

Conservation of Water Towers as Sanctifiers of Life

Summary

"He went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel" | Genesis 29:10

Since the early days of humanity, as for other species on earth, water reservoirs have been sources of attraction, a place to play, relax and communicate. Societies formed, cultures were born and with them evolved unique ceremonies around water, the most common and yet most mystical of all substances.

During the Jewish immigration to Palestine in the 1920s-1940s, tall water towers that were erected in many settlements and towns, primarily to fulfill a functional need, became iconic structures. The water tower acted as a landmark, a meeting point and for many at that time, a symbol of the re-settling of the land. The water tower's effect on its vicinity can be compared to a centrally located church tower which usually stands out as the highest built structure in communities across the Christian world or the Islamic Minaret situated near the mosque.

Hundreds of water towers were built in different periods and styles across Israel, many of which now stand dry, unnoticeably disintegrating. What used to be a sign of vitality now stands as a shameful memory of useless concrete, carrying antennas or advertisement posters. Very few municipalities have realized the historic and cultural value of the water tower and renewed the structure. Most of the towers, however, haven't been gracefully treated, if at all.

For instance, in the heart of the white city of Tel-Aviv, recognized in 2003 by UNESCO as an international conservation site for the heritage of the modern movement, stands a water tower, built in eclectic style in 1924 by Engineer Arpad Gut. For over a decade, the tower was Tel-Aviv's tallest building. Local residents realized the social and cultural importance of the water tower and regarded it as an important landmark. The elderly still tell of a night In December 1931, when the

firefighter choir performed an act on the roof of the tower, before lighting the big Hanukkiah (candle holder lit over 8 evenings of Jewish holiday of Hanukkah), presently still situated on the roof, crumbling from rust.

Technology has deeply transformed the traditional customs around water. In the metamorphosis brought by modernity, the well became a pump, the bucket had turned into a tap, and humans, deprived of a social custom that had for centuries bound communities, are becoming more comfortable and yet lonelier.

On a theoretical level, the water towers of Israel should regain their communal role as sanctifiers of life, resume their position as public spaces in a form adequate to the contemporary lifestyle. On a more practical level, these towers' centrality can be used for multiple social purposes. Their internal space and roof can be used for recreational activities. In a way, conserving of local water towers by converting them into to cultural centers would allow us to adapt a valuable age old custom to the 21st century.