

תל אביב עיר הקדש
TEL AVIV – OLD AND NEW COMING TOGETHER
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The year was 1902. The ancient port-city of Jaffa was experiencing a cholera epidemic. Its Jewish population of some five thousand was faced with a crisis – the Ottoman officials would not allow burials within the city walls. After extensive negotiations, community leader Shimon Rokach obtained permission to purchase lands for a new Jewish cemetery outside the city limits, in an area then known as the Lands of North Jaffa.¹

Were one to visit this cemetery today, now known as Trumpeldor Cemetery, or simply, “The Old Cemetery,” one would find the graves of some of the most influential figures of modern Jewish history, among them the Zionist leader Max Nordau, the greatest of modern Hebrew poets, Chaim Nahman Bialik, his contemporary Saul Tchernichovski, and the Zionist thinker Ahad Ha’am, and Tel Aviv’s first mayor, Meir Dizengoff. More recent burials at Trumpeldor include popular singer Shoshana Damari, and nuclear physicist-turned politician Yuval Ne’eman.

Among some of the more striking *matzevot* at Trumpeldor is a very simple monument. The name inscribed is that of Akiva Aryeh Weiss HaCohen. By virtue of the modesty of the stone one could assume that he was a man of limited lasting significance, but nothing could be further from the truth.

¹Barbara Mann, *A Place in History*, Stanford, 2006, p. 33

Akiva Aryeh Weiss was born in Grodno, and raised in Lodz, Poland. His dream was to become an architect, and after his earlier Jewish and secular studies, he immersed himself in books to learn what he could about buildings, cities and infrastructure. However the death of his father intervened and led him to take over his father's jewelry manufacturing business.

Akiva Weiss was heavily influenced by Theodor Herzl, leading to his chairmanship of the Lodz Zionist organization. He visited the Land of Israel in 1904, the year of Herzl's death, and eventually settled in Jaffa. It was here that his early interest in cities and construction again came to the fore. He was very much taken by the words of Eliezer ben Yehuda, who had sparked the revival of the ancient and sacred Hebrew language into an every-day spoken tongue, and who, after the death of Herzl, proposed building a city in Herzl's honor, in which, as he described it, "all the residents will talk Hebrew, in its streets and public square only Hebrew will be heard and in its shops only Hebrew will be spoken...."²

It was Akiva Weiss who took upon the challenge of creating "the First Hebrew City." He encouraged Jewish families to build homes in land north of Jaffa, adjacent to the newly-dedicated Jewish cemetery. In 1906 he formed a small group of like-minded pioneers, who called themselves "*Ahuzat Bayit*," meaning "acquisition of a home." Three years later, in 1909, the town of Ahuzat Bayit was established. One year later, the residents decided that a name-change was in order. Some wanted to name the

²Maoz Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv, Mythography of a City*, Syracuse University Press 2007, p. 36

city after Herzl. But others were influenced by the Hebrew translation of Herzl's Zionist manifesto, *Altneuland* – “Old-New Land.” Nahum Sokolov had translated the title into the elegant Hebrew “*Tel Aviv*,” the name of a Mesopotamian town mentioned in Ezekiel (3:15), but more to the point, *Tel*, an archeological term, calling to mind an ancient civilization; and *Aviv*, meaning spring, rebirth, revival. Old-New; Tel Aviv, was the name adopted in 1910 for the First Hebrew City, the first new Jewish city in two thousand years.

Following the establishment of the new city of Tel Aviv, Akiva Weiss would return to the jewelry business and become the founder and first president of Israel's Diamond Exchange. The more colorful Meir Dizengoff would be the fledgling city's first mayor. Neither Weiss nor Dizengoff would live to see the establishment of the State of Israel; Dizengoff dying in 1936, and Weiss dying seventy years ago, just months before Ben Gurion's proclamation of the State in May of 1948.

When we think of Israel, of course, it is Jerusalem that we designate עיר הקודש, The Holy City. It is Jerusalem that reflects thousands of years of history, that reminds us of the ancient glory of the *Batei Mikdash*, the Holy Temples. It is Jerusalem that King David established as our capital more than three millennia ago. It is Jerusalem whose destruction became part of our eternal consciousness, as we integrated into our lives the injunction of Psalms (137:6): “אם לא אעלה את ירושלים על ראש שמחתי” - that memories of the ancient glory of Jerusalem and our sadness at her destruction remain with us even at our happiest moments of life.

I would like to stake a claim for Tel Aviv's holiness as well. Whereas the *kedushah*, the holiness of Jerusalem is God-given, the holiness of Tel Aviv is man-made. Tel Aviv is clearly not a city designed by God; its clutter and congestion attest to its literally having been designed by committee. But there is holiness in what Akiva Weiss and his generation accomplished, when, out of nothing, they fashioned an energetic, dynamic, exciting and functioning commercial, industrial, cultural center, the first Hebrew city.

