

The Right to The City: The “Religious” Beach of Tel-Aviv

public places seem to be an important feature of cities (Goffman, 1963). Lofland points out that “the public realm is made up of the public places or spaces in a city, which spaces tend to be by persons who are strangers to one another” (1989:454). In such an anonymous crowd people do not know who the others are, and social statuses might be ignored. Streets, parks and promenades are common public spaces. In some cities, public beaches are another example of the public realm where people of all social strata mix with each other (Freeman, 2002).

Such a city is Tel-Aviv; situated along the Mediterranean coastline, which stretches along 14 kilometers. There are 13 public beaches along this coast, connected by a promenade. The seashore is covered with white sand and the city is responsible for its maintenance. Almost all beaches are equipped with lifeguard posts and with other facilities. During the summer months the beaches are usually crowded with people coming from all over the Metropolis.



The one exceptional beach is the “religious” or “separate” beach. This section of the beach is located in the center of the seashore, between the “Hilton beach” and the “Peepers beach” known for its uninhibited lifestyle. Whereas all other beaches are open to all directions, stone or tin walls separate between the “religious” beach and the adjacent ones, and a heavy rubber curtain hangs on the entrance door.





This particular section of the seashore looks like an enclosed and peculiar enclave in the midst of the open sea front. It can be regarded as a “gated beach”. However, due to the topography one can look down to this part of the beach from the top of the hill leading to the waterfront. Thus this particular beach is not hermetically closed, and its partition can be viewed to some extent as symbolic.

The main characteristic that distinguishes the “religious beach” from all the other seashores is that the “religious” one is segregated and regulated according to gender. Three days a week the beach is open only to women, while the other days- are only for men. A big sign is posted at the entrance announcing that women are allowed in on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, and men- on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.



The Ultra-Orthodox Community

The cultural heritage, the way of life, the attitudes and behavior of the Ultra-Orthodox community are very different from that of the mainstream society. Two basic characteristics are worth mentioning. Firstly, since religious families usually do not practice birth control, families are much larger than the average. Secondly, men study in religious institutions up to their late twenties and older, even when they are married, and many do not join the labor force at all. Consequently, ultra-orthodox communities are among the poorest in Israel. One has to bear in mind that “being modest” is considered a virtue, and living on a scanty basis is justified on religious and ideological grounds.

Although Ultra-Orthodox people accept modern technology, they reject modern culture and values. They even keep strict dietary laws, which are different from the mainstream

society. This is an Autocratic community, with a tradition of discipline and obedience (Shilhav, 1997).

The members are, to a large extent, dependent on religious decrees and on the words of their spiritual leaders - the Rabbis. Those leaders are trying to insulate their followers from the influence of the secular society. Voluntary residential segregation is one way of doing so. However, since they are dependent on wider society for their livelihood, the contact with the secular population is unavoidable.

The most striking difference between the Ultra-Orthodox and the rest of society is expressed by the way people dress. Men are dressed in the same manner as their 18th century ancestors in Europe used to dress. "Modesty of the individual" is a basic rule, especially for women. They always wear long dresses with long sleeves, and married women are never seen in public without having their heads covered. Since these people differ in their appearance from the rest of society, they are quite conspicuous.

Men and Women are socially segregated. The differentiation between private and public spheres regarding gender (Rosaldo, 1974) is very prominent in this community. Ultra-Orthodox people often quote the Psalm "The honor of the Princess lies inside", meaning that the honor and modesty of the woman oblige her to limit her activities to the home and family (Friedman, 1988).

There are different codes of behavior in public places for men and women. For example, women often have to work, but are much more restricted in the choice of work place. They are not allowed to work together with men, especially non-religious ones.

Some changes have been observed in recent years. Ultra-Orthodox Jews started patronizing urban public spaces that were not considered "religious", and are now also present in "secular" places such as various shopping malls and parks. Some scholars argue that this is due to the adoption of new consumption patterns by this community. In other words, Ultra-Orthodox people wish to participate in the mass consumption culture of modern society (Elor and Neriya, 2003). However, although they are present in regular shopping centers, parks and other facilities, there are some territories where this population preserves its separate open public spaces. One example is the "religious" beach of Tel-Aviv.

Ultra-Orthodox Women on the Tel-Aviv "Religious" Beach

This paper is based on participant observation of Ultra-Orthodox women and their children using the "religious beach" of Tel-Aviv during the summer months. As mentioned before women can use this beach on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Although the beach is open to all women, the vast majority who patronize this specific beach are the religious ones. The non-religious population prefers the adjacent, mixed beaches.

