

Regulating Public Space: The “Religious” Beach of Tel-Aviv

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Abstract

Contrary to the past, Ultra-Orthodox Jews patronize urban public spaces that were not considered “religious”, and are now also present in “secular” public places. However, there are still some public spaces that are used separately by this community. One example is the “religious beach” of Tel-Aviv. A “gated beach” surrounded by walls dividing it from the adjacent shores, while rubber curtains hang on its entrance. Contrary to all other public beaches, this one is regulated according to gender; three days a week it is open only to women, while the other three days are for men.

This study is based on participant observation of Ultra-Orthodox women and their children during the summer. Most live in a nearby city, and come to the beach via organized public transportation. The women are accompanied by many children; girls of all ages and young boys. Some teenage girls and older women come on their own. The only men present on the shore are lifeguards.

Although this kind of leisure is universal, Ultra-Orthodox women are different in their attire and behavior. They arrive on the beach in their long dark dresses. Moreover, these women do not wear bathing suits even inside the water, and while on the beach are dressed in cotton robes that cover their knees. Their heads are also covered. Only little girls wear bathing suits. Most bathers cannot swim and thus concentrate close to the shore. In contrast to the long open seashore, to an outsider this beach looks very crowded.