Part of that generation was Avraham Shlonsky, one of the greatest of Israel's modern Hebrew poets. Schooled in his native Poltava in traditional Jewish learning, his family sent him to the new city of Tel Aviv in his Bar Mitzvah year of 1913, so that he could study Hebrew. Forced to return to Russia during the First World War, he returned to Palestine in 1922, and worked in farming and road building. This profoundly talented literary figure personally paved many of the roads of Tel Aviv. His classic poem "*Amal - Toil*," reflects his unique view of the new city, and the surrounding landscapes of Israel.

“עוטפה ארצי אור כטלית – My country wraps itself in light as in a *tallit*.”

בתים נצבו כטוטפות – Houses stand out like *tefillin*-boxes.

וכרצועות תפילין גולשים כבישים סללו כפים – And like the *tefillin*-straps, the roadways that palms have paved glide down.”³

³Abraham Shlonsky, *Amal*, in *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, Schocken 1966, p. 74-75

It is clear from Avraham Shlonsky's imagery that he saw the construction of the roads, houses and buildings of Tel Aviv as a profoundly religious act. His words reflect the transformation that was beginning to unfold at the outset of the twentieth century – in which the world of the Jew, for two thousand years confined to ritual and to study, was finally to expand out of the pages of sacred texts and into the realm of sacred space.

Akiva Weiss and Avraham Shlonsky were representative of a generation of young men and women who left families behind in Europe to embark on an extremely hazardous journey. Many of them were affluent, almost all of them were highly educated. Their decision to leave the world they knew, with its cafes and universities and culture and comforts for the untold hardships of Palestine was voluntary. They could have listened to their families and friends and remained in Europe. Yes, warning signs of bad times to come were ever-present, from the pogroms of Russia to the notorious Dreyfus affair in France. But the worst was still three to four decades away, and not yet on the radar screen.

Who were these brave young men and women? They were the generation who would drain swamps, who would literally transform wasteland into fertile fields, who would, out of nothing, build cities that had never before existed, such as Tel Aviv, or revive other centers of Jewish life that had been dormant for centuries or millennia. In many cases, families back in Europe were furious at their young upstarts who had left the comforts of home, for such dangerous ground. In some

tragic instances, their families sat *Shivah* for them, disowned them. Here they were in an untamed, dangerous, fiercely hot, unfriendly climate – young, scared – but filled with vision. They risked all, and, in many cases, lost all, on behalf of future Jewish generations – on our behalf – because they were not prepared to sit back and wait for the *Mashiah* to escort them to the Promised Land. They, through their actions, proclaimed an end to Jewish waiting. They knew what we all should have known, that the time had come for Jews, after thousands of years, to take charge of their history, not to wait for miracles or divine intervention, but to act decisively and courageously, once and for all.

The State of Israel was proclaimed five years before I was born. My entire life has been lived with there being a State of Israel. My generation, and those subsequent to me, have never known what it would be like for there not to be a State of Israel. We can't imagine it. But many of you here today can, because you lived through its creation - you may remember, if you were old enough, seventy years ago this November, in 1947, listening to the radio as the United Nations' vote to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab entity was unfolding live. You may remember Ben Gurion's proclamation of the state on Erev Shabbat, May 5, 1948. If you do remember, you were witness to the establishment of that which had not been seen in Jewish history since the defeat of Bar Kochba in the mid-second century CE – a state that would be ours, with all of the myriad of problems, crises and tensions that statehood, surrounded by hostility, would bring.

You, who were alive in those years, who bore witness to the creation of Israel, know what it was like for there not to be an Israel. Those of you, especially, who endured

the *Shoah*, who lost so much, sometimes everything that was precious to you in the universe, your families, your home towns, your childhood, your friends – you knew that we could no longer be satisfied pleading for the mercy of host nations, who, when push came to shove, could not have cared less about us – it would no longer be good enough for us to wait patiently for God’s next intervention in history.

A hundred and ten years ago, a courageous group of young visionaries left their relative security in Europe to create a new Jewish reality. They likely could not have foreseen the full extent of what awaited their people in Europe, but they knew, correctly, that there could be no Jewish future without a homeland in Israel. The most astounding fact about the members of this greatest of Jewish generations was that they were overwhelmingly secular, some tenuously connected to tradition, some rejecting of all of it. They were not beholden to a text or a tradition that told them to be satisfied, to be grateful, to wait. Thus, it was their destiny to lay the groundwork, literally, for the creation of a Jewish homeland. It was their destiny to transform the רצועות, the straps of the *Tefillin*, into the roadways of a new Jewish state, and the בתים, the *Tefillin*-boxes, into the homes that would house future Jewish generations in a Hebrew-speaking city, a Hebrew speaking country. In a truly incredible twist, their secularism led to what may have been the greatest act of holiness in all of Jewish history, the bringing into being of התקווה בת שנות אלפיים – the hope of two thousand years – להיות עם חפשי בארצנו – of being a free, independent people in our own land.

