of donkeys and the crows of roosters. Clamor rose constantly from ubiquitous construction sites and heavy traffic. Children in playgrounds, those participating in open-air activities of youth movements and other organizations, and young people who sang and shouted on the streets late at night all contributed to the general din. Many of the complainants called the city’s noise “hellish,” and even the mayor wondered, “Who will consent to live in a city pervaded, day and night, by an infernal racket, making it impossible to rest or engage in intellectual pursuits?”

Technological innovations that reached the city during the 1930s added another level of noise. Mayor Dizengoff maintained that radios and gramophones were the major source of noise in the city. Radios had been on sale in Tel Aviv since the mid-1920s, and by the 1930s they were common, and more compact and sophisticated receivers became available. Those who owned them turned them up loud and left them on at all hours. The radio, originally an appliance to be used within one’s private quarters, thus became a major infringement on the public space.
The residents of one street complained about a shack that had been converted into a synagogue by a Yemenite organization. Beginning at 3 a.m., “loud calls” came from the synagogue and woke up the neighborhood’s hardworking laborers from their precious sleep. In a heterogeneous immigrant city like Tel Aviv, the prayer of one ethnic group was noise to another. Members of a bridge club, protested the homeowners on another street, kept playing cards and laughing loudly even when a wave of Arab murders of Jews began in 1936. The card players also held matches on the fast of the Ninth of Av, and even “on the night that Mr. Dizengoff died, when the entire city was in deep mourning.” From these examples we can see that sensitivity to noise was not an ethically neutral matter. It had a moral dimension. The bridge enthusiasts kept playing at a time of national catastrophe, on a religious commemoration of a historic tragedy (the destruction of the Temple), and on a day of municipal mourning. Thus, neighbors’ sensitivity to the actual noise made by the bridge club was clearly exacerbated by what they considered inconsiderate and inappropriate behavior.

Language is a salient physical feature of every city. Verbal communication constitutes a large part of the urban soundscape, although language is also expressed visually, in the form of signs and billboards. The Hebrew language was considered a major force for defining and unifying the Jewish nation, so its revival was a central goal of Zionism, as many studies have chronicled. The Tel Aviv municipality fought against the use of other languages, campaigning for the exclusivity of Hebrew: “Every new immigrant who comes to our city should remember that Tel Aviv is not just any Oriental city, with a jumble of nations and languages. It is a culturally Hebrew society that has but a single language, the language of the Bible, and all alien tongues brought from foreign lands must give way to this language.” Dizengoff stressed the unifying force of Hebrew and called on all the inhabitants of the first Hebrew city to be “Hebrew in your speech, your names, your signs, and in every part of your daily lives!”

In order to reinforce Tel Aviv’s Hebrew character, the municipality named the city’s streets after important figures in Jewish and Zionist history, and after places in the Land of Israel. Since the municipality viewed Tel Aviv as “the living pantheon of the Jewish people,” it did all it could to honor with street names worthy persons and entities, in response to the many requests it received from individuals and organizations in the city, in the country, and in the Diaspora. The municipality instructed business
owners to change the names of their firms to Hebrew and established a committee to otherwise strengthen the city’s Hebrew character.74

Despite leaders’ efforts, the linguistic homogeneity of the first Hebrew city was often violated. Hebrew was its official language, the principal language that its inhabitants spoke, especially the younger, native-born generation. Nevertheless, many signs over stores and businesses were in other languages, and some were in ungrammatical or misspelled Hebrew. Newspapers in foreign languages were sold on the street, available to the clientele of cafés and restaurants. Tel Aviv was in practice a multilingual city. One visitor commented that most people spoke Hebrew but that she also heard Yiddish, Polish, English, French, Hungarian, German, and other languages. Another visitor described Tel Aviv as a modern Tower of Babel, a city on whose crowded streets all the world’s languages were spoken.75 Every effort was made to use only Hebrew at official events, but in less formal situations many could not resist the temptation to use their mother tongues. Many divided the sacred from the profane: “Newspapers, public gatherings, and official letters in Hebrew, everyday life in the language of inertia and habit.”76

Hebrew itself was heard in a broad range of accents and varieties. European immigrants spoke with the accents of their mother tongues, and Sephardi inflections offered a still different variation. The Yemenites had their own special system of pronunciation. The native “sabras,” as Jews born in the Land of Israel were called, had their own accent, but during the Mandate era this aboriginal Hebrew speech was still viewed by the elite as substandard compared to their own Russian- and Yiddish-influenced pronunciation or to the formal pseudo-Sephardi pronunciation.77

In the 1920s, a branch of the Hebrew Language Defenders’ Battalion operated in the city. This was a group of determined teenagers who fought for Hebrew dominance. Members of the Battalion would approach people they heard speaking in another language and demand that they speak in Hebrew. The activists distributed ribbons bearing the slogan “Hebrew [person], speak Hebrew.” They also pasted up posters that called on the public to use its national language, and badgered institutions and companies by denouncing their use of other languages. When word reached the members that a Yiddish film would be screened in one of the city’s cinemas, they reacted with fury. Yiddish, the vernacular tongue of Eastern European Jews, was seen as the main threat to the national language. The Battalion told the cinema’s manager to cancel the show, but he refused. Dozens of the city’s inhabitants signed a petition against the film, on the grounds that
it would be “hugely detrimental to the Hebrew language.” Yet a large audience wanted to see the Yiddish film anyway. When it was finally shown despite the protests, a loud demonstration amassed, and Mayor Dizengoff ordered the police to prevent a second screening.78

In the decade that followed, German replaced Yiddish as Hebrew’s major nemesis. Even though German was only one of many languages heard on Tel Aviv’s streets, it became more common in the 1930s with the arrival of refugees fleeing the Nazi regime. Their mother tongue was received with particular hostility. The cultural distinctiveness of the German immigrants, who were derisively referred to as “Yekkes,” stood out more than the traits of residents from Eastern European lands. Some Jews of Eastern European origin identified everything German with the Nazi regime and, in turn, they referred to German as “the Nazi language” and found its use on the streets, in stores, and at cafés infuriating. The Yekkes who settled in Tel Aviv were treated coldly and even antagonistically by the city’s veteran Eastern European inhabitants, and the linguistic pressure placed on them was particularly aggressive. A public mock trial was held in Tel Aviv in 1935 to highlight the evils of using the German language in the Land of Israel. A pamphlet published at this time that called for the use of Hebrew referred explicitly to the German immigrants as a “foreign” element, accusing them harshly of “scorning our national language” and of lacking any connection “to our labors of construction and creation in our homeland.”79

Animals and Other Tel Avivians

In the 1920s and 1930s, many different kinds of animals lived in Tel Aviv. They gave it the feel of a Levantine city, or of a big European city of the premodern period — that is, a city that integrated urban and rural elements. In 1932, for example, a count found that the city was home to 292 cows, 30 heifers, 16 calves, 13 donkeys, 11 camels, 78 mules, and 145 horses. Camel trains bore sand and other construction material from the beach to building sites, and Arab shepherds ambled down the streets with their herds of sheep and goats. In 1938, a jackal that was lurking in the old cemetery and in the yards of nearby houses was hunted down. Oxen were led along the street to the slaughterhouses, and in some cases they broke free and gored people. Stables, chicken coops, barns, and camel sheds were located in the middle of residential neighborhoods.80
The city received complaints about hundreds of rats “the size of cats.” The municipality, fearful of outbreaks of bubonic plague, ordered its sanitation crews to kill the rodents. Special attention was given to danger spots, such as the outdoor marketplaces and the shantytowns, where rats attacked children and adults. During the 1930s, complaints about vermin grew more frequent. At the end of the decade, the municipal veterinary service supplied 1,990 doses of poison to residents who wanted to rid their houses and businesses of rodents. People also bought and used such poison on their own.\textsuperscript{81} The sanitary inspector wondered in desperation whether he should stop killing the city’s stray cats so that they could help fight the rodent plague. But the municipal veterinarian told him that the mice and rats should continue to be poisoned, because the cats were themselves pests. So the sanitation department continued to kill the garbage bin cats whose nocturnal caterwauling disturbed the sleep of the citizenry.\textsuperscript{82}

Even when Tel Aviv was just a neighborhood of Jaffa, many of its inhabitants complained about the dogs that roamed the streets. These strays were “dogs dying of disease, whose hide was covered with parasites and sores, who had death in their eyes and threatened every passerby.” They rummaged through garbage and then came into contact with people, especially children who were playing outdoors. Packs of strays formed in the streets, barking and howling so that people could not sleep. Bite victims had to be treated immediately for rabies “by Pasteur’s method.” Mad dogs were especially frequent in summertime. Even though complaints about stray dogs became less common in the 1930s, the municipality continued to kill thousands of them whenever the threat of a rabies breakout seemed possible.\textsuperscript{83}

Drivers sometimes used wounded animals or gave them loads too heavy to bear, and beat them brutally. A tourist from Germany wrote to the mayor that the only deplorable occurrence she found in otherwise harmonious Tel Aviv was cruelty to animals. Despite national laws against cruelty to animals and the work of a humane society, inhabitants continued to treat some beasts of burden viciously. Dizengoff, a horse owner and animal lover, issued a municipal proclamation in July 1933 urging Tel Avivians to “have mercy on animals.” He wanted to put an end to the whipping of beasts of burden who were “partners in our construction [of the city].” He pleaded with children not to torture house pets, “because they are citizens like us!”\textsuperscript{84}

Violence against dogs was viewed with special alarm. According to municipal law, dog owners had to have a license that was to be renewed each
year. The municipality could revoke the license if a dog was deemed uncontrollable and dangerous, or if its barking disturbed the neighbors. Dogs without tags were rounded up and killed. The sanitation department’s dog-catcher was diligent to a fault. His belligerence—he sometimes physically grabbed unlicensed dogs from the arms of their owners—and his cruelty toward the dogs he caught were viewed as an insult “to the moral sensitivities” of the inhabitants. Thus, to avoid shocking the citizenry, the commander of the police force proposed that dogs be rounded up only between five and seven in the morning.  

Dog ownership was already common during the 1920s, but in the 1930s it took on new dimensions, apparently as a result of innovations brought by new immigrants from Germany. In March 1935, the city saw its first dog show. Different breeds were displayed, among them German shepherds and boxers. Lapdogs were popular among the well-off. These animals were well-kept pets, not like the strays of the 1920s. A visitor from Lithuania wrote that Tel Aviv’s newfound passion for dogs was a sign of boredom, empty hedonism, a tasteless joke, a sad sign, evidence that Tel Avivians wanted to be just like the gentiles. Guard and tracking dogs were considered acceptable by such standards, however, and during the period of the Arab revolt even seen as essential. In contrast, keeping lapdogs was viewed as a decadent custom. Especially during times of recession and unemployment, many regarded keeping a pet dog as evidence of insufficient social solidarity. Dog owners liked to bring their pets to cafés and to the movies. One of the city’s rabbis wrote that to ensure that the city thrived, it was necessary “to forbid the appearance of unleashed dogs on streets and in yards, as in all the enlightened countries of Europe.” Citizens complained about the practice of taking dogs on buses, but when an attempt was made to require that dog owners pay a fare for their dogs, “they sat their dogs on seats, while [human] passengers were left standing.” The keeping of spoiled pets was a habit imported from the West but, in a typically Tel Aviv fashion, their unmuzzled presence all over the city took the European custom to anarchic extremes.

Tel Aviv’s dogs might have held a special place of honor, but the animals that really controlled the city were their human owners.

Many documents testify to the feeling of freedom and security that the city’s overwhelmingly Jewish demography and its municipal autonomy gave to both inhabitants and Jewish visitors. Shalom Asch wrote that Tel Aviv’s inhabitants felt themselves to be free people. In a purely Jewish environ-
ment, “you can do everything and say whatever is on your mind.” The Polish Zionist activist Yitzhak Gruenbaum maintained that in Tel Aviv the Jews had regained the confidence that they had lost in Europe. There they had felt inferior, fearful, and anxious, while in Tel Aviv Jews were upright and forceful. It was their city, and they all felt themselves to be first-class citizens. In contrast with Haifa and Jerusalem, with their multinational populations, in Tel Aviv “the Jew feels at home, free in his own creation. There is a sense of homeland, a bit of self-governance, and a hint of dominion.”

Others, however, were concerned about the negative repercussions of these feelings of freedom and confidence. The editor of a socialist publication expressed the worry that Tel Aviv could turn into Babel, if not Sodom. The city and its inhabitants, he wrote, had acquired bad character traits resulting from the ingathering of the exiles and “the sense of lawlessness that comes with the exodus from slavery to freedom.” In Tel Aviv no one feared the gentiles, heaven, or the force of tradition. Such a lack of restrictions could easily deteriorate into anarchy. Mayor Dizengoff claimed that Tel Aviv’s younger generation was unruly and undisciplined. “But even among the members of the previous generation, educated in European culture,” he wrote, “are those who feel, on the soil of this new homeland, as if they are exempt from all the precepts of decorum that they used to observe so painstakingly and precisely when they lived in exile among foreign nations.”

Tel Aviv’s inhabitants were not, as already noted, obedient by nature. Their sense of freedom could often degenerate into disorder, as could be seen in the city’s frenzied traffic. People often ignored “no smoking” signs in the theater, cinema, and on buses.

Tel Avivians were also informal and relaxed—to a fault, some thought. The boundary between informality and discourtesy was a narrow one, and subject to the eye and expectations of the observer. Gitlin found that Tel Aviv’s Jewish character created an automatic intimacy that made it possible to start up a conversation with anyone at all. The wife of a British officer, on the other hand, wrote about the horrible manners of young people on the Tel Aviv beach, expressing the regret that, with the exception of a small number of polite and elegant German-born Jews, incivility was characteristic of the entire Yishuv.

Informality sometimes took the form of behavior that some regarded as licentious. In 1937, residents complained to the municipality that bus drivers allowed people dressed in just bathing suits, dry or wet, to board, in spite of a municipal regulation that forbade people from appearing in
bathing suits outside the immediate area of the beach. Three years earlier, Mayor Dizengoff had grumbled that young people and vacationers who appeared on the city’s main streets in immodest bathing suits violated the sense of propriety held by many of the city’s residents. The mayor’s usual tactic was to warn that Tel Aviv was turning “Levantine,” but in this case he appealed to Eastern mores, claiming that even in Europe’s coastal cities, “where standards of modesty are less stringent than in the lands of the East,” people were allowed to appear in bathing suits only on the beach itself.93

At the beginning of the 1920s, many couples behaved “im modestly” in public. The chief of the municipal police force requested that he be allowed to use the full weight of Turkish law against them. A British subject who visited the city in the middle of the 1930s summed up the situation by writing that “it is a city with a queer morality.” While on the one hand, there was not, as in Arab cities, a prostitutes’ quarter, “half the town seems to be living in what they genially call ‘free-love.’” A red-light district was usually part of traditional and conservative cities like those of the Arab East or Victorian Europe. But in Tel Aviv, in which permissiveness held sway over a large part of the population, there was no need for such a spatial distinction between the forbidden and the permitted. Tel Aviv certainly had prostitutes. But the city’s liberal reputation derived not from prostitution but rather from the easygoing attitude, manifested by the prevailing norms of its residents.94

Accusations of “shameless” behavior during the 1930s were focused on two phenomena—smoking and shorts. Haaretz published an article by a former smoker who considered himself an authority on the act and its sublime pleasures. In Tel Aviv, however, he had encountered “a practice I have not seen in any other country: Jewish women, daughters of Israel, smoking in the street.” Women in Europe and America, including in egalitarian artistic circles, smoked more than they should, he maintained, and still had not learned to indulge in this pleasure with the refinement that could make it sublime. The modern Western woman smoked hysterically, obstinately, rather than with the appropriate leisureliness and languor. “But,” he wrote, “at least she is innocent of one sin: nowhere and never does she smoke in the street.” The writer claimed that it was even rude for men to smoke in the street, since “smoking is an extremely refined spiritual and psychological matter,” an intimate activity not to be engaged in publicly. Women should certainly not smoke anywhere but at home or in a secluded place. Even
Gypsies, who smoke as they beg and when they read the palms of passersby, do so sitting down, not walking in the street. “But Tel Aviv, which has only these last few years enjoyed electricity and comfortable washrooms, surges forward and casts off accepted norms,” wrote the aficionado. “Women take equality much too far. The sight of a woman smoking on the street unavoidably elicits associations of some sort of state of anarchy,” leading one to think that “the world has turned lawless, has broken loose, because all has turned topsy-turvy, because all standards are gone.”

During the second half of the 1930s, short pants on women came into vogue in Tel Aviv. Up to this point the only women who had worn them were pioneer farming women and manual laborers. Shorts became a fashionable item in the city under the inspiration of sportswear and film stars who showed their shapely legs. However, while in other Western countries women wore shorts when engaged in physical activity, in Tel Aviv shorts became casual everyday wear. The chief rabbis wrote to the mayor about the disturbing custom, “one among the acts of wantonness” committed in the city, “of women wearing men's pants and young women revealing their legs in an utterly immodest way.” The rabbis asked that the city council pass a law to end “the spread of this revolting blight,” at least among schoolgirls, and to “utterly remove this disgraceful and shameful sight of half-naked women walking on our streets.” Some ordinary citizens, dentists and shopkeepers, were no less upset, and protested that women wore shorts on the street “with no embarrassment or shame,” a sight one would never behold in London, Paris, Poland, or even in revolutionary Russia.

If women smoking or wearing shorts in public offended esthetic and religious sensibilities so fiercely, it is hardly surprising that the reaction to the combination of the two was even stronger. One citizen asked Mayor Dizengoff, as patron and father to the city’s inhabitants, “who wished and aspired to see the city built in the spirit of European tradition and manners, attracting all circles within Judaism,” to put an end to Tel Aviv’s wantonness, “which has no parallel among European cities.” The writer noted that he had visited many cities but had never encountered licentiousness like what he saw in Tel Aviv: “A girl walks about in public in shorts, with a cigarette in her mouth — how can she afterward become a Hebrew mother and establish a new family in Israel?” These impertinent and shameless girls who strode past the Great Synagogue with cigarettes between their lips, he wrote, were a blot on Tel Aviv as a whole.

While censured by some as wanton, Tel Aviv’s women also received many
tributes to their beauty. The women of the agricultural settlements were viewed as foundation stones of the national home, but Tel Aviv’s women were “the jewel in the crown.” The women on Tel Aviv’s beach were so attractive that single men who wanted to remain unattached were warned not to go there. Beauty and pleas to curb immodesty were mutually reinforcing. Shorts, and fashionable clothing in general, highlighted women’s allure, and the attraction they aroused in men produced, or at least reinforced, the outcry against their immodesty. In effect, the boldness of Tel Aviv’s women both reflected and enhanced the city’s attributes of security, freedom, and informality.

“Beneath the Unattractive Exterior”

People not only know the environment in which they live, they also experience it sensually, immediately, and directly. Reports about cities include subjective, sometimes implied, impressions of their form, nature, and special atmosphere. These impressions depend not only on unmediated personal experience but also on a given city’s image, and on preconceptions about it. After all, a visitor to Paris “knows” that he is in a romantic city, just as a visitor to Rio de Janeiro “knows” that he is in a sensuous one. Such knowledge inevitably influences his impression of a place. When a visitor senses a glaring disparity between a city’s reputation and its reality, he will likely make a point of expressing his surprise or disappointment. Even though his prior knowledge impinges on his impressions, it does not determine them.

Since impressions are by nature subjective, we can find a wide range of characterizations of the city that reveal their authors’ different tastes, attitudes, and perspectives. Still, some impressions seem to have recurred more often than others. For example, in many observations of 1920s and 1930s Tel Aviv, the city is described as dynamic. The constant construction not only affected the city’s size and congestion — it itself became part of the city’s image. Houses under construction became one of Tel Aviv’s notable features. Construction took place in full view, with the landscape including laborers at work, building materials and tools, camels bearing loads, pits and scaffolds. Unlike older cities, which grew over centuries, Tel Aviv was built quickly, before its inhabitants’ eyes. Feverish construction, which in the 1930s included the demolition of old houses and the construction
of new ones in their place, created a sense of hustle and bustle, haste, and transience. A British visitor wrote that the rapidly growing city gave him a strange feeling of instability.102

Swift growth also produced an ambience of vitality, energy, and youth. Writers and Zionist activists who visited the city remarked on its vigor and effervescence. They applauded its potent youthful charm and its dynamic rhythm, as well as the exuberant energy that courséd through it.103 A British tourist was astonished by this modern city, with its carefree, lively inhabitants, something he had not seen in any of the world’s great cities.104

According to the writer, journalist, and Zionist leader Nahum Sokolov, Tel Aviv’s vivacity was evident in its energetic commercial activity: “From its craftsmen to its industrialists, from its schools to its shops, from one building to another, from one firm to another, from one store to another—Tel Aviv labors, toils, creates, makes, sells, buys, exchanges—by all means and all stratagems, by all devices and tools, by all the latest innovations it has learned from others, and which it has devised on its own.”105 Tel Aviv was depicted as a city that combined youthful energy and daring, allowing new and unprecedented initiatives. This image was reinforced by comparisons with Jerusalem, which was cast as the stronghold of the traditional Jewish population, a Jewish religious center overburdened with sanctity, serious and even forbidding. All this contrasted with Tel Aviv, the city of the new Jewish community, secular and Hebrew-speaking, cheerful and impulsive.106

Tel Aviv was described, in keeping with its lively atmosphere, as a city whose inhabitants were infused with a joyful spirit, as a place where Zionist construction was carried out in delight rather than in sadness, as a city uniquely contented with its lot, the only city in the world where Jews were happy, satisfied, proud, and full of strength.107 As a British observer put it, “I also had the idea that the Jews in Tel Aviv looked happier than those elsewhere in Palestine. I sincerely hope that they are happier. They probably are. It is their city.”108

Only rarely was young Tel Aviv described as unreservedly attractive.109 In many cases, Tel Aviv’s beauty was referred to apologetically, as if in debate with the city’s detractors. The editor of Haaretz wrote that it was high time for the customary condescension and scorn for Tel Aviv to come to an end. The overstated charge that Tel Aviv was ugly derived from the bias of bored tourists and the polemics of architects who had played no role in the construction of the city. Tel Aviv’s esthetic flaws, the editor added,
were balanced by spots as lovely as those of European cities. One of Tel Aviv’s first residents came to its defense against those who criticized the city for being neither Paris nor Berlin. True, Tel Aviv had its uncongenial locations, but it had Jews, and nothing could be more beautiful than Jews in the Land of Israel: “What connection do I have with Berlin, what do I have with Paris and what with Moscow? Tel Aviv is more beautiful than they are, seventy times more beautiful, because it is Hebrew, because it is mine, because it is illuminated with my light.”

The staunch tone of those who defended Tel Aviv’s attractiveness came in reaction to the frequent description of the city as ugly. People tend to prefer cities with ample plants and flowers, water and mountains, organized, clean, well-tended cities, cities with an open, broad horizon, cities where history is evident in the citiescape. Tel Aviv did not live up to any of these standards and therefore it was only seldom described as beautiful. Yet calling the city ugly did not necessarily equate with dislike for it. Many such references came along with explanations and excuses—the city was ugly, but it had many good aspects. In the mid-1920s, Straus-Mochenson wrote to her friend that “We live here in a town so ugly that it makes one’s eyes ache, with neither a public library nor a park nor a sewage-system, with higgledy-piggledy housing and no control to speak of. It’s miraculous how well things go!”

In 1933, a British visitor attributed Tel Aviv’s ugliness to its eclecticism:

Balconies from Berlin . . . ; verandahs from American bungalows; arches and domes strangely torn from Russia; modern German wallpapers from Frankfurt. All are hurled together to make the ugliest and yet, perhaps, the most vital city I have ever seen. Each Zionist had come here, weighed down by the taste of the country from which he so gladly made his escape. The result is a muddle of shapes and towers and balconies and doors and colors, such as has never been brought together in one place before. Aesthetically, Tel Aviv is a sad blunder.

Others attributed Tel Aviv’s unsightliness to its modern architecture. The French-Jewish writer Edmond Fleg expressed regret that Tel Aviv had violated the wonderful and expansive landscape of the Land of Israel and done no more than try to imitate “graceless modern Europe.” The geographer Avraham Yaakov Brawer unfavorably compared Tel Aviv’s tiring monotonity, all straight lines, to the exoticism of Jaffa. Brawer’s complaint about the alignment of the city’s streets directly contradicted Bialik’s peeve about
how twisted the roads were. For Brawer, the paradigm was the winding alleys of Jaffa, while Bialik was presumably comparing Tel Aviv to Odessa’s grid of avenues. The municipal engineer was probably right when he maintained that those who found fault with Tel Aviv held it up to the standards of large cities they had seen or heard about in their countries of origin. 

Tel Aviv was built in the Middle East by Jews who came, for the most part, from Eastern Europe. Their aspiration was to build a modern Western community. The first Hebrew city was to be “one little patch of Europe in grubby Asian Jaffa,” or, as its leaders stated, “the only European city among the derelict Asian cities in our homeland.” 

It was meant to be a modern alternative not only to Palestine’s Arab cities but also to the crowded Jewish urban ghetto and the ramshackle and wretched shtetl (small peripheral town) of Eastern Europe. 

This ambition was accompanied by concern that proximity to Jaffa would cause Tel Aviv to devolve into a typical Levantine coastal city. 

Signs of provincialism led to claims that Tel Aviv was in fact recreating the milieu of the Diaspora’s Jewish towns. In many ways, Tel Aviv assumed a very urban appearance—it boasted asphalt, modern architecture, busy traffic, streetlights, and storefront signs. But the more it aspired to achieve a Western ideal, the greater the gap became between its ambitions and its manifestly nonideal reality—disorder, dirt, noise, and noisomeness. In fact, the city’s Western and modern motifs actually spotlighted its accompanying Eastern European and Levantine traits. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who visited the city in 1934, was taken by the strange juxtapositions he encountered—like a little Polish Jew wearing a small black cap, shouting commands in Arabic to a pack of camels he was driving down a street. 

The city government tried to impose Western customs on inhabitants and to shape Tel Aviv as it saw fit. But cities are built on the basis of ongoing give-and-take between their governing authorities and the desires and actions of the individuals and groups who inhabit them. In the 1930s, the municipal government broadened its powers and tried to address the city’s heterogeneous look by imposing greater control and uniformity. Yet the power of its residents to create facts on the urban ground in accordance with their interests and habits won the battle. The authorities’ efforts, whether with regard to cleanliness or gardening, were for naught, or at most enjoyed only partial success. The city government’s laws and initiatives in these fields were often incompatible with the daily behavior of its citizens.
“Shall I ever forget the way my heart sank the first morning I looked around me and saw what was to me one of the most unattractive towns I could ever hope to see?” wrote Marcia Gitlin in 1933. “Tel Aviv,” she added, “is far from beautiful.” Wandering through the streets during the first week of her stay, she “often wondered what made those who visited it, indifferently Zionist as they were before they came there, return so enthusiastic about Tel Aviv.” Yet gradually Gitlin “began to see beneath the unattractive exterior,” and after a seven-week stay in Palestine she left the city “with something akin to sorrow.” One thing that made Tel Aviv attractive in spite
of it all was its liveliness: “Anything of course that is still in the process of growing must be alive, and Tel Aviv is not only alive but intensely alive.” Yet for Gitlin the crux of the matter was Tel Aviv’s Jewishness: “It is something that insinuates itself into one and gives one a sensation of complete freedom. One is utterly at home.”
Chapter Two

PUBLIC EVENTS

Ceremonies shape, represent, and reinforce readings of social reality. Such public events are organized more systematically than are the chance events of daily life. They include rituals through which the collective—whether nation, community, class, or ethnic group—signifies its existence and its values. Ceremonies convey social information and bolster collective feelings. To do so, they must differ from daily life and be experienced in distinctive ways. They must be clearly structured, with recurring patterns, and use explicit cultural codes. A survey and analysis of a few of the wide range of public events held in Tel Aviv during the 1920s and 1930s provide information about the city’s prevailing values. These events reflect the ways in which social reality was construed—the stories that the Tel Aviv community sought to tell about itself symbolically—and, between the lines, reveal unconscious attitudes and intentions.

Public events in Tel Aviv were held according to a variety of cycles. Exceptions included formal receptions for distinguished visitors and the widely attended funerals of well-known individuals, occasions for which dates were not set far in advance and that did not follow a regular pattern. Other events took place every few years. Traditional holidays were celebrated on an annual basis, and the Sabbath was observed weekly. Some events were planned down to the very last detail, allowing no room for improvisation. Others, in contrast, had no fixed rules or advanced planning, and so they owed their form and structure solely to convention. A well-planned event expresses, principally, the official ideology of its planners and participants, while more spontaneous events may reveal the participants’ unofficial, sometimes even unconscious, perceptions and ways of thinking.

From the first time and every time they are held, ceremonies are aimed at creating traditions. Even a newly invented tradition, designed with the purpose of instilling values or reinforcing norms by returning to or appealing
to a real or fabricated past, is meant to signify continuity. Tel Aviv ceremonies were called “traditional” from the minute they were first devised, granting new customs an aura of legitimacy and importance. Since ceremonies are based on a language of symbols unaccompanied by detailed verbal translations and explanations, the members of the group that holds the ceremony must, in order to understand and decipher the symbols, have certain commonalities. The symbolic language of Tel Aviv’s ceremonies was thus based on shared assumptions, beliefs, and views of the world.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm draws a distinction between traditions that have quickly disappeared and those that have endured. In his view, an invented tradition must not simply be imposed from above. For it to succeed and survive, it must meet the needs of its participants. The limitations of propaganda and manipulation by ruling elites were especially evident in the Jewish community under the Mandate. The Yishuv was a voluntary society whose institutions did not have the authority to enforce their will and therefore depended largely on the cooperation of members of the community. Tel Aviv’s inhabitants chose freely whether or not to participate in celebrations and ceremonies. The municipality planned some public events and sponsored and assisted with others. In addition to the municipality, members of the cultural elite—writers, artists, musicians, and dancers—helped plan and produce celebrations. While most such occasions were planned from above, their success depended on approval by the public on ideological grounds and on public willingness to participate. The municipality acknowledged the loyalty of inhabitants who attested to the unity of their community by helping organize and produce holiday celebrations.

A public event does more than demonstrate the existence of a municipal community. It helps create and consolidate that society. The Zionist community in the Land of Israel invented and promoted a variety of ceremonies that expressed and reaffirmed national values and social cohesion. Alongside national and Zionist motifs, many Tel Aviv ceremonies took the city itself as their central subject. The first Hebrew city was watched closely by members of the Yishuv and by Zionists abroad. Public ceremonies offered a golden opportunity to advertise the city’s ideals to tourists, potential inhabitants, investors, and donors. They were also opportunities to portray the city in writing and in photographs, so the local and foreign press were invited to many events.

But the city’s “marketing” of itself was not merely cynical manipulation. Public events were not directed only at outsiders. They were instruments
for shaping the city’s image and, in the eyes of its leaders and residents, reinforcing it internally. Ceremonies that underlined Tel Aviv’s importance and success helped create community consciousness and local pride. The very organization of and participation in public events became part of a collective memory that was under construction. The production and documentation of such events thus became integral to the story of the city that Tel Avivians told to themselves and to others.

Respect for the Dead and the Living: Funerals and Receptions

A number of Tel Aviv’s public events took the form of processions along its streets. Many were carefully organized and had the character of a parade. Wherever cities have developed and flourished, street processions have become an inseparable part of municipal governance. Parades create a sense of connection to a place and symbolize residents’ belonging to their urban space. Frequent processions help foster the idea of a united and harmonious city. Processions on roads along which important sites are located create and reinforce the participants’ mental map of the city, and enable them to experience the urban space in an emotional, subjective way.

Tel Aviv processions generally ran along the city’s main streets, sometimes stopping at a symbolic site. In 1934, the remains of Leon Pinsker (1821–1891), founder of the early Zionist movement Hibat Tzion, were brought to Palestine for reburial in Jerusalem. Before the remains were sent on to Jerusalem, a ceremony was held in Tel Aviv, including a procession through the city. The convoy halted in two places, the first in front of city hall, where Deputy Mayor Israel Rokach eulogized Pinsker, and the second at the Great Synagogue on Allenby Street, where the famous cantor Shlomo Ravitz chanted a prayer. The stop next to city hall symbolized Tel Aviv’s political independence, while the second stop marked its link to Jewish tradition.

