as an acceptance of false idols. Likewise, while Zionists were among the Agudah’s main enemies—and Birnbaum’s own credibility derived in large part from being a defector—his statements on Palestine are of a piece with some of his earlier views. “The Land of Israel must not simply become a land of Jews,” he said in a speech to an Agudah delegation in New York in 1921, “it must be a Jewish Land, a land that carries the seal of the Holy Torah, the seal of the Holy One, blessed be he…” (281). The basic importance of maintaining the Jewish character of a Jewish homeland, though restated at this point in theological terms, evokes the earlier statements of Aḥad Ha-‘am and the younger Birnbaum in their critiques of Theodor Herzl.

Olson’s biography leaves us with the picture of a man whose basic concerns recurred even as his organizational commitments changed dramatically. We also find a consistent personality trait: at every stage he was paradoxically known both for his leadership and for his distance from, and suspicion of, the institutions that he so influenced. “His confidence in his convictions faltered before the gritty reality of party politics” (292), Olson writes of Birnbaum’s participation in the Agudah, a statement which might sum up his entire career.

The continuity of Birnbaum’s ideas coupled with the discontinuity of his professional affiliations might serve as a cautionary note for historians who assume that organizational allegiances circumscribe and define historical actors’ positions. Though Birnbaum is exceptional in the way he moved through different nodes of modern Jewish thinking, his very movement helps underscore the common concerns that led Jews to such intense and diverse forms of Jewish communal activism around the turn of the twentieth century.

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In the last decade, as Tel Aviv’s centennial anniversary in 2009 approached, a massive wave of studies about Tel Aviv came crashing on the city’s shores, reflecting an increasing interest in Jewish urbanity, or “Jews and the City.” Among them is Anat Helman’s Young Tel Aviv, first published in Hebrew in 2007. This work provides a remarkably thick description of everyday life in interwar Tel Aviv. Amid the recent wave of scholarship, this book stands out for its intentional dissociation from the mythological discourse created by Tel Aviv’s artists and writers. Each chapter in the book describes and analyzes one aspect of everyday life in the first Hebrew city: public events, consumer culture, leisure activities, and urban subcultures. The book is written in a talkative, fluent, and often amusing style.

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The first chapter was most enjoyable, to my taste, since it includes a lively sketch of the multi-sensory experiences of living in or strolling around the city. Helman vividly recreates some of the inimitable Tel Aviv sights, sounds, tastes, and smells: the filth and stench produced by the heterogeneous traffic (cars, donkeys, and camels), the crowded vehicles of public transportation (wagons and buses), the smells of sewage and the garbage wagons, and much more. Not often do readers come across a history book so accessible and reader-friendly, yet so meticulously documented. No wonder its Hebrew version has won several awards. The English translation can be expected to win some more.

Young Tel Aviv is a remarkable example of the new cultural history, which detaches itself from the traditional history of elites and dramatic events to narrate a history of “common people” and everyday life. In order to capture the spirit of interwar Tel Aviv as it was experienced by its inhabitants and visitors, Helman ignores, at least as statements about reality, the vivid images created by the urban intellectual elite in prose, poetry, and visual art. Instead, the author demonstrates a virtuosic use of a dazzling variety of primary sources: public and private correspondence, journalistic stories (including contemporary tabloids), advertisements, posters and pamphlets, photos and films, and even graffiti in public restrooms. Complaint letters sent by residents to the municipality proved to be particularly informative. This approach is not yet widely employed in Jewish or Israel studies, and its innovative use positions Young Tel Aviv as a pioneering work, both methodologically and empirically.

The description of the Sabbath in Tel Aviv (67–75), shows the advantage of the new cultural history over the more traditional intellectual history. Helman mentions the heated debate between the secular elite —led by “national poet” Hayim Nahman Bialik—and rabbinic authorities, regarding the question of whether the Sabbath should be halakhically observed or reimagined with new secular intellectual-cultural content. However, she notes that this learned debate did not concern the majority of the populace. Most residents of Tel-Aviv chose a third way to spend the Sabbath: as a routine leisure activity, whether going to cafés and restaurants, bathing or sun-tanning on the beach, or just strolling around the city in order to see and be seen. This was the unique Tel Aviv Sabbath which “took place not only in public but for the public” (68). Condemned in vain by both intellectual elites, the secular and the religious, this way of spending the Sabbath was neither traditional nor anti-traditional, and as such, it was—and still is—Tel Aviv’s unique contribution to modern Jewish cultures.

Helman portrays interwar Tel Aviv as urban, capitalist, even somewhat hedonist. At several points in the book, she depicts Tel Aviv’s everyday life as a subversion of the dominant Zionist ethos of pioneering puritanism, and as a contrast to the image of the Yishuv society as singularly focused on national tasks. This tension is particularly focal in the third chapter, which deals with consumer culture and describes the clash between the dominant puritan ethos and the concurrent popular perception of purchase as personal self-fulfillment.

At the same time, though, Helman depicts the other side of the coin, that of the devotedly Zionist Tel Aviv. The Jewish city was the most eminent urban center in Palestine; up to forty percent of the country’s Jewish population was
concentrated there, and it was dominated by the sound of the newly revived Hebrew language (30–33). More importantly, in the period under discussion Tel Aviv was considered by Jews, Arabs, British, and foreigners as an experiment in Jewish sovereignty. By no means was Tel Aviv merely a “bubble,” as the city is too often dubbed in contemporary Israeli culture—that is, a locus of anti-Zionist sentiment, an enclave where national tasks are ignored. In fact, its everyday life was driven by Zionism, but it was expressed in Tel Aviv differently than elsewhere in the Yishuv. *Young Tel Aviv* therefore raises anew the question of the relationship between Israeli urbanty and Zionist ideology.

True, the mainstream of Zionist ideology was at first anti-urban, and indeed, no new cities were founded by Zionist institutions during the British mandate period. Nonetheless, the landscape was shaped by Tel Aviv’s unplanned but rapid development in the early 1920s into a city of tens of thousands of inhabitants—all of them Jewish; by the accelerated processes of urbanization and industrialization in Palestine; and by the inception of a capitalist economy after World War I and the British conquest. The newborn Jewish city in northern Jaffa introduced urban ideological notions into Zionist life. The new urban Zionism was expressed in the aim of creating an exclusively Jewish public sphere (the borders of the city were precisely drawn so as to leave out the non-Jewish neighbors—Arabs and German-Templars)—one that was nonetheless diverse and stratified, welcoming Jews from all professions, classes, sub-Jewish ethnic origins, and political or religious affiliations. This ideology also embraced Western mass culture, which emphasized leisure and consumption as the ultimate articulations of the individual’s free choice. This meshing of capitalism and nationalism, in a celebration of Tel Aviv city as a place where Jews did whatever they want, stood in contrast to the bleak existence of Jews in exile, where, as it was imagined, they could not. *Young Tel Aviv* sheds powerful light on this urban-Zionist ideology, which was not articulated in the literature of the time, and had no political expression, yet was deeply embedded in the everyday life of the Yishuv, no less and perhaps more than was the puritan ethos of the pioneers.

Today, looking back at more than a hundred years of the Zionist project, it is clear that the new Jewish public sphere was created mainly in the city, although urban life was mostly ignored or condemned in Zionist visions. *Young Tel Aviv*’s illustration of the day-to-day life of the interwar Jewish city in Palestine calls for a historical reevaluation of the Zionist project—an examination not of the socialist-utopian dream that was prophesied and desired, but rather of the capitalist-bourgeois reality that actually developed.

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