



Photo: Israeli Tourist Office

The minaret of the mosque at the port of Jaffa is beloved of photographers of the Tel Aviv coastline. It punctuates the line of modern hotels with an exotic and distinctive end-point and attracts many tourists to the artists' boutiques of renovated Old Jaffa. But for SUSAN LOEWENTHAL LOURENÇO, real Jaffa is something different

I've lived by choice in Jaffa for 13 years, after a few years in Tel Aviv, the economic and cultural powerhouse of Israel. Tel Aviv is dubbed 'cosmopolitan', but I beg to differ. It's Jaffa that's cosmopolitan – definition: "having constituent elements from all over the world or from many different parts..."

Where else could I find four or five denominations of churches, a variety of mosques and hole-in-the-wall synagogues? There are bars and shops offering top quality wines, a variety of humus 'joints', coffee shops with good conversation, the two best next to homemade ice creameries, their huge samovars pouring out 'sahlab' on cold winter days, a café serving food lovingly made by local women, or vegetables, such as 'red carrots' found at just one greengrocer in the entire area, freshly baked pittot and beigele made only on Saturdays, butchers cutting and selling meat of rare quality and served with all manner of *mezze* (small salads), fish and seafood in cliff-top restaurants, every day, with no break for Yom Kippur, Christmas or Muslim Eid!

And then there are avant garde art galleries, a store front Physicians for Human Rights surgery, churches offering their organs to aspiring musicians to practise, Christmas carols sung by a largely African congregation as well as a flourishing, uncompromising Arab-Hebrew theatre where *One Thousand and One Nights* was recently performed in the round, in partnership with Israel's national Habimah theatre. How many of my Tel Aviv friends have Muslim or Christian neighbours with whom they're on speaking terms and exchange recipes and gifts?

Tel Aviv is 100 years old, but Jaffa was for thousands of years the Eastern Mediterranean's economic and cultural centre. Said to be the oldest Mediterranean

city, though with still visible scars it died as a city 60 years ago and is, today, a small suburb, engulfed by a large metropolis.

Jaffa was incorporated into Tel Aviv in 1950, as 'Tel Aviv-Jaffa' – a peculiar irony since, a century ago Tel Aviv began life as a Jaffa suburb. Palestinians who chose to remain remember the city with a great deal of nostalgia, a tremendous sense of pain and loss, as the "bride of the sea", or a "diamond-studded lantern rising from the water".

It was home to publishing houses, newspapers, cinemas, theatres, sports teams and social clubs. Its middle class families were proud of their heritage yet rooted in the modern world. That world ended abruptly in April 1948. The thriving urban centre became a marginalised neighbourhood, suffering poverty, discrimination, gentrification, crime and demolition. Since 1948 Israel has attempted to absorb the Palestinian city of Jaffa into Tel Aviv – a new city lacking time-honoured traditions and with little semblance of charm.

The area where I live, on the edge of Ajami, boasts many beautiful old homes, a few green parks, lovely sea views, good fish restaurants and an authentic neighbourhood atmosphere. But for the most part, Ajami underscores the Tel Aviv-Jaffa Municipality's neglect and the residents' poverty.

In the time that I've lived here, I sense a difference, some kind of political and cultural revival among the younger Palestinian citizens of Israel – the third generation since 1948.

They have begun to discover and assert their rights – and their Palestinian identity. Many of them are well educated, often in French universities (after attending local, private church schools), but often, also, at Israeli universities.

The past is always present in Jaffa; properties from which Jaffaites fled in 1948 were transferred first to a 'custodian', then to government housing companies. Since then, these areas (among the poorest in Tel Aviv-Jaffa) have experienced soaring property prices, the housing companies are keen to evict the remaining Palestinian tenants. But the newly aware younger generation of Jaffa social activists (Arabs and Jews) has been fighting, legally, to stop the presently scheduled evictions and demolitions of 497 homes.

Jaffa's pain is epitomised by the new Peres Peace House, a multi-million-dollar so-called community outreach centre. Designed by an Italian architect it is nothing more than a long box pointing out into the Mediterranean, segregated from its surrounding poverty-stricken public housing estate next to an ancient Muslim graveyard.