Public funerals stressed the unity of the Yishuv and the public’s gratitude for the contribution the deceased had made to the national cause. As soon as word of the death in Paris of the Zionist leader and novelist Max Nordau reached Tel Aviv in 1923, a memorial assembly was organized. Two years later, at the initiative of the Tel Aviv municipality, Nordau’s remains were brought for burial in the first Hebrew city. At the funeral, his daughter said
that her father’s final resting place would not be Jerusalem but Tel Aviv, a new entity that was entirely Jewish. “The remains of our great leader” were interred in the Tel Aviv cemetery in a formal ceremony attended by a large gathering. Nordau’s grave would “glorify the first Hebrew city,” and “draw large numbers of the members of our nation who come here.” The funeral procession included representatives of various organizations, and crowds lined the streets, some of which were still unpaved sand-swept paths, in order to pay their last respects. This formal ceremony connected Tel Aviv with one of Zionism’s founding fathers.

At the time of his death in 1934, the poet Hayyim Nachman Bialik was a national literary figure. Bialik settled in Tel Aviv in 1924 and even though he had spent most of his final years in a rented apartment in neighboring Ramat Gan, Tel Aviv claimed him as one of its own. Newspapers reported that Bialik’s death struck like a thunderbolt, that a black pall of mourning had fallen over the city, which had lost its crowning figure. The funeral was attended by throngs. A few days later, when footage of the funeral was screened in movie house newsreels, accompanied by Chopin’s funeral march, “the public stood in honor of the deceased.”

The funeral of Meir Dizengoff, one of the city’s founders and its mayor during most of its early years, was an event of special significance. Funeral announcements covered the city’s billboards, and city hall was wrapped in black cloth. Dizengoff’s coffin was placed in the municipal museum, the house that he had donated to the city. He was wrapped in a tallit (prayer shawl) and surrounded by wreaths of flowers. The funeral procession began at the museum, led by a police honor guard that was followed by delegations of students from the city’s schools, members of sports and women’s organizations and youth movements, and some two hundred wreath-bearers, children and adults alike. The pallbearers were all founders of the city. The coffin was followed by Dizengoff’s family, the chief rabbis, a large delegation from the British administration, delegations from other Yishuv communities, and foreign consuls. Walking at the end of the procession were many of the city’s citizens, some of whom wore black armbands.

Tel Aviv also knew how to honor the living. The private receptions held by the municipality to recognize important visitors were limited to invited guests. Only the city’s leading figures and representatives of select organizations were asked to participate in these concerts, tea parties, and formal dinners. Since these receptions were exclusive, an invitation quickly became a symbol of social status and a measure of prestige. Consequently, the
municipality had to deal with an endless line of people who had been insulted or who protested because they had not been invited. Spokespeople of organizations and institutions complained about being neglected or discriminated against despite their vital contributions to the city and their public value. Some individual citizens reacted with vehemence when they did not appear on the guest list for a reception to which they were certain they should have been invited. They accused the city of favoritism, discourtesy, idiocy, and provincialism. While the municipality tried to invite to each reception the most appropriate guests, within its constraints of space, Dizengoff acknowledged wearily that “not a party or celebration has gone by without complaints and appeals.” People who saw themselves as representatives of the public or as local notables insisted, in their quest for prestige, on receiving invitations. While the official purpose of receptions was to host important personages and present the city to them, such events served indirectly as the litmus test of membership in the city’s elite. Those invited ostensibly attended to pay their respects to the guest of honor, but in some sense they also came to show their faces and in so doing confirm their social status and the level of respect due them.

Before or after such exclusive receptions, the honorees were taken on a tour of the city, on foot or by car. The public was called on to receive them with cheers, flags, and applause. Photographs show crowds in which some people were dressed in holiday or formal clothes. Clearly, these were not simply passersby—they had shown up deliberately in response to municipal posters requesting that citizens greet the guests. The municipal leaders took all visitors to several key sites: city hall, a hospital and/or school, a factory and/or the municipal power station, ending with tea at the fashionable Palatine Hotel. The tour presented Tel Aviv as a sovereign political entity with social and economic achievements and a bit of cosmopolitan charm.

The municipality and the local press attached huge importance to outsiders’ reactions to the city. In preparation for each reception, the municipality went to great lengths to make sure that the city looked its best. A few days before every official visit, a frenzy of sprucing up occurred, mostly of a cosmetic nature. Eyesores that had been neglected or for which no permanent solution had been found were moved or covered up. Before a visit by the British high commissioner in 1922, the municipality ordered the local police to ensure that no one littered or soiled the streets and sidewalks, to force shopkeepers to take down merchandise and other objects they had hung in their windows, to hustle all peddlers off to side streets during the
visit, to repair all street signs and straighten all posters that were not hung properly, and of course to ensure perfect order and silence on the day of the visit. As recounted in the previous chapter, the municipality acted to keep the city clean and its signs in good repair as part of its routine maintenance work; haste, urgency, and determination signaled that an official visit was in store.

King George V of England never visited Tel Aviv, but in honor of the monarch’s silver jubilee the municipality named the eastern part of Ha-Carmel Street after him. The city sent the king and queen an official greeting full of praise for Great Britain, and expressed the national hopes of “the youngest city in the Holy Land.” The street-naming was marked with a formal ceremony that included the erecting of an ornamental gate, speeches by distinguished figures, a ribbon-cutting, and renditions of the British and Zionist anthems. Two years later, the municipality took advantage of the coronation of King George VI to launch a public relations campaign for Tel Aviv. A holiday was decreed, and the city was bedecked and lit up for a celebration with the British military. A special prayer for the new king was drafted and
chanted in all the city’s synagogues. Local historiography prefers to emphasize the Jewish struggle against British rule, a struggle that intensified in the 1940s. In turn, it often plays down efforts by the Jewish community and its leadership to cooperate with and even curry the favor of the British. But in the 1920s and 1930s, figures from the British administration and army who visited Tel Aviv were received with great honor, and the imperial anthem and flag were integral parts of many Zionist public events.

Exhibitions and Fairs, Workers and Bourgeoisie

A company named Commerce & Industry organized exhibitions in Tel Aviv in 1923 and 1924 that displayed goods produced by the Yishuv. In 1926, the company sponsored a Land of Israel and Near East Fair. Foreign firms participated in another such fair three years later. The first international Levant Fair was held in 1932, and a second followed two years later. Both were great successes, with dozens of countries participating. But the third Levant Fair, in 1936, was cut short by the breakout of the Arab Revolt. All these fairs were part of a Western trend that had begun with London’s Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851 and lasted through the New York World’s Fair of 1939. International fairs celebrated new building technologies and industrial production, and their major impetus was national pride and an interest in expanding international markets.

Tel Aviv’s exhibitions and fairs put the city’s economic success on display, as well as its modernist image and its ideal of attaining technological progress. We may presume that Dizengoff was quite pleased with the medal he received from the king of Romania in the wake of the second Levant Fair, which cited him for “first-class commercial and industrial achievement.” No less flattering was the report of the Confederation of British Industry, which termed the fair a huge success on both the technical and business levels: “The Levant Fair in appearance and equipment was a show of which any European capital would be proud.” It was well planned, the organizers were energetic and effective, Tel Aviv and Dizengoff were wonderful hosts, the audiences were intelligent, well ordered, well behaved, and displayed keen interest in the exhibits. The report’s wording discloses the authors’ appreciation but also their surprise—they clearly did not expect to see such a Western-style exhibition in the Levant, attended by natives so culturally advanced.
World’s fairs generally create a temporary landscape of pavilions, a kind of display window onto the accomplishments of industrial capitalism. Tel Aviv’s exhibitions, accordingly, served as a visual symbol of the city’s modern spirit. The ceiling of the exhibition hall of 1926 was typically “industrial,” much like the ceilings of nineteenth-century European train stations. The temporary pavilions of the Levant Fair of 1932 displayed the spirit of the times in both exterior and interior design. In anticipation of the Levant Fair of 1934, concrete roads and sidewalks were paved at the exhibition grounds to the north of the city. This time, permanent concrete structures were built. Their cubist style was inspired by the modernist architecture then coming to define Tel Aviv’s urban landscape. At the New York World’s Fair five years later, a glass model of the Tel Aviv fairgrounds would even be displayed in the Land of Israel pavilion. As two contemporary writers argue, “The Fair of 1934 presented a visual and cultural image and portrayed the Zionist concept that the Jewish settlement wished to show the world. Its rhetoric promoted the image that in Palestine a secular, Western, advanced and strong society, liberated from past traditions, was developing.”

Huge crowds attended the opening ceremonies of the Levant Fair of 1934. They wanted to see the exhibits and hear the speeches made by the local leaders and invited guests, who wore formal dress. Moshe Shertok (Sharett), head of the Jewish Agency’s political department (later to become Israel’s second prime minister) brought Dizengoff the apology of the British high commissioner in Amman, who was unable to attend the opening ceremony: “As a private note I add that Colonel Cox mocked us, the Jews of the Land of Israel, for imitating the British in all things and insisting on a dress code that is inappropriate to the torrid climate of this country. He said that the requirement that he wear a black formal suit and top hat was one of the reasons that induced him not to attend the opening ceremony.” Shertok seems to have chosen to quote Cox’s patronizing comment because he himself saw European formal dress as unnecessary and inappropriate for spring in Tel Aviv. He sought to hint at this point tactfully, adducing a British source, since Dizengoff was highly attuned to British standards.

Even if the British thought of the Jews in Palestine as “natives,” the Jews themselves sought to use exhibitions and fairs to portray Jewish settlement in the country as a modern Western colonial project in the East. One exhibition organizer claimed that the Levant Fair’s symbol, a flying camel,
encapsulated the spirit of the event. The camel represented the Orient, but in contrast with the actual unhurried camels of the East, this camel’s wings symbolized Jewish Palestine’s Western orientation and dynamism as it acted energetically to develop its industry. Indeed, the previously cited report of the Confederation of British Industry noted that Tel Aviv’s atmosphere was manifestly Western, and that the Orient was barely noticeable.

The Levant fairs were seen as having public relations as well as economic value. The hope was that they would convince neighboring Arab lands to establish commercial ties with the Jews of the Land of Israel, because only this way “will we be able, in the future, to restore to the Near East the economic status it enjoyed in ancient times.” While a few Arab countries participated in the international fairs of the 1930s, the increasing focus on industry served to perpetuate the ever-growing disparity between the Jewish and Arab economies in Palestine itself. Mandate Palestine Arabs opposed what they considered the explicit imperialist message conveyed by the events. They boycotted the Levant fairs, which they saw as a “Jewish-British exhibition” that represented all of Palestine except the Arabs.23

Following the first Levant Fair, its management wrote that “The fair showed itself to be a means of international public relations for increasing

immigration to the Land and increasing the capital invested in it.” The management claimed further that the fair had attracted a stream of visitors that benefited the tourist industry, providing jobs for laborers and bringing in a great amount of capital. Economists noted a “significant commercial stimulus” in Tel Aviv after the fair, as well as after the Maccabiah games and Purim festivities. The municipality and the press encouraged the use of holidays to seek profit and engage in advertising, but price gouging and other such practices were condemned as money-grubbing that was diametrically opposed to the purpose and spirit of Jewish holidays. The municipality had to put up posters counseling wariness of the drivers of cabs and wagons, restaurant owners, and others who doubled their prices during the fair and at holiday time.24

World’s fairs were a manifestation of the rise of Western consumer culture. Not only were goods sold and industrial projects displayed; the fairs also disseminated ideas and promoted new patterns of consumption. They served in effect as ideal “cities” of consumption, as dream worlds that linked the realm of the imagination to that of materialism and commerce. Supplementing the fairs’ impressive architecture and museumlike exhibits were theatrical events and live performances.25 The Palestine and Near East Exhibition of 1929 and the Levant Fair of 1934 were produced concurrently with the city’s twentieth and twenty-fifth anniversaries. They therefore celebrated Tel Aviv’s crafts and industry at the same time that they trumpeted the city’s overall success.

Concerts and dance performances, plays and silent films, games and competitions, raffles and lotteries were all presented in the pavilions and compounds constructed for the display of merchandise. This shared space blurred the differences between national, local, municipal, and hedonistic consumer values. A long list of events took place on the fairgrounds, among them popular dance competitions and performances by amateur orchestras. Other activities included a gathering for students, a Flying Camel Ball, and fireworks. Locally made prizes were awarded, and visitors were given the opportunity to take part in a variety of comical competitions. The fairground’s fantasy atmosphere, which symbolized a world of plenty and gaiety, was reinforced with dreamlike lighting. In addition to the large, high, globular fixtures that provided the basic illumination, the pavilions, most notably the Palace of Local Industry, as well as the Ferris wheel were decked out with strings of colored lights.26 This ambience and the plethora of celebrations disturbed the editor of a socialist magazine. In an essay entitled “The Fly-
ing Camel,” he cited his appreciation of the fair but expressed concern that it offered in some ways an escape from the serious problems faced by the Zionist project. He supported holding such fairs but reminded his readers that they could not be the basis for creating a sound Zionist society in the Land of Israel. Fairs could in no way serve as a surrogate for living “lives of productive labor” and for strengthening the settlement of the Land.27

Following the lead of other world’s fairs, and as part of the magical, hedonistic microcosm it sought to create, the Levant Fair included construction of an amusement park, an act that quickly proved controversial. The press and some leaders condemned the devotion to pleasure as a danger to public morals. The public, on the other hand, loved the rides. The manager of the amusement park assured Mayor Dizengoff that his apparatuses presented no moral danger at all to the crowds that lined up to ride them. But the mayor was not convinced. He had heard rumors that the facility included games of chance, raffles, roulette, and other pastimes that encouraged the public to waste its money.28

Tel Aviv was a heterogeneous city, home to various political and ideological currents within the Zionist movement. Even an event like the Levant Fair, about which there was a broad national consensus, elicited a few specific objections. Following the 1929 fair, the city’s chief rabbis censured the municipality and demanded to be allowed to supervise the restaurants and cafés that operated during the next fair to ensure that the food served was kosher. The menu of the cafeteria on the fairgrounds reveals what aroused the rabbis’ ire — among the cold items, egg dishes, hot drinks, and ice cream, hungry fairgoers could buy a plate of ham and eggs.29

This fair’s ushers were provided by two organizations with political views at diametric opposites—Betar, the youth movement and sports organization of the right-wing revisionist movement, and Ha-Po’el, the labor movement’s sports organization. Zeev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, leader of the revisionist movement, applauded the cooperation between the rivals and viewed it as a paragon of tolerance.30 But at the 1934 fair, the manning of these posts became a point of dispute. The jobs were to be split between the two groups, but Betar’s members refused to work without their movement uniforms, so Ha-Po’el ended up filling all the usher positions. Betar’s head office complained angrily that Ha-Po’el’s ushers had shown up in their own uniforms and had let supporters of their political party into the fair without tickets. Ha-Po’el was also accused by Betar of organizing catcalls directed at the Betar team in the dance competition.31
The political polarization that characterized the Yishuv during the Mandate period led to public altercations at municipal events. Such political disagreements were all the more common at partisan gatherings. In 1922, a total of seventy-four of the city's inhabitants petitioned the municipality to prohibit a procession, planned for May Day, of marchers carrying red flags. But despite opposition, the workers' holiday was marked ever more elaborately as the years went by. The workers' councils declared it a day off and supplemented the parade with large celebrations and concerts. In its newspaper, the labor movement wrote with pride about the red flags, the flowers, and the electric lights that were hung on the walls of the city's labor organization offices, as well as the lively dancing that continued late into the night. Workers were called on to wear the blue shirts that were the uniform of their movement so as to highlight their party's strength in Tel Aviv and the Yishuv as a whole. Even though May Day was originally designated as a class holiday—the holiday of the workers—in British-ruled Tel Aviv, the day's official messages were replete with national Zionist content. International class issues went almost unmentioned, but the celebration served as an arena in which the workers' organizations gave voice to their political doctrines and their opposition to the middle-class factions that controlled the Tel Aviv municipality.

Politization was also salient at sports events. The middle-class sports organization, Maccabi, sponsored the Maccabiah games, a sort of Jewish Olympics. The first and second Maccabiahs were held in Tel Aviv in 1932 and 1935. The nationalist agenda associated with the games was on display in the opening and closing processions, which went from central Tel Aviv to the new stadium that had been built in the north of the city. Twelve riders on horseback represented the twelve tribes of Israel, and the ceremonies included the Zionist flag and anthem. Speeches were made by leaders of the Maccabi movement, the Tel Aviv municipality, and Zionist institutions. Dizengoff viewed the Maccabiah as proof to the world that “our ancient race” was still potent and that Jewish youth had the same affinity for physical culture as did gentile youth. He presented the first Maccabiah as demonstrating Jewish achievements in the Land of Israel during the first half-century of Zionist settlement, and called on Jews who came to Palestine for the event to join their brothers and sisters in the building of the homeland. In fact, the Maccabiah was used as a means of spiriting several thousand new immigrants into the country, in excess of the legal quotas set by the British.
The Maccabiah’s nationalist message was crystal clear not only to its participants, audiences, and guests, but also to the country’s Arabs. They complained about the parade’s military character and the use of the games to smuggle in illegal immigrants. The Maccabiah so infuriated the Arabs that officials of the Jewish national institutions, fearing an outbreak of violence, asked Jewish cinemas not to show newsreels with footage of the games, at least until Arab anger had dissipated. The British authorities also sought to downplay the games’ nationalist character, and restricted both the size of the second Maccabiah’s opening procession and its route.36

The Maccabi organization invited Ha-Po’el and other local Jewish sports organizations to participate in the games. After considerable hesitation and internal debate, Ha-Po’el turned down the invitation on the grounds that its members would not be allowed to appear in their uniforms, with their insignia, flags, and slogans. As an alternative, Ha-Po’el organized its own games and participated in international socialist sports events, where it could express its political identity. The revisionists proudly accepted the invitation to the Maccabiah, terming it a “wonderful national festival,” and accused Ha-Po’el of seeking to sabotage initiatives to unify Hebrew sports.37 The spillover of partisan ideological debates onto the playing field was symptomatic of how ideology pervaded all areas of life in the Yishuv.
Political rivalries were major factors in shaping the new Zionist culture, its symbols, and its ceremonies.38

Traditional Holidays in New Guises

Traditional Jewish holidays were celebrated in Tel Aviv both in old and familiar ways, with the incorporation of modern additions, and in entirely new ways. Old festivals were infused with new meanings, and sometimes familiar messages were expressed in national and Tel Aviv–specific terms.

Some holidays were not institutionalized to any great extent. Such was the case, for example, with Pesach, which was observed for the most part within the family — although large public Seders were held to account for the needs of the city’s considerable cohort of single men and women. The Histadrut, the General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel, held one such huge Seder, attended by hundreds of workers, many of them unemployed. An artistic program ended with the participants dancing until morning. During the 1920s, Seder nights were described as cheerful and bustling, but descriptions from the 1930s portray them as quieter and more family-oriented. Thus, a holiday that typically was not celebrated in any public or institutionalized way took on a special citywide character.39

Tu Bi-Shevat, the “new year of the trees,” was a minor observance traditionally. But it acquired special Zionist significance at the end of the nineteenth century, when Jewish settlers in Palestine began to celebrate it as a tree-planting festival. “Making the desert bloom” was a value shared by a broad Zionist consensus, and Tu Bi-Shevat expressed and reinforced this national goal in both a symbolic and practical way. The festivities thus included processions accompanied by music and drumming in which participants bore farm tools. Children in school and preschools observed the holiday by planting trees and eating local fruit. The celebrations in Tel Aviv may also have contained echoes of the founders’ dream of a green “garden city.”40

Agriculture was a dominant motif as well on Shavuot, the festival of the first fruits, another traditional holiday that the Zionists refashioned. In ancient times, the Jewish people observed the holiday by bringing their first fruits of the summer to the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem, but following the Temple’s destruction and during the exile, the holiday was celebrated as the anniversary of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. At the end of the 1920s, the Union of Hebrew Teachers and the Jewish
National Fund (JNF)\textsuperscript{41} organized ceremonies in which Jewish settlers and children brought gifts of produce for the JNF. This tribute, recalling the ancient festival, became an important holiday on the calendar in kibbutzim and other farming settlements. Such celebrations were also held in Tel Aviv beginning in the 1920s, and in 1930 all the city’s schools, along with those of area farming communities, began holding public ceremonies along the lines suggested by the teachers’ union and the JNF. A round, stepped stage was built in the middle of Maccabi Stadium in Tel Aviv. Files of children marched up to it, carrying baskets of fruit to the dais and calling out, “We have brought the first fruits of our land as a gift for the redemption of the soil of Israel.” The children wore white clothes and wreaths placed over white scarves on their heads, a reference to the sacred garments of the priests. Girls in white dresses and scarves accepted the baskets from the children and arranged them on the platform. The holiday celebrated the produce of the renewed Land of Israel—as emphasized by the dedication of the fruits to the JNF and the singing of the Zionist anthem “Ha-Tikva” at the end of the ceremony—and the connection between the produce of the new era with the land’s biblical agricultural past and holidays. One Tel Aviv preschool teacher claimed that the children loved no other holiday better. But film footage belies this—the small children who appear at the celebrations look exhausted, overexposed to the sun, and not very happy.\textsuperscript{42}

On Hanukkah, schoolchildren participated in a nighttime torchlight procession ending at the Great Synagogue on Allenby Street, which was festooned with electric lights and had an electric menorah on its roof. The inhabitants of the first Hebrew city had no trouble deciphering the Zionist significance of the ancient holiday—the procession memorializing the Maccabees also symbolized hope for national liberation and independence. This new take on Hanukkah focused on the Jewish people’s aspiration to re-establish itself in its ancient homeland, not on the divine miracle that had occurred centuries before in the Temple.\textsuperscript{43} When internal political tension between the Zionist right and left reached a climax in 1933, in the months preceding the assassination of the labor Zionist leader Haim Arlosoroff, the municipality canceled the torchlight procession, noting that a fight had broken out the previous year. It anticipated an even more serious incident in 1933, “especially given that the streets have recently been the sites of public scandals.”\textsuperscript{44}

The children’s procession answered the call of Zionist duty; adults took advantage of Hanukkah to hold parties. Sometimes such parties had a local
or traditional theme or program, such as Hebrew folk dancing or eating the traditional potato pancakes, but most featured a band, prizes, and ballroom dancing, sometimes including a New Year celebration. Such parties had a fairly standard format—jazz dancing with a live orchestra, plus confetti and food.45

The religious public was not always pleased with the holiday innovations of nonreligious Jews. The Zionist first fruits ceremonies were viewed by the religious as a sacrilege against the Shavuot holiday’s traditional observance. Observant Jews also opposed the recitation of religious prayers at nonreligious events, when men had their heads uncovered and the sexes mixed with one another. The Queen Esther beauty competition held on Purim also aroused fierce opposition from rabbis and religious circles. While they were unable to prevent private parties, they did compel the mayor to cancel his sponsorship and support for the beauty contest.46

Observing Jewish holidays in secular ways could arouse the ire of the religious minority, but the celebration of Christian holidays angered a much larger section of the Jewish public. The most widespread such celebration was the marking of the Gregorian New Year, which the Yishuv understood to be a Christian religious holiday, with dances, singing, and the drinking of champagne at midnight. Haaretz deplored how the first Hebrew city’s streets were packed with people in holiday clothes on their way to public and private parties on the eve of the New Year: “We have indeed become just like the gentiles.” Under public pressure, the municipality decided to wage battle against this custom in 1935, the year following the Haaretz editorial. The head of the education and culture department sent a letter to the proprietors of halls and cafés that had advertised New Year celebrations, demanding they be canceled. “In coming to this Land, we assumed a number of national duties, even if they meant financial sacrifice, and there is no way we can give in on the question of foreign holidays,” she wrote. In December 1935, the municipality placed notices in the newspapers calling on café owners not to hold New Year celebrations and on the city’s inhabitants not to participate in them.47

---

Was the Purim Carnival a Real Carnival?

Purim, a minor traditional holiday that comes toward the end of winter, celebrates the overturning of a plot by the evil Haman to kill all the
Jews of Persia, as related in the Book of Esther. The Yishuv gave this festival a new form and new meanings. In the 1920s, it became the largest annual event in Tel Aviv, a public happening that became identified with the city and its spirit. Sources dating to the 1920s and 1930s refer to the Purim celebrations as a carnival—borrowing the term from the pre-Lenten celebration of the Mardi Gras. Over the decades since, linguists, anthropologists, and historians have written fascinating studies of the carnival phenomenon. They have portrayed the carnivals of medieval Europe and modern Latin America as celebrations of rule-breaking and insubordination, especially in societies with strict hierarchies. The events serve as a sort of safety valve and as a regular, controlled outlet for aggression and other primal urges repressed during the rest of the year. The pre-Lenten carnival celebrates a world upended, in which the social and political orders are reversed—the king is portrayed as a fool and the village fool is crowned Carnival King. Carnivals observe no separation or clear boundaries between the holiday’s central, planned event—generally a parade of some sort—and the audience watching it. There are no “actors” and there is no “audience.” Rather, the merriment sweeps up all those present into a single disorderly multitude.

During the Middle Ages, traditional Purim observances, which were themselves influenced by pagan springtime festivals, borrowed many aspects of the European Catholic carnival. But was Purim in Tel Aviv also characterized by the casting off of inhibitions, sexual license, and sensual intoxication? Written and photographic evidence portrays gaiety and merriment but well within the bounds of the proper. Haaretz was impressed by the 1926 celebration, noting with satisfaction that public order had been maintained throughout, despite the entire city being in high spirits, and imbibing them, too. The newspaper credited the police with their ability to ensure impeccable order in a celebrating city. Moshe Beilinson, a physician and journalist, wrote:

[A]nyone who has seen the Christian carnival in those places where it originated and developed, in the Catholic lands, can only wonder at the “purity” of the Hebrew carnival, the absence of sexual laxity; this sight has no parallel—even when, ostensibly, “all is permitted,” a woman can walk down the street at night without any risk of encountering rude behavior or even a hurtful jeer. Our “rudeness” is manifested in singing in the street.
Such propriety was indeed strictly observed, to the point that the municipality even decided not to allow a dance studio to participate in the parade. For “educational reasons,” it decided, it was inappropriate for tens of thousands of people to watch a dance performed by fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls. In the 1930s, each year as the holiday approached, the municipality put up placards on “Keeping Order on Purim.” They enumerated the rules applying to outpourings of joyfulness, forbidding, among other things, setting off firecrackers, wearing costumes offensive to religious and national mores, and overcrowding on balconies and roofs along the parade route.53

Purim in Tel Aviv was not unbridled. Traditional Mardi Gras customs stressing the lower stratum of the human body, such as public gluttony and urination, nudity, and open lovemaking, were nowhere evident. A lone, and relatively tame, exception was provided by the Trask gang. Before World War I, Avraham Aldema, a high school painting teacher, organized a group of young people who held parties, a Purim costume parade, and processions in which they sang loudly and committed pranks. Following World War I, when the Yishuv experienced a recession, Aldema reconstituted the group. He and about twenty others made a practice of going out to sing in the street. Trask gradually attracted new members: artists, actors, workers, and unemployed people. The group developed original and assertive techniques in its war against snobbism and in sympathy with the city’s wretched and downhearted. In the Purim parades of the 1920s, Trask evoked the body’s lower stratum. For example, one of its placards of 1928 was emblazoned “Enemas for All.”54 But even among the high-spirited Trask gang, scatology was sporadic and purely verbal.

Purim, even in Jewish tradition, is a topsy-turvy holiday. But in Tel Aviv, social and political conventions were not violated—and were, in fact, affirmed in symbolic ways. The themes chosen for Purim parades reinforced national values, linking them to the Jewish people’s history. The municipality’s festivities committee chose an overarching theme for each year’s procession—such as the aliyot (waves of immigration), the twelve tribes, Jewish ethnic groups—on which the parade’s floats and displays were based. Other themes representing the national consensus also made an appearance, such as “kings of anti-Semitism,” “We are crossing the Jordan,” “internal Aliyah” (referring to the Yishuv’s birthrate), “the Tower of Babel” (to encourage the use of Hebrew), and other such concepts. Displays presented subjects including the municipal budget, the Jewish Agency, and
the plight of the unemployed. Banners that hung from balconies declared, “The Land belongs to those who purchase and cultivate it.” A British guest wrote wryly that “Early in the procession was a historical tableau. Then came groups of Jews in costumes,” poking fun at the British administration: “It seems that we are a very wicked and dishonest people.”

In 1933, one of the floats displayed a figure of Hitler mounted on a horse; hanging from the dictator’s neck was a sign reading “Death to the Jews,” and two bleeding Jews were shown trampled underfoot. Unlike the traditional burning of Haman and other enemies in effigy, this mannequin was displayed unharmed, a reference to current events in Germany—where the Nazis had recently come to power. The German consul in Jerusalem sent Mayor Dizengoff a letter of protest and demanded politely but firmly that the Purim committee apologize for insulting Germany’s chancellor. Dizengoff responded no less firmly and politely that the portrayals of the persecution of Jews in Russia and Germany were a spontaneous expression of the prevailing feelings in the Yishuv. The oppression of the Jews of Germany was not forgotten even on joyous occasions, and Dizengoff wrote that he was actually astounded that the public had not displayed its anger more vehemently. A year later the parade featured a huge monster with a swastika on its back. This symbol of anti-Semitism was burned in response to the burning of Jewish books in Germany.

The parade was led each year on horseback by Mayor Dizengoff and Avraham Shapira, a well-known leader of the nearby moshava (farming town) of Petah Tikvah. No fool was crowned king in this parade, and if there was anything buffoonish about the horsemen, it was entirely unintentional. The parade included floats and skits performed by representatives of respectable organizations and businesses. Rather than creating a disordered world, the parade expressed in concrete ways the existing social order and its official values. Tel Aviv and Yishuv society was, in the 1920s and 1930s, in the early stages of consolidation, and the Purim parade served as a discrete way for this young urban community to define itself and reinforce its boundaries.

In Tel Aviv’s Purim festivities, the crowd did not blend with the parade; the boundary between active participants and passive observers was not crossed. Photographs show well-behaved spectators watching the carefully planned parade go by. The organizers knew exactly who would participate, what they would do, and where they would walk. Neither place nor time existed for spontaneity. Some bystanders broke out in circle dances, but
they remained among the spectators, well separated from the dancers in the parade. The onlookers were expected to obey the parade captains and to stay off the street while the parade was passing by. Most adults on the streets, balconies, and roofs along the parade route were dressed in ordinary clothing—they saved their costumes for the parties to be held in the evening. Visually, the costumed participants in the parade were clearly distinguishable from the observers in their street clothes, demonstrating the invisible and impenetrable barrier between the two. Since the parade was a show put on before an audience and not a carnival meant to sweep up everyone who encountered it, Arabs from Jaffa also came to watch. However, even this passive participation in the event elicited censure from the Arab press. Late in his life, the dancer, filmmaker, party organizer, and Tel Aviv resident Baruch Agadati related that he did his best to induce a joyful ecstasy in the Purim crowds of the 1920s. But by the 1930s, he said, the parades had become institutionalized performances.

Since Tel Aviv’s Purim celebration really bore little resemblance to traditional carnivals other than its being termed a carnival, we may presume that the event did not serve the same sociocultural purpose as that served by carnival celebrations in other societies. It should be kept in mind that the traditional carnival was repressed and subdued in Western Europe from the sixteenth century onward and in Eastern Europe from the nineteenth century onward. Purim, which in the medieval and early modern periods had been influenced by surrounding customs and absorbed various elements of the Christian carnival, was also tamed and ceased to be a carnival in the old sense long before its celebration in Tel Aviv. It may be that Tel Aviv’s relatively permissive and secular society did not need a special holiday for hedonism and indulgence. As an immigrant society in the early stages of consolidation, a society mobilized to achieve a national goal, Tel Aviv did not want, or perhaps was unable, to create a topsy-turvy world. Ultimately, its profoundest need was to reinforce and firmly establish its values, not subvert them. It sought to use its holidays—especially the Jewish holiday most closely identified with the city and its image—to promote its national ideals. In retrospect, Tel Aviv’s Purim, in its content, form, and cultural role, was not a carnival but a holiday of another type.

Beginning in the early 1920s, a variety of groups and organizations celebrated Purim with parades in the morning and public or private parties in the evening. Especially notable were the exclusive parties organized by Baruch Agadati. The mid-1920s saw a process whereby the events were
unified and institutionalized. The JNF’s carnival committee oversaw the program and organized strict supervision of public order during the parade, reining in the holiday’s popular and spontaneous aspects. In 1929, the responsibility for organizing the holiday was transferred to the Tel Aviv municipality, which established a Purim committee whose members included writers, artists, theater professionals, and public officials. The municipality provided most of the funding, but the JNF and figures with economic interests, among them industrialists, merchants, and hotel proprietors, also contributed money and prizes for contests and raffles. As the celebrations grew ever more institutionalized, their economic value rose. Tourists from within and outside the country came to Tel Aviv for Purim, creating a large block of consumers, so the municipality permitted stores and commercial establishments to remain open until ten at night on the holiday—three hours later than the normal closing time. In 1936, when the municipality canceled the celebrations owing to the economic downturn, the commercial and industrial associations protested hotly and tried, without success, to persuade the municipality to reverse its decision.

