



These are the lines that you really travel on Yehuda Amichai

Tel Aviv – Sand, Sea, & the Search for Identity

Introduction & Background

[Tel Aviv](#) is at first glance a city like all other cities. It has neither the ancient historical roots of neighboring [Arab Jaffa](#) nor the expansive wings of holiness granted to [Jerusalem](#). Already in Tel Aviv's infancy, [Nathan Alterman](#) (1910-1970) gave voice to the sense that the city lacked presence, depth, roots; but at the same time, he insisted that Tel Aviv had a certain, ineffable *je ne sais quoi*

Nevertheless She Has a Certain Something Nathan Alterman

The folks of Jerusalem say:
Tel Aviv is nothing special
Professors are few and far between there
And there are no prophets at all.

She doesn't have even a pinch of history.
No gravity. No weight.
It quite true, Sir and Madame,
No, she has nothing ... nothing ... yet still...

בכל זאת יש בה משהו נתן אלתרמן

אומרים אנשי ירושלים:
כן, תל אביב, זה סתם גלגל...
אין פרופסורים בה כזית
ונביאים בה אין בכלל.

היסטוריה אין לה אף כזרת.
אין רצינות בה. אין משקל.
נכון מאוד, אדון וגברת,
לא, אין בה כלום... לא כלום... אבל...

From the urban poverty of its southern edges to the high-rise wealth slouching towards Herzliya, much of the city is a graying tumble of cubicles and an elongated grid of boulevards and streets jammed between the Mediterranean and the Ayalon freeway. Visitors comment that Tel Aviv is really no different than any other international city, a center for finance and journalism, a source of smog and gridlock. Tel Aviv's inhabitants, like the residents of cities like New York, Paris, and London, curse the legendary lack of parking spaces; while simultaneously blessing the [Bauhaus 'White City'](#) as a new *axis mundi*, as their undisputed center of the world.



Makōm דִּקּוּם
Renewing Israel Engagement
A Jewish Communities / Jewish Agency Network

Telling Israel explores the hidden layers of Israeli place and the challenges they pose to who we are and who we want to be as Jews.

These are the lines that you really travel on Yehuda Amichai

From its very [beginnings as a modern city](#), Tel Aviv was both in search of roots, of gravity, of meaning and also reveled in the self-perception that the city had emerged from the sea and sand, and was free of the weight of history and the onus of sanctity. [Moshe Shamir](#)'s (1921-2004) Hebrew classic 'With His Own Hands' the story of the penultimate sabra, opened with the words, echoing the Hebrew myth of Tel Aviv – 'Alik was born from the sea.' The [famous photograph of Tel Aviv's founders](#) gathered on the empty beach to divvy up plots for development reflects the same urge. For the Zionist movement, the founding and development of the first Hebrew city was an act of creation *ex nihilo*, an attempt to give the Jews a new beginning with a new story against a new-old backdrop. The very name of the city – *Tel Aviv* – pointed to the desire to build not only a home but also a new Hebrew golden age. [Nahum Sokolow](#) (1859-1936), leading Zionist activist and journalist, translated [Theodor Herzl](#)'s (1860-1904) utopian novel '[Old-New Land](#)' describing the future '[State of the Jews](#)' as Tel Aviv (In Sokolow's word's – "A ruined place blessed by spring.") It was this name with its images of old and new, of rebirth and hope that was chosen for the fledgling city in 1910.

Tel Aviv was also imagined, for better or for worse, in opposition to Jerusalem with its historical solidity and spiritual authority. Writing that praised the city, as well as writing that maligned it, accepted the essential dichotomies distinguishing Tel Aviv, ``the first Hebrew city" from Jerusalem, distinctions at the center of larger debates over the cultural and political identity of, initially, the Jews as a nation and eventually, the State of Israel. Tel Aviv, for its development as a cultural center and the representation of this evolution in society at large, remains a synecdoche for the nation, and for Israel's complex and changing relation to both the local landscape and to the past.

From "**The Vicarious Landscape of Memory in Tel Aviv Poetry.**" **Barbara Mann**. Prooftexts, 21.3, (Winter 2001), 350-378

'The popular Tel Aviv slogan – 'Ir l'lo Hafsaka' (עיר ללא הפסקה) – 'A City that Never Sleeps.' is a description of the dizzying energy of urban life. The slogan may also reflect Tel Aviv as part of the Zionist movement's desire to create a city – as opposed



Telling Israel explores the hidden layers of Israeli place and the challenges they pose to who we are and who we want to be as Jews.

These are the lines that you really travel on Yehuda Amichai

to Jerusalem – not grounded in the need to constantly reflect on the obligations of memory – but rather grounded in the aspiration to foster a Jewishness that rejected the Jews 'as a nation apart' and sought to promote a Hebrew identity – 'like all the nations' – an identity of connection to place, to language, that could celebrate sun and beach unfettered by self consciousness and unease of the Jew as perennial outsider.

