



Shulie Mishkin



For Israel's 70th birthday, the city of Tel Aviv inaugurated a one-kilometer long path called the Independence Trail, *Shvil HaAatzmaut*. The idea was modeled on Boston's famous Freedom Trail and – like that walk – includes many sites significant to our country's early history. The trail begins in the heart of today's financial district, at the intersection of Rothschild Boulevard and Herzl Street. The names of the streets are significant: Herzl was the visionary and Rothschild was the banker. Ideas and dreams may drive innovation but without the money man, you won't get far!

This was the core of the Achuzat Bayit neighborhood, the seed from which Tel Aviv grew. Achuzat Bayit was founded in 1909 by 66 families, and eventually adopted the name Tel Aviv, a reference to a site in the book of Ezekiel but also a play on Herzl's famous book *Altneuland*: a *tel* (an archaeological site) is old, while *aviv* (spring) is new.

The trail meanders down and around Rothschild Boulevard. One significant site is the house of Akiva Aryeh Weiss, a religious Jew who was the force behind the new neighborhood. He gathered the group of 66 families, laid out the plots and organized the lottery (with the plot numbers written on seashells!) that assigned each area to a family. Imagine the vision it took to lay the plans for a full-fledged neighborhood, with a school, homes and main streets, when all he saw were sand dunes.

Speaking of the school, the trail also passes by the Shalom Tower, a few decades ago the tallest building in the Middle East, today not even the tallest building on its block! The structure that originally stood here, at the center of Achuzat Bayit, was the most important building in the neighborhood, the Gymnasia (Hebrew high school). The importance of Hebrew to the founders of Achuzat Bayit cannot be overemphasized. The rebirth of the Jewish people had to be accompanied by the rebirth of its language and culture. Near the Shalom Tower is the magnificent mosaic fountain created by Nachum Gutman, a child of Achuzat Bayit. It depicts scenes from Jaffa, Tel Aviv's much older sister, and Tel Aviv itself.

The trail encompasses many other important sites but its last stop is the most significant. This is the modest house at 16 Rothschild Boulevard, formerly the Dizengoff family home, today known as Independence Hall.

Meir and Zina Dizengoff were among the first families of Achuzat Bayit. Meir became Mayor of Tel Aviv in 1911, and until his death in 1936 he was actively involved in building up the city. When his wife died, he donated the main floor of his house to become the Tel Aviv Art Museum and he lived upstairs. But the building is not famous for its art and culture. On May 12th, 1948, a meeting of the *Minhelet HaAm*, the People's Council, was held to decide whether to create the Jewish State upon the withdrawal of British forces a few days later. After hours of debate, the faction that

wanted to declare the State immediately, rather than waiting, won by a **single** vote.

Invitations were sent out to a ceremony declaring independence to take place two days later, Friday the fifth of the Hebrew month of Iyar, in this building. Why was it held in Tel Aviv in this particular building? Because Jerusalem was under siege and inaccessible to many members of the proto government. The art museum was essentially a bunker, located underground and thus safe from enemy attacks.

There are many other fascinating aspects to the story of the Declaration of Independence. To me though, the most significant one is what I just mentioned: despite the festive atmosphere, Israel was in mortal danger on May 14th. Gush Etzion had just fallen, Jerusalem's Old City was under siege, Jerusalem itself was blockaded, and the Egyptian army was advancing on Tel Aviv. Battles were raging all over the country. There were no guarantees this audacious gamble would work. And yet it did and we are here to tell the tale 72 years later. Although Independence Hall is not mentioned in the Gemara in Brachot, it seems an eminently appropriate place to recite the blessing "*sheAsah nes laAvoteinu baMakom haZeh*," blessed are You, O G-d, Who performed a miracle for our forefathers in this place!

Shulie Mishkin is an Israel tour guide who specializes in "back to the sources" tours