Purim served as an opportunity to advertise for consumer products by linking them to the holiday, its customs, and its spirit. The back of a Purim pamphlet displayed an advertisement stating: “You’re exhausted from all the dancing and cheer; if you’ve come down with a headache, don’t worry! Aspirin, which gets rid of every pain, is available in your pharmacy.” Another ad said: “You need a souvenir of the festivities, but you won’t have a good souvenir if you didn’t take pictures with an Agfa.” Food and drink were also advertised in the Purim spirit. Such products were displayed colorfully in the parade itself, advertising integrated into the ceremony. Even before the holiday was institutionalized and commercialized, “popular” processions included advertising exhibits and performances from various companies. As time went by, these commercial displays came to constitute an ever greater part of the parade. In the 1930s, processions consisted of two elements. The first was floats produced by various organizations that related to the parade’s overall theme, and were put together under the supervision and advice of the parade organizers, sometimes subsidized by the organizing committee. The second element was commercial. Businesses advertised their wares in Purim style, and paid the municipality for the right to include their displays in the parade. In 1935, for example, twenty-one organizations and voluntary entities participated in the parade, along with twenty-seven industrialists and manufacturers. The previous
year, visual advertising was first supplemented with sound piped through loudspeakers.62

But the Purim festivities were not simply a walking advertisement. Photographs and films show that the lively presentation of commercial products served not only as advertising for specific products—it also promoted consumerism and material progress as a wider value. The commercial displays portrayed Tel Aviv as an economic success, and titillated with the delights of consumer gratification. Baruch Agadati wanted to exploit the cluttered appearance of the typical Tel Aviv emporium to amplify the holiday atmosphere. He asked the municipality to allow storekeepers to hang merchandise at the entrance to their shops “to give the city the special character of a kind of fair, a multihued festive look.” While the displays centered on urban production, agriculture, the apple of the Zionist movement’s eye, was not left out. Dizengoff invited nearby farming communities to participate in the parade, and in one of the processions a huge mannequin of an industrial laborer was accompanied by displays of pioneer farmers working the land.63

Throughout the world, festivals of abundance create a symbolic link between communities and their principal natural resources—the productivity of the land and of human labor. At the heart of such festivals is a celebra-
tion of the local economy. Outside the traditional agricultural context, festivals can seem less poignant, since the community does not depend on the fruit of the land for its very survival. Still, festivals of abundance continue to be celebrated in the modified form of exhibitions of urban products, with stress placed on the community’s involvement in their creation. Just as Shavuot, the feast of the first fruits, became a day on which agricultural settlements displayed pride in their produce, Purim morphed into an opportunity for Tel Aviv manufacturers and merchants to parade their products. On Purim, the city that had become the Yishuv’s commercial, industrial, and financial hub, as well as the center of its consumer culture, celebrated its economic success.

The Sabbath Promenade

Tel Aviv, wrote Marcia Gitlin, seethes with activity from the early hour of the morning until the very late hour at which it retires:

It rests only on one day, Saturday, when all its business houses are closed, and no Jewish buses run and something of a festival spirit pervades the atmosphere. On that day the whole populace wanders down the Allenby Road to the sea and sits for hours on deck chairs and dozes in the sunshine. The younger members may bathe—many of them do—and, tell it not in Gath, some of them do not even come to the sea but play football, much to the hurt and fury of the orthodox. But the percentage of the latter is small. So up and down the Allenby Road on Saturday the long procession goes—men, women, children, babes in arms, and babes in perambulators—this is the one great day of the week when you may don your best attire and see and be seen to advantage by the rest of your neighbors.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Sabbath—Friday night and Saturday—was a central public event in Tel Aviv, all the more so because it occurred every week. Residents described their city’s version of the Sabbath as unique. In other words, their interpretation reflected self-awareness and a deliberate intention to create a specific image. In contrast, however, with most of the other kinds of events and celebrations surveyed thus far, the Sabbath was not characterized by a fixed ritual or program. Instead, it was composed of a system of general customs and conventions. Its informal character thus
makes it a window through which we can discern well-ensconced cultural values, some of which can be perceived only indirectly or by implication.

The beginning of the Sabbath on Friday evening was announced by a shofar (ram’s horn) or trumpet blast, which served as a signal for businesses to shut down and for traffic to cease. Most business establishments closed from this moment until the end of the Sabbath at nightfall on Saturday. Public transportation did not operate. On Friday nights and Saturdays, the streets were packed with people. Synagogues, especially the Great Synagogue on Allenby Street, filled with worshippers. People flocked to the beach. One resident complained that the people who strolled on the Sabbath day and Saturday night left huge amounts of litter behind them. An English observer described Tel Aviv as an Oriental city, which was why even on the Sabbath there was no peace and quiet—the streets were filled with chattering crowds. This same observer noted that promenading men did not get drunk or flirt with girls—people just walked around and chatted, and anything out of the ordinary drew a big crowd. People bought snacks from stores and stands that remained open, sat in cafés, and sometimes broke out in song or dance at night. In the morning, they occupied themselves with low-key leisure activities—for example, taking snapshots and weighing themselves. The stroll continued along the narrow beach-front, and the cafés there were always full. People swam in the sea, sun-bathed on beach chairs or on the sand, and engaged in sports—soccer, ping-pong, sailing. They bought bananas, hot corn on the cob, fizzy drinks, and ice cream from peddlers.

The so-called promenade was the principal form of weekend recreation in Tel Aviv. To promenade is to take a walk with the purpose of presenting oneself to the world and of observing other people. One visitor was impressed by the festive atmosphere of the “processions” of Tel Avivians ambling up and down Allenby Street. It was the happiest day of the week, when people put on their finest clothes and sought to look their best for neighbors. Photographs confirm these testimonials, depicting Saturday strollers in elegant clothes, wearing a variety of hats. Women donned stylish dresses; many of the men wore suits and ties. In the summer heat, promenaders preferred white or light-colored holiday clothes.

In contrast with the traditional Sabbath, which was a family occasion devoted to the home and to reflection, Tel Aviv’s Sabbath took place not only in public but for the public. The promenade, the weekly opportunity to see and be seen, was a manifestation of the modern urban phenomenon
of the individual presenting himself and his image, seeking to make an impression on others. The promenade and Sabbath leisure activity involved other modern values as well, such as self-definition via consciously chosen patterns of consumption and recreation. On the beach, people of all types displayed their bodies in bathing suits. A tourist referred to the thousands of Saturday bathers and strollers as “Hebrews,” meaning that they spoke Hebrew, but he added that they were “Hellenists” in their enjoyment of sensual pleasures and their focus on maintaining fit, athletic bodies. Another visitor wrote that “On Friday evening and on the morning of the Sabbath there are services in the synagogues, but here in Tel Aviv amongst the modern and more materialistic Jews there are many who do not now trouble about these observances. Instead, the whole population seems to have

spilt itself upon the seashore.” The beach was so crowded that one could barely move or even see the sand. The cafés, kiosks, and food-hawkers on the beach did a brisk business.70

According to Jewish tradition, the Sabbath was a holy day meant for spiritual pursuits, and was not to be frittered away on mundane or worthless activities. Religious law prohibited a variety of activities, some of them relating to work and others to the sacred nature of the day. Among the items prohibited were riding or traveling by automobile, handling money or tools, turning electric lights on or off, and listening to the radio and talking on the phone. Some historians have portrayed public observance of these rules of the Sabbath as nearly universal in the Yishuv during the Mandate era, and thus as representing a general consensus.71 But in actuality the situation in Tel Aviv was more complex. The promenade and consumerism in many cases involved violation of traditional Sabbath strictures—and this incited the ire of religious Jews and their leaders. At the beginning of the 1920s, when the city’s boundaries were fixed and its institutional structure established, the municipality issued a set of Sabbath regulations. The Mandatory government confirmed these rules, which stated that “The Tel Aviv city council . . . declares the [Jewish] Sabbath to be a general day of rest throughout the city, and forbids all work in factories and the opening of stores and businesses, with the exception of food establishments.”72 The exception was made because of the large population of single men and women who lived in rooms lacking kitchens. They could not prepare food for themselves, so they needed to be able to eat elsewhere. Yet the prohibitions were often not observed. The municipality received countless complaints about the desecration of the Sabbath—smoking in public places, driving, people working, sporting events organized by Maccabi and Ha-Po’el, parties, and the playing of musical instruments. Most of the grievances related to economic activity—stores and barbershops open for business; shoe shiners plying their trade; bakeries and factories operating as on weekdays; hawkers of newspapers and flowers; photographers and cinemas. Notably, many complaints were lodged against businesses that provided meals: workers’ kitchens, restaurants, cafés, kiosks, purveyors of ice cream and soft drinks, and other food sellers. Sometimes violations of the Sabbath were met with violent responses—altercations at the entrances to businesses that opened on the Sabbath, with some of them ending in arrests; attacks on Arabs who were employed by Jews on Saturdays, fistfights between nonreligious and Orthodox Jews.73
But the dividing line was not always so sharp—religious versus non-religious Jews. We have testimonies about religious and traditional Jews who violated the Sabbath, and nonreligious Jews who actively supported the public observance of the Sabbath. A careful examination of accounts of the Sabbath in Tel Aviv and the disputes about it reveals three major approaches to the issue. The first was advocacy of traditional religious observance of the Sabbath; the second was to create a new, nonreligious national-spiritual observance; and the third was to make the Sabbath a day for promenades, leisure pastimes, and consumer pursuits. The first two approaches were consciously ideological and presented clear programs of what the Sabbath should look like. The third was a pragmatic approach, based on broad social conventions, without a systematic ideological basis.

Traditional observance was advocated primarily by the city’s religious community. In the mid-1920s, the municipal rabbinate formed a Sabbath committee to help it process proposals and complaints regarding observance. In the vanguard of the campaign was an organization called Sabbath Watch, the Tel Aviv chapter of which was founded at the beginning of the 1920s. Its members conducted observations every Friday night and Saturday, generally of establishments known to violate the Sabbath. When the organization’s members caught people desecrating the Sabbath, they first tried to persuade the offenders to change their behavior, and reported the incident to the movement’s headquarters. Sabbath Watch sought to achieve its aims through persuasion, but sometimes it went a bit farther — its members occasionally got into fights with the Sabbath breakers. In the mid-1930s, for instance, the group had to provide compensation to the proprietor of a café on Herzl Street after a member of the organization spit into a container of ice cream.

The municipality’s Sabbath ordinances were perceived by religious groups as distortions of the real Judaic laws of the Sabbath and therefore as deficient. When even the minimal requirements laid down in these municipal ordinances were not observed, religious Jews wrote letters of protest, put up posters, tried to persuade individuals to observe the day in the traditional way, and organized rallies and demonstrations. The rabbinate used its powers to condition its certification of restaurants and food establishments as kosher on Sabbath observance. Other than this measure, it had no effective way of asserting its will, or bringing about a change in Sabbath legislation. The declaration that Saturday was in principle a national day of rest was not supplemented by a specific definition of what constituted rest, and to
what extent it resembled or differed from traditional observance. Whereas municipal officials evinced some understanding of the rabbinate’s position, the British were totally unsympathetic to religious demands. For example, a Mandatory court sentenced fifteen religious demonstrators to up to six months in prison for disturbing the public order. “You may be religious and try to obtain a place in Paradise,” said the British judge, “but you have no right to disturb those people who are ready to proceed to Hell, even if they go there through Allenby Road.” Before reading the sentence, he stated that Tel Aviv, in his opinion, was one of the worst towns on the Mediterranean as regarded public order, worse than a city ten times its size.76

Lacking enforcement power, the religious camp tried to explain the importance of Sabbath observance to the Tel Aviv populace. Its principal claim was that the Sabbath was a national asset, a foundation of the nation’s spiritual existence. Desecration of the Sabbath, the religious advocates said, was injurious to the “soul of the nation,” a disgrace to the entire Yishuv, and impaired the settlement of the Land. Furthermore, non-observance of the Sabbath was depicted as assimilacionist, an artifact of life in the exile, empty hedonism, a replacement of the sacred with transient pleasures. Sabbath Watch distinguished between young singles who had no choice but to eat in public kitchens and the epicurean public, whose members simply wanted to eat out for the fun of it. Eateries, the traditionalists acknowledged, were necessary for the city’s thousands of single men and women, but “coffee is luxury.”77

Yet some secularists also advocated Sabbath observance, making nationalist arguments. While they did not believe the Sabbath had religious value, they opposed engaging in hedonistic and materialistic pastimes, which they saw as lacking in spirituality. In 1927, a Tel Aviv printer proposed to carry on the tradition, begun in Odessa, of Sabbath literary, artistic, intellectual, and social gatherings, under the rubric of “Oneg Shabbat.” Bialik supported the idea with enthusiasm and ran the program in Tel Aviv until his death seven years later. At first the event was held in Bialik’s home; it later moved into the larger house of a Zionist activist and philanthropist, and guest lecturers were invited to speak. When the crowds became too large for a private home, the gatherings were held in the Shulamit Music Conservatory and afterward in the hall of Herzliya High School. The program consisted of lectures in the morning and free activity in the afternoon—conversations among friends, discussions, and public singing of Jewish and Hebrew songs under the direction of Shlomo Ravitz, the city’s
most celebrated cantor. Shmuel Blum, owner of a factory that made false teeth, helped fund the construction of Ohel Shem, a public hall dedicated to cultural activities, and at the end of the 1920s the Oneg Shabbat program moved there. The hall, which could hold 1,200 people, filled each week with crowds who came to hear lectures on a variety of subjects, focusing on material relating to the Land and to Judaism—Bible and Talmud, Aggadah (rabbinic homilies), literature, history, geography of the Land of Israel, the Hebrew language, and much else. Bialik did not view Sabbath observance as a religious requirement, but called it “Judaism’s greatest gift to the world” and “the purest, most authentic symbol of the ideal of social equality and human worth.” He claimed that Sabbath observance was equivalent to observing all the commandments and the basic rules of the Torah, because the Sabbath “is culture itself.” In his literary endeavors, Bialik collected and anthologized those products of Jewish culture that he considered appropriate for the national enterprise. Along similar lines, the Oneg Shabbat program made use of traditional elements and frameworks but without necessarily connecting them to religious observance or belief. Bialik tried to fashion a new Sabbath tradition that would combine a collective-national dimension with spiritual uplift for the individual.

Dizengoff and his colleagues in the municipal administration tried to devise a golden mean of “reasonable” public Sabbath observance. In posters and notices, the municipality explained the importance of the Sabbath as a sign of national solidarity, and accused public violators of the Sabbath of doing damage to the nation’s soul and of betraying their people. Tel Aviv, these notices claimed, was not just a refuge but rather “a spiritual center in which we have reinforced and renewed some of the Hebrew nation’s eternal possessions.” Sabbath observance would preserve the city’s Hebrew national character, and unite and merge its diverse inhabitants into a single national public. The municipality, however, seems to have advocated Sabbath observance primarily to prevent conflict and disturbances caused by its desecration. Dizengoff wanted it to be respected in public only insofar as it was consistent with his aspiration for a modern and efficient city. He opposed religious coercion but expected nonreligious Jews to display consideration for religious sensitivities.

But, as noted, a third approach to the Sabbath also developed in Tel Aviv—and it was this approach that was followed by most of the city’s inhabitants. The third way was not in keeping with a religious or national doctrine, but rather with the previously described manner of taking pleasure in the
day of rest. The elements of this form of “observance” were the promenade along the city’s main streets and the beach, the enjoyment of food, entertainment, and leisure activities, and appreciation of culture and art. Avraham Yaakov Brawer wrote that the difference between the city’s secular and religious neighborhoods was that “There the Sabbath takes the form of Sunday in Italy, while here it takes the form of a Jewish town in Poland.”

In this period, almost no Tel Aviv residents acted out of ideological liberalism or a systematic antireligious doctrine. Most of the Sabbath violations committed by promenaders were not motivated by antireligious sentiment, and most of the offenders responded with polite, even apologetic, sympathy when they received a scolding from a member of Sabbath Watch. Sabbath behavior was determined largely by the laws of supply and demand: Tel Avivians wanted to spend their day off in a way that would provide aesthetic and sensual satisfaction, and commercial establishments were quick to offer the merchandise and services that people wanted. Most people’s recreational preferences seem to have overcome any duty they felt to observe the Sabbath traditionally. In any case, the definition of Sabbath violation held by the nonreligious community was much more flexible than that of its religious counterpart. Maccabi announced that sporting events were not themselves violations; cinema owners promised to sell tickets before the Sabbath, but saw nothing improper about screening the movies. Café proprietors claimed that artistic performances in their establishments were not, as far as they were concerned, disrespectful of the Sabbath. Yet all these activities were forbidden by religious law or religious custom.

Traditional Sabbath observance remained the province of the religious minority; a nationalism-imbued Sabbath continued as the aspiration of a cultural and municipal elite and those who attended the Oneg Shabbat activities. But most Tel Avivians observed the Sabbath by promenading. The national tradition that Bialik and Dizengoff sought to cultivate was a conscious and deliberate effort, supported by municipal bylaws and the institutionalized custom of attending Oneg Shabbat. In contrast, the promenade and other pastimes, which Bialik saw as uncouth, were the spontaneous products of public action. They created a Sabbath custom that was not premeditated but rather crystallized over time, growing out of the cultural preferences of most of the city’s inhabitants. This practice, which itself became a tradition, had its special ambience and character, as visitors to the city wrote over and over again, and most of the city’s residents took part in it. Even as it did not rely on a clear set of laws or specific institutions, and
perhaps precisely because of this, the tradition took root during the 1920s and 1930s and became a key component of the city’s culture.

Groups with well-formed ideologies, like the religious community, the labor movement, and the revisionists, held ceremonies that demonstrated and reinforced their political programs. In contrast, the pragmatism and lack of a clear and institutionalized ideology on the part of the bourgeoisie does not mean that this majority group in the city did not hold profound cultural values. Public events reveal some of those values. Economics was a primary motive of many of these events, and flaunting the city’s wealth was in keeping with bourgeois interests and agendas, and encouraged the consumer culture. The values of beauty, glamour, elegance, and pleasure were promoted by parties, receptions, and the Levant Fair amusement park. It was the bourgeois concept of the Sabbath that ended up setting the tone for the weekend, the promenade serving as a time when every individual could show himself to everyone who went by, and display his prosperity with his fine clothes and other consumer choices.

Some bourgeois values were, during the Mandate period, considered as contradictory to prevailing Zionist views. Pleasure and glamour did not sit well against the dedication, sacrifice, and suffering that the national mission demanded, and bourgeois elegance clashed with the simplicity of the pioneering farming life. Therefore, these values, which lay outside the Zionist consensus, could be celebrated only indirectly and by implication. But an implied message can be stronger and more attractive than a direct one, and the fact that it need not be declared officially, didactically, and persuasively is actually a sign of its resilience.
Chapter Three

TEL AVIV’S

CONSUMER CULTURE

Every human society has some sort of culture of consumption, consisting of its own practices regarding how goods and services are used by its members. But “consumer culture” (sometimes called consumer society) is a phenomenon of the modern Western world. In a consumer culture, a large part of the population consumes far beyond what it needs for basic subsistence. People obtain goods and services primarily through economic exchange, and only to a small extent from self-production. Consumer societies view consumption as an acceptable and appropriate activity, and their members tend to judge others, and themselves, in terms of their consumer lifestyles. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, luxury items that previously had been enjoyed by only a tiny elite became obtainable to ever-larger swaths of the population. This came about through the mass production of such goods—or at least goods superficially resembling the handcrafted products that formerly had been too expensive for the masses. Industrialization increased the number and variety of goods available; marketing and distribution networks came into being. Rising wages and credit made these new products available and affordable.¹

But the economic infrastructure was not enough. To grow and flourish, the new consumer culture needed a moral climate that would support it. Across Western societies, the Protestant ethic of salvation through restraint and self-denial was replaced at the end of the nineteenth century by a new therapeutic ethic that stressed self-fulfillment. This ideal was achieved through consumption for the sake of physical and mental health. In other words, the individual began to seek to actualize himself with the help of goods and services. Under the influence of romantic ideas, people purchased goods and experiences not just for the immediate sensual gratification they provided, but principally because they sought, through
material objects, to live their illusions and fantasies. Goods increasingly took on symbolic value, and their style, design, and marketing elicited in consumers emotions, desires, expectations, and aspirations. The individual began to fashion and cultivate himself and his image via the goods and services that he chose to purchase. The consumer culture was part of the emergent, burgeoning bourgeois ideal, but it gradually penetrated the working classes as well. A rhetoric of frugality, hard work, and sobriety was supplanted in the early decades of the twentieth century by one encouraging a lifestyle centered on pleasure. Advertising was at the vanguard of this new gospel; it was a medium that summoned the individual to take part in the consumption of attractively packaged goods as well as experiences associated with prosperity.²

The consumer culture is especially salient in the urban context. In the modern capitalist city, the processes of production and consumption are separated, as are the places and times devoted to work and to consumption. Consumption has become an inseparable part of urban life and behaviors; in cities, shopping is a major leisure pastime. While in basic terms shopping is an economic activity, it also functions as social interaction and entertainment. In the urban environment, the symbolic importance of consumption is magnified because of the impression it makes on strangers and the ways in which it influences them. A person’s consumption of goods can construct his selfhood and enable him to be seen and judged, and to stand out against the anonymity of other people. Alternatively, one’s consumption can serve as a façade that conceals the inner life of the individual, a kind of armor that, in an alienated society, protects the individual from strangers.³ In Tel Aviv, the consumer culture manifested itself in part through the relatively large number of choices of goods and services available for purchase, and consumer values were promoted by the mushrooming art of advertising. Inevitably, the Zionist pioneering ethos of frugality and the pleasure ethic that characterizes modern consumer society did not sit well together.

---

**Stores, Markets, Peddlers**

Only a relatively small portion of a city’s land is occupied by retail establishments, but this small portion has a major impact on daily activity, lifestyles, transportation, and employment structure.⁴ During the 1920s
and 1930s, Tel Aviv became the country’s commercial and wholesale center, but it also developed a thriving retail sector. Retailing was a common Jewish occupation in the Diaspora, and many immigrants reestablished themselves as shopkeepers; this did not require them to learn new skills or make large investments, and shops could be operated by the old and weak. Each wave of immigrants brought more shopkeepers with it and, during recessions, those who had failed in agriculture, industry, and construction also turned to this pursuit. The proliferation of stores produced fierce competition as retail business grew at an even faster rate than the rapidly increasing population. By the end of the 1930s, Tel Aviv had more than 3,500 stores—that is, a store for every forty-four inhabitants. At that time, Britain had a store for every forty inhabitants and the United States one for every seventy-seven inhabitants. In addition to the stores, the city had hundreds of kiosks and stands that sold soft drinks, snacks, newspapers, and cigarettes.5 “At practically every other street corner is a kiosk selling red and yellow Gazos sodas, lemonade, sweets and fruits, to a perennially hot and thirsty public,” Marcia Gitlin noted.6

When Tel Aviv was a garden suburb of Jaffa, it forbade the opening of stores within its boundaries. But following World War I, this changed quickly. The building boom led to the opening of shops on the main streets, and distaste for them was overcome by a desire to end Tel Aviv’s commercial dependence on its Arab neighbor. In 1921, the municipality provided assistance for the opening of a commercial area in the city’s south. It was not long before Tel Aviv’s official commercial district consisted of two large zones in the south and considerable portions of the main streets in the city’s center and north. Tel Aviv quickly became the locus of the Yishuv’s wholesale and retail trade.7 At the beginning of the 1920s, some observers decried the proliferation of stores. With most new immigrants settling in the city, the critics carped, “It is turning into a faithful reflection of the livelihoods in which our people engaged in the Pale of Settlement in Russia and in other Eastern European lands.” The proliferation of stores was sometimes seen as a betrayal of the Zionist agricultural ideal—instead of changing the nation’s employment profile and turning the Jews into productive tillers of the soil, arrivals flowed into the city and became shopkeepers in the land of their national revival.8

The German-born economist Alfred Boneh, who arrived in Palestine in 1925, wrote in 1938 that the Land’s urban population preferred new stores, such as those that had opened in the large cities, to the old open-air
marketplaces. Spacious emporia, designed in keeping with these tastes, improved the look of the commercial streets. As a result, Boneh wrote, “the famous Oriental bazaar is on its way out, its place slowly being taken by buildings and arrangements like those in Europe and America, and the Oriental bazaar will remain just a romantic and historic relic, a memorial to a long-gone economic era.” Boneh here offered the familiar vision of the Jews bringing the clean, advanced West into the filthy, backward East. Avraham Yaakov Brawer likewise remarked that the storefronts on Ben-Yehuda Street “give the impression of an avenue of shops in a quiet suburb of a big Western European city, or in one of the summer vacation spots near the city, like Baden, near Vienna.” The municipality took measures of various kinds to ensure that the stores within its jurisdiction were run in “Western” ways. Licenses were given only to those owners whose establishments met sanitary and safety standards and were certified by the municipal health authorities. The urban construction committee set standards for the physical infrastructure of stores, and issued guidelines for sprucing them up, both inside and out.

Department stores first appeared in the West in the nineteenth century. They offered an alternative to traditional stores, which sell a limited range of merchandise in accordance with their type and specialty. In some cases, merchandise in traditional stores is sold by factory outlets, or even ordered specially by clients, who often know the shopkeeper personally. Prices are negotiable and people go to stores only when they already know that they need a particular item. Department stores, in contrast, offer a large variety of merchandise, displayed in attractive ways in illuminated shop windows. Prices are fixed and nonnegotiable. The department store encourages browsing, and the purchasing process is impersonal. When the first four department stores appeared in Tel Aviv in the mid-1930s, alongside thousands of specialty stores, this new type of competition alarmed traditional shopkeepers. The Merchants Association pasted up notices calling on Tel Avivians to boycott the large stores, and demanded that the municipality not license them, on the grounds that they threatened thousands of small businesses.

At the same time, a seemingly opposing European trend started taking hold in Tel Aviv—a further specialization of shops. For example, in the second half of the 1930s the number of small grocery stores grew by 47 percent, but the number of stores specializing in specific kinds of food grew by 72 percent. Stores specializing in bread and baked goods, or dairy products,
or liquor and soft drinks, or tobacco products all opened during the years of increased immigration from central Europe. Traditional corner grocery stores found themselves limited to selling basic foodstuffs, because consumers preferred to buy items like chocolate and imported cheeses—for which profit margins were higher—in specialty stores.\textsuperscript{14}

The attempt to model Tel Aviv’s stores after the modern Western example did not always succeed. Brawer noted that, in contrast with the modern and tidy shopping areas mentioned earlier, other shopping sections of Tel Aviv displayed “Arab-Jewish and Eastern European Jewish influences, with the latter setting the tone. The Western European Jewish shopkeeper is still not to be found here.” A man who visited the city at the beginning of the 1930s wrote to the municipality that, in sharp contrast with Tel Aviv’s

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{The display window of a delicatessen, its sign boasting of electrical refrigeration, 1934. Government Press Office photo collection, D838–082. Photo: Zoltan Kluger.}
\end{figure}
Western pretensions, most of the city’s shops lacked all “European form and taste,” and looked just like the marketplace stalls of a small town in the Diaspora. Of course, the adjective “European,” when held up as an example, referred to Western, not Eastern, Europe. Many businesses opened without a license from the national health department. Some operated out of shacks and with substandard sanitation. At the beginning of the 1920s, many storeowners displayed their merchandise on the sidewalks in front of their stores. Likewise, many made no effort to keep their stores clean and neat. They kept cans, crates, and empty sacks that served as breeding grounds for mice. Inside the shop, goods lay heaped on the floor, next to the garbage. While the German immigrants who arrived in the 1930s brought with them the art of the display window, most of Tel Aviv’s stores, according to contemporary descriptions, remained cluttered dumps.15

The behavior of proprietors kept anyone from mistaking a Tel Aviv store for a Western one. Tel Aviv’s storekeepers were notorious for raising their prices before holidays, but they were also described in uncomplimentary terms throughout the rest of the year. Most complaints against them came from shoppers from Western countries who were unaccustomed to, and profoundly shocked by, Eastern European and Oriental commercial practices. Western tourists described Tel Aviv storekeepers as small-minded, uncouth, impolite, imprecise, and unreliable. German immigrants, typically raised where business was conducted honestly and graciously, were stunned when local proprietors swindled them. British soldiers also griped about rude Tel Aviv storeowners who charged exorbitant prices.16 Gitlin, from South Africa, was no less put out:

I went into the shops and found the shopkeepers little more than a shopkeeper in mentality and outlook. He was often rude, ungracious, gasping. About the shops there was a general appearance of lack of order and office discipline. Often one felt a rather too emphatic value placed on money. And what worried me a great deal was the dreadful unpunctuality and unreliability of the people in Tel Aviv—really of the people of Palestine as a whole.17

When the economist Boneh predicted in 1938 that the Oriental bazaar would quickly vanish from the Land of Israel, he admitted that, at the time he wrote, the bazaar still prevailed. There, in the middle of the country’s main city, merchants haggled in the old, traditional way. Craftsmen offered their own handiwork, storekeepers and peddlers sold special items, and
villagers brought their produce to the metropolis. Boneh, as noted, referred to the bazaar as a relic of the primitive Oriental economy. It could not last, he wrote, because the poor hygiene of the open-air market did not meet the standards of European consumers.\footnote{But Tel Aviv proved Boneh wrong. Its bazaars not only survived, they prospered. During the 1920s, three new markets appeared, either of their own accord or set up by the municipality. Two more opened at the end of the 1930s.}18

The bazaars were certainly unsanitary. Butchers threw bones on the ground and fishmongers tossed rotten fish into the street. Poultry was slaughtered on the spot; the birds’ blood dried on the sand and, carried by the wind, feathers wafted through windows of the nearby homes. The marketplace was full of flies, a potential vector for bubonic plague. Rats and mice were everywhere.\footnote{The municipality tried to gain control over the markets, to fix their locations, to ensure that only stall keepers who paid to receive a municipal license plied their wares there, and to maintain a proper level of hygiene through legislation and by fining offenders. But open-air markets are bottom-up forms of commerce, established in the places and under the conditions set by sellers and buyers. The municipality had little success in its attempts to intervene in the locating and management of the markets. Nor did bazaars organized and supervised by the authorities experience as much success as the wildcat ones. The stall owners in municipally run bazaars complained of unfair competition from peddlers in adjacent Jaffa, who were not subject to the same sanitary regulations and the Tel Aviv municipality’s other demands. Merchandise declared unfit by Tel Aviv’s policemen and inspectors was sold, without interference, farther down the street, over the municipal line in Jaffa.}

Boneh was not the only observer to refer to the open-air markets as an Oriental or Arab phenomenon. In the 1920s, people living adjacent to one of the city’s bazaars raised objections to the loud and “strange” shouts of Arab hawkers, and asked the municipality to put an end to this unruliness “in the first Hebrew city—which is supposed to be a European city.” During the decade that followed, people wrote that European mores had penetrated all areas of life except the bazaar. It remained “Asian in the full sense of the word, with its filth, its congestion, its rough manners, and its Levantine cries.” One Tel Avivian complained that the open-air market had taken on an entirely Arab appearance. It was seldom cleaned; Bedouins and Arabs slept on the stall tables, washing their lice-infested clothes,
their feet, and their grubby children at the same spigot used to rinse the vegetables.22

Yet the Jewish stall keepers themselves actually supported the Arab hawkers. The interlopers attracted shoppers who would otherwise seek the Arabs out elsewhere. Many Tel Aviv women were accustomed to purchasing certain products, such as vegetables, from Arabs. The preference was so ingrained that if they did not find Arab peddlers in the Jewish marketplace, they would find them somewhere else. The Jewish stall keepers preferred to ride piggyback on this habit rather than to try to change it.23 So Boneh’s prophecy that the Oriental bazaar would wither away turned out to be wrong. The wandering hawkers, most of them Arabs, were one of the bazaar’s principal draws. The people who came to buy there were not looking for European-like conditions—they wanted low prices, and the Arabs’ wares were often the best bargains.24

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the bazaar became a place where Jews and Arabs met for the purpose of retail trade. When Jewish shoppers did not find Arabs in the marketplaces on Tel Aviv’s margins, they often went to search them out in Jaffa. But the situation became more fraught when the Arab Revolt began in 1936. The Carmel market, which lay on the boundary with Jaffa, became a dangerous place. Before the year was out, the Tel Aviv municipality stopped leasing stands to Arab merchants and peddlers.25

If the bazaar was the avatar of Oriental commerce, the sight of peddlers on Tel Aviv’s streets recalled Eastern European scenes. Peddling is an unstructured form of exchange not limited to regular hours. The peripatetic salesman has always been a mysterious figure, not only because of the ambiguity surrounding the provenance of his merchandise, but also because of the way he sells it. Unlike a shopkeeper, the peddler’s contact with his customers is transitory and erratic, likely to arouse suspicion. In the modern era, peddling became a trademark Jewish profession in Europe, the Islamic world, and America, primarily because of Jewish migration.26 In Tel Aviv, it was considered an appropriate occupation for the unemployed, as well as for the ill, disabled, and elderly, who could perform no other kind of work, and the municipality granted licenses to people in these categories. But a large number of unlicensed peddlers operated in the city as well, among them healthy, strong, young people. Poor children hawked merchandise to help support their families, while orphans and waifs did so to feed themselves. Youngsters ages eight to fourteen plied their wares in cafés and on the streets, selling items such as flowers and shoelaces. Deputy Mayor Is-
rael Rokach claimed that parents sent their children out to peddle in order to exploit shoppers’ compassion, knowing that the police would not arrest them. Jews were not the only peddlers in the city. Arabs also hawked wares on the streets and Arab peasant farmers sold their produce from door to door or on donkey-back. In the 1930s, the city had hundreds of peddlers.27

Tel Aviv’s peddlers offered a variety of goods and services. Some stood at tables in the spots allotted them, while others wandered through the zone assigned to them with wagons, containers, or trays. Both licensed and unlicensed peddlers sold milk, ice cream, lemonade, soft drinks, bananas, falafel, and fish. Some sold hot corn on the cob on the beach, where in
1933 the Assis soft drink company employed ten children as peddlers, “who filled the whole area with their shouts.” Youngsters with trays looped by a string around their necks sold sweets, chanting, “Good cake, sweet cake.” Tel Avivians could buy a newspaper from a kiosk or a newsstand, but the dailies also employed bands of wandering paperboys. Most newspaper hawkers were Yemenite men and boys. At the end of the 1930s, all were required to wear a special uniform, including a cap bearing the name of their newspaper. Another category of peddler was the wandering photographer, who worked primarily on the beach, in particular on Saturdays.

