Deep blue water. On a clear day the plane approaches Israel and suddenly the coastline appears, hazy at the horizon. Still too far away, it is hard to spot any familiar sights along the coast. From up here, Israel looks like one long narrow strip along an extended shoreline, a country with a high coast-to-land ratio, cut off from its hinterland. In those minutes during the landing approach, the stories of those who came long before in order to stay for good become visible to the mind’s eye. Countless immigrants approached the land by air or by water, and the first sight of Erez Israel, be it the Carmel mountains near Haifa, the port of Jaffa, or later the port in North Tel Aviv, produced excitement and anxiousness simultaneously: the vision of the ‘promised land’ and the actual place, Israel, were about to merge. The harbor was a gateway to a new life. Immigrants left their native lands behind and were about to arrive in an unfamiliar place, one that was supposed to become their new home. Now, the coastline becomes more differentiated and the old harbor of Tel Aviv, Sha’ar Zion, the gate to Zion, the desired destination of each journey across the Mediterranean, can be spotted. Today, the old Tel Aviv port is undergoing a process of gentrification. Attractive new boardwalks and paved paths run along the seaside, and trendy seafood restaurants occupy formerly dilapidated warehouses, offering seating next to the old port basin. Yet, the black and white photos lining the hallway leading to the restrooms in the restaurant Yama show heavily-laden camels and dockworkers discharging loads off ships, a reminder of times past. The camels carry heavy building materials to be used in constructing the nearby Reading Power Station, a steam-driven turbine built in 1938. A prominent Tel Aviv landmark, today it serves in part as an art exhibition space. As the point of touchdown draws closer, the circular Kikar ha-Medinah and Dizengoff Street, running in a neat parallel to the sea, become visible. It seems that Tel Aviv, with its coffeehouses and its wonderful people, with its countless stories, eager to be told and written down, is waiting for some focused attention.

Looking back at Israel’s modern history, the sea has played a less important role when compared to the land. One demonstration of this can be found in renowned Israeli graphic designer David Tartakover’s, impressive collection of picture postcards from the 1920s to the 1970s.
In these images, it is striking that the sea, if it is present at all, only appears in the margins. The focus of the photographs is on the actual sites, with the Mediterranean, when it is visible, functioning only as background. Some of the postcards depict sites that became symbols of Tel Aviv over the years, for example, the Reading Power Station, the Mugrabi and the Eden cinemas, the Gymnasia Herzlya, the Hotel Gat Rimon, and Tel Aviv’s city hall. Each of these sites was significant during a specific period of Tel Aviv’s development and demonstrated the city’s openness, Westerness, and modernity. Explaining the absence of the sea, Tartakover remarks: “They had no relation to the sea—although they came through the sea to Palestine. My intuition is that the sea is a traumatic place for them.”

What is the meaning of the Mediterranean for the Israeli consciousness? First and foremost, the sea was once an important passageway to Israel. Most Jewish immigration to pre-state Israel took place via its waters. In a poem by Chaim Guri, we find the line *Between me and my father—the sea*, which addresses the dichotomy between the two different worlds, the Diaspora and a newly invented Hebrewness or Israeliness. “‘Between me and my father—the sea,’ I wrote as I turned 35. He was born in Russia. I, in Tel Aviv. But I was born in the ‘first Hebrew city’ for my father and my mother had immigrated to the country on the ship Ruslan that began the third Aliya in 1919.” After the Second World War, the sea remained the passageway of escape from the ‘continent of murder’ for Holocaust survivors. The so-called illegal immigration during British Mandatory Palestine comes alive in the impressive memories of the commander of those immigration ships, Yossi Harel. Writer Yoram Kaniuk gathered Harel’s recollections into a book, *The Commander of the Exodus*, which poetically tells the story of the emergence of the state of Israel.

There has been much academic and public discussion about the relationship between ‘Tel Avivers’ and the sea, which has played many different roles in the city’s urban development. When Tel Aviv was founded in 1909 north of Jaffa, the first district, called *Achusat Bayit*,

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