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# The Creative Road: From Jerusalem to Tel Aviv

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Until the mid-19th century, Jerusalem was a cultural wasteland, with little significant activity. In fact, creativity that was focused on Jerusalem was more apparent from afar. Jews and non-Jews alike expressed their feelings without setting foot in the holy city; and yet the city was represented in religious poetry and liturgy, in Judaic and Christian art, and in folkways and traditions.

With the advent of modern Zionism and broader geopolitical developments, the pyramid flipped. Jerusalem became a real place with real people and politics. In 1905, the Fifth Zionist Congress, which took place in Basel, announced the establishment of a modern art academy to be located in Jerusalem. A year later, Professor Boris Schatz founded the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in the fledgling downtown of West Jerusalem. It drew young Zionist artists mainly from Eastern Europe to the unique landscape of Jerusalem. Together with traditional Judaic craft makers, these artists fashioned a new line of work that marked the early steps of modern Israeli art and design.

At the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century, a small, modern artists' community began to grow in Jerusalem. Along with a handful of Second Aliyah social and political activists, such as Yitzhak and Rachel Ben-Zvi (who later became Israel's president and first lady) and the author Yosef Haim Brenner, the group of young, modern, secular visionaries formed a community called "the New Jerusalem." Jerusalem was on its way to becoming *the* cultural scene.

The promise was short lived. World War I put a serious damper on the development of the Jewish community in Palestine, and for several years Zionist activity came to a virtual standstill. After the war, the focus of culture and economics shifted to Tel Aviv, and from the 1920s onward, Zionist creative energy was split between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Though it was not the result of a deliberate or formal decision, the division of labor was clear: Tel Aviv, a city that grew out of the sand dunes, extended a more welcoming hand to artists and cultural agents and became the center of culture and art; Jerusalem, serious and historical, became home to intellectuals and politicians who worked to create the infrastructure for the new state.

Where Jerusalem housed the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), the political foundation of what later would become the Israeli government, as well as the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv became the hub of visual art, theater, literature, and journalism. That division of labor still holds today — to the chagrin of the loyal Jerusalemites who balk at the notion of a culturally inferior Jerusalem. The distinction, though, lacks nuance and reinforces certain stereotypes. A deeper analysis notes that many cultural innovations begin in Jerusalem and then relocate to Tel Aviv.

A few years ago, the daily newspaper *Haaretz* ran a story about a cutting-edge rock group. The band members, now based in Tel Aviv, described how they began their creative journey in Jerusalem. The article concluded that while Jerusalem served as an effective breeding ground for cultural innovation, once the artists matured and their art became their livelihood, they moved to Tel Aviv.

Here's a theory: While Tel Aviv is the hub of Israel's cultural scene, Jerusalem is the breeding ground for a plethora of cultural innovations. Why does this happen? Even though Jerusalem is the largest city in Israel, it does not have the critical mass to sustain a vibrant cultural life. The proximity of Jerusalem's diverse population is a source of tension, curiosity, and inspiration to many artists. The presence of art schools and various cultural and religious groups that fill the city make Jerusalem a fertile ground for start-ups and fringe cultural innovations. But once the cultural innovation has matured, the cultural creators move to Tel Aviv, a city that has the capacity to sustain the art.

Jerusalem's demography remains a significant challenge to artistic activity. The robust ultra-Orthodox center located in Jerusalem is insular and rarely plays a role in the country's cultural renaissance. Increasingly, for some, the closed traditional society puts a "damper" on one's sense of freedom and creativity. Literally, one sees the cloistered courtyards and high walls in Jerusalem as bounded while the expansive Mediterranean Sea of Tel Aviv appears boundless. As well, the Palestinians of Jerusalem are connected to the cultural centers of the West Bank and the Arab world.

This very friction — of walls and dogma — ignites rebellion and innovation, which is encouraging. More than 100 years since the founding of Bezalel, Jerusalem is positioning itself as the "start-up" cultural phenomenon: *Ki MiZion Tetzei Torah* — From Zion comes Torah.

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