CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: POINT OF DEPARTURE

The preliminary events that led to increased attention being paid to the concept of Mediterraneanism, or *Yam Tikhoniut*, will briefly be introduced here. The longing to find a place is a central topos found throughout Jewish history; however, the orientation of the Jews has always been geared toward the land. The place of the sea in the evolving territorial consciousness of Jews was certainly ambivalent and must always be seen vis-à-vis the centrality of territory. After centuries of Diasporic existence, the state of Israel was established in 1948, thus enabling Jews to return to and (re)settle their ‘ancient Jewish homeland.’ Upon the arrival of immigrants to *Erez Israel*, the discrepancy between imagined place—the idealized heavenly Jerusalem—and the actual place—the realities in the land of Israel—surfaced, resulting in numerous rifts within an already heterogeneous society. As a consequence, public discourse over the past decades has repeatedly dealt with the questions of collective identity and belonging, as well as with the search for a shared Israeli culture among a population comprising a wide diversity of immigrants. And the discourse on Yam Tikhoniut under observation here must be seen within that larger context.

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1 In the following the Hebrew term ‘Yam Tikhoniut’ (*Yam ha-Tikhon* means the Mediterranean Sea, literally ‘sea of the middle’) will be used as a synonym for ‘Mediterraneanism’ or ‘Méditerranité’. The revival of ancient Hebrew is credited to the Zionist Eliezer Ben Yehuda, who believed that the Jews should return to their ancient homeland and begin anew to speak their own language. In his first Hebrew dictionary (the first edition was published in 1908), Ben Yehuda gives several references for the Hebrew word *tikhon*: “du milieu, intérieure, innerer, mittlerer, inner, middle” and continues with the references to *Yam ha-Tikhon*, which, according to Ben Yehuda, is a translation from various foreign languages (“Mittelmeer, Mittelländisches Meer, Mediterranean [sea], Méditerranée”) into Hebrew. See Eliezer Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* (New York: Sagamore Press, 1959), 7735.

2 Even though the discourse on the Mediterranean in Israeli public discussion is being analyzed here, this work is not a ‘discourse analysis’ per se, which would focus on a linguistic analysis as well as on a deconstructive reading and interpretation of text. Using the term discourse in this project refers not only to the spoken language (as in conversations, daily interactions, interviews, etc.), but also to written statements from academia, the media, and literature.
Identity and the construction of identity have been much contested in modern and postmodern discourses. Identity today is generally understood to be in constant flux, but is at the same time also subject to historical contexts and antecedents. Yet, identity is not something that is simply inherited; it is also transmitted culturally. There has been an outpouring of research and theoretical debates around the concept of identity and the term is used in many different academic frameworks, although its specific meaning varies depending on the particular research context. To quote Stuart Hall, who deploys a concept that accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.3

Hall also sees in identity formation the “different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”4 Following along these lines delineated by Hall, who points out the inherently shifting character of the object under observation, the focus of this research is the constitutive role of Mediterranean space and place in the construction of Israeliness, i.e., a specific Israeli identity. In this case, Israeliness refers to a common denominator and a reference point that can validly be applied to all the culturally heterogeneous groups within Israeli society. The subject of Israeli identity continues to attract significant public attention and is a highly-charged subject of both academic and public debates. The question of the content of Israeliness is an ongoing, contested issue in Israeli discourse. While some deny the existence of an essential Israeli cultural identity, others proclaim that Israelis are in the midst of an Israeli cultural renaissance. The late Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling pointed out that contemporary Israeli society is characterized by a trend he described as being a subdivision of Israeli identity, one that consists of many different versions but containing only one soft core.5 The search for this soft core, the ‘glue’ or the common denominator of Israeli identity, constitutes an ongoing

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