A Global City

The Hon. Ron Huldai

**An Interview with
The Honorable Ron Huldai,
Mayor, Tel Aviv-Yafo**

EDITORS' NOTE *Ron Huldai is an Israeli politician and a former high school headmaster and fighter pilot. In the course of his 26 years of military service in the Israeli Air Force, he served as a combat pilot and held several key senior command positions including Brigadier General. Following his retirement from active duty, he became headmaster of the prestigious Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium (High School) and remained in office for six years. A member of the Labour Party, Huldai was first elected mayor of Tel Aviv in 1998, and was reelected in 2003 and again in 2008. He is running for his fourth term in an election that is expected to take place on October 22nd.*

How has Tel Aviv performed so successfully year after year?

Israel and the financial industry went through a crisis in 1984 when the banking system was nationalized. This brought about new legislation and regulation, which resulted in a conservative system.

The conservative banking system and a strong high-tech industry are the basis for a stable system in the State of Israel.

When I became the Mayor of Tel Aviv 14 years ago, the city was on the verge of bankruptcy. It was a problematic situation compounded by a deteriorated infrastructure and a negative budget balance.

We have turned around the way we manage the city. After doing so, we have achieved a balanced budget and greater stability for 11 years in a row.

By investing more, we have created an image for the city, which has meant that the number of young people between 18 and 35 has doubled over the past 14 years. Every year, we open more elementary schools, high schools, and kindergartens, because a lot of young families are now settling in the city.

Today, the city of Tel Aviv is in good shape and very vibrant, and the center of everything in Israel. There are several months until the next election. There are no term limits in Israel so I'm going to run again.

Our vision for the future is to create the kind of city that one can navigate without cars by traveling on foot or bicycle, car sharing, or by taking a light rail that we are going to begin operating in 2018. We have become the hub for SkyTrain, which is based on a special technology developed by NASA.

Has the message gotten out about how much you have improved the city in terms of safety and security?

Those are concerns. We have changed the way we promote the city. Until recently, we neglected the American market and concentrated on London, Paris, and Berlin. We have seen a real change in the type of tourist that is coming to visit and the perception of Tel Aviv.

People don't understand that although soldiers with guns are on the border, they are not present in everyday life. Tel Aviv is one of the safest cities on earth.

Because we are promoting the city, the occupancy of our hotels last year was more than 80 percent on average. We saw the highest number of tourists in Tel Aviv last year.

Tel Aviv represents modern Israel. I'm speaking of greater Tel Aviv, which comprises around three million people; it's half the country and represents democracy, pluralism, science, culture, and education, and it's home to every minority – everyone can feel safe living here. We're also an international city that doesn't isolate itself.

Do you have the infrastructure necessary to meet the demand today?

Investment in the tourism industry is being done with an eye on the long term. Today, we have 8,000 rooms and we have another 2,000 rooms in construction that will be available in the years to come. We are seeing a lot of boutique hotels in the city and not only on the beach, but also in the center of the city.

How important is the entrepreneurial focus for Israel?

No one knows what spurred innovation in Israel, but it's certainly there. I'm trying to empower that activity and make Tel Aviv better for entrepreneurs and innovators. We have set a goal to be a kind of Silicon Valley for the rest of the world.

To facilitate, we are cultivating the right ecosystem for our people. We have opened a public library for those working on start-ups. They get free Wi-Fi, coffee, and a table to work at. Also, by getting together, they can brainstorm and network.

The beach in Tel Aviv

We are now working to encourage the government of Israel to offer start-up visas for entrepreneurs from around the world who want to work with our people. We are trying to double the number of foreign students coming here, and we are developing special programs for these young people.

We're also developing apps for practical use in the municipality and to ease the process for the people of Tel Aviv to get services. We offer free Wi-Fi throughout the city, so people can work anywhere. In many of the schools today, we don't use paper books, but only iPads and laptops. They don't even write with pen and paper. We are trying to use technology for practical living.

How important has Israel's world-leading education been to developing a strong workforce?

Education is one of the core values of the State of Israel. We have developed a system that is serious about promoting teaching. Israel is among the leading countries moving into the future in science, and also in math, English, and computational science.

Tel Aviv is also special because the Weizmann Institute submitted a paper for the government of Israel on how to teach science effectively in the future and the city of Tel Aviv was the only city to pick it up as a challenge and follow through on it.

We have a special center in the middle of the city where our high school students can come to be educated by the best teachers; there is also an advanced lab there. We invest a great deal in this center.

What should business leaders know about Tel Aviv?

Tel Aviv is a place where perception does not equal reality. Once you come here, you will want to return because Tel Aviv has it all – the right size; the right roads; excellent people, weather, and food; and it's very vibrant. It's good for business and leisure. ●