The image of Tel Aviv was and remains intimately connected with the image of Jerusalem. The two cities – almost regardless of their shared realities – have become mythic mirror images, two reflections of Israel's complicated realities, and of its dreams, and fears towards tomorrow.

Theodore Herzl is Alive and Well and Living in Tel Aviv

Graffiti photographed outside of Dizengoff Center (December 2008)





Telling Israel explores the hidden layers of Israeli place and the challenges they pose to who we are and who we want to be as Jews.

These are the lines that you really travel on Yehuda Amichai

Tel Aviv – Sand, Sea, & the Search for Identity Text Compasses

Another belief I have always had... is that **Jerusalem** is vaster than its geography. Which is to say: despite its pavements, sewage systems, electric companies, bureaucracies, schools, offices, garbage disposal, all the data that would define a real city, Jerusalem is now, right now, what is has always been: a sustenance, an aspiration, an ascendancy, and idea, a city of the mind. All this of course, is magic.

Cynthia Ozick, American Jewish Congress Bi-Weekly 15 June 1973.

Could the same be said of Tel Aviv? What is inspiring, magical about Tel Aviv?

If Jerusalem is, according to Ozick, a 'city of the mind', Tel Aviv is 'city of....

The view of Tel Aviv from Jerusalem from a child before 1948...

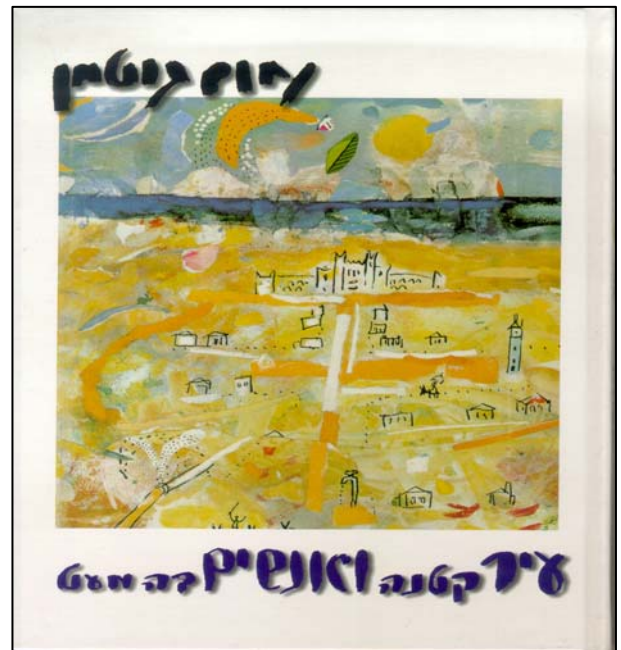
How far away Tel Aviv was! In the whole of my childhood I visited it five, or six times at most: We used to go occasionally to spend festivals with the aunts, my mother's sisters. It's not just that the light in Tel Aviv was different than the light in Jerusalem, more than it is today, even the laws of gravity were different. People didn't walk in Tel Aviv: they leaped and floated, like Neil Armstrong on the moon.

Amos Oz. From [A Tale of Love and Darkness](#) (Harcourt, 2003). P.7

Tel Aviv as a metaphor?

Months later, I came to see that Tel Aviv was a metaphor. It stood for the flawed aspirations of its founders, who in 1909 assembled on a sand-dune north of the Arab town of Jaffa and dreamed of creating the first Jewish metropolis since biblical times. They were turning their backs against the past towards the future. They were trying to reinvent themselves for the 20th century in a longing much bigger than political nationalism. In building the new city, they wanted to rebuild the new Jew from the ground up, but in so doing they had built into their vision an abandonment of their history.

Linda Grant ['Smitten in Futureville,'](#) The Guardian, 11 March 2000.



TEL AVIV - THE GOLDEN?

Nahum Guttman. "A Small City with Few People" (1959) was first released to mark the 50th anniversary of Tel Aviv.



Why do Tel Avivians choose to live in Tel Aviv instead of Jerusalem?

I'll let you in on a big secret. We prefer Tel Aviv because Jerusalem has no beach. And no, I don't mean the lack of sunbathers or people playing paddle ball (and certainly not the jellyfish).

When Tel Avivians travel to Jerusalem, they feel a sense of awe. Some would even say holiness, that the city does "something" to them. They even love Jerusalem. How could they not? For Tel Avivians, Jerusalem feels a little like walking into a synagogue. But a synagogue is a place to do soul searching, to purify oneself, to strive for new heights. It's not a place to live. For the Tel Avivian, life is outside, in the open spaces.

Tel Avivians need their beach and their open spaces in order to feel free. Free to do business, free to live their lives. Therefore, they leave Jerusalem to build their homes and businesses in Tel Aviv. Jerusalem is left in the background, protracting rays of light from afar. In the meanwhile, Tel Aviv makes due with the light from the Azrieli Towers, but deep down, those who are honest with themselves know there is a difference between natural and artificial light.