Most women who use this beach live in a city about ten kilometers northeast of Tel-Aviv. Although there are various "religious" neighborhoods in the metropolis, this is the only "religious" city in the area, with a population of 150.000.

During the summer most of these people commute via organized public transportation from their hometown to the beach. Busloads bring them in the morning and pick them up during the afternoon. On the "women's days" one can observe dozens of buses unloading women, girls of all ages and little boys up to 3 years next to the beach. The commuters have to go down to the shore, a 7 minutes walk.

Some women who live in other areas (or who have missed the bus) get to the beach on their own. Most of the beachgoers are women with many children; they carry a lot of packages and strollers for the little kids. Older girls carry their little sisters or brothers. One can also observe some groups of teenage girls with backpacks, and several older women going down to the beach.

Any one who bypasses the crowd going down to the beach can tell that these are Ultra-Orthodox women and their children. Unlike the general public, they are fully dressed until they are "enclosed" in the religious beach. For them the voyage of "going to the beach"

starts only when they enter the gate. Until they get there, women and girls wear their daily attire. The same is true for men and boys going down the beach on “men’s days”. They usually wear black long trousers and white shirts, and carry their bathing suit in a plastic beg.



In contrast to “A world of strangers” (Lofland, 1973), where people cannot tell who the others are, it is very obvious that these are Ultra-Orthodox women. All are dressed in long skirts or dresses with long sleeves. In spite of the heat, their bodies are completely covered, including their heads. In many cases they wear dark dresses even while going to the beach.



Once on the beach, they disappear in the public bathrooms and change. Some hang their street clothes on hooks posted on various walls. Sometimes one can even see a wig hanging on a hook. It is important to point out that most Ultra-Orthodox women do not wear bathing suits, but are dressed in long cotton robes covering their knees. Some put on short pants underneath their robes. This is the way they sit on the sand and even go into the water. All married women cover their heads with a scarf or hat all the time. Little girls do wear bathing suits, but teenagers already put a T-shirt on top of their bathing suits.



One characteristic of beaches everywhere, including Tel-Aviv and elsewhere, such as the Rio beach (Freeman, 2002), is the anonymity. Bathers claim that one cannot tell who the people in bathing suits are. However, even on a beach where everybody wears a bathing suit, there are subtle differences. "And regardless of what people might say about the leveling effect of the bathing suit, beach goers are actually aware of the social connotation of each part of the beach" (Freeman, 2002:16). On the Religious beach it is very obvious who the people are, and one does not need any subtleties to distinguish them from others.

Quite often I found myself the only adult woman wearing a bathing suit. I was aware of the fact that I did not conform to the dress code of most bathers, but since this is a public beach I did not feel a need to obey their rules. It is worth mentioning that while I did fieldwork in the Ultra-Orthodox city, I dressed according to their dressing code (Churchman and Ginsberg, 1997). The city is their territory; the beach belongs to every one.

Very seldom one can observe a woman in a bathing suit. Once I saw three teenage girls in bikinis. I asked them if they come to this beach regularly, they giggled and said they just came here by coincidence and usually go to the "peeper's beach".

The only men on the beach are the lifeguards, and the staff at the first-aid station. Sometimes a man in charge of easy chairs or one selling ice cream cones will enter the premise, but this is clearly a women's territory. When on rare occasions a man enters the premise by mistake there is a big uproar, and the man quickly disappears from the beach.

The lifeguards claim it is more difficult to be stationed at the Religious beach than at any other beach because this group follows his orders less than the general public. It seems that what makes their job more difficult is the larger number of children. The area seems to be very crowded. Moreover, according to one of the veteran lifeguards, the vast majority of the beachgoers cannot swim. Only 5% of the women and 10% of the men are able to swim. This is particularly interesting about the men, since in the Talmud (a religious Jewish script) it is mentioned that a father is obligated to teach his son to swim.

Women and children usually concentrate very close to the shore, where the water is shallow. Many girls use kind of inflated rubber wheels around their bodies and try to drift on the water. One can see women, many girls and a few very young boys playing in the shallow water. Very often older girls are in charge of their younger sisters or even their little brothers. Some are more courageous than others and are playing closed to the deep water.

The lifeguards are constantly on guard trying to prevent the crowd from going into the deep water, or too close to the wave breaker.



