CHAPTER TWO

TRACING YAM TIKHONIUT IN CONTEMPORARY ISRAEL

As historian Yaakov Shavit has shown in his scholarly article about the origins and the application of Mediterraneanism, the subject “became the basis for a renewed evaluation of the place of Israeli culture within the overall framework of Mediterranean civilization,”¹ and the notion of Mediterraneanism can increasingly be found in Israel’s public discourse dating from the early 1980s. However, its appearance was sporadic and not yet accompanied by a broader public discussion in the media and the academy. This situation had noticeably changed by the 1990s, which can partly be explained by developments related to the Barcelona Process and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Program. Since that time, the Mediterranean has been a viable cultural framework for some, as well as a cultural utopia for others, and one in which Israeli society continues to work to position itself. The inner-Israeli discussion on Yam Tikhoniut is often linked to an open conflict over the meaning of Israeliness, of a specific Israeli identity. In this context the Mediterranean Option is referred to time and again in various ways. Analyses of the public debate and the content of interviews conducted since the mid-1990s demonstrate that the increasing use of the term in numerous fields in the public sphere are indicative of a growing awareness of the region and sense of locality among the Israeli public.

The Succot supplement 2007 of the Israeli daily Haaretz with the title Ha-yam shelanu: me Atlit ad Gibraltar. Mabat al ha-yam ha-Tikhon haiom (Our Sea: from Atlit to Gibraltar. A view of the Mediterranean today), serves as a striking example of this trend. This supplement, printed only in the newspaper’s Hebrew version, contains a potpourri of articles that are all somehow linked to the sea, but are not necessarily limited to the Israeli Mediterranean.² However, whenever the specific Israeli

¹ Shavit, “The Mediterranean World and ‘Mediterraneanism,’” 112.
² One finds the description of Greek islands as a desired getaway, the city of Alexandria between mythos and reality, dolphins, pollution, Jews in Gibraltar, underwater archeology, the city of Istanbul, Islamic countries bordering the shore, and illegal
The growing interest in the history of Mediterranean countries and the Jews of the Mediterranean region among academic circles has become apparent and intensified in the last decade, with various conferences and publications, literary journals and artistic expressions addressing the topic. The tone of the academic discussion ranges from total embrace to harsh rejection. On the one hand, the stance of full approval considers Yam Tikhoniut as a metaphorical entity, a poetic and elitist concept with the potential to integrate the polarized elements of society. On the other hand, the opposition and complete rejection, holds that the concept is a purely artificial construct, turned backwards and glorifying the past. The different individual voices that form these two discourses are analyzed in the chapter ‘Mapping Yam Tikhoniut.’

refugees stranded in Malta. The specific Israeli case is addressed with articles that deal with, e.g., Mediterranean architecture or cookery.