

If you will it, this is no dream

By Dan Rabinowitz

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Jaime (Haim) Lerner completed his remarks to prolonged applause - something rare at any university conference. I close my eyes and try to imagine an experimental project. Say we take the Ibn Gvirol route in Tel Aviv from Kikar Hamoshavot to Sde Dov and scatter innovative bus stops every 300 meters along its length. Each of the stations would look like a transparent horizontal tube about 20 meters long with a diameter of about 3 meters. It would be raised about 60 centimeters above the pavement, it would have a few automats in it for purchasing tickets with cash or a credit card, air conditioning and four large exits.

And let's suppose that we purchase scores of those bendy articulated buses with 300 passenger-capacity, with doors tailored to fit the stops. When the doors of the buses and the stops are open, a continuous surface is created, without a step or a gap, which makes it possible for about 100 passengers a minute to board or alight, like on the platform of a subway train. And let's say we take two out of the four existing traffic lanes and devote them to the exclusive use of the new buses, one lane in each direction. And let's suppose buses are dispatched every two minutes. Would it, in the light of all this, not be correct to say that we had transformed a congested traffic artery into an efficient and user-friendly mass transit system?

And let us suppose that the public likes the new accessibility, and a year later, after public pressure, we open another line, perhaps from Hatayassim, through Hashalom, Kaplan and to Ibn Gvirol, or alternatively from Derekh Yaffo-Tel Aviv to Petah Tikva, via Jabotinsky in Ramat Gan and all the way to Jabotinsky in Petah Tikva and Kikar Rothschild. And supposing that we make sure that existing railroad stations and future stations along the suburban train line are linked by open pedestrian paths to the new bus stops. Would it not, given all this, be correct to say that the Tel Aviv metropolis has undergone a transportation revolution that enables it to enjoy unprecedented economic and social growth?

Lerner, the man whose words led me to this reverie, was the main speaker at a recent academic conference on public transportation that was initiated by the Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership, Merhav, and the Porter School of Environmental Studies at Tel Aviv University. The prolonged applause that Lerner earned was an expression of the fact that in academia, too, they value what Lerner has in abundance: winning clarity, common sense and above all - the wisdom of the experience of someone who has already done what he is proposing.

The son of Jewish immigrants from Poland, Lerner is an architect by training, and served three terms as mayor of the city of Curitiba - a poor Brazilian city of 3 million inhabitants. When he first took up the position and discovered that there was not enough money to build a train, he took a main boulevard, quite similar to Ibn Gvirol in Tel Aviv, and within half a year built there the bus line as described above. Later on he transformed about a square kilometer in the center of the city into a pedestrian mall and restricted entry of cars into the rest of the city. The municipality he headed also began

to buy sorted waste from the inhabitants and achieved one of the highest waste sorting rates in the world, but that is another story.

Thirty years on and Curitiba is flourishing, full of parks and the site of an open ecological university and an improved quality of life. Lerner is a celebrity in the international environmental movement and in the field of municipal government.

Israel urgently needs a Lerner of its own, and he need not be from the center of the country. A smart bus line from the Eilat Airport to Almog Beach, or along the main boulevard in Kiryat Shmona or on Paul VI Street in Nazareth could bring about the revolution of consciousness that is needed and make waves throughout the country.

I'm not a vengeful sort of person, but when I ponder a transportation revolution like this, I cannot but rub my hands in glee at the thought of its victims: the manufacturers and importers of cars, the fuel companies and the road-pavers of all sorts who are systematically damaging the quality of urban life all over the world.