Regulating Public Space: The “Religious” Beach of Tel Aviv

by Yona Ginsberg

Public places seem to be an important feature of cities. Lofland points out that “the public realm is made up of the public places or spaces in a city, which tend to be inhabited by persons who are strangers to one another”. In such an anonymous crowd people do not know each other, and social status may be ignored. Streets, parks and promenades are common public spaces. In some cities public beaches are another example of the public realm where people from all social strata mix.

Such a city is Tel Aviv, which stretches for 14 kilometers along the Mediterranean. There are 13 public beaches on this part of the coast, made up of white sand and connected by a promenade. The city is responsible for the maintenance of the seashore. Almost all beaches are equipped with lifeguard posts and 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. It is located at the center of the city’s seashore, between “Hilton beach” and “Peepers beach”, the latter being known for its uninhibited lifestyle. Whereas all other beaches are open from all directions, stone or tin walls separate the “religious” beach from the adjacent ones, and a heavy rubber curtain hangs on the entrance door.

The “religious” beach looks like a 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 it from the top of the hill leading to the shore. Thus the “religious” beach is not hermetically closed, and its separation can be viewed to some extent as symbolic.

The main characteristic that distinguishes the “religious” beach from all the other beaches is its segregation and regulation according to gender. Three days a week the beach is open only to women, three days it is reserved for men. A big sign is posted at the entrance announcing that women are allowed on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and men on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

4 The beach was named after the movie “Peepers” filmed here in the 1970s.
5 The sign is written in both Hebrew and English.
The Ultra-Orthodox Community

The way of life, attitudes and behavior of the Ultra-Orthodox community are very different from those of mainstream society. Two basic characteristics are worth mentioning. Firstly, since religious families usually do not practice birth control, they are much larger than average. Secondly, men study in religious institutions up to their late twenties and beyond, 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 keep strict dietary laws, which are different from those of mainstream society. Their community is autocratic, with a tradition of discipline and obedience. The members are, to a large extent, dependent on religious de-

6 According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, the Ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak in 2001 figured among cluster 2 out of 10 in the socio-economic index ranking Israeli cities.

crees and on the words of their spiritual leaders, the rabbis. These leaders try to
insulate their followers from the influence of secular society. Voluntary residential
segregation is one way of doing so. However, since the Ultra-Orthodox rely on
the wider society to support them, contact with the secular population is unavoid-
able.
The most striking difference between Ultra-Orthodox people and the rest of soci-
ety lies in their attire. Ultra-Orthodox men are dressed like their 18th-century an-
cestors in Europe. “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 the Ultra-
Orthodox differ in their appearance from mainstream society, they are quite con-
spicuous.
Furthermore, men and women are socially segregated. The differentiation between
private and public spheres regarding gender\(^8\) plays a very prominent role in the
community. Ultra-Orthodox people often quote the Psalm “The honor of the
princess lies inside”, meaning that the woman’s honor and modesty oblige her to
limit her activities to the home and family.\(^9\)
Finally, there are different codes of behavior in public places for men and women.
For example, Ultra-Orthodox women often have to work, but are much more re-
stricted in the choice of workplace. They are not allowed to work together with
men, especially non-religious ones.\(^10\)
Some changes have been observed in recent years. Ultra-Orthodox Jews started
patronizing urban public spaces that are not considered “religious”, and are now
also present in “secular” places such as shopping malls and parks. Some scholars
argue that this is due to the adoption of new consumption habits by the commu-
nity. In other words, Ultra-Orthodox people desire to participate in modern soci-
ety’s culture of mass consumption.\(^11\)
However, although they are present in regular shopping centers, parks and other
places, there are some areas where the Ultra-Orthodox preserve their separate
public spaces. One example is the “religious” beach of Tel Aviv.

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8 Rosaldo, M. Z. Women, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview, in: Women, Culture and So-
17-42.
9 Friedman, M. The Ultra-Orthodox Woman. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Israel Research, 1988
(in Hebrew).
10 In the past most Ultra-Orthodox women were employed as teachers. Recently many of them got a
job in the high-tech industry, where there are specific jobs for women.
11 Elor, T. and E. Neriya, The Ultra-Orthodox Wanderer: Time and Space Consumption in Jerusalem,
in: The Israeli Ultra-Orthodox. Edited by E. Sivan and K. Kaplan. Jerusalem: The Van Leer Insti-
Ultra-Orthodox Women on the “Religious” Beach of Tel Aviv

This paper is based on participant observation of Ultra-Orthodox women and their children frequenting the “religious” beach of Tel Aviv during the summer months. As mentioned before, women may use the beach on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Although it is open to all women, the vast majority who patronize the beach are religious. The general public prefers the adjacent mixed beaches.