Built for three times the original estimate, the Peres Peace House is less than 300 metres from the water line, making it illegal. Ironically, it was opened on a completely unpeaceful day, the wind roaring, the waves pounding, and papers blowing all over the place. The litter remained for days after the VIPs, not a Jaffa dignitary or council member among them, had left. The relationship between the Peres Peace House and Jaffa, like that between Jaffa and Tel Aviv, is a metaphor for power and muscle versus disadvantage and weakness.



Susan Loewenthal Lourenço (right) and her neighbours

A CITY FOR ALL ITS RESIDENTS

SUSAN LOEWENTHAL LOURENÇO stood for the 'Jaffa List' in the recent Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality elections. She describes the moves towards greater representation of local and environmental issues

One of the grievances of Jaffaites has been the lack of direct representation in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa Municipality (situated in Rabin Square, six or seven kilometres from Jaffa). The council is responsible for social services, community programmes, public infrastructure, urban planning, tourism and other local affairs.

As in national elections, voting is not for specific candidates, but for a list (the 'party list' – a leftover from the selection of Zionist Congress delegates).

Almost as many parties run in local as in national elections, 18 in our last municipal elections but local parties are, more and more, being created to deal with local issues. The question they are asking is not whether Israel will become a state of all its citizens but whether Tel Aviv-Jaffa will be a city of all its residents. Some small steps have been taken recently to evoke a glimmer of hope that transparency, openness and less centrality may be forced on the municipality.

In the recent elections in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, *Ir LeKulanu* (City for All of Us) showed that there could be an authentic, incorruptible political movement representing pro-environment advocates, young people and neighbourhood residents who hold both rightist and leftist views. Meanwhile, in Jaffa similar forces are bringing a new and vibrant energy to local politics.

For the past few years, Jaffa was represented on the Council by a member of Meretz, a leftwing party whose concern was not Jaffa per se. Before that, two members of the Jaffa community, one Christian, one Muslim, rotated in the five-year Council term. Until this year, however, Jaffa's special needs and differences were not really taken into account, either by the parties while campaigning, or by the representatives elected by Israel's complicated method of vote counting (the number elected being proportional to actual votes cast for each party).

So, why was this last municipal election different? The 'Jaffa List',

effectively a new party, put up 31 names, the number of seats on the Council, with the optimistic hope that one, or perhaps even two seats, could be won. What was new and special was the inclusion of women, men, Christians, Muslims and Jews, young and old.

Heading the list were a local businessman with a long record of activity in community affairs and a PhD student at Tel Aviv University, both Muslim; a local Jewish woman and a Christian man followed, and so the list went on, a sprinkling of this, a sprinkling of that, true integration. I was delighted to be a lowly number eleven. For the first time, Jaffaites realised that they needed each other, and they needed the interest, support and votes of their brothers and sisters in Tel Aviv. Together, Palestinian and Jewish Israelis could make a difference. We did.

Typical of Israeli electioneering are 'Open House' invitations extended to

candidates to meet groups of friends in somebody's home. The Jaffa List created a schedule of such meetings to get out its message, and to inform well-meaning Tel Avivians in particular, of Jaffa's needs and concerns. Other than coming to eat fish or 'wipe some humus', few people, living but a few kilometres away, know anything about everyday life in Jaffa. We brought our story to Tel Aviv to those willing to listen.

And we were successful. By the end of a busy and tiring election day, 11 November, 2008, trying to get out the vote, while monitoring the voting process at Jaffa's numerous polling stations, a new councilman from Jaffa had been elected.

A month later, on 15 December, 2008, Omar Siksik gave his maiden speech to the Tel Aviv-Jaffa Municipal Council in Arabic. Earlier, Omar had written to the Mayor, saying that while Arabic is one of Israel's official languages, City Hall does not write to Arabic-speaking residents in Arabic and does not offer Arabic language services in its public offices. Omar's mandate is clear: to represent his broad based Jaffa constituency and make his voice heard. In this, he is being helped out by the five newly elected *Ir LeKulanu* members, all of whom live in Tel Aviv, but who acknowledge and appreciate the stance of the representative from Jaffa.

Susan Loewenthal Lourenço moved to Israel 20 years ago after a long professional career in American universities.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR JAFFA

Clockwise: Councillor and shop-owner Omar Siksik (Muslim)
Mary Kopti, Head of Jaffa Democratic School (Christian)
Yehudit Halibni, Photographer (Jewish)

All on the Jaffa List

Photos: Yehudit Halibni