In a famous Talmudic story [BM 59:] the sages debated the ritual purity of a particular oven, known as the *Tanur shel Aknai* - Aknai's oven. "On that day, we learn, Rabbi Eliezer brought forth every argument in the world, but the sages refuse to budge." They rejected Rabbi Eliezer's argumentation.

Rabbi Eliezer tried a new tact. He says to the sages: "If I am right, this carob tree will prove it." The carob tree moved 100 cubits from its place on the ground. Some say 400 cubits. Either way, impressive. The miracle ostensibly proved that God agreed with Rabbi Eliezer, yet, his opponent, Rabbi Yehoshua, amazingly remained unconvinced. "לא בשמים היא," Rabbi Yehoshua scolded God. "The Torah is no longer in heaven. It is now ours, from which to extract our understanding of the law, our interpretation of tradition."

How did God react to this colossal act of audacity, with His own opinion being rejected by an earthly court? The Talmud describes how Rabbi Nathan encountered Elijah the Prophet and asked him that very question: What did the Almighty do when His children ignored His opinion? Elijah's answer: "קא חייך ואמר" – God laughed and said – נצחוני בני נצחוני בני – My children have defeated me, My children have defeated me!"

I believe as well, with all my heart, that God laughed with the courageous founder pioneers of the State of Israel, the builders of the towns and villages of Israel – even though His people didn't wait for the Messiah to come, to return to the land. Rather, God would have happily proclaimed: "נצחוני בני נצחוני בני" - My people have defeated

me, they have defeated me. They have chosen to act rather than wait. They have shown determination, not timidity, they have shown courage, not resignation. Through loving defiance, they have refused to relinquish a dream.” How could God, in the face of such resilience of spirit, do anything but rejoice?

In short, that is why I believe Tel Aviv, like Jerusalem, to be a holy city. Unlike Jerusalem, the holiness of Tel Aviv, and the many other parts of Israel that we fashioned out of sand and largely inhospitable landscape, is a holiness that comes from us, that represents our determination to actively be involved in the shaping of our destiny, our tomorrows.

Such is the story of the Masorti Movement in Israel, which brings together the Zionist vision and a commitment to an inclusive, tolerant, old-new understanding of our tradition, challenging those who view the hallowed sources of our tradition as incompatible with a modern vision of a just, open, egalitarian society. Such is the story of *Mercaz Olami*, which seeks to empower our Movement and institutions in Israel, helping them reach an ever-growing segment of Israel’s population eager for open-minded traditionalism. Such is the vision of *Masorti Olami*, bringing our message to Jewish communities world-wide, uniting Jews passionate about their heritage and towards our beloved *Medinat Yisrael*.

Like the Zionist pioneers at the turn of the twentieth century, Masorti Jews know that God needs challenging. Just as those who survived the Shoah and fought in Israel’s War of Independence seventy years ago understood that faith at that critical juncture in history meant not patiently awaiting the *Mashiah*, but, rather, paving

the roads, building the houses, and fighting the battles of an old-new country on behalf of yet-to-be-born Jewish generations; so too, Masorti Jews understand the need for their active participation in building the Jewish tomorrow, so that God again would have reason to proclaim, as any parent proud of his precocious, yet accomplished offspring: “נצחוני בני נצחוני בני – My children have defeated me, My children have defeated me!”

From Abraham to Akiva Weiss, from the foundational generations of our people, to the heroes of our day, we have stood our ground, when necessary, to protest injustice, to secure our future, to defend our rights and those of others to pursue their legitimate dreams. We, the descendants of the visionary founders of the State of Israel who chose action over passivity, who sacrificed comfort for future, ought have no hesitation about putting heart and soul, resources and energy, into advocating for Israel and for a viable Jewish tomorrow for those who will come after us.

Rabbi Tarfon, in *Pirkei Avot* (2:16), reminded us: “לא עֲלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמּוּר, וְלֹא אֵתָהּ בֶּן חוּרִין” – “לבטל ממנה” – it is not up to us to complete the task, but neither can we abdicate our responsibilities in seeking to build for a solid Jewish future, a vibrant Israel, a tolerant society and a better world. It was none other than Theodor Herzl, whose dream materialized in spectacular fashion seventy years ago, who wrote: “אם תרצו – אין זו – אגדה – legend can become reality.