Inhabitants also used the services of shoe shiners, especially in the evening, when they went out after work, and when they went to parties, the cinema, and the theater. People had their shoes shined at night as well, sometimes on their way home from evening pastimes, in preparation for the day to come. Jewish shoe shiners did not work on Saturdays, but since it was a promenade day and people wanted to look their best, they patronized the Arab shoe shiners who worked on Herzl Street that day each week.

In 1923, a municipal inspector wrote to the mayor about the shoe shiners who sat along the sidewalks, ruining the appearance of Tel Aviv’s streets. They took up space, disturbing weary residents with clatter and shouts. The municipality ultimately ordered the police chief to impose collective penalties on shoe shiners if they left trash, stones, or rags in the streets. Someone proposed that they work in barbershops, as was common in American cities. But the idea was rejected, and the shoe shiners, with their little kits, continued to work outdoors during the 1930s.

The peddlers were, as noted, “eyesores” to be removed from main thoroughfares any time an official visitor arrived or a formal event was planned. They hollered to attract customers, often peppering their calls with Yiddish. Deputy Mayor Rokach claimed that, if Tel Aviv were to attract tourists, it had to place restrictions on peddlers, who were a blot on the landscape and “made a horrible impression, especially on new immigrants.” The city continued to issue annual licenses at its discretion, but asked the police to jack up their enforcement and to remove unlicensed hawkers from the main streets. Shopkeepers did not like the peddlers, and griped that street hawkers, exempt from the taxes and expenses that they themselves incurred, blocked the entrances to their establishments. Even though the peddlers did not depend on a steady loyal clientele, as most stores did, they sometimes constituted serious competition for storekeepers, for example in the sale of haberdashery.
Peddling was a very low-status trade. The image was a carry-over from the traditional Jewish Diaspora view of peddlers, supplemented by the identification of peddling with the Jewish culture of the exile, which the Zionists rejected. Some writers viewed peddling as a form of economic activity that made no contribution to the national enterprise. It was presented as the polar opposite of productive agricultural labor, akin to begging. But street hawkers defended their jobs, and in the 1930s founded a Tel Aviv Peddlers Association to protect their interests. It asked the municipality to take measures against unlicensed hawkers and to improve the working conditions of those who had licenses. The association proposed that the municipality build stalls for them so that they would not need to walk the streets. It also demanded the renewal of licenses and better treatment. The peddlers claimed that the police dealt with them brutally and inhumanely. If policemen in other countries treated Jewish peddlers comparably, they said, “the entire Hebrew public would be outraged and accuse that regime of anti-Semitism.”

Stores, markets, and peddlers reveal Tel Aviv cultural trends that we have already encountered in other contexts—such as that reflected in the gap between the aspiration to be Western and the myriad influences from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. A related trend involved the struggles and compromises between the municipal authorities and the needs and interests of private citizens, firms, and organizations. Alongside the city’s many stores, outdoor retail trade—peddlers, hawkers, and open-air marketplaces—continued to thrive. This was a manifestation of Tel Aviv’s lively street life, and its inhabitants’ penchant for congregating in public spaces. Shopping on the way to or back from an outing was an integral part of the Tel Aviv leisure culture. The plethora of stores and vigorous commercial activity engaged in by its residents reinforced the city’s image as a pleasure-seeking place—to the extent that some critics saw it as a betrayal of the ascetic Zionist pioneering ideal.

The Pioneering Ideal versus the Hedonistic Ethos

A person’s finances place limitations on his consumption. But consumption is also checked by moral sensibilities. People seek to modify their behavior, including consumption, in order to conform to a social ideal to which they subscribe. Even if they do not actually achieve that ideal, they
seek to persuade themselves that they possess attributes consistent with it, which they seek to display to others. But attempts to embody and display moral attributes are not merely artificial, hypocritical attempts to impress an audience. Their primary purpose is self-confirmation. People seek to prove to themselves, not just to others, that they possess moral values. For this reason, they often behave in accordance with their ideals even when they are alone. Each era and society has its own models of ideal character, and people adopt them and adjust their behavior accordingly. Consumption patterns are also influenced by such ideals.35

The Zionist pioneering ideal, which originated at the beginning of the twentieth century, took form during the early years of the Mandate. The pioneering ideal was perceived as commitment to the national enterprise in ways that made high demands on the individual. The pioneer was supposed to have no interest in improving his individual economic status, and was to view physical labor not just as a livelihood but as the means to spiritual and national redemption. Even though asceticism for its own sake was rarely advocated, the ideal as a whole centered on the pioneer’s willingness to endure material privation in the present in order to build the nation’s social and economic infrastructure for the future. In practice, not all Zionist immigrants could live up to these exacting demands. Yishuv leaders criticized the materialism, laziness, economic dependence, and lack of productivity that, they claimed, typified the great majority of the immigrants. Pioneering values were fully realized only by a minority, but were perceived by many as an obligation for the entire public. In particular, many Zionist and Yishuv leaders, including those who did not belong to the labor movement, saw these values as central to the Zionist project. They accepted as axiomatic the moral superiority of the pioneering ethos, which they considered essential, at their point in history, for the success of Zionism. Therefore, even if most immigrants did not in practice adhere to it, the pioneering ideal was held in high regard by the entire Yishuv. The disparity between the ideal and its realization grew wider as the standard of living among some parts of the population improved. But on the ideological and rhetorical levels, frugality and antimaterialism were commonly held to be the appropriate values for a sincere Zionist. This governing ideal dictated a social ethos even to those who did not define themselves as pioneers. Behavior incompatible with this ideal was seen by most of Yishuv society as improper or, at best, insensitive.36

Consumerism is often a target of philosophical and social criticism.
Those who commit the sin of acquisitiveness are often depicted as narcissistic and lacking in values. They may be described as unredeemable hedonists who aspire to climb the social ladder, who wait obsessively for the next prestigious luxury item to hit the market. As already noted, in the Yishuv during the 1920s and 1930s, under the broad ideological banner of pioneering Zionism, the consumer culture was seen as a violation of the Zionist ideal. Among socialist Zionists, consumerism was perceived as a betrayal of the ideal of equality, as the importation of the hierarchal social values of exilic Jewish society, at a time when Zionism should be creating a more just society in the Land of Israel. The view that a life of luxury was despicable was not limited to the socialists, however. Even a capitalist like Meir Dizengoff wrote that one cause of the Yishuv’s great economic crisis of 1923 was the luxurious habits of a broad segment of society. Just a few years later he spoke out against Tel Aviv’s growing materialism. The very word “luxury” became a derogatory term. In contrast with the United States, where consumerism was seen, from the 1930s onward, as a popular and national value and as a material and ritual expression of American identity, loyalty to the Yishuv required one to consume only the produce and goods made by the Jewish community in the Land of Israel.37

The clash between the pioneering ideal and consumer culture was especially sharp in Tel Aviv. The pioneer was prototypically an agricultural laborer who lived in difficult conditions and with few material pleasures. The municipal arena and the consumer culture presented inherent contradictions to the pioneering ideal. Tel Aviv, the urban incarnation of the Zionist nation in the Land of Israel, quickly became a symbol of nonpioneering materialism. Tel Avivians were accused of being unproductive, profligate, and hedonistic. From the beginning of the Mandate period, they were seen as pleasure-seekers who were apathetic to the sacrifices being made by pioneer workers. Tel Avivians of the 1920s and 1930s also claimed constantly that the city had once had more pioneering spirit, and that only now was it becoming materialistic. Every new wave of immigrants was described as being more acquisitive than the one before it. The contradiction between the Tel Aviv spirit and the pioneering ideal was evident even when it came to shorts worn by women. In 1937, a local observer wrote that pioneer women wore shorts because they were more comfortable to perform physical labor in, while in Tel Aviv beautiful women wore shorts out of sheer vanity.38

It is easy to pinpoint the ideal that motivates a religious puritan or an ascetic pioneer. But hedonistic behavior is generally equated with a lack of
ideals or seen as a moral shortcoming. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, hedonism became an ethos in and of itself, an ideal with its own moral code that dictated a specific kind of behavior and way of life. The hedonistic ethos does not see consumption as an individual right but rather as a civic duty. Just as the puritan is duty-bound to thrive economically for the sake of God, and the pioneer is required to suffer in order to realize the Zionist vision, so *Homo consumens*, Consumer Man, is required to be happy, admiring and admired, charming and charmed, euphoric and dynamic. He affirms his existence via the intensive use of symbols and objects, and is obligated to exploit, systematically, every possible pleasure. The hedonistic ethos thereby engenders constant anxiety about missing out on one pleasure or another. It fosters a kind of “entertainment ethic,” and commands every individual to take full advantage of his potential for experience, pleasure, and satisfaction. Yet, despite its compelling force, the hedonistic ethos did not become an explicit and official ideal in the Yishuv. Since it contradicted the familiar and accepted pioneering ideal, it showed itself largely in indirect and oblique ways.

Such implicit manifestations of the hedonistic ideal can be discerned in public events of the type surveyed in the previous chapter. The Purim beauty pageant, where a Queen Esther was crowned, stressed physical appearance, a notable value of Western consumer culture. The municipality also held formal receptions for beauty queens from foreign countries. The organizers and guests of parties and balls in Tel Aviv put on a display of finery and elegance, in imitation of the Western culture they aspired to emulate. Most women arrived at Purim balls in magnificent evening gowns in the latest styles. In a society that looked askance at waste and frivolity, Purim balls, where the topsy-turvy feel of the day meant that some conventions could be broken, afforded a rare opportunity to show off one’s couture without incurring feelings of guilt or social censure—since the evening gown could be passed off as a costume.

### Explicit and Subliminal Messages in Advertising

Advertising also reflected Mandatory Tel Aviv’s hedonistic ethos. In the Western market economy’s early stages of development, advertising already existed on the cultural margins. But with the expansion of the press at the end of the nineteenth century and the spread of modern consumer-
Tel Aviv’s Consumer Culture

93

ism, advertising became in every way a form of cultural production. Professional advertising agencies and companies began to appear. In addition to its role in disseminating mass consumer products, modern advertising created new desires and habits, an image of the good life that consumers could purchase in the form of goods and services and flaunt before envious peers. Many goods were depicted as means for achieving success. Advertising professionals also knew how to manipulate the public’s fears. In a world in which a person was continually being judged by his peers, he might find himself rejected and alone if he did not make the correct purchases. As an alternative to the class consciousness associated with one’s work, modern advertising proclaimed that a person could acquire an individual consciousness and self-expression through possessions. Advertising thus carved out a central role for itself in the creation of modern consumer culture. It encouraged the individual to seek constantly to improve himself by buying certain goods or services. It reflected and promoted consumer culture and its values at the same time that it reinforced and intensified that culture. In a world in which a person was continually being judged by his peers, he might find himself rejected and alone if he did not make the correct purchases. As an alternative to the class consciousness associated with one’s work, modern advertising proclaimed that a person could acquire an individual consciousness and self-expression through possessions. Advertising thus carved out a central role for itself in the creation of modern consumer culture. It encouraged the individual to seek constantly to improve himself by buying certain goods or services. It reflected and promoted consumer culture and its values at the same time that it reinforced and intensified that culture.41 Like a fantasy factory, advertising tapped into real human emotions and desires, and connected them to the world of commodities.42

In 1920s and 1930s Tel Aviv, advertising could be found in newspapers and magazines, and on business cards, signs, and posters and placards. Some written ads were imported from other countries and translated into Hebrew, apparently because the agencies that paid for the rights to use them believed that the ads would appeal to local shoppers. In the early 1930s, the city was home to fifteen advertising firms. The wave of immigration from central Europe brought with it a new professional approach to advertising and new practitioners of advertising and marketing. The second half of the decade saw the establishment of the Land of Israel Association of Advertising Agencies. The ad levels in local newspapers grew steadily, and supplied an increasing portion of the newspapers’ revenues. During the 1930s, newspaper ads became more sophisticated, as verbiage was supplemented by artwork and photographs. The text itself, which in the 1920s had merely provided bland descriptions of the product or service on offer, now included more subtle and manipulative messages.43

Some advertisements from the 1920s and 1930s promoted the pioneering ethos. For example, thrift was represented positively in advertisements that stressed products’ low prices. Stores calling attention to sales emphasized discounts, especially on simple clothing, such as socks and work shirts, pants, and shoes. Some ads promised the public that a piece of clothing’s
low price did not mean that it was not attractive or fashionable, but others entirely ignored esthetics and mentioned only quality and durability.44

Advertisements for products of the Jewish economy played on national solidarity to compete with Arab competitors, or with imported products. Many stores tried to attract customers with the slogan “Products of the Land.” Some companies, with an eye on traditional holidays, promoted sales in advance of Purim, Pesach, and Hanukkah by placing their products in the context of the holidays’ values or customs.45 Linkage of a product to a holiday appealed to the local-religious-national sentiments of potential buyers.

Some advertisements played on these feelings explicitly. A firm on Allenby Street urged Tel Avivians to send crates of local oranges as gifts to friends and relatives overseas, because no other gift could be as nice. Tnuva, the cooperative that distributed and marketed the produce of hundreds of Jewish settlements and farms, and ran dairies that produced milk and milk products, became in the 1930s a symbol of food produced by the Yishuv. Tnuva promoted sales by fostering images of rootedness in the land and pioneers cultivating their national soil. Its advertisements positioned the cooperative as the link between the Yishuv’s cities and its agricultural settlements, and depicted the consumption of Tnuva products as the duty of every Jew who sought to aid in the absorption of new immigrants who would become Hebrew agricultural pioneers.

The Lieber chocolate company portrayed consumption of its sweets as a national duty, and Assis marketed its fruit juice products as “the national beverage.” Local cigarette makers gave their products names with nationalist connotations, such as Aliyah (immigration) or Galil (Galilee region). When the Tel Aviv port was opened in 1937, a new brand of cigarettes was named Namal (port). In addition to raffle tickets and coupons, the packs contained cards bearing illustrations of historic events and literary subjects. The cigarettes were thus marketed not only as an enjoyable, high-quality, inexpensive, and wholesome product, but also as one that educated its users in national values and the ethos of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel.46

The heroic pioneer, a stock figure in the period’s literature and posters, appeared in only a small proportion of advertisements. Sometimes products were given symbolic attributes linking them to the Land or to Jewish heritage, but this seldom involved the figure of the pioneer. On the contrary, when one tobacco company published an advertisement depicting a female Jewish agricultural laborer smoking one of its cigarettes, a woman
leader in the labor movement condemned the ad as crass. Perhaps such imagery was used scarcely because the ascetic facet of pioneering was incompatible with consumption and promotion of the consumer culture as an ideal. In tempting the public to buy more and develop new habits of consumption, it was necessary to nurture values contrary to the pioneering ideal. One should hardly be surprised to learn, then, that the figures who appeared most often in advertisements during this period were not Spartan pioneers but elegant, well-dressed Western gentlemen and ladies.

Zionism sought not just to transplant Jews from one geographical location to another. It wanted to change the very nature of the Jewish people. The Zionists portrayed the Jew of the exile as passive and weak; the so-called new Jew was proud, Hebrew-speaking, and strong. The labor movement’s icon was a simple figure, rooted in the soil. But the revisionist movement’s ideal of “majesty” (hadar, which can also be translated as “elegance”) was the well-groomed, well-mannered Western European gentleman. Zeev
Jabotinsky, the movement’s leader, spoke of a bourgeois Zionist ideal that combined citizenship with economic initiative, national values, a republican ethos, and individualism. While not seeking to disparage the pioneers of the farming settlements, the revisionists sought to broaden the pioneering spirit beyond a single class or occupation. The gentleman may have been marginal in the Yishuv’s official ideology, but he held a place of pride in Tel Aviv fashion. Many of the city’s inhabitants made a point of dressing properly, stylishly, even elegantly. Accordingly, the lady and the gentleman were the protagonists of many an advertisement in the 1920s and 1930s. The frugal, austere pioneer was rarely seen in ads, which focused instead, directly or indirectly, on splendor, wealth, elegance, and cosmopolitanism. Advertisers knew that, in practice, these values were attractive to a large part of the public, and that they could be used to sell products and to encourage consumer culture as a whole.

Since the hedonistic values contradicted ideology, they were often not presented directly in text but rather only hinted at by illustrations. In such instances, visual expression could be less straightforward and more suggestive than words. Advertisements placed by manufacturers of men’s and women’s clothing frequently depicted slender, fashionable women in chic dresses and high heels, and men in tailored suits, with ties and homburgs. At times the text referred explicitly to smart dressing, elegance, and refinement, in words meant to attract middle-class customers of discerning taste. Clearly, these figures were diametrically opposed to the image of the simple, austere pioneer and those who sought to emulate him. Despite the campaign to encourage people to buy local Yishuv products, and in opposition to all official preaching, imported goods were still widely sought-after. Advertisements promised ladies that they could dress like their contemporaries in Paris and Vienna. The names of boutiques, such as “Louvre” and “Le Petit Magasin,” invoked French fashion. Merchants knew how to take advantage of the awe in which provincial consumers held anything that came from overseas.

When a society becomes a consumer society, it undergoes a change of values. Whereas in preconsumerist societies individuals avoided arousing the envy of others (for fear of departing from their community’s norms), now they deliberately tried to stir envy by flaunting their belongings. Advertisements for luxury items promised Tel Avivians of the Mandate period that their clothes and cars would elicit the admiration of their peers. Such ads appeared even in the labor movement’s daily newspaper, which advo-
cated class solidarity and social equality. The average worker could not afford a car or fancy clothes, but the fact that such goods were advertised in the newspaper indicated that the consumer culture was becoming an accepted norm.51

Advertising demanded that individuals take responsibility for their appearance. The cosmetics, beauty, fitness, and leisure industries came to their rescue, offering weapons in the battle against signs of aging. The beauty industry equated youth, beauty, and health with one another, just as the consumer culture as a whole stressed youth, grace, energy, physical fitness, activity, freedom, romance, exoticism, luxury, and pleasure. Good grooming was presented as the key to making the right impression on others.52 Advertisements originating in Tel Aviv sought to inculcate this message by suggesting the specter of an implicit or direct threat. For example, an ad for skin cream warned women that preserving their beauty required measures grounded in science. It was therefore their “duty” to apply face cream throughout the year. In the 1920s, beauty salons first appeared in Tel Aviv. They offered haircuts, massages, manicures, and pedicures “using the latest methods from Europe and America.” Hair stylists had their own trade newsletter, and an issue from 1939 proclaimed that facial massages and other such treatments “are now routine for every woman who thinks in esthetic terms,” because “even the softest and most delicate woman can accomplish great and wonderful things — if she really wants to.” Newspapers and magazines included columns offering beauty tips. Because beauty treatments had to be adjusted to the conditions of the hot climate, these columns advised drinking much water, taking cold showers, applying cream to the entire body, washing hands and face in eau de cologne, and applying talc to absorb perspiration.53

Hair evidently was a principal concern of Tel Aviv’s inhabitants. Wonder products of all kinds promised to stop hair loss and to prevent graying. Both men and women dyed their hair, either at home, using products they bought, or professionally at hair salons. Men went to barbershops for haircuts and shaves, in particular on Fridays and before holidays. Women’s visits to hairstylists increased when the permanent wave, which first appeared in the 1920s, became all the rage in the decade that followed. With cosmetics becoming central to the Western ideal of beauty by the end of the 1930s, Tel Aviv boasted eighteen cosmetics and toiletry shops and six cosmetics factories. Pharmacies vowed that the cosmetics they sold would guarantee “beauty, youth, freshness, health.”54
In the 1920s and 1930s, Western advertising proclaimed the victory of culture over nature in all areas of life. Modern products supposedly could liberate the individual and society from aging and deterioration. Biological processes that had previously been regarded as natural and inevitable were now treated as menaces. Natural odors were perceived in an entirely different way. The close contact between strangers that was a feature of urban life made people ever more concerned about how they smelled. They worried about the odors of their breath, their sweaty bodies, and bodily discharges, and sought to neutralize them. This concern was evident in Tel Aviv culture. Advertisements offered tips on how to cope with the profuse perspiration that inevitably resulted from the climate’s heat and humidity. Some offered remedies for odors caused by eating certain foods while others warned of the disastrous social consequences of halitosis, which could be avoided only by the regular use of mouthwash. The cultural war waged against the biology of the individual constituted an alternative to the romantic image of the pioneer worker that saw the return to nature as an ideal. Against the idealized image of simple and natural rural life, Tel Aviv offered a vision of complicated and, in ways, disinfected city life.

The growing stress on both physical and mental energy and intensive activity that typified the early twentieth century led to a glorification of youth and a decline in the status of the aged. The experience of the old was valued less than the vigor of the young. Efficiency was equated with youth, and this value was reinforced by advertising that placed a premium on youth and beauty. A paradoxical example of the power of such messages can be found in a Tel Aviv newspaper’s fashion column from 1931. The author denounced women’s use of artificial means to preserve their youthful appearance, because the war against aging caused nervous tension, fatigue, and actually accelerated the process. Happy acceptance of aging, the fashion columnist wrote, was the best way to slow the ravages of time. The writer must surely have adopted such a polemical tone in reaction to advertising campaigns proclaiming that any sign of aging was a catastrophe that required immediate treatment. “Modern cosmetics and scientific care extend youth!” promised an ad for a beauty parlor. “Youth — happiness! Forever young! Old people! Don’t despair! Young people! Don’t wait! Quick! Don’t tarry!”

Cosmetics were touted as a means to make their users look younger. Yet Tel Aviv was a city of young people — its average age was considerably lower than that of urban Jewish communities in the Diaspora. And Jewish
immigrants to the Land of Israel were largely young people in their twenties. Tel Aviv’s population was, on the average, younger than that of the Jews in Jaffa and Jerusalem, although older than Haifa’s. The Yishuv’s urban population, in turn, was older than that of its agricultural settlements, in particular the communal ones. Glorification of youth was a central component of the pioneering ethos, since the archetypical pioneer was a young person who had rebelled against the exilic mentality of his elders. But the pioneering ideal equated youth with revolutionary Zionist action, whereas the hedonistic ethos of Tel Aviv equated it with looking young, vigorous, and well groomed.

Health was the third element in a triad with youth and beauty. Until the end of the nineteenth century, purity had largely been viewed as a spiritual attribute, but thereafter it began to be seen as a quality of the body rather than of the soul. The pursuit of efficiency produced growing intolerance for pain. During the nineteenth century, people in the West increasingly sought to suppress pain, which had previously been seen as a part of life to be accepted. The obsessive demand for goods and services that promised health and physical fitness derived from the status that one could gain from one’s personal appearance. Health, like beauty, was a function of the quest for social prestige.

In Tel Aviv, the concept of healthful nutrition affected consumer food-purchasing habits. To purify the body, to make it more efficient, and to prevent or assuage pain, a person had to purchase certain goods and services. Health was frequently invoked in advertising and was portrayed as vital for preserving youth. An advertisement for locally produced juice drinks, for example, included an image of a smiling young man drinking the beverage: “Men like it because it preserves their youthful strength,” and the vitamins and calcium in the drink “produce the energy and strength that our Land’s hot climate requires.” Men who drink this juice daily, the ad proclaimed, remain robust and immune to digestive ailments and acid in the stomach. The product was depicted both as an elixir of youth and a prophylactic against pain and discomfort, as well as fuel for energetic masculinity. Ads for sanitary napkins and painkilling pills stressed the values of hygiene and productivity.

Like youth, health was also valued in the pioneering ideal. Manual labor and farming the soil of the Jewish people’s land were endeavors aimed at creating a new and whole Jew, one who was sound in body and mind. But here, too, the pioneer view of health differed from that of bourgeois Tel
Avivians. The pioneers believed that health would result from a life of hard labor on native soil, whereas the city’s inhabitants thought it could be obtained through the consumption of goods and services. In the pioneering ideal, life on the land was healthy by definition, whereas the hedonistic ethos viewed health as a successful battle against aches and maladies.

Western advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s were dominated by a new and demanding ideal, which involved the elevation of the individual through “personal efficiency.” This efficiency was perceived as a part of Western technological and cultural advancement, and as mandating an entire way of life. Visual expression of the values of progress and efficiency can be seen in modern design, for example in the International style and Bauhaus, both familiar elements of the Tel Aviv landscape in the 1930s. The ideal of cleanliness promoted both in the 1930s and the decade before was bound up with the general aim of producing a better future. Products were designed and marketed as contributing to cleanliness, harmony, and convenience. In the 1930s, food was advertised as hygienic and even germ free. Advertisements for cleaning products presented cleanliness in ecstatic terms, as creating a new, pure world accessible to every consumer. A broom was vaunted as an appliance that could “sanitize, sweep, clean, scrub, polish.” This drive for cleanliness encouraged the development of new service industries, such as the dozens of laundries that appeared in Tel Aviv during the 1930s.

The figure depicted as being responsible for efficiency, health, and cleanliness was often the housewife. During the twentieth century, in the West, the home increasingly became isolated from the workplace. It was seen as a source of physical well-being and health, and both the home and its appliances were designed for maximum efficiency. The task of keeping the home sanitary and healthy for the family (as a condition for the health of the nation as a whole) fell to women, and advertisers in the West stressed the housewife’s obligation to care for her children and husband so that they could perform their own duties properly.

The housewife’s duty to her family seems to have been accepted and taken for granted in the Yishuv, in both rural and urban communities. She was required to manage her kitchen effectively so as to keep her family from contracting diseases, not to mention unnecessary expenses. Women were expected to fortify their families with nourishing, healthy food. Advertisements called on Tel Aviv housewives, both bourgeois and working class, to manage their households with modern efficiency for the benefit of
their families and their homeland. They were to base their methods on scientific research conducted in the West.62

In Western societies, the modern housewife was expected to see herself as the successor of the middle-class matron of the nineteenth century—certainly not of the working-class wife and mother. But, in practice, the modern housewife was required to carry out tasks that in the past had been handled by the servants in a middle-class home. She was expected to derive pleasure from housework and from caring for her family. To divert attention from the less palatable parts of these endeavors, advertisements and the media, including women's magazines, portrayed housework as a pastime that was not really work, but rather a sort of hobby. The middle-class woman was not to see herself as a servant, and some household products were portrayed as surrogates for a maid.63

The same Tel Aviv women who were called “ladies” in clothing advertisements became “housewives” when household products were marketed. But the housewife had to continue to feel like a lady, so the ads promised her that the product they promoted would do the housework for her. The gas stove would cook for her, the pot on the burner was designed with her needs in mind, proper organization of the kitchen would save her time and energy, and her laundry detergent would launder her clothes of its own accord and allow her to rest. A locally made mop was marketed as being so efficient that, according to the illustration in the advertisement, the woman who used it would turn from an ugly and overweight scullery maid into a beautiful, slim princess. Ads thus stressed the importance of housework and the housewife’s responsibility for it, while demonstrating respect for her image of herself as a lady who ran an efficient and comfortable home.64

Progress and technology were part of the Zionist vision, as repeatedly depicted in Herzl’s writings. Both the cities and farming communities of the Jewish state would be “modern.” The ideal of the Zionist farmer also stressed progress, modernity, and efficiency. The mythical pioneer returned to the land, but he was not a traditional, primitive, rude peasant. He was educated and advanced, and used the best of current technology to make his desert homeland bloom.65 Ostensibly, the ideal of progress and its values—efficiency, cleanliness, and hygiene—were common to both the pioneering and the hedonistic ethos. But the pioneers enlisted progress in the service of constructing the nation. The hedonists, in contrast, saw progress as providing a healthier and more comfortable life for individual and family alike.
Official declarations made in consonance with the prevailing ideology paid homage to the pioneering ideal. In less formal contexts, though, such as advertising, the hedonistic ethos emerged, whether between the lines or, sometimes, with surprising blatancy. It hardly needs repeating that the ideal of pioneering mobilization, collectivization, and frugality was a natural foe of the consumer culture, whereas the hedonistic, individualistic lifestyle encouraged and reinforced it. The pioneering ideal was stated explicitly, while the ethos of pleasure, with its values that were considered less worthy and even counterproductive to the nation’s goals, was not formulated as a formal doctrine. Instead, it penetrated Tel Aviv society subversively and potently via everyday acts, such as purchases, and aided by textual and visual advertising.

The claim made by its critics that Tel Aviv’s consumer culture was hollow bourgeois materialism and in diametric opposition to pioneering “spirituality” blurred the society’s real complexity. The hedonistic approach can be seen as an unformulated but deeply rooted ideal centered on the pursuit of pleasure and experience, while the modern consumer culture can be seen as an attempt to actualize fantasies, self-definition, and self-realization through making certain purchases. If such a statement has truth, then we are not speaking of an ethical standard facing off against a pattern of behavior entirely without values. Instead, each set of behaviors can be seen as reflecting a distinct ethos, with the two sometimes in opposition to each other. The individual sought to prove his worthiness to himself and to others —whether he tended toward asceticism or the pursuit of luxury. A Tel Avivian who chose to live modestly expressed his commitment to the pioneering ethos. Another who on principle bought only Yishuv-made products not only helped prop up the Jewish economy in the Land but also reinforced his self-image as a participant in the national enterprise. Yet another who pursued an image of elegance, prosperity, and health through the acquisition of goods and the purchase of services could likewise view himself as an exemplar of the material success of the national project.

Consumption is conditioned first and foremost on the consumer’s economic capacity. A person’s wealth and income dictate what he can buy. The choice to pursue a particular pattern of consumption is thus not necessarily made freely. Consumer choice can mean something more modest — following a particular set of actions with respect to a limited range of options based on certain judgments of appropriateness or correctness. Tel Aviv’s poor could not choose among alternative patterns of consumption. But a
large portion of the population in a modern Western society—and this was certainly the case in Tel Aviv during the British Mandate—is able, to a lesser or greater extent, to make choices about what goods and services to consume. Within the limitations, some chose to make do with less while others engaged in conspicuous consumption. In both cases, Tel Aviv’s inhabitants sought to live up to their ideals.
“It is not a meaningless Palestinian platitude which says that everything creative in the Land of Israel is to be found in Tel Aviv. It is true,” wrote Marcia Gitlin. Within a few years of its founding, Tel Aviv had become the Yishuv’s cultural center. The city in the 1920s and 1930s had all the attributes of a cultural capital—cultural institutions such as museums, galleries, orchestras, and publishers; cultural producers such as critics, curators, and editors; as well as cultural conventions and standards. It also had both material and symbolic attributes—the first in the form of space, buildings, artistic personnel, and financial investment in culture, the second in the form of a vision to create a place with a dynamic atmosphere of art and design, of experimentation and experience, of new trends and fashions. The city boasted Hebrew-language theaters and a variety of musical institutions. It also developed into a center of the plastic arts—an art museum and art studios opened, creating an artistic milieu that rivaled the circle of artists centered on the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem. It was not long before most of the Yishuv’s painters and sculptors congregated in the city. Similarly, most of its writers and poets settled there. In the 1930s, the city was home to ten publishing firms and four public libraries. All the arts were mobilized, to one extent or another, for the ambitious national enterprise of creating a new Hebrew culture in the Land of Israel.

