

Ambassador Dan Shapiro,

Mickey Gitzin - Member of the Tel Aviv-Yafo city council, and the chair of our pluralism and diversity committee,

Dear leaders and members of the central conference of American Rabbis,

Good evening and Shavua Tov.

I am pleased to be with you today - and I am even more pleased that you have chosen to spend time in our city for the first time.

The significant place that Tel Aviv-Yafo had in your plans is an expression of the unique standing that the "first Hebrew city" העיר העברית הראשונה has today among Jews worldwide. This is a relatively new standing.

In the last ten years, Tel Aviv-Yafo is seen more and more not only as Israel's cultural and business center – but also a city that has unique Jewish importance.

Tel Aviv-Yafo is known in many titles: a nonstop city; a smart city; a tolerant and gay-friendly city; a cool city; and so on. Yet in recent years it is also perceived, more and more, as a Jewish city.

In the eyes of many Jews around the world, Tel Aviv-Yafo represents the optimal model of modern Jewish Independent life. The best proof of that is, that for the first time since the establishment of our State, Tel Aviv-Yafo is today the number one destination for Aliya of Jews to Israel.

But let us not be mistaken: from the very beginning - Tel Aviv was a Jewish city. Since its earliest days, it has been a city of the Torah – but not necessarily one where all the commandments were strictly observed.

It is a city of the Torah in the broadest sense of the word: A city that developed Modern Hebrew culture and brought it to new heights.

And Tel Aviv has also been a Jewish city in terms of its social sensitivity, TIKUM OLAM; its care for the less fortunate; its warm embrace to all parts of Israeli society: Jews and Arabs, Israeli and foreign - all in the spirit of the teachings of the Torah: "One law and one ordinance shall be for both you and for the stranger who lives with you."

This unique model of Tel Aviv 'Jewishness' was not evident for too many years. In the last decade we are experiencing extraordinary prosperity of Jewish life in the city. This prosperity can be seen in religious and cultural initiatives of all types. It can be seen in the sense of community that has developed among many diverse groups around the city. It can be seen in many Jewish festivals, conferences and events.

As I see it, Tel Aviv's model of Jewish life is fulfilling Herzl's dream – who envisioned a democratic and modern Jewish state and not a Medinat Halacha – a state governed by Jewish law.

That is what draws so many Diaspora Jews to Tel Aviv-Yafo today. Some chose to live here; Some visit; Some send their children on Birthright or academic programs. All of these visits are very important to us – because one of the greatest challenges of this generation is maintaining an ongoing connection between Jews from the Diaspora and the State of Israel.

This connection was something that came natural to our parents and grandparents, but does not come natural to our youth. Therefore, you will find us an attentive and eager partner in whatever you choose to do to make that bond stronger.

I wish to end with a special expression of gratitude to the head of the Reform Movement in Tel Aviv-Yafo, Meir Azari. The strong bond that exists today between the movement and the Municipality is in many ways a result of Meir's devotion to the city and its people.

**In Pirkei Avot (פרקי אבות), Yehoshua Ben Perschia
(יהושע בן פרחיה) said - Make yourself a rabbi, and
acquire for yourself a friend. Meir fits that
description: a rabbi in the deep sense of the word: a
community leader and a spiritual guide. But he is
also - and this is perhaps more important - a ^{true} friend.
A friend of Tel Aviv-Yafo, and of me personally.
Thank you Meir for everything you do.
Shavua Tov!**