

Shchenim, shchunot, shchunatiyut: Ha-haim ha-ironiyim be-Falestina-E"l ha-mandatorit [Neighbors, neighborhoods, and neighborliness in Mandate Palestine]

by Elia Etkin, Jerusalem, Magnes, 2025, 417 pp., \$43 (hardcover), ISBN 978-965-7839-46-1

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BOOK REVIEW

Shchenim, shchunot, shchunatiyut: Ha-haim ha-ironiyim be-Falestina-E'I ha-mandatorit [Neighbors, neighborhoods, and neighborliness in Mandate Palestine], by Elia Etkin, Jerusalem, Magnes, 2025, 417 pp., \$43 (hardcover), ISBN 978-965-7839-46-1

In contemporary Israel, one's neighborhood rarely serves as a meaningful source of identity or sociality. Our children will probably not write nostalgic songs about their neighborhoods, as earlier generations did. The term "neighborhood" has even taken on a pejorative slang meaning in Hebrew, implying sloppiness or uncivilized behavior. Yet this was not always the case. As Elia Etkin's fascinating book shows, the Mandate-era neighborhood was a locus of collective significance, belonging, and civic action. While not the first study devoted to urban life in the Yishuv, it is the first one dedicated to this socio-spatial unit. What happens, Etkin asks, if we tell the story of Zionist settlement and nation-building by shifting our gaze from rural settlements or entire cities to neighborhoods and neighborly relations? Such a perspective, she argues, can shed new light on the history of nation-building in a context shaped by immigration, empire, and colonial domination.

There is a strong connection between immigration, weak state provision, and the formation of urban communities with strong communal ties. While cities provide immigrants with culturally heterogeneous environments and economic opportunities, they are also characterized by social anonymity. Given that many of the Jewish immigrants to Mandate Palestine arrived without family networks and that the welfare mechanisms of the Mandate government and the Yishuv's institutional framework offered minimal assistance, if any, neighborly relations assumed heightened importance.

"A neighborhood" might be a formal unit for municipal administrators, but it is first and foremost the residents, and not municipal officials or developers, who make a neighborhood. Neighborhoods formed their own governing institutions, and those framed the neighborhood as a community united not only by a shared physical space but also by common lifestyle, socioeconomic profile, and often ethnic, national, or political affinities. The neighborly identity, Etkin argues, motivated people to act within the neighborhood for its advancement. In her account, neighborhoods – more than cities – were the key arenas of civil participation in the Yishuv. They were the smallest collective units that reveal how urban society was consolidated and the source of much of its cohesiveness.

Yet Etkin does not offer a nostalgic or idealized portrait of communal life in neighborhoods. Her account is attentive to social differences, tensions, and conflicts, not just between but within neighborhoods. Neighborhoods could be contiguous yet sharply divided by invisible lines of class, ethnicity, nationality, or religion, some more easily crossed than others, depending on historical context. Everyday spatial practices and experiences in and of neighborhoods varied significantly depending on one's social categories of affiliation. And neighborly relations, even when they provided a sense of belonging and a network of support, could also be sites of friction, resentment and social control.

The book is divided into three parts. The first examines the establishment and management of neighborhoods. The Mandate period witnessed a surge in the founding of new Jewish neighborhoods. Etkin traces the processes behind their establishment and maps the diverse types of neighborhoods that emerged. Given the marginal place of the city in Zionist ideology and the absence of a governmental body responsible for building new urban neighborhoods,

most new Jewish neighborhoods were established “from below” – initiated by local entrepreneurs, voluntary associations, and ad hoc groups. They tended to be geographically peripheral, heterogeneous in layout and population, and developed without centralized principles. Etkin also analyzes the formation of neighborhood communities, their bylaws, and committees, which attempted to regulate collective life.

The second, and most substantial, part of the book presents three case studies: The Haifa neighborhood of Bat Galim – a secluded bourgeoisie Jewish neighborhood on the coast; The Jerusalem “garden neighborhood” Bayit Ve-Gan, established by members of Ha-Po’el Ha-Mizrahi on the city’s western outskirts; and the Ha-Tikva neighborhood, established on the south-eastern outskirts of Tel Aviv, and populated primarily by Mizrahi Jews. Each chapter examines one neighborhood in depth – its founding, its communal institutions, its demographic and spatial character, how it was perceived internally and externally, its social and cultural life, its relations with municipal and governmental bodies, and its interactions with its Palestinian Arab “neighbors” (I use quotes because in the case of Arabs, neighbors is a figure of speech, indicating both geographical proximity and exclusion from Jewish kinship). Etkin walks us through the history of these neighborhoods’ development, their unique spatial and social traits, and the network of actors, institutions, practices, and conflicts that turned each into a distinct urban space.