By the 1920s, Tel Aviv was home to the editorial offices of most of the Yishuv’s newspapers and magazines. Moshe Glickson had conditioned his appointment as editor of Haaretz on transferring the newspaper’s offices from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. Most of the daily newspapers published during the Mandate period were founded and printed in Tel Aviv, and the same was true of other periodicals. Tel Aviv–related content was covered extensively
by the newspapers published in the city, and thus the city became the ob-
ject of constant description, analysis, and criticism.3

What counts for “high” culture is produced largely by specialists and professionals. A cluster of authoritative and recognized creators and critics determines what is included under this rubric, and the results of their sifting are taken to represent the best of a given society’s artistic and literary production.4 In Tel Aviv, the elite culture that developed was depicted as a positive phenomenon, an essential building block in the construction of the Jewish homeland. The city’s leaders and admirers portrayed Tel Aviv as a new center of Jewish-Hebrew creativity. But alongside its high culture, the city had developed a lively leisure culture that reinforced its image as a pleasure-seeking community lacking in substantive values. Its detractors cast the city as a center of substandard entertainment; shallow, vulgar leisure pursuits; and sensationalism. The elite culture of the Yishuv and of Tel Aviv has been addressed and analyzed comprehensively by scholars of art, literature, theater, and music. This chapter is thus devoted to the city’s consumption of mass and leisure culture during the Mandate period.5

Something for Everyone

As work hours became confined to just one part of the day and modern Westerners’ buying power increased, the importance of leisure culture grew. Many leisure activities became part of the economy, since they involved the purchase of goods and services. New forms of leisure were to a large extent an urban phenomenon. The growth of cities, along with their density and heterogeneity, encouraged the establishment of official institutions and services devoted to entertainment and amusement. In addition to providing diversion and enjoyment, cities’ leisure activities helped crystallize identities, served as a force for social cohesion, and enhanced the attraction of city life.6

During the evening and at night, Tel Aviv’s main streets became filled with residents and tourists out to consume the city’s high culture and diversions, or simply to stroll along the roads or the beach. At the beginning of the 1920s, the municipal police chief expressed concern about crowding in places of entertainment, caused in part by the tendency among establishment owners to sell more tickets than their halls could accommodate, and also by the habit among policemen charged with keeping order outdoors to
go inside and enjoy the shows and parties. Shoe shiners, as noted already, made most of their money at night from clients on their way to events and parties. Soft drink peddlers also waited eagerly for nighttime, when thirsty audiences and partygoers headed home. Tel Aviv’s hot, humid summer nights drew people out into the street in a desperate search for a cool breeze. A British police officer asserted that the summer heat made it impossible to stay at home. Leisure pursuits in Tel Aviv were thus conducted largely outside, or in the city’s generous selection of popularly priced restaurants and cafés.7

Marcia Gitlin listed the available evening pastimes: the movies, theater, musical recitals, lectures, social visits, or a walk along Allenby Street to the beach, a route lined with teahouses and fashionable hotels. Gitlin was disappointed to discover that, except for the Hebrew-speaking theater, most of Tel Aviv’s leisure activities were hardly unique. The cafés were “European-style,” and even the films resembled those in Cape Town, except that they had subtitles in English, Arabic, and Hebrew. The poet Natan Alterman described these places of amusement as drab in the morning glare as opposed to “when the day goes dark, when the bright lamps are lit on their fences.” Then they came to life, giving the old peddler his livelihood and filling the street with melodies blaring from loudspeakers and the aroma of roasted peanuts. In the light of morning, Alterman wrote, Tel Aviv looked like a humdrum, workaday city, but enrobed in magical electric lights, it was transformed in form and essence each evening. A journalist, Uri Kesari, wrote that 9 p.m. was the hour at which reality metamorphosed into a land of desires and illusions.8 The Tel Aviv municipality took a more practical approach to the city’s nightlife—it imposed a differential tax on the price of event tickets, to the benefit of high culture. Popular amusement was seen as a luxury, and thus as something that could and should be taxed. Serious artistic institutions were forgiven half of the entertainment tax. The more commercial a show or activity, the more tax it had to pay.9

Several circuses with trained animals and acrobats visited Tel Aviv, and the municipality allowed them to operate only on condition that they close on Sabbath and holidays, and that they address their audiences in Hebrew. Likewise, vaudeville troupes arrived from overseas, offering acrobatics, music, singing, operetta, and ballet, “two and a half hours of enjoyment, delight, and laughter.”10

Other leisure activities were popular as well. During the 1930s, photography became a widespread hobby. Alongside the amateurs, professional
photographers roamed the beach offering to take pictures of bathers and promenaders or opened photo studios in storefronts or shacks. These stores also sold photography equipment and supplies to hobbyists, and in the mid-1930s the Merchants Association sponsored a photography contest, with prizes, for the city’s “photography lovers.” At the beginning of the decade, a zoo opened in the city’s north, on land allocated by the municipality. By the decade’s end, it featured lions, panthers, bears, hyenas, jackals, monkeys, poisonous snakes, turtles, hyraxes, exotic birds, and parrots. Some people spent their free time hiking in nearby areas or rowing at night on the Yarkon River."

Sports were pursued largely within the framework of clubs, the most important of which were Maccabi and Ha-Po’el. Large numbers of adults and children practiced and competed in swimming, bicycling, boxing, and other sports. In 1933, for example, the Tel Aviv branches of both organizations had a combined 2,300 active members—that is, about 3 percent of the city’s inhabitants at the time. To this must be added the members of the city’s other sports clubs, which were devoted to a specific game or had a political or ethnic affiliation. Soccer was the most popular sport. Men and boys played on the beach and on vacant lots, sometimes to the risk of passersby. The policemen who were supposed to prevent such pickup games were once caught obtaining medical certifications allowing them to take sick leave so that they could organize their own matches. Yet most soccer lovers were content to be spectators, and Tel Aviv’s fans had a reputation for being enthusiastic, even rowdy, supporters of the city’s teams."

Tel Aviv was also a center of dance. Performances attracted large audiences and were covered in detail by the press. By the end of the 1930s, four dance studios operated in the city. Professional dancers tried to create a national style of dance that would express the spirit of the Orient and pioneering experience. But the dance milieu was not the exclusive preserve of professionals or the particularly talented. In societies throughout the West, commercial dance halls were, during the 1920s, one of the most important venues for disseminating popular music to audiences. Dancing became a popular pastime in the United States during the decades in which jazz and jazz clubs emerged and flourished, and the fashion spread to other countries. The phonograph and the record industry fed the dance craze, with records serving as a compact, available, and inexpensive alternative for those who did not have the money to hire a band. Radio stations began broadcasting dance music. Tel Aviv was not left out of this process.
Dance halls opened in Tel Aviv, and dances were also held in entertainment halls, hotels, and cafés. At the beginning of the 1920s, dance parties took place on the beach, and such happenings were integral parts of holiday celebrations or events like the Levant Fairs. In the summer, dance parties were held on the roofs of cafés and hotels, under the stars. As soon as the summer ended, the “winter season” began. Popular dances included the tango, the waltz, and the foxtrot. Tel Avivians could take lessons at dance schools to prepare for such parties, or simply because dancing was their hobby. Dance studios flourished during the second half of the 1930s and became a prominent part of the city’s cultural landscape.\textsuperscript{15}

Another kind of dancing also gained wide popularity—spontaneous dancing while singing on the streets in the late-night hours. This activity came to be seen as part of the Tel Aviv experience. In the Yishuv’s other urban areas, dancing and singing of this type was confined to holidays, but in Tel Aviv it occurred nightly and was an important part of the city’s vibrant after-hours scene. Visitors marveled at how young Tel Avivians would break out in song and circle dances in the small hours of the night. Not surprisingly, the municipality and police also received complaints from residents who were woken up by such revelers.\textsuperscript{16}

As a cultural genre that placed the body and its esthetic movement at its center, dance, like sports, played a role in constructing the new, physical Jew—the polar opposite of the spiritual Jew of the exile, whose body was marginalized and neglected. Ballroom dancing was an institutionalized and commercial pursuit, a Western cosmopolitan import, and participants danced to music from Western Europe and North and South America. Most such dances were designed for couples, and the practice fostered the image of a new Jew who was a man or woman of the world. Street dancing, in contrast, was spontaneous and done to Jewish songs from Eastern Europe or the Land of Israel itself. Such collective dances, most notably the hora, a circle dance of Balkan origin, were identified with the pioneering experience, and promoted the image of the new Jew as Hebrew rather than cosmopolitan.

\textit{A European Plage in the Middle East?}

Avraham Yaakov Brawer said that the beach was a wonderful gift that God had given to Tel Aviv—but His only gift. While the city was home to a winter swimmers’ club, it was in the summer that the beach filled with
promenaders, bathers, ballplayers, and diners. One could sit at a restaurant on the beach to eat, drink, and dance, or buy corn on the cob, soft drinks, and ice cream from hawkers; one could also have one’s picture taken by a beach photographer, get exercise, swim in the sea, sunbathe, rent beach chairs, or just walk along the shore. In 1926, the municipality built a wooden bandstand where a brass band played live music during the summer months. The Yiddish writer Shalom Asch wrote that everyone in Tel Aviv went to the beach. Five in the morning was the hour of the German Jews who lived close by. Then office workers arrived for a swim before work, then schoolchildren with their gym teachers. The late morning was the hour of young women in revealing outfits with their small dogs; they were followed by various pleasure-seekers, Asch recounted, with the crowd reaching its height at midday. Gentlemen and workers read books on the beach, high school students did their homework. “Every Jew—and I am one of them—has two requests of God: a place in paradise in the next world, and a place on the Tel Aviv beach in this world,” Asch concluded.

A British police officer wrote that you had to see the Tel Aviv beach to understand what an experience it was. Thousands of people spent their free time—especially on Saturdays—swimming in the sea and playing beach games. It was so crowded that there was no room to just stroll along the water. Contemporary photographs show that he was not exaggerating—during the bathing season, the beach was so closely packed with people sitting, standing, rambling, and swimming that one really had very little room for taking walks. The Tel Aviv penchant for congregating in groups, which was sometimes portrayed as a Jewish trait, was expressed especially on the beach.

The centrality of the beach in the city’s leisure culture derived in part from Tel Aviv’s aspiration to become a tourist attraction, and its desire to emulate Europe’s most attractive coastal cities. Beach resorts had begun to develop in Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as supplements and alternatives to the traditional spas around hot or medicinal springs. In the nineteenth century, southern Europe’s coastal cities served as winter vacation spots for the northern European population, and gradually the French Riviera and similar areas developed as summer vacation spots as well. Traveling east, such was the case with Odessa, on the Black Sea coast, from which some of Tel Aviv’s leading citizens had emigrated. Across Europe, the popularity of such sites increased in the 1920s, in tandem with the “solar revolution” that made suntans fashionable and
led people to see sun-darkened skin as a healthy and esthetic end. Tel Aviv’s municipality and private developers wanted to take advantage of the warm climate and beach to turn the city into a winter and summer vacation spot on the familiar European model.  

This attempt to create a plage, an accessible and organized European-style beach, was frustrated by the characteristic Tel Aviv tendency toward disorder and lack of discipline. Attempts by the municipality and the police to restrict bathing hours, enforce standards of modesty, segregate men and women in separate bathing areas, arrange an effective lifeguard service, and limit the distance people could swim out to sea all ran into huge difficulties. The cafés, shops, photographers, and hawkers, all of which, according
to municipal ordinances, were not supposed to operate on the Sabbath, did so anyway. Bicycle, motorcycle, and horseback riders infringed on areas reserved for pedestrians, ball games endangered passersby, and no one listened to the lifeguards. The beginning of the bathing season was especially dangerous—each year several drownings occurred. Lifeguards had to deal with recalcitrant swimmers, and the police announced that they would not interfere with anyone who wanted to hasten his own death. Heading far out to sea was taken as a test of machismo. At the beginning of the 1920s, a resident of the city was brought before the municipal court on the charge of disturbing the public order and the safety of other bathers by swimming beyond the legal limit and ignoring the whistles of the lifeguards—“and many of the young bathers wanted to emulate him.”

Although swimming in the sea was viewed as “the healthiest thing to do in the summer,” awareness of the dangers of overexposure to the strong Levantine sun gradually increased. People were warned not to stay out for too long, and to apply protective lotion when they did. Yet the beach was at the center of a new sun cult. European immigrants brought with them a yen for a fashionable tan and happily took advantage of the sun despite the long-term danger to their health. The beach was also a key element in creating the image of the new Jew of the Land of Israel—a healthy, muscular, tanned Jew, the direct opposite of the archetypical sickly, skinny, and pale Jew of the exile.

Elizabeth Montgomery, wife of a British officer serving in Palestine during the 1930s, described “the attitude of the Jews towards the sun”:

The large majority, Poles, many Russians, and Germans, come from a cold northern climate. In Palestine they immediately discard their clothing, and those who can, linger on the beach for hours every day, clad only in bathing dresses or pants, without any further protection for their heads or bodies. The chaluzim, the agricultural laborers, both male and female, wear only the shortest of bright blue pants and a white or blue shirt. On the other hand, the natives of the country, the Arabs, take the greatest care to cover both head and body from the sun’s rays. . . . They also one and all take a long siesta during the middle of the day. But the Jew works and plays throughout the hottest hours.

Montgomery discussed the issue with a Tel Aviv physician, who admitted that overexposure to the sun could cause heart, brain, and nerve ailments. “Many of the young men in Tel Aviv are darker than any Arab, their
perhaps naturally dark skins tanned to the color of mahogany,” she wrote. “One cannot help speculating as to what the eventual results will be upon the physical and mental efficiency of the Palestinian Jews.”

During the 1920s and 1930s, some Tel Avivians and visitors complained that the beach was an immodest place where scantily clad men and women mixed with no compunction. People undressed in public rather than in dressing rooms. In the 1930s, long one-piece bathing suits gave way to fashionable, modern styles, as seen on Hollywood stars. These were quite revealing by the standards of the time. In addition, the fence that separated men’s and women’s bathing areas was low and did not stretch far into the sea. It was made of a net stretched between poles, so it was easily scaled. Someone even set up a ladder to make it easier to cross. Policemen sent to enforce the separation preferred to position themselves on the women’s side, and the police chief had to remind them to stand on the dividing line between the men’s and women’s areas. Even in the dressing rooms, complete separation was not observed — the door between the two sides did not always close, and no warnings were posted. The city’s chief rabbis called on the municipality to ensure that the sexes remained apart, on the grounds that mixed bathing was detrimental to public morals and gave the Yishuv a bad name among its neighbors and tourists. One city resident argued that mixed bathing prevented many people from going to the beach because it offended their moral and esthetic sensibilities. “We do not have to foster and adopt all the negative aspects of European culture!” he wrote.

A municipal ordinance mandated that bathers wear suits that were “one piece (covering the whole body) and made from an opaque and dark weave.” But even at the beginning of the 1920s, some people appeared on the beach in skimpier suits, in nightgowns, and in sheer garments. As beach fashion grew more daring, complaints increased. In 1932, the chief rabbis of Jaffa and Tel Aviv, Shlomo Aharonson and Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel, filed a complaint with the municipality about “the hundreds of girls and married women who walk around nearly naked on the sand, for a kilometer, or sit for entire hours in bathing suits in a manner that stimulates the bestial urges of passersby, among whom are non-Jews who come to fill their eyes and take pleasure in our shame.” The municipality was obliged “to preserve the honor of our people, who rejoice crudely and dissolutely in a way never before seen in our history.” The Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine, Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook, sent a letter from Jerusalem calling on the city’s leaders to end such shameful practices, so as to preserve the nation’s
honor. Even as the municipality pleaded repeatedly with inhabitants not to appear on the streets in bathing suits and to respect prevailing standards of morality and modesty, the rules were vague and, according to a municipal inspector, could not be implemented or enforced in the absence of a clear definition of what constituted a modest bathing suit.25

Despite the low cost of using dressing rooms, the public did not make much use of them. Many preferred to disrobe outside, in full view of others. One resident saw a group of schoolboys and schoolgirls, five to seven years old, bathing in the nude. He said he had never seen such a thing in any other city in the world. Indeed, while European seaside cities did not hesitate to include erotic and romantic messages in their advertisements, visitors to such cities could clearly discern the difference between the playful image the cities fostered and the much stricter rules that prevailed. This was not the case with the Tel Aviv beach, which appeared to be very permissive, shocking many tourists.26

Many of the complaints drew a connection between immodesty on the beach and the Arabs of Jaffa. The non-Jewish “neighbors” who walked down the beach were depicted as fixing their eyes on the exposed flesh of Jewish women, and as taking joy in the shamelessness of the Jews. On the other hand, Arabs were apt to turn violent when they encountered violations of accepted Oriental mores, it was said. A concerned citizen wrote to Deputy Mayor Rokach in 1936, when the Arab Revolt broke out, about how each year brought with it even more outrageous women’s bathing suits. At least this year, he noted, the Arabs had not shown up on the beach, so the new fashion has remained a scandal, but at least no strangers saw it. But if the curfew imposed by the British authorities after the riots broke out were to end and the “neighbors” returned to the beach, they might well riot at the sight of the shocking way “our ladies” dress. A counter-reaction by “our young men” would have the most unfortunate consequences. People also said that British policemen and soldiers did not observe the rules involving segregation of the sexes and that they undressed on the beach, in violation of municipal laws.27 Such concerns seem to have derived from a sense of national possessiveness—Jewish males wanted to protect Jewish women from the lust of foreign men.
The Silver Screen

Film developed into a new form of entertainment during the early decades of the twentieth century. European and American films were viewed all over the world. Until the development of talkies in the second half of the 1920s, films were silent and the owners of cinemas hired bands or pianists to provide musical accompaniment. Ticket prices were low enough to make watching a film an accessible form of entertainment for all classes. The cinema thus became an integral part of popular culture, providing entertainment and pleasure, stimulating dreams and fantasies, and serving as a place where young men and women could meet and where families could go on an outing. For many, watching films became a kind of ritual and a central part of modern life.28

With its popularity, the cinema influenced consumer culture both directly and indirectly, in profound and far-reaching ways. Such influence derived from the nature of the medium itself, with its stress on the visual rather than the verbal and with its focus on the body, clothing, outward behavior, and movement. Hollywood films reflected and reinforced new standards of physical presentation, and convinced the masses that they needed to cultivate their personal appearance. Hollywood disseminated the values of the new consumer culture by presenting to the entire world the glamorous lifestyles of film stars. In fan magazines, detailed accounts appeared of the stars’ lives, and readers, especially women, were given advice on beauty, exercise, and diet.29

The first “cinematograph” opened in Tel Aviv in 1914—the Eden Cinema on Lilienblum Street. Others opened in the latter part of the 1920s, and the first talkie was screened in the city in 1930. This put musicians who had once played background music to silent films out of work. By the end of the 1930s, the city had twelve movie houses. We do not have precise figures for moviegoers, but in 1926 it was estimated by a local reporter that, on Saturday nights, four thousand of the city’s inhabitants—that is, about a tenth of the population at the time—attended one of the three cinemas then in operation.30

As in other communities around the world, members of the Yishuv argued about the effects of the cinema. In 1926, a municipal inspector voiced his firm opposition to displaying posters containing pictures from the films. In reply, the deputy mayor explained that this was how films were
advertised all over the world and that the law did not allow such censorship. But he nonetheless agreed that the municipality should ensure that the pictures did not violate standards of “morality and etiquette.” Some opposed the cinema in principle, while others made distinctions between artistic films, which were esthetic and moral, and bad films. Or they distinguished between film as an important and beneficial modern invention and films made simply for profit, which poisoned the public’s soul and exploited people’s “predisposition for sensation and the basest instincts of the masses.”

It was clear from its advent that film could be useful for persuasion and promotion. Good films were thus seen as those that combined entertainment with an educational message. In 1929, Hayyim Nachman Bialik, the national poet, acceded to the request of one cinema that he recommend a film that it was screening. He described it as “pleasant and strong.” He also noted that the censor’s cuts had been accomplished tastefully and without harm to the integrity of the work (and in fact spared the public from having to see an overlong film). He noted that it had been adapted for Hebrew-
speaking audiences and that the translation provided was free of errors. A year later, the director of the municipality’s education department offered her impressions of another movie: “The film does a good job of explaining the importance of the fire department and it is thus worthy that the city’s inhabitants see it in large numbers. The photography is notable for its wonderful technique and has a positive and educational influence on the public at large. Those who see it will benefit and enjoy themselves.”

After the Nazis rose to power in Germany, the Yishuv’s Committee to Boycott German Products forbade the screening of German films that had not been shown in the country prior to 1933 or to which the distributor did not own full rights, out of concern that part of the box office gross might reach Nazi Germany. The boycott was principally an economic one, but the committee also forbade the showing of movies in which “the leading actor is a member of the Nazi Party,” or German-language films that were connected in one way or another to Nazi Germany. This prohibition was not easy to enforce, since a large number of the films screened in Tel Aviv up to that time had been German. To get around the boycott, some cinema owners began advertising their “Austrian-language films.” The boycott ran counter to consumer demand for German-language movies. At the end of the 1930s, all Tel Aviv cinema proprietors showed German-language advertisements before movies and had films subtitled in German, attesting to the preponderance of local German-speaking moviegoers.

Attempts by Jewish leaders to influence the kinds of movies seen in Tel Aviv accorded with practices in Britain at the time. A 1909 law granted local governments there the power to license films, and the British brought this approach to censorship with them to Palestine. In 1921, the first high commissioner of Palestine, Herbert Samuel, promulgated an ordinance mandating the censorship of films, in order to protect young people from immoral influence. Cinema owners were required to report to the district governor whenever they planned to screen a new film, and a license would be granted only after a municipal censorship board composed of representatives of the police and the municipal education department certified the film as morally acceptable. The board screened new movies each week and issued recommendations as to their fitness for adults and children. It cut footage it considered unacceptable and in some cases forbade the screening of entire films.

The board of censors devoted a large part of its time to movies for the young. In the silent era, when the Eden was still the city’s only cinema,
some Tel Avivians were already complaining that their sons and daughters were spending their evenings at the movies rather than doing homework. Their children’s behavior was degenerating, parents complained; their health was being ruined by too little sleep and the cigarette smoke in the unventilated hall. During matinees, hundreds of children packed into the theater, shouting, pushing, and trampling each other. Grade school and teenage children were viewed as groups most at risk of being corrupted by inappropriate movies. Across the West at large, the deleterious influences of crime and gangster films on local youths were being decried. The U.S. government appointed a commission to study the connection between movie watching and juvenile delinquency. The Tel Aviv police chief, a member of the board of censors, objected to films that depicted “heroics and wonders performed by thieves.” After seeing one such movie, he wrote, “All the children bought little toy pistols and began shooting on the streets until I was compelled to detain a few of them and take away the pistols, with which they were frightening the passersby on the streets, especially in the evening.” Parents complained that “deplorable and harmful shows” were a bad influence on their children’s morals. They also blamed the movies for their children’s frivolity and ignorance.

The perceived negative influence of films on children was not limited to content alone. Equally harmful, many felt, were the youngsters’ membership in the “gang of idlers” that hung out at the movie theater. Girls were exposed to sexual harassment at the cinema, where young people of both sexes sat together in a dark room in “turmoil and mayhem.” Sometimes fist-fights broke out. In 1934, a municipal law was passed forbidding children under the age of six from entering movie theaters, and those younger than sixteen from entering after 9 p.m. or to watch movies that the censorship board had restricted to adults only.

The cinema attracted gangs of homeless and indigent street boys. In the 1930s, teenagers showed up at the Eden cinema, looking for ways “to earn a few pennies and to get into the movies, or at least to buy sunflower seeds to munch on.” The proprietors occasionally hired a few of them to sweep up during intermissions. Other youths offered to guard cars and motorcycles that moviegoers parked outside. A person who refused the offer might find, after the film was over, that his vehicle had been vandalized. Cinema owners lodged complaints about the young hoodlums who congregated at the movie houses every day and disturbed employees and audiences with their shouting. The city’s child care department claimed that the youths involved
all came from poor immigrant families. The department’s chief believed that if these young people were allowed in to see movies in an organized way, for free, they could be taught to behave properly. When they did manage to get in to see a film, according to one journalist, they experienced “a blurring of the distance between reality and fiction, a dissolution of the distinction between passive viewing and active participation.” The journalist wrote that these young moviegoers were the neglected children of unemployed workers or impoverished small shopkeepers. The youngsters responded to action on the screen by applauding, crying out, and laughing loudly.38

Tel Avivians of all walks of life and every age attended the movies. The illustration that accompanied the movie listings in a local weekly paper depicted a small boy, a well-dressed gentleman and lady, a pair of workers, and a British policeman. All the Eden’s employees—the mechanic, the snack bar manager, the guard—and their families saw the movies gratis. So did the policemen assigned to keep order outside. As was happening elsewhere in the world, local fashions were influenced by motion pictures. At the end of the 1930s, women on the dance floor at the San Remo café, one observer said, “all look alike, and they are all caricatures of Marlene Dietrich.”39

Despite the presence of policemen and the efforts of the ushers, cinemas were disorderly places. People smoked despite the “no smoking” signs, and brought their dogs with them. Movie-watching was considered a less formal and respectable pastime than seeing a stage play or attending a concert, even when the latter events were held in the same halls. The police force accepted this view and ultimately rescinded the prohibition against smoking in the cinema. The “no smoking” signs were put up only when plays or concerts were held in the hall. A few years later, when the ban on smoking during films was reinstated, audiences were unmoved, and ushers and policemen did not try to enforce the rule. Visitors from overseas were astonished to find Tel Aviv cinemas full of tobacco smoke, and said they could barely breathe.40

Some Tel Avivians didn’t just watch movies—they also made them. While Dizengoff’s hope that Tel Aviv would turn into “a kind of Hollywood and Los Angeles” did not materialize, most Yishuv filmmakers lived and worked in the city. Its inhabitants liked to be photographed during the week by local newsreel cameramen, and then see themselves on-screen on Saturday night. The intensive documentation on film of Tel Aviv events and people offered another manifestation of the city’s self-awareness. Forays into making fictional movies ran into budgetary and artistic obstacles,
so most films seen by Tel Avivians, both features and newsreels, were imported. While cinema’s persuasive powers and popularity made it a potentially effective vehicle for promoting the Zionist cause, these same qualities made it a principal conduit through which foreign cultural influence could travel. The consumption of film created a shared vocabulary between Tel Avivians and their fellow moviegoers in Western countries. Periodicals devoted considerable space to reporting and commenting on the film industry and its stars, alongside the film reviews offered by the daily papers.41

---

**Cafés and Restaurants**

The distinction between cafés and restaurants is a flexible one, hinging largely on the menu and the size of the meals served. In the mid-1930s,
Entertainment and Leisure

Brawer noted that the city had two distinct kinds of eating establishments: cafés and restaurants in the city’s commercial center, where “you go to eat a quick bite between one trip and another, between unloading cargo and loading cargo,” and the places on Allenby Street, where you go “for relaxation, to eat and drink at leisure, for friendly conversation and a game of chess.”42 The first sort was simply a means for providing food for working people, while the second played a broader cultural role.

In cultural centers, restaurants function as sites for meeting and discussing new fashions, trends, and ideas, trading gossip, and making business deals. Eating and drinking outside the home has additional symbolic significance. When dining in a restaurant, the eater is under frequent scrutiny, and eating becomes an act of public display. Restaurants thereby become part of the entertainment industry, generating moods and passions as well as giving physical sustenance. Here, a person does not just eat — he asserts his social status and possibly his cultural and political affiliation. Eating out also entails its own customs, norms, obligations, and social codes, different from those observed when taking nourishment at home. The ceremony of the restaurant meal, in which both diners and servers participate, takes place in public.43

In Tel Aviv under the British Mandate, food services were provided by eateries, dairies, cafés, boarding houses, hotels, and workers’ kitchens. Some of these establishments were certified kosher by the rabbinate, but others served nonkosher food. It is difficult to estimate the size of the food service sector because the categories and definitions changed from one census and address list to the next. But hundreds of such institutions clearly operated on the city’s main streets. In the 1930s, most were concentrated on Allenby and Ben-Yehuda streets, and along the beach, but others could be found outside the official commercial and business areas. The members of the restaurant and café owners’ branch of the Small Business Association claimed that far too many such establishments were operating. Burgeoning competition prompted proprietors, especially those launching new eateries, to resort to advertising and marketing gimmicks to lure customers. The gimmicks included free samples, raffles, and free meals and portions.

Cafés were salient features of the cityscape — many of them received licenses to set up tables and chairs on the sidewalks. Photographs and films of the era show men and women sitting at tables outside cafés and restaurants, day and night, summer and winter. If dining outside the home is akin to a public performance, the case is all the more pronounced when
a person dines outdoors ostentatiously, in a place offering little privacy, where everyone can see him. Tel Aviv diners saw and were seen, not just by other diners but by everyone on the street. The number of cafés per capita in Tel Aviv was on a par with that in European capitals. Tel Aviv’s models were bourgeois Vienna and coastal cities like Odessa, where the main streets were also lined with cafés; in the case of Odessa, many of them were owned by Jews.44

The common explanation for the large number of eating establishments in Tel Aviv was the need to cater to the city’s thousands of single men and women, people who had no families with whom to eat and no kitchens in their lodgings. This may indeed have been a major factor. But it was not sufficient to explain why people in all walks of life, of all ages, and of whatever marital status—not just singles—patronized restaurants and cafés. For many, these establishments served an important social function that went beyond the food and drink offered on their menus. The practice of dining out was so widespread that the municipal police chief had to strictly forbid his officers and patrolmen from sitting at cafés while in uniform. The Tel Aviv café culture was notable for its heterogeneity and long hours, with cafés open much later into the night than those of the country’s other Jewish population centers. It was an expression of some inhabitants’ flamboyance and sociability. Furthermore, these residents sought to create and display a personal lifestyle in their eating habits, as they did in other parts of their lives.45

In a general sense, a diner can indicate his social status via the restaurant he chooses to patronize. At the same time, a restaurant’s clientele can create and reinforce the establishment’s position in the status hierarchy—one that attracts elites and famous personages might gain a glamorous reputation.46 In Tel Aviv, the Casino—a café, not a gambling spot—located on the beach, was renowned for having famous customers. Its décor was luxurious (for its time), though when it first opened its clients were “families of sunflower-seed spitters with screaming children,” who sat there for hours on end without ordering anything and without paying. The owners claimed that proper customers did not come to the Casino because they could not find a free table and did not wish “to spend time in the same place with guests who only wanted a free place to sit.” Frustrated, the proprietors eventually imposed a small minimum charge for patrons. In the 1930s, they demanded that the men who attended its afternoon dances wear sports jackets and the women dresses. The strategy worked. The at-
mosphere at the Casino became quite respectable. By 1939, when the café closed and its building was demolished, it had become a Saturday afternoon hangout for high-level Zionist officials. When in 1934 the municipality demanded that the Casino close its doors on Friday nights and Saturdays, its owner protested that he needed his celebrated Sabbath patrons because they enhanced the café’s prestige, guaranteeing good business throughout the week. In any case, he added, sitting at the Casino had become an established custom for these eminent diners.\(^{47}\)

The city’s artistic elite patronized certain cafés regularly, giving these establishments bohemian reputations. Writers, musicians, thespians, and visual artists would gather in their favorite spots to socialize, argue, and sometimes to pursue their intellectual and personal grudges. One notable example was the Sheleg Ha-Levanon café on Allenby Street, frequented by members of the Ha-Matateh satirical theater troupe, as well as by newspaper employees and others who worked in the evening and at night. These bohemian types liked the establishment despite it being, or perhaps precisely because it was, inexpensive and popular among laborers and the unemployed. In 1931, when the municipality sought to enforce a midnight closing time for all cafés, the satirical theater troupe’s actors asked that their haunt be given a dispensation to remain open later, so that they would have a place “to dine and relax” after work. A few days later, a petition with 411 signatures, including those of writers, poets, actors, and artists of the first rank, asked that the closing order be rescinded. “Most of the patrons of Tel Aviv cafés at night are people engaged in the arts, workers at various artistic institutions, theaters, and at concerts,” the petition stated. After
hours, they liked to get together at cafés for conversation and to pass the
time; they did not drink alcoholic beverages or disturb the public. Since
most of these people worked during the day, the petition explained, “the
[late] night hours are our only time for enjoyment, and without them we
would have no opportunity for social life and nowhere to do our artistic
business.”48 They claimed that cafés played a concrete and important role
in both their social lives and their creative endeavors.