Most women who patronize the “religious” beach live in the city of Bnei Brak, about 10 kilometers northeast of Tel Aviv. Although there are various “religious” neighborhoods in the metropolis, Bnei Brak is the only “religious” city in the area, with a population of 140,000.12

During the summer most of the Ultra-Orthodox people commute from their hometown to the beach by chartered transportation. Buses bring them in the morning and take them back in the afternoon. On “women’s days” one can observe dozens of buses unloading women, girls of all ages and little boys up to three years, on the sidewalk next to the beach. The commuters have to walk down to the shore, a seven-minute walk.

Some women who live in other areas (or who missed the bus) get to the beach on their own. Most of the beach-goers are women with many children; they carry plenty of packages, and strollers for the little ones. Older girls carry their younger sisters or brothers. One can also observe groups of teenage girls with backpacks, as well as several older women walking down to the beach.

Anyone who passes by the crowd walking down to the beach can tell that these are Ultra-Orthodox women and children. Unlike the general public, they are fully dressed until they are “enclosed” in the “religious” beach. For them the journey of “going to the beach” only starts when they pass the gate. Until they get there, women and girls wear their daily attire. (The same is true for men and boys going to the beach on “men’s days.” They usually wear long black trousers and white shirts and carry their bathing trunks in a plastic bag.)

In contrast to a “world of strangers”13, where people cannot tell who the others are, it is 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 when going to the beach.

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Once on the beach, they disappear in the public bathrooms and change. Some hang their street clothes on hooks attached to 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. Underneath the robes some women wear short pants. This is how they sit in 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 wear a T-shirt on top.

One characteristic of beaches around the world, be it in Tel Aviv or Rio\(^\text{14}\), is their 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”.\(^\text{15}\) On the “religious” beach it is obvious who the people are, so there is no need to look for subtleties in order 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 with the dress code of most bathers, but since it is a public beach I did not feel a need to obey their rules. It is worth men-

\(^{14}\) Freeman (2002) ibid.
\(^{15}\) Freeman (2002) ibid, here: p. 16.
tioning that while I did fieldwork in the Ultra-Orthodox city, I dressed according to their dress code. The city is their territory; the beach belongs to everyone. Very seldom one can observe a woman in a bathing suit. Once I saw three teenage girls in bikinis. When I asked them if they usually come to the “religious” beach, they giggled and said they just came here by coincidence, and usually go to the “Peepers 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 appear, but this is clearly a woman’s territory. When, on rare occasions, a man sets foot on the premises by mistake, there is a big uproar, and the man quickly disappears from the beach.

The lifeguards claim that it is more difficult to be stationed on the “religious” beach than on any other beach, because people here follow their orders less than the general public. It also seems that what makes the job more strenuous is the larger number of children. The area is very crowded. Moreover, according to one of the veteran lifeguards, the vast majority of the beach-goers cannot swim. Only

5% of the women and 10% of the men are able to swim. This is particularly interesting with regard to the men, since in the Talmud there is a reference saying that a father should teach his son to swim.\(^{17}\)

As a result, women and children usually stay very close to the shore, where the water is shallow. Many girls use inflated rubber tires around their bodies 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 brothers. Some are more courageous than others and play close to the deep water.

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

One indication of the lifeguards’ permanent state of alert is the fact that they do not stop yelling into their microphones, calling on the bathers to be careful. On no other beach one can hear the lifeguards shout as much as on this one. They usually address the mothers, urging them to watch their children and keep them close. Sometimes it is funny to hear that someone is looking for “the woman wearing the blue hat”. In addition, from time to time a child gets lost, and then one can hear the lifeguards trying to locate the mother.

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

Most of the time the women spend on the beach they just sit around sunbathing, 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 then uses his microphone to find the child. One can hear the announcement all along the shore.

Most beach-goers bring along food. In the middle of the morning they will unpack their groceries and call all family members to join. However, they will not start eating before performing some rituals. First, they get up and walk to the wa-

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\(^{17}\) The Talmud is a recorded rabbinical discussion pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs and history. It was written around 500 CE. It contains “Shisha Sdarim”, six orders, each of them devoted to a different subject. Religious Jews regard the Talmud as an obligatory text. In “Masechet Kidushin”, which is part of the “Seder Nashim” (order of women), it says that a father has to teach his son to swim, and some say to even have the son swim in the river (“Tosefta Kidushin”, chapter one, Mishnayot A).
ter faucets located close to the entrance of the beach, in order to wash their hands. They take the cup tied to the faucet, fill it with water, pour the water over their hands and say a blessing. Then they go back, sit down and start eating, yet not before saying a 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. In the early afternoon many beach-goers leave in order to catch the chartered bus to their hometown. Mothers yell for their children, making sure that all of them are ready to leave. Then they disappear into the public bathroom and come out dressed, holding their shoes in their hands. They go to the water faucets and wash their feet, dry them and put on their shoes. Older girls help the little ones perform this task. Before leaving, some stand at the wall separating the beach from the promenade and read from their prayer book.

After making sure that nobody stays behind, the families leave the beach and walk over to the bus. The chartered buses wait for the beach-goers on the street close to the shore. In a few cases I saw vans waiting on the promenade by the beach, usually picking up some older women.