The third part focuses on neighborly relationships and residents’ attachments to their neighborhoods. Chapter 6 explores “intimate neighbors” – strangers sharing apartments, a widespread arrangement in the Yishuv that challenged prevailing notions of domestic intimacy. Etkin examines not only the complexities of these arrangements but also the institutions charged with regulating them, especially the Comrades’ Courts of the Histadrut. The final chapter explores the various practices, spaces, and institutions that “made a neighborhood” – that created a sense of shared socio-physical space – and how gender and age structured the ways people made and experienced their neighborhoods.

Taken together, the book shows how a convergence of factors shaped neighborhoods as core spaces of Zionist social and cultural formation: rising Jewish immigration; increasing spatial separation between Jews and Arabs; the unregulated and peripheral character of neighborhood development; the localized management of neighborhoods; intimate neighborly relations; and the emergence of a sense of neighborhood belonging rooted in everyday practices and networks of mutual support and solidarity. The neighborhood, Etkin argues, was the locus where diverse Jewish groups maintained social contacts anchored in the connection to the physical environment; where a new, secular Hebrew culture was fashioned, with affinity to the Jewish calendar and social and cultural institutions; and where social inequalities and power struggles were manifested on the level of everyday life and social interactions.

Etkin situates her work within the “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences, which views space as socially constituted and generative rather than as a neutral backdrop for human activity. To regard a spatial unit such as a neighborhood as generative means to understand it not as a scaled-down version of a city, but as a space with particular characteristics and affordances. These characteristics were themselves shaped by shifting historical, political, and economic conditions – most notably the intensifying national conflict and the growing spatial separation between Jews and Arabs. At the same time, Etkin notes how internal boundaries of class and ethnicity shifted in meaning during the 1948 war, when national borders acquired heightened significance.

Neighbors, Neighborhoods, Neighborliness is a substantial scholarly achievement, impressive in its scope and depth. It combines a gaze from above with a gaze from below, encompassing institutions, professional actors, reformers, activists, and

residents, across three distinct urban contexts. Hardly any aspect of neighborhood life is left unscrutinized, and the analysis is rigorous and multifaceted, considering both structural factors and the contingencies of everyday life. It is also an engaging read, and the wealth of photos enriches the historical account. The book will be of interest to scholars in a range of disciplines, including history, urban sociology, anthropology, planning, as well as to the general interested public.

There are, however, points where more elaboration would have been useful. One concerns the selection of the three neighborhoods. Etkin mentions that all three were populated by groups outside the hegemonic center, but she does not clarify whether this was the guiding rationale for choosing them. If it was, what insights does focusing on these particular groups offer? How do these forms of peripherality compare? Would an analysis of central neighborhoods, or mixed Arab–Jewish neighborhoods, have offered a different outlook on the significance of neighborhoods?

More significantly, Etkin refrains from providing a sufficiently explicit conceptual framework for the emergence of spatial separation between Jews and Arabs. She identifies three explanatory frameworks – the dual-society framework, the colonial framework, and a relational framework focused on contacts – but does not articulate how they might be integrated or how she positions her argument in relation to them. Without a clearer conceptual anchor, the underlying logic driving the establishment of separate Jewish neighborhoods, and their relationship with the Palestinian–Arab population, remains under-theorized, beyond references to fears of violence. Etkin herself mentions that the relationship between Bayit Ve-Gan and the neighboring villages was tense almost since Jews started buying land in the area. For example, the assertion of Bayit Vegan residents that they “let” Arabs from neighboring villages pass through the neighborhood as a favor, despite the absence of any “formal right,” raises questions about entitlement, ownership, and hierarchy that would benefit from a more systematic treatment.

Compared with studies that treat everyday life as either an escape from politics or a site where political structures are simply reproduced, Etkin offers a more nuanced approach: while everyday practices are not reducible to politics, they can generate political sentiments and dispositions. Yet without fuller engagement with the mediating discourses through which everyday experiences acquire meaning, it remains difficult to explain why such experiences should cultivate a sense of shared fate “more everyday and real than any publicist text” (p. 326), rather than reinforcing alienation or difference. This is not to deny that everyday experience can generate political attachments, but to underscore the importance of attending to the broader discursive frameworks through which they are interpreted by the historical actors.

Regardless of these points, the book is an important and original contribution to the history of Zionist urbanity. Etkin’s thoughtful analysis illuminates a largely overlooked unit of attachment, community formation, and civic engagement, demonstrating its importance for understanding how a national community was fashioned in the everyday spaces of Mandate-era cities.

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