One indication that lifeguards are constantly on watch is the fact that they do not stop yelling into their microphones begging the bathers to be careful. On no other beach one can hear the lifeguards shouting as much as on this one. They usually address the mothers and beg them to watch the children and keep them close. Sometimes it is funny to hear that one is looking for “the woman wearing the blue hat”..From time to time a child gets lost, and then one can hear the lifeguards trying to trace the mother.

Women go into the water wearing their robes. It is impossible to swim or even play in the water dressed this way, and the women are aware of this. The robes stick to the bodies and prevent them from circulating in the water. Some try to tie the robes, but in most cases this does not help. As one woman said “you have to cope with the difficulties..”. When they get out of the water they stand for a while in the sun in order to let their wet robes dry.

Most of the time on the beach, the women are just sitting around sun bathing, talking with friends or neighbors, and eating. Some bring their own chairs, others put a sheet or blanket on the sand, and a minority rents an easy chair. The children usually run around and play. From time to time mothers will call their children just to find out whether they are nearby. Sometimes a child gets lost and the mother approaches the lifeguard who tries to trace the child with his microphone. One can hear the announcement all over the coastline.

Most beachgoers bring food along. In the middle of the morning they’ll unpack their groceries and call everybody in their family to join. However, they will not start eating before performing some rituals. First, they get up and walk to the water faucets stationed close to the entrance of the premise, in order to wash their hands. They take the cup tied to the faucet, fill it with water, pour the water on their hands and say a blessing. Then they go back, sit down and start eating, not before they say another blessing. Sometimes the women buy a drink or an ice cream cone for the children, but not before verifying that the food has the right rabbinical approval.

During the day there is a constant movement of women going in and out. At the early afternoon many are leaving in order to catch the bus taking them to their hometown. Mothers yell at their children, making sure all of them are ready to leave. Then they disappear in the public bathroom and come out fully dressed, holding their shoes in their hands. They go to the water faucets and wash their feet, dry them and put their shoes on. Older girls help the little ones performing this task. Before leaving, some stand at the wall separating the beach from the promenade reading from their prayer book.



After making sure that nobody stays behind, the families leave the premise and walk to the bus. The buses wait for the beachgoers on the street close to the shore. In a few cases I saw vans waiting outside the beach on the promenade, usually picking up some older women. Sometimes in the early evening I saw women and children waiting at the regular bus stop. It was obvious they came from the beach, waiting for the bus to take them to their hometown. Apparently they came on their own later during the day, and did not use organized transportation. Men and older boys use the regular public bus more often than women, and one could see them frequently during the summer evenings at the bus stop.

Encounters with the General Public

The beach is a public open space; in this realm everybody comes and goes as they please. In contrast to the more or less segregated hometowns or neighborhoods where the Ultra-Orthodox population lives, on the beach- they cannot avoid coming across the secular population. As already mentioned those two groups usually use different parts of the beach and thus do not encounter each other while spending time there, but they do meet on the way going to the seashore and coming back.

As one can imagine most people go down to the beach dressed in minimum clothes. Looking at people on the streets nearby, one can tell who is going to seaside. The ritual of "going to the beach" starts long before getting there. Men and women would usually walk in shorts and a T-shirt over their bathing suit, wearing sandals on their feet. The majority of beachgoers dress this way. They encounter religious men and women who are not only fully dressed, butS are wearing clothes which look very peculiar to them.

Elor and Neriya (2003) pointed out that secular and religious consumers participate in similar activities in the public realm, although they do so wearing different cloths. In no other space can this point be better demonstrated than on the public beach.

Interestingly, both groups pass each other, look at each other, do not say a word and continue their ways. Walking home from the beach at the end of the morning, I saw two young girls dressed in long skirts going down towards the sea. They passed three girls at about the same age in tiny shorts, going to the "peepers" beach. They looked at each other but their facial expression revealed nothing.

Some beachgoers perhaps ignore each other, but it seems that the more common behavior is what Goffman's (1963) coined "civil inattention". As Goffman elaborates "What seems to be involved that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present, while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention so as to

express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design" (1963:84). According to Lofland this means "inhabitants of public settings act primarily as audience to the activities which surround them "(1989:463).

Lofland further argues that one of the rules of behavior in the public realm is "civility toward diversity" meaning that "the urbanite, will act in a civil manner; will act "decently" vis-à-vis diversity" (1989: 464). This certainly applies to the two groups, particularly the non-religious majority.