Amir Berger, [Source of Light](#), Ynet (25 May 2006)



Tel Aviv – a provocation?

What do the beach, the sea, and the light symbolize about Tel Aviv in the above texts?

Building on Berger's image of 'Jerusalem as synagogue,' what does he suggest about the attitudes of many Israelis not only to Jerusalem, and the synagogue, but also to Judaism and Jewishness?

Berger implies that Tel Aviv is all about 'artificial light.' Is Tel Aviv a source of light in its own right?

Tel Aviv represented a provocation. From the moment of its foundation it was called into question by those who built it and voice conflicting views about its future, by visitors who came with certain expectations and could not believe what they saw, by its enemies, who made a point of writing its name in inverted commas. But Tel Aviv lived and by its very existence posed other questions – about the ability of immigrants to settle successfully; about the course and the portrayal of Jewish history, which here faced a new challenge; about the city's neighbours and their ability to tolerate its existence; about our assumptions and the methods we normally use when thinking about and studying large cities. The city's motto is (Jeremiah 31:3) **'Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built.'**

Joachim Schlör, [Tel Aviv: From Dream to City](#) (Reaktion Press, 1999)



Tel Aviv – Sand, Sea, & the Search for Identity Ideas for Educators

- Maybe you are in Tel Aviv:

You may have visited the Independence Hall on Rothschild Boulevard, or the Yitzhak Rabin Memorial at City Hall, or Sheinkin Street and the Carmel Market. As your group has the opportunity to build an impression of Tel Aviv head down to the beach, or go up to the top of the Azrieli Towers. Both sites provide good backdrops to explore some of the issues suggested in the texts above.

- Maybe you are in a classroom, or a community center, or synagogue, or living room in your own community:

You may want to ask people to search youtube for videos about Tel Aviv. Share three of the youtube videos as your opening trigger. See below for some suggestions. What kind of city is represented? What about the Tel Aviv presented in the videos could be seen as Israeli? As Jewish? As Mediterranean? As Middle Eastern? As Western?

You may want to begin with a word association. Divide your group into two. Give one group a piece of paper with the word 'Jerusalem' printed on it. Give the other group a piece of poster paper with the word 'Tel Aviv' printed on it. Each group has two minutes to write down as many associations as they can with one of the two cities. At the end of the two minutes, post the two pages – 'Jerusalem' and 'Tel Aviv' side by side. Compare the two lists – where are their differences? Where are their points of similarity?

- Discussing the texts: (whether in Tel Aviv or not...)

You may want to give people an opportunity to work in pairs or small groups, reading and discussing some of the texts on their own. Do the texts complement and/or echo the perceptions of Tel Aviv that group participants have gathered from their experiences in the city? Maybe ask each small group to take on one or two of the texts above. Allow groups time to read and discuss based on the questions suggested in boxed in bold. Invite each of the small groups to present the perception of Tel Aviv presented through the texts that they encountered.

Take a look together at the last text above that begins with the line – "Tel Aviv is a provocation." In what ways is the paragraph not only about Tel Aviv, but perhaps about the Israeli story in general?



These are the lines that you really travel on Yehuda Amichai

For further exploration:

● On the shelf

Maoz Azaryahu, [Tel Aviv: Mythography Of A City](#) (Syracuse University Press, 2006)

Barbara E. Mann, [A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv, and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space](#) (Stanford University Press, 2006)

Rutu Modan, [Exit Wounds](#) (Drawn and Quarterly, 2007)

Joachim Schlör, [Tel Aviv: From Dream to City](#) (Reaktion Press, 1999)

Yaakov Shabtai, [Past Continuous](#) (Overlook Press, 2004)

● Digital Texts (all links active on 11 March 2009)

Nurit Alfasi, [A Tale Of Two Cities: Jerusalem And Tel Aviv In An Age Of Globalization](#) (Cities, Vol. 22, No. 5, 2005)

Tel Aviv-Jaffo Digital Handbook 1909-2009

http://digital.timeout.co.il/activemagazine/welcome/TLV_100ENG.asp

Tel Aviv – The White City

<http://www.white-city.co.il/english/index.htm>

Catherine Weill-Rochant, [Myths And Buildings Of Tel Aviv](#) (Bulletin Du Centre De Recherche Français De Jérusalem 12, Printemps 2003)

● On youtube (all links active on 11 March 2009)

[The Differences – Jerusalem & Tel Aviv](#)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WT10lv31r5Y>

HaDag Nahash, "[Here I Come – הנה אני בא](#)"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kke3qP1Opi4>

Subliminal feat. Wyclef Jean - In Tel Aviv & / Subliminal & Miri B A - Classit & Parsi (Dj Ls Groovymix)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7-sYGjbX0&feature=related>

Israel21.com, [Tel Aviv Centennial](#)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpr0GqY5m6s>