Sometimes in the early evening I saw women and children waiting at the public bus stop. It was obvious they came from the beach, waiting for the public bus to take them home. Apparently they had come on their own later during the day, not using chartered transportation. Men and older boys use the public bus more often than women, and one could frequently see them at the bus stop on summer evenings.

**Encounters with the General Public**

The beach is an open public 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 live, at the beach they cannot avoid coming across the secular population. As already mentioned, the two groups usually use different parts of the shore and thus do not cross each other’s path while spending time there, but they do meet on the way down to the beach and back.

As one can imagine, the general public goes to the beach dressed in only a minimum of clothing. Looking at people on the streets nearby, one can tell who is heading towards the sea. The ritual of “going to the beach” starts long before getting there. Men and women usually wear shorts and a T-shirt over their bathing suit and sandals on their feet. The majority of beach-goers dress like that. They
encounter men and women going to or coming from the beach who are not only fully dressed, but also wear clothes that look very peculiar to them.

Elor and Neriya\textsuperscript{18} pointed out that secular and religious consumers participate in similar activities in the public realm, even though they do so wearing different clothes. 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 way. Returning home from the beach at the end of the morning, I once saw two young girls dressed in long skirts walking towards the sea. They passed three girls about their age in very tiny shorts, going to the “Peepers beach”. The two groups looked at each other, but their facial expressions revealed nothing.

Some beach-goers perhaps ignore each other, but it seems that the more common behavior is what Goffman has termed “civil inattention”. As Goffman elaborates, “What seems to be involved is 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”\textsuperscript{19} According to Lofland, this means “inhabitants of public settings act primarily as audience to the activities which surround them”\textsuperscript{20}.

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”.\textsuperscript{21} This certainly applies to the two groups, particularly to the non-religious majority.

Tel Aviv is the main metropolis of the country. It is the center of business, finance and cultural activities and regards itself as a secular, cosmopolitan global city. As Gurevitz and Aran describe it, life centers on the daily personal experience of “living, culture, socializing and having a good time”.\textsuperscript{22}

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

\textsuperscript{18} Elor, T. and E. Neriya (2003) ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Goffman, E. (1963) ibid, here: p. 84.
\textsuperscript{20} Lofland, L. (1989) ibid, here: p. 463.
Whose Beach Is It?

The beach described in this article is a public beach open to everyone. Yet it is regulated according to gender. Interestingly, the majority of the population more or less accepts this arrangement without question. However, one of my neighbors once said, “this is the best beach, they always get the best”. Moreover, the majority of Tel Aviv’s population is secular, and the “religious” beach serves mainly those who live elsewhere. Nobody actually remembers when this arrangement started. I personally have observed this scene for the last decade. Despite recent changes in the consumption habits of the Ultra-Orthodox, it seems that going to the beach is still one of their favorite pastime activities.

At some point the city closed the beach on Saturdays, since religious people do not patronize it on the Sabbath. Many residents protested and some even signed a petition, and the city had no choice but to back down and reopen the beach on Saturdays. In the summer of 2007 the “religious” beach changed its function on the Sabbath and became a mixed beach like any other one. The lifeguards are on leave, but the beach is crowded with men, women and children, all in bathing suits.

Also in the summer of 2007 the city council discussed moving the “religious” beach to another section of the shore, either to the far south or far north of the promenade. One could regard this act as an attempt to drive 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 deserved a bigger portion of the shore, which could be divided into two parts: one area for men and one for women. This way both women and men could use the beach on the same days. The secular representative, on the other hand, claimed that the “walls” surrounding the “religious” beach made the entire shore unattractive, and therefore should be pulled down. However, he did not question the legitimacy of regulating an open public space that practically caters for only a small part of the city’s community.
Discussion

Observing Tel Aviv’s public beach presents an opportunity for studying the various ways people use public spaces and the different meanings they attribute 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”.24

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

Gans25 mentions that a similar space does not necessarily have the same effect on everybody. This is certainly true when one compares the different beaches of Tel

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Aviv. Ultra-Orthodox women enjoy going to the beach like everybody else; otherwise they would not take the trouble of carrying all their children and gear to the sea three times a week, in the summer heat. However, in contrast to the uninhibited lifestyle 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. Spending their leisure time on the “enclosed” beach, dressed in “peculiar” clothes, clearly helps these women maintain the boundaries of their community.

There is an inconsistency in the fact that although officially the “religious” beach is open to all women on specific days, Ultra-Orthodox women patronize it almost exclusively. One can rightly claim that a 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”26.

Perhaps one can look at the situation from another perspective and wonder whether society as a whole may also benefit from it. Recent studies advocate urban policy and planning practices that enable the usage of public places by people of alternative cultures. As Shaw noticed, these practices “can contribute to the diversity and meanings of the city”.27 Paradoxically, one can argue that regulating Tel Aviv’s sea front might add to the social and cultural variety of the city’s open public realm.