

Cleaning up the 'rear end' of Tel Aviv

By Raz Smolsky | Apr.08, 2009 | 1:25 AM

The city of Tel Aviv is celebrating its 100th birthday, at least as a modern urban center. Which raises an interesting point: Tel Aviv and Jaffa were merged into a single municipality in 1950, creating "Tel Aviv-Jaffa", a cumbersome name for a city if ever there was one.

More to the point, while Tel Aviv's actual age is arguable, Jaffa's is less so. It goes back thousands and thousands of years and is mentioned several times in the Bible, including as the city whence Jonah fled forth to Tarshish in his ill-fated attempt to evade the long arm of the Lord. You know how that worked out for him.

Tel Aviv was officially founded in 1909, at the edge of the ancient port city of Jaffa. Yet you can't exactly say that "Tel Aviv-Jaffa" is celebrating its centennial.

Jaffa had been mostly Arab when Tel Aviv was founded. Today its population is mixed, and the local population is not happy.

Both the formal institutions of the state and developers contribute to the discrimination against Jaffa's Arabs, according to speakers on the social-demographic panel at the Centennial Conference on Urban Sustainability, held by the city of Tel Aviv on April 1.

The panel participants, including builders developing luxury housing in Jaffa, admitted they don't feel comfortable with the treatment of the city's Arab residents. However, for all the open discussion, no solutions were proffered.

The discussion on the panel was begun by Chaled Kabub, a judge at the Tel Aviv District Court and resident of Jaffa. He related the story of buying his first home, an apartment in Tel Aviv, back in 1984. After he bought the apartment, Kabub said, a rabbi from Nazareth tried to foment bad sentiment against him among the neighbors in the building. At least that story ended on an optimistic note: Kabub stayed in the building for 12 years and occasionally provided legal services to his neighbors.

Tel Aviv grew as a Jewish city but, as said, Jaffa didn't, and the problem is that the Arab residents feel pressure there too. Some are expelled from their homes. Others feel discriminated against by the sheer lag in developing infrastructure in Jaffa compared with neighboring Tel Aviv.

But mainly, they aren't happy about the massive entry of new, wealthier people into the neighborhood. Extraordinary homes go up alongside dilapidated hovels. Complexes such as the Andromeda Hill are erected in utter detachment from the surrounding area.

Rachel Alterman, a city planner and lawyer, says that in the past, the state had a clear policy to reduce the Arab population of the seaside city. Today planning policy vis a vis the Arab population has improved, she observes.

The force often blamed for "expelling" Jaffa's Arabs are the developers. Panel member Alon Kastiel, a young builder whose family was involved in the prestigious "Tsedef" project in Jaffa, took the audience by surprise by concurring with the accusations. Prestigious projects in Jaffa are driven by market forces, Kastiel argued - but these forces have to be balanced by regulation, and affordable housing solutions. "But I think that the city of Tel Aviv does nothing but talk. It isn't doing anything about it," he said.

As for Kabub, the judge blames the law governing abandoned property for Jaffa's deterioration. "Before 1948, Jaffa wasn't a slum," he said. "But today it looks like Tel Aviv's rear end. The original sin was the Abandoned Property law, which enables a person to be dispossessed, transforming him from asset owner to protected tenant who pays rent and can't even leave the apartment in his estate."

How can the weaker segments of society be protected? "By positive discrimination," suggests Kabub, explaining that projects should be built in which locals are given first priority to buy. "The Israel Lands Administration should make land tenders contingent on building a number of apartments in each project for local residents. Until a genuine attempt is made to end the discrimination, the situation will only worsen."