In the 1920s, many cafés were simple and inexpensive. A local journal-
ist wrote wistfully about the ambience, when “shorts and pioneer shirts
were almost the uniform dress of café patrons, poetry was to tea as butter
to bread, and folk dancing after the tea was like a pineapple cream cake
today.” Sheleg Ha-Levanon was noted for its popular prices and menu, and
afforded a surrogate family and home for the workers and singles who fre-
quented it. The café was always packed with people who came to listen
to the radio for free, to eat French fries, and to drink beer. Relations be-
tween waiters and customers were warm and friendly. The waiters never
approached customers to take an order until they were called, and let them
sit as long as they liked. Anyone who lacked money was allowed to drink
tea on credit. “For hundreds of people it served as a ‘home’ where they
rested, read the newspaper, conducted private and public conversations,
did business, delved into literary questions, drank a decent glass of tea, ate,
chatted, played chess. What an atmosphere the place had!” the nostalgic
journalist wrote.49

Sheleg Ha-Levanon’s homey atmosphere was not shared by other cafés
and restaurants, which exuded wealth and luxury. At these establishments,
the tables were covered with tablecloths, the waiters donned elegant uni-
forms, and band members wore dark suits. These cafés, which appealed
to a richer crowd, offered more than just food and the spontaneity con-
btributed by artistic clients. They provided entertainment programs of one
type or another. Jazz bands played every evening, or at least several times
a week, and the clientele was invited to dance and participate in dancing
contests. Bands and locally famous musicians playing what was known as
light music represented another attraction. At the end of the 1930s, a fad
for light entertainment swept the city’s cafés, with bands, singers, dance
troupes, and solo dancers performing for the diners.50

The café scene played a central role in Tel Aviv’s lively late-night cul-
ture, and all efforts to limit hours failed. Proprietors could not withstand
the temptation created by the huge demand for their services. The legal
closing time, first set for midnight, was moved up to 11 p.m., then back to midnight, and then to 1 a.m. Proprietors petitioned the city for more time, and some permits for 2 a.m. closings were granted to those who promised to keep their places quiet. Many café owners disregarded even the later thresholds and closed between 2 and 4 a.m., to the chagrin of their law-abiding competitors.51

Many found the 1923 edict requiring food establishments to close at 11 p.m. instead of midnight incomprehensible, since it kept patrons from relaxing after meetings or performances, and violated “people’s right to spend their time as they wish.” Clearly, by the beginning of the 1920s spending a night out was already common practice in Tel Aviv, and the attempt to change these habits was viewed as an infringement on civic freedom. But those who protested the order did not realize that it was, in fact, a compromise. The British district police had originally ordered all cafés and restaurants to close at 9 p.m. Mayor Dizengoff, who was attuned to his city’s culture as well as to the British administration’s concerns regarding public order, used his not inconsiderable diplomatic skills to negotiate for Tel Aviv’s establishments a special dispensation to close two hours later. In support of the extension, Dizengoff noted that Tel Aviv’s streets were now illuminated by electric lights. Furthermore, the city’s residents had already become accustomed to going out to cafés late at night, and a sudden change would cause disquiet and a spate of rumors about possible sinister reasons for the restriction.52

Café owners said that late closings were vital for “the public and cultural life that is such a salient feature of our city.” Tel Aviv’s high-spirited hubbub made the city attractive for its inhabitants, tourists, and visitors. Young people would not give up their nighttime enjoyment and, if all Tel Aviv’s cafés were closed on the Sabbath, they would simply head for those in Jaffa, the proprietors said. Demand was so great that the owners were not able to close of their own volition. This was proved in 1932, when a number of the city’s café and restaurant owners, locked in a labor dispute with their waitstaffs, decided to close their establishments for a day. Those establishments that did not participate in the protest were packed and, one by one, the other proprietors caved in and opened their cafés and restaurants during the course of the day.53

From the time Tel Aviv became a city, its inhabitants liked to spend time at coffeehouses, although in practice residents of Eastern European origin mostly drank tea. The Central Europeans who arrived in the 1930s changed
the café culture in a major way. In the 1920s, most of these establishments were fairly simple in format and style. In the 1930s, proprietors began to put more effort into their decor, comfort, and cleanliness. Well-known architects designed several new cafés in the International style. The menus changed, with the addition of such items as coffee and cream and cream cakes. The elegant atmosphere that these “Yekkes” brought to the city’s cafés was accepted with forbearance and even approval, but some observers protested about clients and waiters communicating in German and the fact that the newspapers offered were nearly all in foreign languages.54

Waiters became more and more professional. By the mid-1930s, the restaurant and hotel workers’ union had more than five hundred members, including ninety waiters and waitresses. At the end of the decade, a Waiters’ Club was established, where members of the trade could learn languages, take courses, and read professional periodicals. The waiters opposed the practice of basing their earnings on low fixed salaries, meant to be augmented with tips. They demanded to receive 10 percent of their restaurants’ revenues, as was the accepted practice in other countries. Proprietors, for their part, claimed that such a policy would force them to raise prices, which would send many clients elsewhere. The dispute reached a climax with the unsuccessful 1932 attempt at a shutdown by some of the city’s restaurants. In the end, the waiters’ protests did not succeed in changing the tip system. On the whole, uniformed waiters were rare in the 1920s, but they became a much more common phenomenon in the 1930s. Their white shirts and aprons, black bowties, and dark pants gave them an elegant air.55

As they took on a more respectable pose, the cafés of the 1930s became the subjects of detailed local press coverage. Reports on them became almost as common as theater and film criticism, and helped enhance the cafés’ status as places where new trends were created and followed.56

The cafés played an important role in creating an image of Tel Aviv as a happy and bustling place, but they also exacerbated its infamy as a sinful Babylon. Cafés began attaching amplifiers to their radios and record players, attracting crowds who added to the uproar. The noise became so great that it upset the neighbors. One resident commended the city’s initiative to make closing times earlier — while cafés indeed made Tel Aviv seem like Paris, she wrote, the time had not yet come to adopt Paris’s customary nightlife. “Tel Aviv seems to have some ‘nice’ people without worries and without work who are capable of idling away the whole night in cafés,”
she remonstrated. These café idlers had no compunction about disturbing others. But if Tel Aviv wanted to be a place where people could relax, she added, this already clamorous city had to set limits on how much noise it produced. In the 1930s, the municipality received an increasing number of complaints about the din produced by cafés. In turn, it issued warnings to proprietors and threatened sanctions.

Some cafés had bad reputations. One was the Segal on Rothschild Avenue, where disorderly drunks stumbled out onto the street during the dances held there every Sunday. In 1923, some patrons were beaten up by two inebriated Englishmen. The police chief deployed an undercover officer there to report on who frequented the Segal, then recommended to the municipality that it revoke the special permit it had given the establishment to sell alcoholic drinks after 9 p.m. Observation of late-night drinking and parties on Sundays, when the British had the day off, indicated that much of the clientele consisted of British soldiers. Tel Aviv’s Jews were not heavy drinkers, but British soldiers and policemen stationed in the country brought their native drinking habits with them. People living on Nahalat Binyamin Street complained that soldiers reveled until late at the Bar-Kochba café, getting drunk and sometimes even sleeping there, to the indignation of the families who lived nearby. “Many girls from respectable Tel Aviv families go there and remain until late at night with the soldiers; it’s not at all nice and the children and neighbors see it,” the neighbors protested. The establishment ended up with such a bad rap that the Language Defenders’ Battalion demanded that the municipality remove the café’s sign. Members argued that it was improper for such a place to desecrate the name of Bar Kochba, the leader of a Jewish rebellion against Rome whom Zionists viewed as a national hero.

Sexual licentiousness went hand in hand with drunkenness. Cafés that catered to British policemen and soldiers were often the subject of such complaints. In the mid-1920s, the municipal police chief proposed a measure forbidding women, except for musicians, from working in cafés after 6 p.m. In many cases, he said, so-called waitresses were in fact prostitutes. During the 1920s and 1930s, the rabbinate, as well as neighbors and other citizens, frequently protested that cafés were hotbeds of prostitution and crime.

In the mid-1930s, at the time of the Arab Revolt, tensions ran high on the boundary between Jaffa and Tel Aviv. Residents of a street that bordered the Arab Manshiya neighborhood complained that nearby Arab cafés were full
of “dangerous elements—provocateurs, thieves, prostitutes, pimps, with their shouts, the wild music that they sing or play on gramophones and radios with amplifiers.” The Jews accused the customers of one particular café of creating a disturbance deliberately “in order to make our lives hell.” Nearly every night gunshots and explosions could be heard there. They asked why the municipality was concerned only with the city center, while neglecting taxpayers who lived on the margins. Inhabitants of streets at a farther remove from Jaffa complained about “Arab” cafés that had opened recently—that is, those owned and patronized by Eastern Jews who had fled from Jaffa as a result of Arab attacks. Tel Aviv’s mostly Ashkenazi inhabitants suddenly came into direct contact with Jews who spoke Arabic and whose leisure activities they found alien and uncouth—backgammon and checkers, card games and gambling, loud altercations in Arabic. The Ashkenazim asked the municipality to drive this shameful “cancer” out of the center of the city.

Hayyim Nachman Bialik was also apprehensive about Levantine Jaffa’s bad influence on Tel Aviv, which he feared would turn into just another city without a uniform culture. The danger signs were already evident. “All kinds of institutions of ‘light’ culture, doubtful and suspicious culture, are already springing up like weeds and there is no escaping from them,” he wrote. The local phenomena that bothered Bialik were light entertainment forms, dance halls, beauty salons, cinemas, and clubs. He wondered whether the time had not come to establish “serious and profound cultural institutions.” In line with this thinking, the elite sought to fashion a new national Hebrew culture and was suspicious of anything that smacked of mass entertainment, which it viewed as a superfluous and corrupt import from the West. Writers and journalists maintained that the city’s culture had to be founded on esthetic and artistic criteria. They proposed that establishments offering popular light pastimes be required to subsidize serious cultural activities.

Prostitution, games of chance, pornography, and drugs occupied the margins of Tel Aviv society, and the reactions to these practices indicate that they were seen as rare phenomena, not as unavoidable elements of urban life. Presumably, then, it was normative, not deviant and criminal, activity that gave Tel Aviv its permissive reputation—its cinemas, clubs, dance halls, cafés, restaurants, nightlife, and the beach with its bold bathers. These were places frequented by many of the city’s inhabitants and tourists, and they gave it the image of a fun-loving and brazen city whose
denizens incessantly pursued shallow pleasures. In the heady days of the mid-1930s, some observers condemned the young city’s growing hedonistic atmosphere. In 1937, when recession and unemployment hit, the same behavior was deplored by critics, but they now charged that the Tel Avivians who continued to crowd cafés and cinemas were in flight from reality.65

The cultural elite viewed Tel Aviv’s high culture as having far greater importance than its cafés and cinemas. But popular entertainment, like the popular press, did much to mold Tel Aviv’s urban identity and ambience. Tel Aviv was indeed the Yishuv’s cultural capital, and its purveyors of high culture went on tour to other cities and to agricultural settlements. But the city’s nightlife and cafés could be enjoyed only in Tel Aviv itself. They might be envied or deplored, but they were an inseparable part of the city’s character and central to its vitality. Popular entertainment was more explicitly open to outside influences than was the official culture, which was consciously and selectively enlisted to produce a new and unique national Hebrew culture. The leisure culture’s broadness and flexibility made it attractive to a large and heterogeneous public, many of whose members simply wanted to live a “normal” life. In turn, as this secular culture flourished, it reinforced bourgeois aspirations for normalcy.

It could be argued that Tel Aviv’s popular entertainment and its high culture were tightly and maybe even vitally linked. Light amusements are a popular expression of the same creativity that, at its “high” end, produces a society’s serious artists and writers. The worlds of popular and high culture do not operate separately but rather are parts of a continuum. As already noted, cafés were an integral part of the city’s bohemian creative life. Bialik’s black-and-white distinction between desirable, serious culture and cheap, hollow pastimes was somewhat arbitrary. A cultural capital requires a dynamic society willing to try out new fashions, styles, and trends. Tel Aviv’s high culture owed much to the vivacious atmosphere created by the city’s flourishing popular culture.66
In 1931, an article titled “Of the Desires of a Man and Woman” appeared in a Tel Aviv weekly. The author wrote that he had interviewed passersby on the city’s streets, asking them what three wishes they would like to have granted by a magic flute he claimed to have. The people he met presumably represented Tel Aviv’s population as a whole. Their wishes were seen as reflecting the stereotypical and typical cultural characteristics of the city’s inhabitants.

A teacher, about forty years old, asked to be paid his past, present, and future salaries. The man is illustrated as stooped and frayed, a testimony to the problematic state of the country’s teachers, educators of the younger generation, who did not receive their salaries on time. A milk lady represented the part of the population that provided the city with Jewish agricultural products. Her wish was to be rid of her creditors, to win a lottery, and to buy a house with an orange grove in Ramat Gan, then an agricultural settlement adjacent to Tel Aviv. A Yemenite newspaper hawker, seventeen years old, wished for a modest, steady income and a free pass to the movies. He didn’t need such a pass for soccer games, because he got to see them by jumping the fence. The reporter also quizzed his landlord, who asked to receive his tenants’ rent on time, and to build a third story on his house. The reporter made a point of noting that the man was ugly, in keeping with the stereotype of the avaricious capitalist property owner—ironically, a European anti-Semitic stereotype. An elderly woman at a Tel Aviv old-age home represented a more traditional generation living amidst the city’s young and secular immigrant population. She asked for a good seat at her synagogue, and that her granddaughter get married. A storekeeper, whom the writer described as a religious man, wished that his store would burn down so that he could receive the insurance money. A shoe-shiner,
a Mizrahi Jew (that is, one who came from the Islamic world), twenty-five years old and a father of four daughters, wished for a son, a large and steady income—and for the journalist’s magic flute. A nineteen-year-old stenographer wished to win the Queen Esther beauty pageant on Purim, a blithe aspiration that matched the coquetry of her dress and bearing. A British army sergeant wanted a promotion and to be stationed in Tel Aviv, not Nablus, for the duration of his tour of duty in Palestine. An Arab camel driver wished for riches, that his creditors break their necks, and for a second wife, younger than the first. The writer depicted him as primitive but exotic, simple but cruel.

These figures run the gamut of gender, age, ethnic origin, and profession. Despite its stereotyping, the article shows that Tel Aviv society could be subdivided into a number of subcultures. A subculture can be defined as a system of acquired behaviors and values typifying a group of people who belong simultaneously to a larger culture, which includes other subcultures as well. Subcultures have unique identities and customs, but at the same time their members often belong to the general culture.2

Some writers claim that cities are utterly alienated entities characterized by social disorder. But others use the term “urban village” to indicate the existence of close and supportive communities within cities. Being large and heterogeneous, a city can itself help drive the creation of a complex cultural mosaic in which different groups live according to their own faiths and behavioral norms. The encounter between different groups within a city can empower those with unique identities and solidarity within groups. At the same time, contact between subcultures can engender greater tolerance of cultural difference.3

Alongside the ruling culture, which influences most people to one extent or another, a democratic society can contain several alternative cultures, including ones that are opposed to the central culture. Subcultures can challenge the consensus, and not just through direct or political attacks. The challenge may be indirect, through the demonstrative use of styles and symbols. A person can participate in different subcultures simultaneously, because his identification with any one of them may be partial or latent, and change over time.4
The Ingathering of the Exiles

Four of the types described in “Of the Desires of a Man and a Woman” are labeled according to their national and ethnic affiliation: the Yemenite, the Mizrahi Jew, the Englishman, and the Arab. Each of these categories is linked to a specific job or profession. The ethnic origin of the other figures goes unmentioned, but apparently the reader is meant to assume that they are Ashkenazi Jews, who constituted the majority in Tel Aviv (about 85 percent of the population in 1925 and 78 percent in 1938). National myths tend to stress cultural homogeneity, especially during periods when an elite seeks to shape national consciousness and identity. But in the Yishuv, immigration from different countries necessarily created heterogeneity, even cultural divides. In a broad sense, immigrants’ ethnic identities are based on the closeness they feel to the lands of their birth and to the cultural heritage of those lands, as well as on the differences between ethnic groups in the lands to which they immigrate. During the absorption process, groups of immigrants may give up their original cultural heritages entirely or, in contrast, adhere to their original culture while utterly rejecting that of their new land. A group of immigrants might also be shunted to the margins when it is cut off from its original culture but does not accommodate itself to the new culture. Lastly, people may adopt a new culture while simultaneously preserving their original culture, integrating the two in some way.

When they arrived in Palestine, the Zionist immigrants did not find a crystallized and comprehensive local culture that could serve as an alternative to their source cultures. Jews did not want to adopt the native Arab culture, while the new Hebrew culture they were trying to fashion was still in its formative stages. As a result, ethnic subcultures in an immigrant city like Tel Aviv preserved and fostered the unique cultures of their members’ lands of origin, whether totally or partially, whether deliberately or simply out of habit.

The images of the different alyot — waves of immigration to the Land of Israel — were affected by the country of origin of the immigrants, especially when new arrivals stood out as different from the veteran Jewish inhabitants, who had come during previous alyot. Even after a wave of immigration ended, the city’s inhabitants tended to continue to identify themselves and others by country of origin. Shalom Asch enumerated the contribution of each ethnic group in Tel Aviv. The Russians, the first immigrants and
builders of the city, brought with them the ideals of the Russian Revolution, and the pioneering spirit. They were also eager to foster culture in the new city. The Yekkes—the German immigrants—contributed “order, convenience, little lapdogs, eye-catching display windows, top hats, lending libraries, good doctors, world-famous professors, a deluge of clubs and parties in cafés, and jovial feasting on cream and apple strudel.” Polish Jews brought, in the case of the rich, their money, and in the case of the poor, their working hands and mouths to feed. These latter emigrants, according to Asch, added the element of the common man to the ideals of the Russians and the learnedness of the Germans. In general, these stereotypes refer to the different ways of life of urban subcultures that derive from the common characteristics of immigrants from different European countries.

Asch stressed the positive aspects of each ethnic group, but an article that appeared in a left-wing newspaper cast a negative light on each of the subcultures. The writer argued that, along with their foreign languages, immigrants brought with them primitive customs, manners, and the prejudices associated with all the nations of the world—the basest, worthless debris of their countries of origin. The Germans brought the café and dance culture of their large cities, the Poles provinciality, the Russians political extremism, “and the linguistic dialects of the Eastern ethnic groups are accompanied by a good measure of ignorance and superstition from the lands of the East.” The writer, a socialist, saw racial and ethnic differences as forces that distracted the masses from social and class distinctions, and called on the workers’ movement to unite the people and bring an end to superfluous ethnic differences.

The urban culture that the Polish immigrants brought with them in the 1920s was perceived by their Russian predecessors as generally “bourgeois,” and Polish women were sometimes described as licentious. Animosity could degenerate into verbal aggression, as typified by the epithet “Polish whore,” which could be heard on Tel Aviv streets in tense encounters. But a new ethnic group that stood out as different immediately distracted people from the previous stereotype, blurring and softening it. The Poles, who were showered with complaints and accusations for not living up to the supposed greatness of their Russian predecessors, found that they were spoken of in less harsh and more forgiving terms in the 1930s, after the arrival of a new wave of immigrants from central Europe. The Yekkes stood out so prominently that their differences gave Tel Avivians who came from Eastern Europe a sense of solidarity.
In 1933, the director of the Central Bureau of the Language Committee, the jurist Shmuel Eisenstadt, wrote that the Russian immigrants had come as “an army of pioneers” who willingly accepted the dictates of the Land’s environment, while the Poles came as a middle-class group immersed in religious and national tradition, influenced by the Zionist movement. True, wrote Eisenstadt, the Polish Fourth Aliyah in the mid-1920s was one of “cultural vacuity,” especially in the case of the women among those immigrants who continued to read Russian and Polish books and newspapers. But with their traditional outlook, these Eastern European Jews had a natural connection to the Land of Israel and the Hebrew language—unlike the subsequent crop of immigrants, the Germans of the Fifth Aliyah in the mid-1930s, who had fled from harsh persecution in their homeland. These latter immigrants were apathetic about the Jewish national idea and alienated from the Hebrew language and Jewish tradition. Eisenstadt, who was born in Russia and immigrated in 1925, advocated working to bring the German immigrants closer to the Hebrew language and life in the Land. The investment would be worthwhile, he argued, because the people of this immigration wave constituted human material of great potential. Cultural activity could harness this potential for the purpose of constructing the land, and keep the Yishuv from turning into a Tower of Babel and the German Jews from becoming isolated in a “German island within the Yishuv.”

Order was defined in a humorous column as a “‘malady’ imported into Tel Aviv and the Land of Israel as a whole by our brethren the German immigrants, and according to medical authorities is a noninfectious disease.” Making note of the “amusing” characteristics of the German immigrants went hand in hand with abuse aimed at their cultural distinctions and active attempts to repress those differences. The Yekkes were accused of having adopted the bad habits of their nemeses and persecutors. When they argued with other members of the Yishuv about practical or political issues, their arguments would sometimes be met with cries of “Go back to Hitler” or “Heil Hitler!”

Despite the Hebrew language’s special role in unifying the Yishuv, the ethnic diversity of Tel Aviv’s population was made evident by its plethora of other languages. Food, dress, and neighborhood of residence were also linked to ethnicity. As for food, it is an important element of ethnic identities and the Ashkenazi population, which brought European food with it, adapted only partially and slowly to local foods and to the imperatives of the hot climate. Russian Jews still insisted on drinking their Russian tea,
the Germans brought their way of drinking coffee, and the Mizrahi refugees of 1929 preferred to prepare food they liked rather than eat what was offered by the public kitchens run by the Women’s International Zionist Organization (WIZO), an Ashkenazi group. As the years went by, the cuisine of the East made inroads into the larger population of the Yishuv and, later, Israel, but at the end of the 1930s the smell of Oriental grilled specialties like *shishlik* still prompted nausea in many Ashkenazim—even if they had already agreed to taste the falafel sold by Yemenite street hawkers.  

The Ashkenazim wore Western clothes, especially in Tel Aviv, which was the Yishuv’s fashion capital. True, during the 1920s, Tel Avivians added a few decorative Oriental elements to their garb, but these constituted no more than superficial attempts to give Eastern accents to fundamentally modern attire. People who did this sought to “recreate” an ancient Hebrew look that existed in their imaginations; they had no interest in adopting authentic Levantine dress. The silk knits imported to Tel Aviv from Syria and Egypt were also generally cut into Western styles. In the 1930s, the few remaining Eastern accessories disappeared, with faint reminders remaining only in the dress of a few Tel Aviv bohemians and in Purim costumes. Meanwhile, authentic Mizrahi ethnicity could easily be identified against the background of the Ashkenazi majority. Some religious Sephardi Jews continued to wear traditional Eastern garb, including a robe and the Turkish tarbush; some Yemenites, with their long side locks, also kept their traditional clothing.  

As in other aspects of immigration in Tel Aviv, ethnicity was a major determining factor in neighborhood demographics. In describing Tel Aviv at the beginning of the 1930s, Avraham Yaakov Brawer distinguished areas settled by members of different ethnic groups. There were streets populated nearly entirely by members of different Mizrahi communities. (“Our brothers have a unique tendency for each family to isolate itself in its own courtyard.”) There were neighborhoods with a high proportion of Iraqi and Syrian Jews, and streets where immigrants from Germany concentrated in “Berlin-style houses.”  

Despite the tension, even animosity, that surfaced from time to time among Tel Avivians of Russian, Polish, and German origin, the Ashkenazi population was generally viewed as a single entity. Reports, statistics, and literary works all observed a divide among Ashkenazim, Yemenites, and Sephardim. An article published in 1924 noted that mortality among the Yishuv’s Eastern Jews was higher than that of the Ashkenazim, offering the
explanation that the latter “are on a lower cultural level.” Ashkenazim, in contrast, were noted for “cultural and moral superiority.” A decade later, another article explained that the level of illiteracy in Tel Aviv was lower than that of the Jews of Jaffa because most of Tel Aviv’s inhabitants come from “lands of culture,” while most of Jaffa’s Jews are from Eastern ethnic communities. The official distinction between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim made by the municipality, by scholars, and by Yishuv institutions was so prevalent and accepted that in 1937 an organization with the name Association of Citizens of the Land of Israel called on Zionist institutions and Jewish municipalities to unite the Jewish people and do away with the divisions of the Diaspora, as expressed in exclusive terms like “Yemenite” and “Ashkenazi.”

Commonly, tension among Israel’s ethnic groups is thought to be rooted in the period of the huge wave of immigration that followed Israel’s independence. But in recent years historians have noted how ethnic stereotypes consolidated during the Yishuv period. The attitudes of immigrants from Europe toward the East were reserved and ambiguous. Some viewed Eastern culture as a source of inspiration for the new Hebrew culture they were trying to create. In this view, what was Eastern was native to the Land of Israel, and what was not was an import from the European Diaspora. Eastern elements were thereby incorporated into the creative arts. But enchantment with the East, like that evident in plastic arts of the 1920s, waned during the 1930s, in tandem with the growing tension between the Arabs and the Jews. From the start, however, interest in the East seems to have consisted of no more than a superficial, ornamental use of Oriental motifs, carefully selected from a European point of view and modified considerably. In parallel with this Orientalist romanticism, the East was depicted as primitive and backward, with the mission of Zionism cast as an effort to bring advanced Western culture to the region. Immigrants from Europe sensed upon arriving in the Land of Israel that they were surrounded by “peoples and tribes of low culture,” as if they were entering “the gates of a primeval and primitive world.” Eastern exoticism, they wrote, was fine for rich tourists looking for a bit of variety before returning to their own countries. But the Jews, who came to the Land of Israel to live there permanently, had to preserve their Western character and avoid effacing themselves before the “wild culture” of the East.

The dismissive view of the East included derision for the Jews who came from Islamic lands. Sometimes this attitude manifested itself as something
A Yemenite porter in Tel Aviv, 1930. The KKL-JNF Photo Archive, d3010–045.
closer to pity than scorn, but even then it was characterized by a patronizing approach and certainty of Ashkenazi superiority. Eisenstadt wrote in 1926 that immigration from the East had brought people developed in their bodies but not spiritually, whereas immigration from the West had brought people with well-developed souls but without muscles, who were unaccustomed to working the Land. In his view, education should be provided to the population at large, in particular in order to raise the cultural and educational level of Jews “from lands of low culture”—that is, Bukharians, Georgians, Syrians, Yemenites, Moroccans, and other such groups. Many who came from these “dark corners” of the world did not know how to read and write, and a cultural gap existed between them and their counterparts who arrived from “European centers of culture.” This spiritual poverty was most evident among Mizrahi women, “on whom the ignorance in their former environment had left horrible marks.”

The Yemenites were seen as a distinct ethnic community, since many of them were of low social class and employed in manual jobs—the men as construction workers, haulers, peddlers, and shoe repairers, the women as housemaids. The Ashkenazim could identify Yemenites immediately by their features, dress, and unique accent.

There were Ashkenazim who viewed the Yemenites as a “blessing to the homeland, lovers of labor, making do with little.” In particular, Ashkenazim were impressed by “a great aspiration among the Yemenites to be Europeans.” They were further pleased to note that, under the European influence of Tel Aviv’s Ashkenazim, “the custom of child marriage, which they brought from their former homeland, is disappearing among the Yemenites.” They were also overjoyed to see the gradual modification of Yemenite dress, especially among the younger generation, who frequently attended the theater, cinema, and concerts. The Ashkenazim wanted the Yemenites to adopt the daily habits of the West, but wanted to preserve their folklore—“their primitive capabilities, which stand out in their simplicity and innocence, and which can be a blessing for our spiritual lives.” The Ashkenazim especially liked Yemenite dancing, which despite its “somewhat strange movements and special beat” seemed fantastic and full of “a unique mystical devotion.” On the other hand, many Yemenite customs, especially polygamy, were seen as marks of backwardness and inferiority.

Since people’s ethnic origin implants tastes and preferences from childhood, practices treasured by one subculture can disgust another. Many Ashkenazim liked some aspects of Eastern music, when these were blended
into the Western forms they knew. But when performed authentically, the music could seem strange and repulsive to them. Many Yemenites grew fragrant herbs and shrubs to perfume their homes and their hands. Of the odors that the Yemenites preferred, one Ashkenazi wrote: “Our people cannot get used to it.”

Ethnic differences were also evident in the formulas of prayers and in synagogue customs. Mizrahi Jews were largely religious and observant, and their prayer services differed from those of the Ashkenazim. Tel Aviv’s synagogues largely reflected ethnic divisions. While a small number of congregations were “mixed,” most were categorized either as Ashkenazi, Sephardi, or Yemenite. The cornerstone of the Great Synagogue on Allenby Street was laid in 1922, but the building’s completion was delayed by a series of architectural, political, and financial difficulties. It did not open until eight years later. The municipality and the committee that oversaw the synagogue’s construction had to take out loans to supplement private contributions from Tel Aviv residents and the revenues of a special municipal synagogue construction levy imposed for this purpose.

In 1924, the Sephardi chief rabbi of Tel Aviv–Jaffa, Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel, wrote to the municipality that the Sephardim wanted to build a synagogue on a lot they had purchased. Unfortunately, he explained, they could not pray in the Great Synagogue because the congregation there would be mostly Ashkenazi and the form of the prayer service would differ from their own. The Sephardim hoped to raise most of the sum required from their own community, but requested that the municipality fund one-quarter of the costs. The deputy mayor wrote back, welcoming the increased immigration of “our Sephardi brothers,” but asserting that the municipality could not and did not need “to sanction, in its decisions or its actions, the existence of several Hebrew nations within a single Tel Aviv.” From the municipality’s point of view, “all Jews are equal” and pray to a single God. The Great Synagogue did not belong to any particular ethnic community. So instead of building a new synagogue, which would add to and underline ethnic differences, the deputy mayor suggested that the Sephardi rabbi sit down with his Ashkenazi colleague, Chief Rabbi Shlomo Aharonson, and produce a single unified prayer book. Rabbi Uziel replied that he and Rabbi Aharonson were doing all they could to unite the nation, but when it came to the prayer service, ethnic groups were accustomed to different formulas and melodies, “and this matter of tradition, according to which each Jew has become accustomed from childhood, cannot be changed in a single
generation.” When the municipality maintained its refusal to help fund the synagogue, the Sephardim refused to pay the construction levy meant for the Great Synagogue. In 1926, the municipality finally gave in and agreed that the levy collected from the city’s Sephardi inhabitants would be designated for the construction of a separate synagogue, which was dedicated in 1931. This episode testifies to the ethnic and cultural distinctions that prevailed in the city. It also shows that the Ashkenazi leadership identified its own practices and customs as the standard for the nation as a whole. The Ashkenazi leaders expected and demanded that other ethnic groups integrate into their own community, accepting their customs in the name of national unity.24

Yemenites and Mizrahi Jews in Tel Aviv suffered the effects of a certain level of economic, political, and cultural exclusion. While no deliberate Ashkenazi plot existed to shunt others into the margins, Yemenites and Mizrahim were left out because they were not partners in many of the dominant Ashkenazi community’s symbols, forms of discourse, and ways of life. The Ashkenazi majority imposed its standards and conventions in many areas. Given this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that from the point of view of the Mizrahi Jews, public institutions belonged to the immigrants from Europe. Sunflower-seed hawkers who petitioned the municipality not to remove them from the city’s main streets in 1924 noted that European immigrants received aid from public institutions, while they, Yemenites and Mizrahim, had no organization that helped them.25

Unsurprisingly, then, Tel Aviv’s Yemenites founded a Yemenite Union to handle their affairs. The city was full of voluntary organizations, among them landsmanschaften, associations run by people who shared a land or city of origin. Whereas some aspects of ethnic subcultures are automatic and unconscious, joining a landsmanschaft meant deliberately identifying oneself with a specific ethnic group. Sephardim, Iranians, Bukharians, and former residents of Salonika all founded organizations of their own, as did immigrants from Poland, Galicia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Austria, the United States, and other places. These organizations gave their members a channel through which to participate in public life and helped them deal with the technical and emotional difficulties associated with immigration. They helped ethnic groups preserve their uniqueness at the same time that they facilitated gradual integration into Tel Aviv life.26

The city was also home to another subculture, that of its sojourners. The
British had their own language and uniform, and the political tension surrounding their presence placed them in a different category from the rest of the city's population. Furthermore, they stood out in their practices, lifestyle, and behavior. The British military and police force had their own sports organizations and conducted annual games for their personnel only. When the municipality hosted the Royal Navy, the organizers did their best to provide their guests with entertainment that meshed with their practices at home, such as games of hockey, tennis, and cricket. The British district officer even proposed to Mayor Dizengoff that Tel Aviv sponsor dog races, complete with betting, but that particular suggestion was rejected. The British also had their own tastes in food and drink. Their heavy consumption of alcoholic beverages, in notable contrast to the moderation displayed by the Jewish community, impelled the local Jewish police force to bolster its patrols on Sundays and Christian holidays so as to prevent “scandals.” The distinct culture of the British sometimes clashed with Tel Aviv’s dominant culture, but the municipality and its police force lacked the power to change or even restrict unsavory behavior by the British, since they had no authority over British personnel. In 1932, a struggle emerged between the subculture of the British police force and that of the Yemenite residents of Tel Aviv after the Yemenite Union began a campaign to shut down a bar “that was a kind of leprous sore in the Hebrew Yishuv.” A British policeman reacted to the shutdown by seriously beating a member of the organization.

