

Adloyada: Drunk on the History of Yishuv Purim Celebrations

29.02.2016 | Rachel S. Harris

Hizky Shoham: Carnival in Tel Aviv: Purim and the Celebration of Urban Zionism. Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2014. 275 pp. \$59.00 (cloth)



Hizky Shoham offers a charming exploration of the Purim carnival that was the highlight of the interwar calendar in mandate Palestine. Through meticulous archival research he reconstructs the atmosphere, at once celebratory and restrained, of the balls, parades, and public spectacles that drove spectators in thousands to the burgeoning city of Tel Aviv.

In the innumerable details of petty squabbles, local gossip, devious underhanded maneuvering, and the newly modern conceptions of public entertainment we are offered a path into the mind-set of the Yishuv. Tel Aviv was a place at once determined to invent new folk traditions that celebrated a nationalist ethos and the center of capitalist bourgeois kultur. The city's events, and particularly its parade known as the *adloyada*[\[1\]](#), represented the formulation of urban Zionist ideals, which included a celebration of capitalism and local commerce--*totzeret ha'aretz* (local products), a code of civility, entertainment that elevated "the public spirit," (p. 24), and the invention of cultural tradition. This ideology, if studied as mere doctrine, "seems an unclear conglomerate of unreasonable contradictions" (p. 186); however, "studied as a socio-cultural practice, it is understood as a diversified and vivacious life form, with unexpected powers of subsistence" (pp. 186-187).

That the audiences and the organizers found no contradiction in these differing agendas is a testament to the popularity of the occasion and the deft handling of it by the many actors in positions of leadership. The heroes of this story are H. N. Bialik, the esteemed poet; Meir Dizengoff, the city's mayor; and Baruch Agadati, impresario extraordinaire whose eye for the newest fad and vision of an anti-hierarchical engagement with mass culture would establish and shape many of the most recognized aspects of the celebrations, including the costume balls, the Queen Esther pageant, and the carnival procession. These luminaries who believed

in the creation of an authentic local Hebrew identity by way of popular entertainment were not oblivious to the financial advantages of doing so. Yet nor were these events purely for-profit, private affairs; they also became the chief fundraising operations for Zionist charities, particularly the Jewish National Fund (JNF).

As a historical account of the rapidly evolving practices and ideologies involved in the creation of the events, the book provides a microcosm for considering the development of urban Zionism. From year to year, changes in the funding structures, the kinds of events, their management, and their popularity reveal the ongoing negotiation that took place in the country's symbolic center between an ideological vision that informed the national narrative, and the material reality of changing political and social relationships, Zionist values, and the sheer growth of the urban center. But this local evolution, even at the time, was obscured by the larger ideological symbolism that the festivities represented for the wider community of Jews. Ahad Ha'am's Zionist vision of a Jewish homeland that would serve as a progenitor of national culture which would influence world Jewry and create an identification across the Diaspora with a Jewish homeland and its people was realized in the adoption (and adaption) of the Purim celebrations across Jewish communities throughout the world who held masquerade balls, anointed Queen Esthers, and raised money for JNF long after these activities no longer took place in mandate Palestine.

The book's layout guides the reader through different aspects of the Purim celebrations and examines the nuanced meanings of its symbols, reconstructing the events' cultural capital for the reader. The introduction considers the symbiotic relationship between public (the parade) and private (the balls) events that worked together as a cultural exchange to construct a local Hebrew identity--"despite the differences between the two categories, both were part of the same cultural site, which integrated capitalist mass entertainment with nationalist ideology" (p. 2).

Chapter 1 lays out the ways in which the carnival served as a field of cultural production, considering particularly the role of Agadati in shaping and secularizing traditional Purim elements such as the *purimshpiel* (parodies of local leaders and politics traditionally performed by yeshiva students), *mishloach manot* (food parcels), and *matanot la'evyonim* (charitable contributions) into modern Zionist equivalencies. He "was ahead of his competitors not only in the techniques of entertainment, but also in the commercial use of nationalist ideology" (p. 21); ultimately Agadati became a brand, and his name was used to sell the newfangled ideas that entire committees innovated.

The carnival served to mythologize Tel Aviv. Chapter 2 explores the pilgrimic qualities of the event, its role as both contemporary tourist experience and religious journey, not as the "Jewish" observance of the holiday, but as the "Zionist" rite of passage. In chapter 3 Shoham explores the contradictory ideas of invented tradition. The Zionist culture makers believed that they were replacing two thousand years of rituals with new, contemporary customs. In their haste to create a sense of authenticity, for many even a couple of years was enough to regard an occasion as a tradition! Yet as the book clearly shows, just as practices had been in flux over the previous millennia, particularly between Jews in different regions but also in response to differing political situations, Tel Aviv's new rituals would also continue to evolve.

The convention of the processional as a sacred space and the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque, with its inversion of power structures and its lewd, drunken, liberated merriment, are confronted in chapter 4. Tel Aviv's fundamentally egalitarian society and obsessive discourse about civility meant that the celebrations were actually the model of law and order. If the space was sanctified, it occurred in the worship of the national, and in this respect Tel Aviv as the first Hebrew city served as the Yishuv's Madonna.

Historically, the book of Esther, whose rich cast of characters had served as the basis for multiple aspects of Jewish tradition, was also central to the Tel Aviv celebrations. Chapter 5 explores the figure of Mordechai as an allegory of politics and power in the Yishuv, which stood in contradistinction to the effigy of Haman and his sons that had played a central role in Diasporic observance of the religious holiday. By selecting different aspects of the traditional Purim narrative to celebrate that supported a Zionist ethos and reflected the politics of the day Jews in Palestine found original and subversive ways to attack British rule. However, as Shoham explains, the reintroduction of Haman and scenes of his demise, which had never been a part of the carnival, following Hitler's ascendancy to power in Germany, and the displacement of the story's traditional antagonist by the Jewish enemy of the present served as a return of the repressed and showed the ongoing contemporaneity that characterized the ideology of the carnival.

Chapter 6 refocuses the book by highlighting the gendered nature of the entire affair. The absence of women's voices and the expectations of a passive and beautiful Queen Esther who would do nothing to disrupt Jewish male fantasies expose the racist and sexist underpinnings of the entire enterprise. Whilst women no less than men enjoyed the spectacle, it reinforced gender roles and maintained the bourgeois value system that would continue to dominate the Jewish presence in the country at least until the advent of second-wave feminism in the late 1970s.

Carnival in Tel Aviv is an engaging volume which provides real insight into the formative period of the city's development and the conscious arbitration of its role within the Zionist enterprise by those who believed in its ideological purpose. The book's clarity and lively tone are a pleasure and this reader certainly enjoyed the absence of disciplinary jargon. The occasional typographical error did little to mar what proved a fascinating and highly enjoyable read.

[1] The term derives from the Talmudic phrase that one should drink on Purim "until one does not know" (*ad de-lo yada*) the difference between Haman and Mordecai.

Rachel S. Harris is Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Source: [H-Net Reviews](#); this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](#).