Tel-Aviv is the major metropolis of the country. It is the center of business, finance and cultural activities. It regards itself as a secular, cosmopolitan global city. Life centers on the daily personal experience of "living, culture, socializing and having a good time" (Gurevitz and Aran, 1991:43).

There are many conflicts between the Ultra-Orthodox and the mainstream Israeli society. However, perhaps Tel-Aviv is more cosmopolitan than other cities in the country, and thus this diversity can be easier tolerated.

Whose Beach Is It?

The beach described in this article is a public beach open to the public. Yet a specific section of the beach is regulated according to gender. Interestingly, the majority of the population more or less accepts this arrangement without questioning. However, one of my bitchy neighbors once said "this is the best beach, they always get the best...". Moreover, the majority of population of Tel-Aviv is secular, and this particular beach serves mainly those who live elsewhere. Nobody actually remembers when this arrangement had started. I personally, have been observing this scene for the last two decades. Despite recent changes in the consumption patterns of the Ultra-Orthodox population (Elor and Neriya, 2003), it seems that going to the beach has always been one of their favorite pastime activities.

At some point the city closed down this beach on Saturdays, since religious people do not patronize the beach on the Sabbath. Many residents protested and some even signed a petition, and the city had no choice but to back down and open the beach on Saturdays. As of last summer the "religious" beach changes its function on the Sabbath and becomes a mixed beach, like any other one. The beach is crowded with men, women and children, all in bathing suits.

Last summer the city council discussed moving the Religious Beach to another area of the seashore, either to the far South or far North of the promenade. One could regard this act as an effort to push out the Ultra-Orthodox population. However, both religious and secular city councilmen agreed to this move, although for different reasons. The religious representative argued that his community deserves bigger seashore that can be divided into two parts: a men and women's territory. That means that both women and men could use the beach on the same days. The secular representative, on the other hand, claimed that the "walls" surrounding this part of the coast make the whole seashore unattractive, and therefore should be pulled down. However, he did not question the legitimacy of regulating an open public space, catering practically only for a small part of the community.

Discussion

Observing Tel-Aviv's public beach presents an opportunity of studying the various ways people use public spaces, and the different meanings they attributed to the public realm. Gans argues "that individuals and collectives shape natural and social space by how they use these, although each kind of space, and particularly the social, will also have effects on them" (2002:330).

The Ultra-Orthodox community uses the beach for recreational purposes, as does the public in general. Yet the way both groups spend their time on the seashore and enjoy it is very different. One can ask what does going to the beach mean? Enjoying your body, sun bathing, swimming and relaxing and having fun with the opposite sex; or sitting on the sand more or less dressed, eating, saying your blessings and watching your children play?

Gans (2002) also mentions that the effect of a particular space might not be the same on everybody. This is no doubt true when one compares the different parts of the beach. Ultra-Orthodox women enjoy the beach like everybody else; otherwise they would not take the trouble carrying all their children and other stuff three times a week down to the waterfront, in the summer heat.

However, in contrast to the uninhibited life style of most beaches, the religious beach is very traditional. Women and girls dress "in decency" even in the company of other women. They follow their religious rituals and say their blessings while relaxing and enjoying their free time. Their cultural heritage prevents them from using the beach in any other way. Spending their leisure in the enclosed beach, dressed in "peculiar" clothes, no doubt helps these women maintain the boundaries of their community.

There is an inconsistency in the fact that although officially this beach is open to all women on specific days, Ultra-Orthodox ones patronize it almost exclusively. One can rightly claim that an open public beach should not be a "gated beach", and certainly should not be regulated according to gender. However, without this arrangement the Ultra-Orthodox community in general and these women in particular, would never enjoy the seashore. This way they also benefit from what Lefebvre calls "the right to the city" (1996:173). He mentions that the right to participation is implied in "the right to the city".

Perhaps one can look at this situation from another perspective, and wonder whether society as a whole might also benefit from it. Recent studies advocate urban policy and planning practices that enable the usage of public places by people of alternative cultures. These practices, "can contribute to the diversity and meanings of the city" (Shaw, 2005:167). Paradoxically, one can argue that regulating the seafront of Tel-Aviv not only enables Ultra-Orthodox people to participate and enjoy "the right to the city", but might also add to the social and cultural variety of the open public realm of Tel-Aviv.

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