Ethnicity continued to dictate affiliation with Tel Aviv’s subcultures because immigrants refused to give up entirely their symbolic identification with their unique cultures of origin, whether in terms of language, prayer, or day-to-day practices. The force of such well-rooted habits was easy to see. Even those who did not seek to return to their country of origin, and who did not want to see living in Tel Aviv as a transient episode in their lives, could feel, alongside Zionist ideology and their role in enacting it, a yearning for their homeland and its culture. Ethnic divisions were also perpetuated by the treatment of new immigrants by earlier immigrants. As noted earlier, epithets like “Polish whore” or “Go back to Hitler” show that some identified their temporary adversaries as Poles or Germans, thus reinforcing those identities. Certainly, the official and often-used distinction among Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Yemenites institutionalized and reinforced long-standing ethnic differences.
The Worker Subculture

In December 1920, the political parties that represented the Yishuv’s workers founded the General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel, the labor organization better known by its Hebrew name, the Histadrut. The organization was actually more than just a labor union. It organized the growing and strengthening working class so as to provide it with educational and health services and to promote settlement in the Land. Most of Tel Aviv’s inhabitants belonged to the middle class, and it was their culture that dominated the city. More than a third of the Histadrut’s members, however, lived in the city during the Mandate Period. During the 1920s and 1930s, between 50 and 75 percent of Tel Aviv’s manual and hired workers were members of the Histadrut. At the beginning of the 1920s, 30 percent of the city’s population belonged to the Histadrut, but as the city grew, this proportion declined, reaching 14 percent in the 1930s.

Social groups foster their own cultures as a way of maintaining boundaries, strengthening their members’ sense of belonging, and demonstrating to others the groups’ unique identities. Some groups focus on one area of activity, but others aspire to provide their members with a comprehensive worldview. In the Yishuv, the revisionists on the right and the labor movement on the left sought to create total frameworks for their members. The groups were by no means limited to propagating a political identity. They also penetrated members’ private lives and dictated how they should behave. While ethnic subcultures in Tel Aviv grew from the bottom up, on the basis of existing and well-rooted similarities in their members’ lifestyles, the workers’ subculture was, in part, imposed from above. The movement’s leaders and spokesmen tried to create a workers’ culture and instill it among its members.

In any society, an individual’s daily lifestyle depends to a large extent on his earning power, education, and social background. In European cities, workers developed naturally into a distinct social class during the industrial revolution. Working and other classes had their own culture, including well-established habits and lifestyles, even in the absence of an official political or professional framework. In contrast, in the Yishuv the class structure was much more complex and less distinguishable. The working class did not grow organically within a gradually developing economic entity. Instead of moving from village to city, as workers did in Europe, the
Yishuv’s workers migrated from the city to the villages. David Horowitz, an economist, noted that most workers chose to shift from intellectual and commercial work to manual labor. Since they did not integrate themselves into an existing capitalist economy, they were able to develop an independent workers’ economy that itself evolved into one of the country’s largest economic actors—an owner of institutions, cooperative businesses, and monopolies. Haim Arlosoroff, a leader of the labor movement, said in 1927 that the workers of the Land of Israel had not been born proletarians, and their political power and public importance actually exceeded that of many members of the bourgeoisie. It could well be, he suggested, that the Yishuv’s Sephardi and ultrareligious Jews felt themselves to be a powerless proletariat, while “the Histadrut is the Yishuv’s aristocracy.”

Most of the Yishuv’s workers came from a petit-bourgeois social and educational background. However, when they immigrated, their way of life changed. Their voluntary transformation into proletarians included engaging in kinds of work to which they were unaccustomed, and they often experienced a decline in their standard of living. The Yishuv’s workers wanted to create for themselves, together with their political and economic institutions, a manifest workers’ subculture that would set them apart in the Yishuv. For this purpose they changed their lives in radical ways, a move that was necessary precisely because most of these workers came from a bourgeois background. This all happened in the most extreme and complete way in the agricultural settlements. City workers’ transformation was less complete and thus more complex. The labor movement had to address the fact that the city, viewed originally as a stopping point on the way to living out the agricultural ideal, soon became the political, administrative, and cultural center of its activities. Even though the movement viewed rural life as the cornerstone of a healthy society, its leaders also began, in the face of economic and demographic realities, to accept the development of the urban working class. The challenge of creating and maintaining an urban workers’ culture grew more difficult in the 1930s, when urban culture itself gained further influence over the Tel Aviv working class, as a result both of economic prosperity and the decline of its share in the city’s population.

Taste preferences, which along with economic capability dictate consumption patterns, are shaped from childhood by an individual’s material and moral environment. The cultural needs of the Yishuv’s workers, which were generally formed in a bourgeois European setting, meshed with the common wisdom of the movement’s leadership, which was that high cul-
ture was the principal means for shaping the workers’ overall culture. Tel Aviv’s high culture was supported by Zionist institutions and the municipality, but for the most part it depended on the free market — the money it received from individual consumers of culture. Workers preferred to spend their money on high culture forms similar to those patronized by intellectuals and members of the free professions, but their income constrained them, creating a disparity between their cultural needs and their ability to pay for them. This gap was filled by a unique phenomenon: the Histadrut, representing the working class, produced cultural programs and founded cultural institutions. Its national culture committee, and in particular the cultural committee of the Tel Aviv Workers’ Council, fashioned a cultural enterprise meant to shape the tastes and styles of individual workers, to reinforce their political beliefs and party loyalty, and in doing so — through aid and subsidies — to allow them to enjoy the best of Tel Aviv’s high culture.

The Histadrut’s culture committee sought “to give its members, who are unable to pay out large sums to supply their artistic needs, an opportunity to hear and see the best of Tel Aviv’s artistic performances.” The Histadrut provided its members with Hebrew lessons and a library, and during the 1920s it founded a workers’ theater, a publishing house, and sponsored field trips, lectures, a workers’ choir, an amateur orchestra, sing-alongs, and libraries. The committee offered discounted tickets to concerts and plays, and sold books on easy terms. During the week of Pesach, on the holiday of Shavuot, and during the rest of the year it organized guided tours around the country and to neighboring ones — including Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. Workers’ clubs, affiliated with specific professions or workplaces, operated around the city.

The Histadrut’s daily newspaper, Davar, reinforced worker solidarity. The newspaper appeared in the afternoon, with the logic being that workers would only have time to read it in the evening when they returned from work. About 36 percent of the newspaper’s copies were sold in Tel Aviv, and a third of its total subscribers, which included readers overseas, lived in the city. Davar was, in practice, an organ of the largest labor party, and thus shaped a common political consciousness. Since it also covered literature and the arts, it wielded considerable influence in shaping cultural preferences. Davar was not just the house organ of the labor movement, it was also one of its symbols. For May Day, the international workers’ day, copies of the paper adorned with branches and leaves were hung up as part of the event’s decorations.
Beginning in 1925, the Histadrut sponsored its own holiday, Histadrut Day, observed in addition to the annual celebration of May Day. Histadrut Day, held during Hanukkah, was marked with rallies, lectures, sing-alongs, ceremonies organized by Histadrut-sponsored sports teams, theater performances, and concerts. But such attempts to replace traditional Jewish holidays with national-worker ones were only partly successful. Workers had an ambivalent relationship with religion and tradition, as was evident in their actions, if not in their words. Observant members of the Histadrut participated in the organization’s celebrations, but at the same time they continued to observe the Sabbath and holidays in the traditional fashion. Even nonreligious members, who observed no religious strictures on weekdays, occasionally attended synagogue services on the Sabbath and holidays, when they were overcome with “religious sentiment.”

In fostering an appreciation for high culture among the working class, the Yishuv’s labor movement copied familiar models from the Soviet Union and Germany’s left-wing parties. In those countries, leftist leaders worked to disseminate cultural and intellectual material among the masses. However, the attempt to instill a cultured sensibility in the Russian and German proletariat did not always succeed. The working public included people with disparate educational backgrounds, and as such its members were not always eager to consume the cultural goods produced by the intellectual and artistic elite. Despite the similar methods and institutions employed in the Yishuv, the results were notably different. Many Histadrut members had not been born into the proletariat, and some had secondary and postsecondary educations. Whereas Europe’s left-wing movements sought to enhance the cultural and educational level of workers by “improving” them, in Tel Aviv the culture committee’s primary task was to meet the existing cultural needs of the Histadrut’s members. As Arlosoroff noted, the Histadrut’s members were of a higher social than economic class. In the tastes they had acquired since childhood, and in their cultural aspirations, the workers belonged to the Yishuv’s elite. Their intensive consumption of select elements of high culture reflected and reconfirmed the high social status of the Yishuv’s workers.

In addition to promoting high culture, the labor movement sought to fashion an everyday workers’ culture. In line with this goal, similar, if not identical, conditions of employment and compensation created a common milieu for Tel Aviv’s workers. Unemployed workers, who during times of economic crisis walked the streets, formed impromptu debating societ-
ies on Rothschild Street and spent long hours in inexpensive cafés. Light, cheap bicycles were the most common means of transportation for workers; during the 1930s, hundreds of them clogged the sidewalk next to the Histadrut’s central office. Histadrut requirements, such as union meetings, and optional leisure activities filled the hours after work, and tumultuous assemblies and rallies took place in the evenings, sometimes lasting until after midnight.40

Worker solidarity was also reinforced by participation in or support for the teams fielded by the Ha-Po'el sports organization. When it was founded in the Yishuv during the mid-1920s, the group declared itself a sports club for the working class, with the goal of preparing young Jews for membership in the workers’ movement. Ha-Po'el sought to realize socialist and collectivist principles, to promote physical fitness among the working class, and to foster proletarian solidarity. It rejected competitive, individualist, professional bourgeois sport, the kind aimed at breaking records and stoking individual pride. As such, the organization presented itself as the polar opposite of its competitor, Maccabi. Ha-Po'el claimed to have no interest in the promotion of individual achievement, which it portrayed as Maccabi’s chief interest. Faced with Ha-Po'el’s attacks, Maccabi, which began as an apolitical Zionist sports organization, underwent a gradual transformation through which it became identified largely with the bourgeois “civic” sector. But when the two organizations met on the field, both were in fact competing for the same athletic achievements and records.41

Attempts were made to reinforce working class identification by concentrating members residentially in neighborhoods and housing projects built specially for them. Workers’ housing in Tel Aviv—apartment buildings in the International architectural style—was built in several locations around the city in response to a severe housing shortage. These projects also served as incubators of pioneering ideology, an effort to counter the dangers of bourgeois cultural influence on the urban working class. Some critics argue that these buildings did not achieve their purpose because they did not become sealed-off “microcosms.” They were scattered around the city, surrounded by private neighborhoods, so the housing projects were unable to encompass a large, coherent Histadrut community. In contrast to European workers’ housing projects, which were funded entirely by public sources, the tenants of Tel Aviv’s workers’ housing projects paid for their own accommodations. That meant that only workers with regular jobs and relatively high incomes could actually purchase an apartment in
these buildings. Workers’ housing projects were thus home to the working class’s elite. In the end, these initiatives did not solve the housing shortage for workers, and a gap opened between the established working-class apartment owners and those who could not afford such accommodations.42

In other words, the working class gradually stratified. The salaries of Histadrut members in Tel Aviv differed in accordance with the branch of the economy they worked in and their specific jobs. The large wave of immigration at the end of the 1930s and the economic prosperity of that period also exacerbated disparities in the standard of living among the working class. An “aristocracy” of working class functionaries also came into being.43

The project of shaping the lives of workers included promotion of “Histadrut ethics”—a set of injunctions and principles meant as guideposts. A “Comrades’ Court” was created to enforce ethical behavior among Histadrut members according to these standards. It dealt with formal matters, such as expulsion of members from the Histadrut for not paying dues, for members themselves turning into bosses by employing hired labor, or for owning private businesses. The court also had the power to expel members caught stealing or engaging in profiteering. It commonly heard cases in which one member accused another of insulting him, involving the court in interpersonal relations. Histadrut officials and groups often intervened in members’ personal and family lives; these private realms were not seen to be outside their purview.44

The labor movement’s pioneering ideal, which crystallized in the context of its times, maintained that Zionists should adjust their standard of living to the constraints imposed by life in the Land of Israel. It therefore called for frugality, for consumption of simple foods, and for wearing simple clothes.45 One way of organizing and supervising consumer activity was through the establishment of buyers’ cooperatives administered by the Histadrut. But these were not successes during the Mandate period, with the exception of Ha-Mashbir, a supply cooperative. Tel Aviv’s consumers’ cooperative was founded in 1929 and opened four branches offering basic goods at low prices. Six years later, it had only three hundred members, and it supplied only 2.5 percent of the goods consumed by the city’s workers. Performance declined from there for the rest of the 1930s. Consumers’ cooperatives thus did not play a major role in Tel Aviv, as they often did in Europe among organized workers. They faced tough competition from the city’s many shopkeepers and merchants, and the mobile lifestyle of unmarried workers meant that the cooperatives did not develop a large base of regu-
lar clients. As it happened, basic items, such as sugar, soap, and rice, were actually more expensive and less fresh at the cooperatives than at some privately run stores.46

Although attempts to direct consumer consumption from above usually failed, the similar employment conditions and salaries shared by many organized workers created similar patterns of consumption. Workers generally did their shopping early in the morning or late at night, before or after a long day of work. They bought bread on credit and paid the bill to the bakers on Friday afternoon, after receiving their weekly wages. A consumer survey conducted in Tel Aviv in 1931 shows that manual laborers ate more carbohydrates—bread, flour, and rice—than did industrialists, professionals, rentiers, and merchants. These latter groups consumed almost twice as much meat, milk, butter, eggs, vegetables, tea, and oil than did craftsmen, manual laborers, and haulers, and three times as much fruit.47

The working population was characterized by low income, a large proportion of unmarried men and women, and inflexible work hours. Even though many workers patronized Tel Aviv’s cheap cafés, they still required services to cater to their needs and to provide inexpensive prepared food at the hours they required it. So a workers’ hostel that opened in 1924 featured a library, a reading room, and a cafeteria “where tea, bread, herring, and so on may be obtained.” More common were workers’ kitchens, which could be found in nearly every Yishuv settlement with an organized working population. At these public dining halls, a worker could obtain inexpensive fresh food over a long range of hours. Hundreds of workers ate each day at Tel Aviv’s workers’ kitchen. During the 1920s, the menu included a variety of freshly prepared, healthy, and tasty dishes. The place was clean, although it did not offer napkins, and a single cup placed on each table was used communally by all diners. Workers often stood outside the kitchen conducting fierce debates in small groups until the middle of the night. The workers’ kitchen also became a venue for socializing and a symbol of the labor movement—it was a popular place to have one’s picture taken on May Day.48

The menus at these popular dining facilities offer further evidence of the rise in Tel Aviv workers’ standards of living over the period covered in this book. In the 1920s, the kitchens served meatless food, whereas by the end of the 1930s meat had become a regular feature. In the 1930s, the Histadrut’s food services were used by an ever smaller proportion of workers, apparently because of the decline in the proportion of unmarried men and women and the rise in the average age of the Histadrut’s members.49 Nev-
ertheless, workers continued to patronize these establishments, as well as inexpensive cafés, if only because they were also social institutions that strengthened relationships among the Histadrut’s members. In frequenting such places, workers were not fundamentally different from Tel Avivians in general. Rather, they pursued a less expensive proletarian version of the Tel Aviv practice of spending leisure time outside—in public, at cafés and restaurants.\textsuperscript{50}

One of the most common ways for members of a subculture to display their affiliation is through their dress. And indeed Tel Aviv’s workers’ subculture had its own dress code, dictated by economic and professional necessity as well as ideology. Pioneers of the Third Aliyah of the early 1920s advocated modesty and frugality. They thus dressed simply, casually, and practically. Women workers wore much plainer clothing, less fashionable and simple in pattern, than did other Tel Aviv women, often went barefoot, and did not use makeup. During the 1920s, homeless and unemployed workers sewed their own clothing from raw cotton fabric, making them stand out against better-off Tel Avivians who bought clothes overseas and kept up with international fashions. But in addition to economic necessity, the clothes worn by Tel Aviv’s workers became a visual symbol of their ideology. Alongside its practicality, clothing evokes esthetics and achieves communication, especially in an urban environment. In a society where people are strangers to one another, they judge other people by what they see.\textsuperscript{51}

The Yishuv’s workers condemned those who sought to be fashionable and claimed to be free of any desire to follow trends. But styles of dress hardly lack symbolic meaning when they express opposition. Even a person who expresses cultural rebellion by proclaiming that fashions are nothing to him proves that a dominant fashion can create an antifashion that itself constitutes a stylistic statement.\textsuperscript{52} Workers’ clothing thus expressed the pioneering ideal to which they subscribed, and served as a means of protest against the bourgeois ethos. It was an antifashion that testified to the communicatory power of clothing on Tel Aviv’s streets.

Workers’ style was inspired by that of the pioneers in the agricultural settlements, who in turn were inspired by the dress of Eastern European peasants. As in other areas, Tel Aviv’s workers faced more complex influences than their farming counterparts. Like the farmers, the finances of workers in Tel Aviv did not permit them luxury, and at work they required comfortable and durable clothes. On the other hand, they lived and worked in a
city that was the Yishuv’s fashion center. Bourgeois influences thus posed a constant “danger” to the way the city’s workers dressed. At the same time, in the city the workers’ unique style of dress was of much greater importance in expressing opposition to the dominant middle-class culture.

The clothing of workers stood out in particular during the workday. Photographs show working women in shorts, with white kerchiefs or simple hats covering their hair. Workers liked to be photographed in staged postures at work or at rest, leaning on hoes or other tools. Male workers wore dark pants and cotton shirts — often of Russian cut, with the buttons off center. Most wore caps or bucket hats. Such simple clothing supplemented and reinforced the workers’ pride and determination, qualities that were also expressed in their postures. The same rough work clothes that tended to conceal female sexuality accented sturdy, muscular masculine physiques.53
Work clothes had to meet technical requirements, but the principle of simplicity was also observed in clothing worn in off-hours and on days of rest. The holiday dresses of women workers, which they wore to formal events, were simple in cut and largely unadorned. Men marked their affiliation with the working public by wearing a casquette, the brimmed cap that had, by the end of the nineteenth century, become a symbol of the European working class. Most workers wore such caps when working on road-paving teams or construction crews, and many continued to wear them in the evenings and on holidays as well, although at formal events many could be seen in the more bourgeois homburg.

The ready-to-wear clothing industry that developed around the world and in the Yishuv during the early decades of the twentieth century enabled men and women with relatively low incomes to maintain a wardrobe of varied clothing. This served to blur class distinctions in fashion. During the prosperous years of the 1930s, the development of the clothing industry and the rise in the standard of living in the Yishuv affected the way workers dressed. An economic survey in 1933 noted that the garment industry’s profits had grown along with the rising incomes of the principal consumers of locally made clothing—workers, “who are now more careful than they were in previous years about the way they dress.”

The trend toward wearing more elegant, less workmanlike clothing in leisure hours and, in particular, on holidays was already evident in the 1920s and accelerated in the 1930s. In 1934, a photographer submitted a request to be allowed to keep his studio open until 10 p.m., on the grounds that “the working public does not like to be photographed in work clothes and thus prefers the hours between eight and ten at night.” Such a request indicates that workers who in the 1920s had preferred to be photographed at a construction site in their work clothes now wanted portraits taken in a studio after they had had an opportunity to change. In 1937, an organization that promoted locally made products arranged a fashion show to present locally produced clothing to Tel Aviv women workers. The show was modeled on elite fashion shows, evidence that the audience was aware of fashions but also had special requirements that needed to be served by a different sort of presentation. Workers seeking to dress more fashionably sometimes crossed the boundaries of the normative and proper for their community, especially when they purchased imported items. Men and, in particular, women who wore imported shoes were brought up before the Comrades’ Court and fined.
Photographs and films of the period document clear differences between the way Tel Aviv workers and bourgeoisie dressed in the 1920s and 1930s. Western fashions dominated in the city, meaning that sector-oriented styles, such as those of ethnic groups or of pioneers, stood out. Workers could easily be identified, and their specific political and ideological affiliation discerned, by the way they dressed. Illustrated advertisements represented “the population at large” with drawings of typical members of different groups. The gentleman was portrayed in a suit, homburg, tie, and gloves, while the worker was depicted wearing shorts, a casquette, and sandals. The wasp-waisted lady in a close-fitting dress and high heels contrasted with the stocky, solid pioneer woman in a simple skirt and blouse and flat shoes. We may presume that contemporaries who viewed these advertisements immediately identified these types.58

The economic constraints faced by workers were reflected and defiantly displayed as an ideology in the way they dressed. But the prosperity of the
1930s brought changes. Tel Aviv workers allowed themselves more flexibility and adopted, in part, elements of bourgeois fashion. This was not, however, a one-way street in which the workers imitated the class “above” them. Tel Aviv workers’ dress reflected a more complex picture. Unlike in class-stratified Europe, many of the Yishuv’s workers had been born and raised in bourgeois society. Their manner of dress was thus not an outgrowth of their upbringing but rather part of a conscious and comprehensive cultural revolution. A business suit did not represent just bourgeois society—it also symbolized the dress of the society the worker left behind, the Diaspora that he had rejected. Work clothes were, in contrast, Yishuv clothes. The dominance of the pioneering ideal meant that some elements of pioneering style—shorts for women, embroidered shirts and sandals for both sexes—made their way into elite urban fashion as well.

A number of sub-subcultures could be found within the Tel Aviv workers’ subculture. To begin with, disparate incomes among Histadrut members meant differing standards of living. In addition, the daily life of a nonreligious worker was somewhat distinct from that of a religiously observant one; differences existed among Histadrut workers of different ethnic groups, as indicated by the distribution of workers’ clubs; and despite the movement’s ideals and efforts, male and female members of the Histadrut faced different constraints and lived differently. Some members of the labor movement accused Tel Aviv’s workers of being influenced too strongly by their urban environment, of adopting a hedonistic lifestyle, and of behaving like the decadent bourgeoisie.

Apparently, maintaining a subculture over the long run is easier when it is based on well-rooted habits, such as ethnic customs, than when it is based on ideological principles handed down from above. While the attempt to fashion a total workers’ way of life was only partly successful, this subculture was certainly distinct in Tel Aviv. The city’s workers had their own unique traits and tastes in food and dress, in sports and the media, and in their day-to-day living and leisure choices. Their customs both united them and separated them from the bourgeois majority. Tel Aviv’s workers did not possess great financial capital, but they had great cultural capital, both because of their backgrounds and because of the Histadrut’s activities. Life in the Yishuv’s cultural center enabled workers with bourgeois cultural tastes and modest incomes to satisfy their needs and strengthen their status as the Yishuv’s elite.
CONCLUSION

Did Tel Aviv of the 1920s and 1930s have a culture—defined as a system of worldviews, forms of communication, values, and symbols manifested in all areas of social activity—of its own? Did the city’s inhabitants participate in a distinctive physical cityscape, public events, consumer culture, leisure activity, and subcultures?

One common behavior in the city involved spending a large percentage of leisure time in outside spaces. In Tel Aviv, largely because of the warm climate, the street was a place of animated interchange, not just a network that connected houses and buildings. The great majority of public events took place outdoors, as did most interactions in which the city’s inhabitants displayed the distinguishing marks of their subcultures. The central cultural role played by the outdoors was also evident in the city’s vibrant nightlife, in spontaneous singing and dancing on the streets, and in the crowds on the beach and in other public spaces. The street served as the stage for frequent ceremonies and processions; a place of business for open-air markets and peddlers; a site where people expressed themselves through their clothing; a place to eat or to drink a glass of tea outside the home. In these ways, the outdoors did not just serve a functional role—it was a widespread cultural preference.

Tel Aviv’s bourgeois founders were able to fashion a city that reflected their social and political aspirations. The municipal elections conducted in the city during the two decades covered in this book consistently, with just one brief hiatus, placed the city’s governing and administrative institutions in the hands of the political representatives of the middle class. This stood in contrast to the larger balance of power—during the 1920s, the labor movement grew into a major political force, and by the 1930s it had gained control of the Yishuv’s self-governing institutions. Middle-class dominance was evident from the city’s many signs and billboards and in its vigorous commercial activity. Films, dance parties, and cafés reflected, reinforced, and shaped individualistic, hedonistic bourgeois values. Even the
distinct subculture of Tel Aviv’s workers was influenced, to a certain extent, by the city’s middle-class culture.

Tel Aviv’s leaders wanted a modern city, one fundamentally different from both the small towns of Eastern Europe and from Levantine cities. Modernity was therefore a central value of Tel Aviv culture, a characteristic that could be seen clearly in the city’s International style buildings, in its electric streetlights, and in its motorized means of transport. Modern, hedonistic values were, even if indirectly expressed, central to the city’s celebrations and consumer culture. City residents enjoyed up-to-date, technology-based forms of entertainment. Exhibitions and fairs were held every few years to display the Yishuv’s modern industrial products to its inhabitants and to the world. Nevertheless, in several areas a disparity existed between the ambitions of the city’s leaders and many inhabitants and the reality. This discrepancy could be seen in the traffic jams, and in the dirty streets, sanitation problems, and inhabitants’ cavalier attitude toward their parks and public spaces. Emulation of the West while living in the Middle East was a form of escapism, the same sort that could be seen in the multiple celebrations and the consumption of light culture.

Tel Aviv’s population was composed largely of Jews who had belonged to Eastern Europe’s petit bourgeoisie, but the city’s aspirations were sym-
bolized by the Western gentleman and lady who appeared in so many advertising. Yet flesh-and-blood Western gentlemen, such as the German immigrants of the 1930s, were not always welcomed. In technical terms, Tel Avivians managed to create for themselves a city that was fairly modern, but on the cultural and esthetic level it comprised an amalgam of many influences. Paradoxically, the West penetrated the cultural sphere through the back door. This was the area in which the elite wanted most to limit outside influence and create something original and local. While all branches of the city’s high culture sought to produce a new Hebrew art with roots in the land—adopting European models in a strictly controlled way—the entertainment and leisure culture consisted largely of unsupervised imports of Western mass culture, with all its fads.

Although the West served as the principal model for Tel Aviv, in reality the city encompassed great human and cultural variety. But it also nurtured a unique urban version of the Zionist “new Jew.” The Tel Avivian new Jew lived in a built-up, modernist environment with a hot climate that gave it a Mediterranean character. The battle to entrench Hebrew as the city’s spoken language, and the plethora of national symbols that made an appearance in high culture and public events, reinforced the Hebrew, native, and Zionist characteristics of the inhabitants. Immigrants preserved, in their day-to-day lives, cultural practices and preferences that they had brought from their lands of origin. But the athletic, tanned Tel Avivian, free and self-assured, joyful and pleasure-loving, was depicted as utterly different in his looks and his way of life from the stereotypical Diaspora Jew, and from the pioneer as well. Tel Aviv culture blended West and East, Jew and Hebrew, the Diaspora and the Land of Israel, the cosmopolitan and the local.

The city’s myriad forces engaged in a constant game of give and take—the municipality with its policies, along with individuals, firms, and social groups. In practice, the residents had a more decisive impact than the municipality in areas such as sanitation, transportation, construction, and signage. The public had power, and simultaneously displayed a lack of discipline and a tendency to ignore rules. At the same time, as the city burgeoned demographically, economically, and institutionally during the 1930s, a utilitarian approach came to the fore for the city’s leaders and elites. The municipality broadened its powers and its departments began to function better. Romantic and spontaneous aspects of the cityscape, more common in the 1920s, gave way to spaces characterized by greater control, efficiency, and order. The flamboyant “dream houses” of the 1920s made way for the
uniform lines of the International style, and ornate horse-drawn carriages were replaced by motorized cabs. Celebrations shot through with improvisation became institutionalized, and the value of efficiency was promoted by consumer culture and advertising. The immigrants from central Europe may have reinforced this process, just as they helped spur the establishment of more well-ordered and better-decorated cafés. Such changes, which took place in the 1930s, were not unique to Tel Aviv. They reflected trends in the entire Yishuv, as well as international ones.

The Eastern European majority tried to impose behaviors it found desirable on the inhabitants as a whole. Yet, despite a rhetoric of national unity and attempts to implement it, heterogeneity was one of Tel Aviv’s most salient cultural characteristics. Waves of immigration to the growing city quickly produced diversity that could be seen in every area of life. Despite the efforts of the municipality and architects, Tel Aviv remained variegated in form. Particularistic holidays and events were celebrated alongside common national and municipal ones. This diversity, a feature of the city from early on, may have been a factor in making Tel Avivians relatively tolerant culturally. Many decades before postmodernism placed the culture of the “other” at center stage, Tel Aviv allowed many subcultures to find expression through rituals, patterns of consumption, and civic organizations.

Another notable attribute of the culture was its unique combination of individualism and collectivism. These tendencies are traditionally seen as polar opposites, but in practice every society integrates elements of both. Individualism was evident in Tel Aviv’s urban landscape in the form of a capitalist economy and its consumer culture. Most of the Yishuv’s creative artists—the ultimate embodiment of individualism—chose to live and work in Tel Aviv. Tel Avivians, who cultivated their bodies and their appearance, famously neglected and littered their public spaces. On the matter of social solidarity, city residents were accused of being inadequately sensitive. Even during periods of unemployment and shortages, some continued to enjoy their usual pastimes. For example, during the Arab Revolt of 1936, which took the lives of many in the Yishuv, “dancing to jazz music . . . continued in some cafés.” During most of the 1920s and 1930s, the city council was controlled by a coalition of centrist bourgeois parties that translated the individualist interests of most inhabitants into municipal policy. Heterogeneity, wealth, exposure to mass communication, and modernization all encourage individualism, and these factors were certainly characteris-
tic of Tel Aviv, especially in comparison to other Jewish settlements in the Land of Israel during the Mandate era.3

But individualism existed alongside behaviors and activities of a collectivist character. Residential construction according to the fixed and obligatory rules of the International style during the 1930s was a notable feature of both workers’ residences and other private houses. Public events were frequent and well attended. Tel Aviv’s inhabitants were politically active on both the national and municipal levels. They participated in national campaigns to encourage the purchase of Yishuv-made products and for the exclusive use of the Hebrew language. Among workers, the subculture was tightly organized. And Tel Avivians wrote thousands of letters to the municipality, with many of these expressing concern about issues that did not directly affect them, their families, or their homes. Even the warm climate, which was the cause of or excuse for spending a great deal of time outside, reinforced collectivist activity and identity. Inhabitants were not mobilized entirely to act only for greater causes, but neither did they retreat into an alienated, atomistic lifestyle. The result was a delicate balance between individual freedom of expression and public involvement.4

Mayor Dizengoff attributed Tel Aviv’s success to its integration of materialism and idealism. He explained that, unlike Jews in the rest of the world who worked only for profit, in the Yishuv, Tel Aviv included, every Jew, old-timer or new immigrant,

joins his goal of being built in the Land with the entire nation’s goal of being built in the Land, and when the individual builds a home, plants an orange grove, founds a factory, or works to maintain them, he feels that he is working for himself, for his children after him, and for the entire nation. Here even the most typical materialists must be idealists, because their fate is bound up with the fate of the entire nation, and their soul is tied to that of the people.5

Even if Dizengoff was writing about the Tel Aviv he wanted to see before him, not the Tel Aviv he actually saw, his words demonstrate a desire to achieve collectivist and individualist goals simultaneously.

If collectivism was central to the mayor’s vision for Tel Aviv, why was the city often depicted as an individualist society in the extreme? Perhaps the aspiration to live “normal” lives, lives of individual satisfaction and fulfillment, was interpreted as a betrayal of the national ideal. Since Tel Avivians were not willing to utterly subordinate themselves to the dictates of
the national collective, outsiders could mistakenly read their refusal as a total lack of collectivist commitment. The independent urban identity that developed in the city and that was promoted by its leaders was sometimes seen as a dangerous disengagement from the rest of the Yishuv and its problems. While Tel Avivians sought and found personal fulfillment and enjoyment in the consumer culture and in entertainment and leisure activities, in doing so, they gave the city a bad reputation for frivolity and hedonism. However, personal enjoyment did not keep many Tel Avivians from being active in public life in a wide variety of collectivist frameworks. On the contrary, the city’s autonomy served as a stage for a fascinating experiment in independent public involvement supported by the hegemonic pioneering ethos, which encouraged people to act for the public good in all areas, including in the urban context.6

The culture that took form in Tel Aviv during the 1920s and 1930s was sufficiently attractive to convince 40 percent of the Jewish immigrants who arrived in Palestine during this period to settle in the city. But the hegemonic Zionist ethos continued to direct praise toward the agricultural settlements, and Tel Aviv continued to take barbs for the city it was, and for being a city at all. Urban life was portrayed as an abandonment of agricultural pioneering values. Tel Aviv in particular was cast by some observers as a facsimile of the ugly provincial towns of the Diaspora and as a hotbed of parasites and pleasure-seekers. During the mid-1930s, when its economy prospered and its consumer culture flourished, the feeling that it was betraying the agricultural ideal grew even sharper.7

Boosters responded to these volleys with self-justifying attempts to improve the city’s image.8 Its inhabitants paid the pioneering ideal its due by integrating agricultural motifs into their public events and by singing pastoral songs. Nahum Sokolov, the prominent journalist, writer, and Zionist leader, praised Tel Aviv but added that its greatness depended on the agricultural settlements around it. Dizengoff likewise argued that in order to implant an attraction to farming life in the hearts of new immigrants, they should be educated to love the soil of the Land. But he opposed denigration of Tel Aviv and attributed such attitudes to the envy that the city’s rapid development elicited. The time had come, he said, “to stop this incessant wallowing in the negative aspects of Tel Aviv and to devote more attention to the positive, constructive aspects of this wonderful and special city.”9

In contrast with the denunciations, residents, writers, and officials argued that Tel Aviv was the most important urban entity created by the Zi-
onist enterprise, a huge success, a city in which a Jew could feel truly free. Tel Aviv, they said, was of great importance to the nation as the locus for distribution of the Yishuv’s products, as the principal consumer of the produce grown by Zionist farms, and as a flourishing bastion of free enterprise. Defenders depicted Tel Avivians as “doing deeds and building the land no less than Jerusalem’s office workers and the tillers of the soil in the [Jezreel] Valley — each one in his own way.”

Ceremonies and high culture helped nurture a collective local memory. Even though the city was built rapidly before the very eyes of its inhabitants, and even though many of its founders still lived there in the 1920s and 1930s, its origins seemed to lie in a misty, mythical past. Tel Aviv’s founders were described as Vikings who crossed the sea to build a city on the sands. Just thirty years after its establishment, its past was spoken of as having had many historical phases: “From a Jaffa suburb to a distinct neighborhood, from neighborhood to town, from town to city, until it became the largest city in the Land of Israel.” Tel Aviv grew and changed so rapidly that it seems to have compensated for its lack of a long history by creating a densely packed historical memory to the point of producing an almost instant nostalgia. In the 1920s, people harked back wistfully to prewar “Little Tel Aviv,” while in the 1930s they already missed the Tel Aviv of the 1920s, even the times of economic crisis. In general, Israeli nostalgia has focused on the rural and agricultural sector, but in Mandate era Tel Aviv one can find the first glimmerings of an urban nostalgia that has become more pronounced in recent years.

Fostering historical consciousness and local nostalgia was part of the reflexive nature of Tel Aviv’s culture. The city’s leaders and inhabitants worked to sculpt and refine its image incessantly by staging public ceremonies. This constant attention to the city itself and its way of life was reinforced by its position as a cultural center. Writers, poets, and artists produced works depicting the city. As headquarters of the Hebrew press, the city was covered much more heavily and extensively than other parts of the country. During the 1920s, a British official was heard to say that newspaper reports about Tel Aviv, like those of all new cities, were always exaggerated, for better or for worse.

The “marketing” of a place has practical value because it can attract new inhabitants, tourists, and investors. Given this reality, Tel Aviv’s leaders were much concerned with the impression the city made on visitors. Furthermore, from the beginning of the 1920s, the city was seen as a symbol
of Zionist settlement throughout the country and among Zionists around the world, and its leaders wanted it to look to visitors like “a well-ordered city, not like a neglected little town.” The attempt to present its best face to outsiders could be seen in the formal receptions and public events, but internal issues and events also reflected such efforts. The municipal newsletter frequently published letters and essays that portrayed “Tel Aviv in the eyes of outsiders.” The need to justify itself against the frequent criticism it received may well have encouraged this constant quest to shore up its image, along with its provincial fear of what the neighbors might say. But Tel Aviv’s reflexivity was also directed internally, and it affected the daily conduct of its residents. Life in Tel Aviv was not limited to mere existence, and its inhabitants did not regard the city as simply a geographic and administrative entity. Leaders and common people alike nurtured a specific urban consciousness, continuously contemplating and discussing the city’s character and image.

Tel Avivians were depicted as people seeking serenity, comfort, and freedom. “Tel Aviv is not just the Land of Israel; Tel Aviv is life itself,” Shalom Asch wrote, “and its residents fulfill not only the precept of settling the land, but also the precept of life.” But residents were not satisfied with just living in their city, and they often felt the need to conceptualize Tel Aviv by comparing it to other places — Paris, Berlin, Odessa, or New York. Even if they were successful in normalizing their lives in the new city, their aspiration to be like another place, and their self-consciousness, demonstrates an absence of the matter-of-fact normalcy they wished to achieve. Such comparisons also reveal the constant tension between Tel Aviv’s reality and its portrayals. Indeed, the culture that developed in the city during the 1920s and 1930s included ways of life and systems of actual social behavior alike, as well as an impatient and vital need to think and talk about these matters. Even today, after the city’s celebration of its centennial, the story of the first Hebrew city continues to be a tale of two cities — Tel Aviv as it is, and Tel Aviv as it aspires to be.

Back in 1933, Marcia Gitlin concluded her impressions of Tel Aviv as follows:

That is Tel Aviv as I saw it—an unbeautiful body with a good and human soul struggling for expression. I hope the body one day will be largely rebuilt and beautified. I hope that the soul will never cease to struggle but always look to something greater, something finer. I hope it
will be given me to see Tel Aviv fifty years hence, but how much better it would have been to have been able to see it five hundred years from now, no more glaringly new but already old, with an oldness and tradition of its own. I envy the generations to come— but perhaps, on second thought, I do not. I believe after all with Stevenson, that “to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.” I have seen Tel Aviv hopefully out on its journey; those who will see it arrive will never have known the pain, which is also the pleasure, of seeing it grow.15
NOTES

For brevity, the following abbreviations have been used throughout the notes when referencing archives and collections.

BHA  Bialik House Archive
CZA  Central Zionist Archive
ERC  Eliasaf Robinson Tel Aviv Collection, Stanford University
JIA  Jabotinsky Institute Archive
JC  Jerusalem Cinematheque
JNFPA  Jewish National Fund Photo Archive
LI  Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research
PC  Poster Collection in the Manuscript Department of the National Library
SA  Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archives, The Hebrew University
TAA  Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipal Historical Archive

Introduction

1. TAA, 4/3563a: Gitlin’s “impressions,” 1933. Marcia Gitlin, who immigrated to Palestine in the late 1940s, wrote the history of Zionism in South Africa—Gitlin (1950). I would like to thank Milton Shain and Veronica Belling of the Kaplan Centre, as well as Louise Bethlehem, for these details.

2. Regev (1984). Saidman and Kark (2009). Berger (1998), 101. The name has a biblical source as well—the prophet Ezekiel uses it metaphorically to refer to the reborn Jewish nation. However, according to legend, Tel Aviv’s founders were aware only of the modern reference when they chose the name.


Notes to Pages 4–11


Chapter One: Portrait of a City

6. Haaretz, August 10, 1921.
15. Montgomery (1938), 87.
18. Yedi'ot 'iriyat tel aviv (1933), 263. TAA photo collection: 1930s Postcards.
Also see Marom (2009), 141–153.
23. Tolkowsky (1924), 176.
27. TAA, 4/2641: letter from 1928.
29. Dizengoff (1934), 3. And see Gonen (2003), 481.
32. TAA, 4/3563a: Gitlin’s “impressions,” 1933.
35. TAA, 4/284a: letter from 1929.
37. TAA, 4/284a: letters from 1926–1930.
38. TAA, 4/3627: letter from 1929.
39. TAA, 4/249a: letters from 1933.
Photos in Carmiel (2004), 58.
42. TAA, 2/89c: letter from 1923. TAA, 4/248b: letters from 1929 and 1930.
43. Strauss-Mochenson (1939), 79.
Haaretz, July 20, 1934.
TAA, 4/335a: letter from 1931.
49. TAA, 4/1320: letter from 1935.
59. TAA, 4/2830: notice from 1933.
60. TAA, 4/1435: letter from 1933.
Notes to Pages 28–34


64. TAA, 2/64c: letter from 1922. TAA, 2/63a: letters from 1922–1924. Tesha ba’erev, April 1, 1937. Avidar Tchernovitz (2003), 148.


66. TAA, 4/1345: letters from 1931 and 1932.


70. TAA, 4/334b: letter from 1928.

71. TAA, 4/335c: letter from 1936.


75. TAA, 4/3563a: Gitlin’s “impressions,” 1933. Montgomery (1938), 85.

76. Hashomer hatza’ir, November 1, 1936. Also see Helman (2002).


82. TAA, 4/1419: correspondence from 1934.

84. TAA, 4/3452: letter from 1928. TAA, 4/2830: notice from 1933.
87. Vardi (1929), 65.
90. Dizengoff (1934), 2.
91. Li, IV-250-72-1-1240: protocol from 1936.
102. Gibbons (1936), 82.
104. Duff (1936), 194.
105. *Yedi‘ot iriyat tel aviv* (1933), 86.
108. Gibbons (1936), 84.
110. Vardi (1929), 79.
111. Vardi (1929), 80–81.
114. Bolitho (1933), 101.
Chapter Two: Public Events

17. TAA, 4/3456: correspondence from 1937. TAA, P1406, P1407, P1409: photos from the 1930s.
27. Hapoel hatza'ir, March 18, 1932.
29. PC, V2750: menu from 1929.
30. JIA, 70/7/1a: Zeev Jabotinsky, “Tel Aviv’s Exhibition,” 1929.
32. TAA, 2/39a: letter from 1922.
33. Do'ar ha'ayom, April 6, 1924. Davar, May 2, 1926.
36. Hazit ha'am, April 1, 1932. Shavit and Biger (2001), 140.
41. The Zionist Congress founded the JNF in late 1901 to raise funds for purchasing land in Palestine, and soon its bureaus became involved in a wide range of Zionist cultural, educational, and promotional activities.
44. TAA, 4/1764a: notice from 1933. Also see Chazan (2009), 214–215.


51. *Haaretz*, March 1, 1926.

52. Vardi (1929), 76–77.


Also see Penslar (2007), 178.


57. CZA, 619/1, 619/3: photos from 1934. TAA, 4/3221: list of participants from 1935.


60. For different interpretations of Tel Aviv’s Purim, see Arieh-Sapir (2003) and Shoham (2009).


64. Abrahams (1982), 163, 171, 176.


66. TAA, 4/3563a: Gitlin’s “impressions,” 1933.

67. TAA, 4/298a: letters from 1935.


69. Fleg (1933), 133. SA, DTVA139B, VTDA308, VTDA011: “Ideal Travel Talks,” “Tel Aviv,” “The Land of Promise.”
Notes to Pages 70–82

70. Quotation from Montgomery (1938), 89–91. Also see Landa (1932), 22.
72. TAA, 3′/55a: letter from 1935.
75. TAA, 8/780: letters from 1934 and 1935.
80. Yedi′ot ′iriyat ′el aviv (1933), 363. Yedi′ot ′iriyat ′el aviv (1937), 53. TAA, 8/715: letter from 1923. TAA, 4/23r: letter from 1933.

Chapter Three: Tel Aviv’s Consumer Culture

8. Hapo’el hatza’ir, January 12, 1923, August 15, 1924.
11. TAA, 9/1, 9/2: decisions from 1925 and 1935.
Also see Walsh (1999).
14. Jewish Agency (1941), 18, 22.


17. TAA, 4/3563a: Gitlin’s “impressions,” 1933.


24. On different contemporaneous functions of shops and markets, see Welch (2005), 162–163.


28. TAA, 4/345a: letter from 1933.


37. Haaretz, January 5, 1923. Haaretz, July 31, 1923, June 8, 1926, June


42. Jhally (2009), 420–421.


44. *Davar*, April 8, 1927.


57. For example, see Peled (2002), 110–112.

Chapter Four: Entertainment and Leisure

8. TAA, 4/3457: amusement tax prices, 1937.


23. Montgomery (1938), 93–94.


42. Brawer (1936), 314.

Chapter 5: Subcultures in the First Hebrew City
1. Kalno’a, November 20, 1931.
9. Hashomer hatza’ir, November 1, 1936.
12. Tesha ba’erev, August 12, 1937.


27. TAA, 2/90c: order from 1924. TAA, 4/3455: letter from 1935.


43. Ha’apael hatza’ir, August 3, 1934. Iton meychad, 10 Av Tarzach (1938).
55. CZA, 15236, 15292: photos from the 1920s and 1930s. Yahav (2003).
56. Nemirovsky and Proiss (1933), 211.
Conclusion

2. Bernstein (2008), 300.
5. Yedi’ot ‘iriyat tel aviv (1934), 223.
15. TAA, 4/3563a: Gitlin’s “impressions,” 1933.
REFERENCES

Newspapers, Bulletins, and Periodicals

Alon po'alei ha'etz
Binyan vecharoshet
Davar
Do'ar hayom
Haaretz
Habinyan bamizrach hakarov
Habitzron
Hahed
Haishah
Hamachar
Ha'oleh
Hapo'el hatza'ir
Hashomer hatza'ir
Hatzofeh
Hayishuv
Hazit ha'am
Hed ha'am
Hed hagan
Hed hasapar
Hedim
Iton meyuchad
Kalno'a
Krovetz lepurim
Ktuvim
Kuntras
Moreh derekh lechagigot purim veha'adloyada
Palestine and Middle East Tourist Annual
Palestine and Near East Magazine
Palestine Post
Reshimot: mo'etzet po'alei tel aviv yafu
Tesha ba'erev
Yedi'ot 'iriyat tel aviv
Yedi'ot tel aviv
Books, Articles, and Dissertations


Agudat Shoharei Hauniversitah Ha'ivrit Beeretz Yisrael (1935). Divrei Bialik al hauniversitah ha'ivrit (Jerusalem: Azriel).


Arlosoroff, Haim (1927). “Hasotzialiyut umilchemet hama’amadot bamezetziut haeretz-yisraelit.” Ve’idat ha’essrim shel “hapo’el hatza’ir” befetach tikvah (Tel Aviv: Hapo’el Hatza’ir Central Committee), 133–140.


Bender, Thomas, and Carl E. Schorske, eds. (1994). Budapest and New York:
References


References

Brawer, Avraham Yaakov (1928). *Ha'aretz: sefer liyedi'at eterz yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Dvir).


References


Dizengoff, Meir (1934). ‘Al tel aviv ve’orchot chayehah (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Municipality).


Druyanov, Alter, ed. (1936). *Sefer tel aviv* (Tel Aviv: Va’adat sefer Tel Aviv).


Fishman, Ada (1929). *Tenu’at hapo’iel be’eretz yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Hapo’el Hatza’ir).


References


——— (1985). “Habassis ha’ideologi legishatot shel tenu’at ha’avadah klapai
References

193


References


Herman, Hugo (1936). Eretz yisrael kayom: orot utzelalim (Tel Aviv: Mitzpeh).


Histadrut klalit shel ha’ovdim ha’ivrim be’eretz yisrael (1933). Hako’operatzyah hayatzranit vehasherutit shel ha’ovdim be’eretz yisrael (Tel Aviv: Histadrut Klalit).


Horowitz, David (1944). Hakalkalah ha’eretz yisraelit behitpatchutah (Tel Aviv: Bialik Institute).


References


Karni, Israel (1935). *Hachotrim tachat kiyum sfatenu!* (Tel Aviv: Igud lehashlatat ha’ivrit).

References

Levant Fair Committee (1932). *Yarid hamizrach, katalog* (Tel Aviv: Levant Fair Committee).
Magen David Adom (1936). *Seder nezikin: Kovetz lemeni'at mikrei-asson badrakhim uba'avodah ba'aretz* (Tel Aviv: Friedman).


References


Mischar veta’assiyah (1932). Mezonoteiah shel tel aviv (Tel Aviv: Mischar veta’assiyah).


Nemirovsky, Mordechai, and Walter Proiss (1932). Hamatzav hakalkali be’eretz yisrael lereshit tarzab (Tel Aviv: Davar).

——— (1933). Hamatzav hakalkali be’eretz yisrael losef shnat tarzag (Tel Aviv: Davar).


Norman, Yaacov (1929). Le’an? (Tel Aviv: Sh. Jolzhandler).


Rabinovich, Yaacov (1935). Hassagot: ma’amirim ureshimot (Tel Aviv: Mitzpeh).


Rubenstein, Ben-Zion (1924). “Hatenu’ah hativ’it shel ha’ukhluusin hayehudim
betel aviv veyafo bishnat tarpad.” In Sefer hashanah shel eretz yisrael (tarpad-tarpah), edited by Avraham Zifroni, Alexander Ziskind Rabinovich, and David Shimonovich (Tel Aviv: The Hebrew Writers Association), 320–329.


References

References


Soskin, Abraham (1926). Album tel aviv (Tel Aviv: Modan).


Straus-Mochenson, Nellie (1939). Our Palestine (Tel-Aviv: s.n.).


Tel Aviv Municipality (1926). Tel aviv leor hamissparim (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Municipality).

——— (1926B). Lezekher ha’avarat atzmot manhigenu hagadol Dr. Max Nordau zal letel aviv (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Municipality).

——— (1935). Chukei ezer lishmirat hanikayon (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Municipality).

——— (1967). Hitpatchut ha’ta’assiyah veheamel’akhah betel aviv–yafo (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Municipality).


Tnuva (1937). Le’akeret habayit (Tel Aviv: Yair).


Vannini, Phillip (2009). “Material Culture Studies and the Sociology and

Vardi, Aharon, ed. (1929). Ir hapla’ot: divrei sofrim umedina’im al Tel Aviv—leyovel ha’essrim (Tel Aviv: Lema’an Hasefer).


Weissman, David (1923). Ha’ir umekomah bevinyan ha’aretz (Tel Aviv: The United Neighborhoods Committee).


References


Yodfat, Arieh (1969). Shishim shnot hitpatchutah shel tel aviv (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Municipality).

Zabresky, Abraham (1932). Hako’operatzyah, ekronoteiah veheissegeiah (Tel Aviv: Chevrah).


Chartier, Roger, 10
children and cinema, 118
Christian holidays, 60
cigarettes, 94
cinema, 115–20; and children, 118
circuses, 107
city, as document, 9–10
cleanliness: ideal of, 100; and squalor, 25–30
climate, 15–16, 52, 97–99, 111, 135, 155, 157, 159; moral, 77
Committee to Boycott German Products, 117
Comrades’ Court, 148, 152
congress of banking, 18
Confederation of British Industry, 51, 53
consumer culture, 93; and materialism, 102; use of term, 77
consumerism: and Sabbath, 71; as target of criticism, 90–91
consumer products, and Purim, 65–66
consumption: and moral sensibilities, 89; symbolic importance of, 78
cosmetics, and youth, 98–99
cultural categorization, as social institution, 7
cultural history, 6
culture: alternative, 132; anthropological definition of, 8; of cafés, 124–25; conceptualization of, 4–7; of consumption, 77–78; and ethnicities, 135–39; historians of, 6; ruling, 132; summary of, 155–63; urban, of Polish immigrants, 134; victory over nature, 98
dance, 108–9
Davar (newspaper), 145
department stores, 81
desert, 58, 101. See also climate
Dizengoff, Meir (mayor), 3, 23–24, 159–60; and animals, 34; and celebrations, 49; and closing times, 125; and consumerism, 91; and fairs, 52, 55; funeral of, 48; and Hitler controversy, 63; and Maccabiah games, 56; and medal from King of Romania, 51; and noise, 30; and Oneg Shabbat, 74; and Purim, 66; and Sabbath, 73; and sojourners, 142; and Tel Aviv as Hollywood, 119; and wantonness, 38; and Yiddish cinema, 33; and youth, 36–37
Dizengoff Street, 22
dogs, 34–35
dress, 36, 49, 52, 68, 96, 119, 124, 144; and ethnicities, 135–36, 139; and workers’ subculture, 150–54. See also bathing; bathing suits; pants, short
dressing rooms, 112–14
drinking habits, 127
drunkeness, and sexual licentiousness, 127
dysentery, 27
Eclectic style, 11–14; abandonment of, 15–16; European current in, 13–14; and Internationalism, 15–17; Oriental current in, 12–13
economic capacity of consumers, 102–3
economic constraints, of workers, 153–54
economic development, 2
Eden Cinema, 115
Eisenstadt, Shmuel, 135, 139
electric lighting, 22–23
entertainment, 105–20; restaurant as, 121
entertainment tax, 107
Esther, Book of, 61
ethnic diversity, 135
ethnic groups, 133–42
ethnicities, characteristics of, 137–40
Eurocentrism and Zionism, 13
exhibitions, 51–58
exiles, ingathering of, 133–42
fairs, 51–58, 109
filmmakers, 119
Fleg, Edmond, 41
funerals, 47–48
gardening, 22–25
Geddes, Sir Patrick, 19
Gellner, Ernest, 5
George V, King of England, silver jubilee of, 50
George VI, King of England, coronation of, 50–51
German (language), 33, 117, 126
German films, prohibition of, 117
German Jews, and oppression, 63.
   See also ethnic groups; ethnicities; immigrant groups
German Templar sect, 2
Gitlin, Marcia, 1, 20, 43–44, 67, 79, 83, 105, 107, 162–63, 165n1
Glickson, Moshe, 105
golden mean of Sabbath observance, 73
goods, symbolic value of, 78
governance, 2–4
Great Synagogue, 38, 47, 59, 68; construction of, and ethnicities, 140–41
Gropius, Walter, 15
Gruenbaum, Yitzhak, 36
Haman, 60–61, 63
Ha-Mashbir (cooperative), 148
Hanukkah, 59–60
Ha-Po’el, 55, 70, 108, 147
health, 99
heat, 11, 21, 27, 68, 79, 97–99, 107, 112, 135, 157. See also climate
Hebrew (language), 31–33
Hebrew Language Defenders’ Battalion, 32, 127
hedonism, 91–92; and ideology, 96
hedonistic ethos vs. pioneering ideal, 89–92
Hellenists, 69
Hershkowitz, David, 13
Herzl, Theodor, 1, 101
Herzliya High School, 72
Hibat Tzion, 47
Histadrut (General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel), 58, 143, 146–47; age of members, 149–50; cultural committee of, 145; members’ salaries, 148
Histadrut Day (holiday), 146
Histadrut ethics, 148
Hitler, Adolf, 63
Hobsbawm, Eric, 46
holidays: and advertising, 94; Christian, 60; Histadrut Day, 146; Jewish, 58–60 (See also names of holidays)
Horowitz, David, 144
hot springs, 110
house numbering, 19
housewives, 17, 100–101; and ladies, 101
humidity, 27, 98, 107
hygienic standards, 27
images: of Tel Aviv, 39–44; youthful, 40
immigrant groups, 133–42
impressions, subjective, 39
incivility, 36
informality, 36
International style, 14–16, 100, 147; cafés, 126; and Eclecticism, 15–17
Jabotinsky, Zeev (Vladimir), 55, 95–96
Jaffa, 10, 27, 84, 86, 114, 125, 127–28; as Arab city, 1; exoticism of, 41–42; and
Index

illiteracy, 137; Jewish neighborhoods in, 1–2, 17; Tel Aviv as suburb of, 12, 34, 79

Jewish Chronicle (South Africa), 1

Jewish holidays, 58–60. See also names of individual holidays

Jewish immigration, 2

Jewish National Fund (JNF), 58–59, 172n41; carnival committee, 65

Jewish peddlers. See peddlers; peddling

Kesari, Uri, 107

Kook, Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen, 113

kosher laws, and trade fairs, 55

Land of Israel and Near East Fair, 51

Land of Israel Association of Advertising Agencies, 93

landsmanschaften, 141

language, 31–33

Le Corbusier, 14–15

leisure, 120–29; and Sabbath, 71

leisure culture, importance of, 106

Levant Fairs, 51–55, 109

Lieber chocolate company, 94

Maccabees, 59–60

Maccabi, 56–58, 70, 74, 108, 147

Maccabiah games, 54, 56–58

Maccabi Stadium, 59

malaria, 27

Mardi Gras, 61

marketplaces vs. stores, 81

markets, 83–86

May Day, 56, 145–46, 149

Merchants Association, 81; photography contest, 108

Meshel, Avigdor, 24–25

Mizrahi ethnicity, 136

Mizrahi Jews. See ethnic groups; ethnicities; immigrant groups

modernist style, 11, 14–16, 23, 51–52, 157

Montgomery, Elizabeth, 112–13

motor vehicles, 19

municipality of Tel Aviv, 2, 3, 9–10, 17–20, 24–25, 30, 47, 55, 109, 116, 128, 137, 142, 157, 159; administration, 3, 27, 42, 73; architectural style, 13, 158; arena, 91; autonomy, 35; budget, 24, 62–63; bylaws, 74; censorship board, 117; and commerce, 79, 81–84, 86, 89, 123; court, 3, 25; and culture, 107, 110, 113, 145; and development, 110–11; and dress, 36–37, 114; education department, 117; elections, 3, 155; festivities committee, 62; gardening department, 24–25; health authority, 81; and Hebrew language, 31, 127; and holidays, 54, 56, 60, 62, 65–66; leaders, 49, 74; licenses, 17, 81, 86; museum, 48; newsletter, 162; officials, 13, 15, 18, 20, 24, 31, 42, 72, 88, 106, 114–15, 122, 127; ordinances, 24–25, 34–35, 71, 111–14, 118, 123, 127; parks, 24; policy, 25, 31; power grid, 22–23, 49; publicity, 49, 54, 62; roads and streets, 18, 31, 50; Sabbath regulations, 70–71, 73–74; sanitation department, 25, 28–29, 34, 50, 84; special events, 46, 48–49, 56, 59, 65, 92, 110, 142; synagogue, 140–41; veterinary service, 34; zoo, 108. See also police

municipal status of Tel Aviv, 2–3

national-spiritual observance of Sabbath, 71

neoclassical style, 12

neogothic style, 12

neon signs, 23

New Year, Gregorian, 60

night life, 106–9

noise, 30–31
Index 211

Nordau, Max, death of, 47–48
nutrition, 149

Oneg Shabbat, 72
Oriental style, 12

Palestine and Near East Exhibition (1929), 54
Palestine Electric Company, 22
pants, short (on women), 38, 91
parades, 47
parks, 24
peddlers, 30, 49, 68, 78, 83–84, 86–89, 107, 139, 155; and shopkeepers, 88
peddling, as trademark Jewish profession, 86
Pesach, 58, 145
Petah Tikva, 63
photography, 107–8
Pinsker, Leon, internment of, 47
pioneering ethos, and advertising, 93–94
pioneering ideal: vs. hedonistic ethos, 89–92; Zionist, 90–91
plage, beach as, 111
Polish Jews. See ethnic groups; ethnicities; immigrant groups
politicization and sports events, 56
politics, 3
poverty, and architecture, 17–18
processions, 47
progress, as part of Zionist vision, 101
promenade, 74; as weekend recreation, 68–70
Purim, 60–67; and consumer products, 65–66; festivities, 54; tourism and, 64
Purim Carnival, 60–67
Queen Esther beauty competition, 60, 92, 132
rabbis, 35, 38, 48, 55, 60, 71–73, 113, 121, 127, 140
rabies, 34
rats, 34
Ravitz, Shlomo, 47, 72–73
receptions, 48–51; honorees of, 49; participation in, 48–50
religious observance of Sabbath, 71
restaurant and hotel workers union, 126
restaurants, 120–29
roads, 18–22
Rokach, Israel, 22, 47, 86–88
Russian Orthodox architectural style, 13
Sabbath: and laws of supply and demand, 74; observance of, 70–71, 73–74; shofar and, 68
Sabbath Promenade, 67–75
Sabbath Watch, 71–72, 74
Salameh, 2
Samuel, Herbert, and film censorship, 117
sanitation department, 25
Sarona, 2
Schatz, Boris, 12–13
seders, public, 58
Segal café, 127
Sephardim: and Great Synagogue, 140; as powerless proletariat, 144.
See also ethnic groups; ethnicities; immigrant groups
sewage system, municipal, 28–29
sexual licentiousness, and drunkenness, 127
Shapira, Avraham, 63
Shavuot, 58–60, 145
Sheleg Ha-Levanon café, 123–24
Shertok, Moshe, 52
shofar, and Sabbath, 68
shopkeepers, 38, 49, 79, 81–83, 86, 88, 119, 148; and peddlers, 88. See also peddlers
Shulamit Music Conservatory, 72
sidewalks, 18–22
Small Business Association, 121
smoking, 37–38
social customs, importance of, 5
social function of restaurants, 122
sojourners, 141–42
Sokolov, Nahum, 40, 160
sports clubs, 108
squalor and cleanliness, 25–30
stench, 20, 28–29
storekeepers, 83
stores, 78–83
Straus-Mochenson, Nellie, 21, 41
street lighting, 22–25
street naming, 31–32
street signs, 22–25
subcultures, 131–54; use of term, 132
Sumil, 2
sun exposure, risks of, 112–13
supply and demand, laws of, and Sabbath observation, 74
swimming. See bathing; bathing suits
synagogues, 31, 38, 47, 51, 59, 68–69, 131, 140–141. See also Great Synagogue

technology, as part of Zionist vision, 101
tel Aviv Peddlers Association, 89
tel Aviv Workers’ Council: cultural committee of, 145
territorial growth of Tel Aviv, 2
tip system, 126
Tnuva, 94
tourism: and beaches, 110–11; and Purim, 64

traditions and ceremonies, 45–46
traffic, 18–22; consequences of, 20–21
Trask gang, 62
tuberculosis, 27
Tu Bi-Shevat, 58
Tylor, Edward Burnett, 4
typhus, 27

ultrareligious Jews, as powerless proletariat, 144
Union of Hebrew Teachers, 58–59
urban construction committee, 81
urban culture, 4, 9, 144; Polish, 134
urban soundscape, 30–33
urban village, 132
Uziel, Ben-Zion Meir Hai, 113, 140

veterinary service, municipal, 34
vice, 128

Waiters’ Club, 126
Western customs, imposition of, 42
Williams, Raymond, 5
Women’s International Zionist Organization (WIZO), 136
workers’ housing, 147–48
workers’ kitchens, 149
worker subculture, 143–54
World War I, 1–2, 22; as turning point, 9
World War II, as turning point, 9

yekkes, 126, 134–35; use of term, 33
Yemenite Jews. See ethnic groups; ethnicities; immigrant groups
Yemenite Union, 141–42
Yiddish, 32–33
Yishuv, 2, 4; and cuisine, 136; cultural center of, 105; filmmakers, 119; heterogeneity in, 133; housewife’s duty in, 100; and incivility, 36; labor movement, 146; and pioneering
ideal, 90–91; and political polarization, 56; and Purim, 61, 63; and Sabbath observation, 70; and trade, 79; unity of, 47; as voluntary society, 46

youth: and cosmetics, 98–99; glorification of, 98

Zionism, 31, 46, 55–56, 75, 90–91, 95–96, 99, 101, 142, 160; anthem, 50–51, 56, 59; and cinema, 120; and Eurocentrism, 13; and holidays, 58–60; institutions, 137, 145, 147

Zionist Congress, 172n41

Zionist movement, 3, 47, 51, 55, 59, 66, 75, 127, 135–136

Zionists, 3, 21, 24, 36, 40, 47, 59, 72, 90, 95, 123, 133, 148, 157, 160, 162. See also names of individuals

Zionist settlement, 1, 12, 22, 40, 52, 56, 78, 79, 89–92, 96, 101, 161–62

zoo, 108