



TEL AVIV-YAFO

Encouraging and Promoting Creativity

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



The Hon. Ron Huldai

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 Labor Party, Huldai was first elected Mayor of Tel Aviv in 1998, and was reelected in 2003, 2008, and again in 2013.*

Tel Aviv continues to show strong growth. What has contributed to the city's resilience and has allowed for its sustained growth?

There is a distinct difference between the Israeli economy and the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality economy.

Israel came out of the 2008 crisis relatively untouched, which is a result of our conservative banking system and partially because, during the '80s, we faced a crisis when our banks filed for bankruptcy and were nationalized by the government. Since then, the system has become a lot more conservative.

Our economy today, based on the creativity of our people, is still prosperous, and we continue to see growth there.

In terms of Tel Aviv-Yafo as a municipality, we have been rated AAA Stable by Standard & Poors. We have had a surplus in our budget for the past 12 years and, because we are very conservative, we continue to be very careful about only spending on necessary things.

At the same time, we have an excellent record in collecting tax, and in getting more for every dollar we spend.

What has allowed the country and the city to have so much entrepreneurial success?

I am not sure, but I can offer a theory. After 2,000 years of discrimination, people's motivation becomes stronger. That is the case of the Jews – inside and outside of Israel. Because Israel is always in a status of crisis and young people serve in the military at an early age where they meet the cutting-edge of technology, they are always engaged in a problem-solving and creative process.

I'm not pretending to be the one who says he knows why our young people are so creative. But as a mayor, I'm trying to empower the process by encouraging and promoting it, and by creating an ecosystem that provides the best conditions for it.

Is the level of security and safety within the city and country well understood, and how critical is it to promote that understanding?

Israel as a whole is sometimes perceived by outsiders as not safe, but if you live in the city of Tel Aviv, you live in one of the safest cities in the world. There is no problem for anyone, even women going out very late at night in every part of the city. It's safe, by all means.

It's not a misnomer that it's known as the nonstop city; it has been a goal of the city to remain active at every hour of the day by creating better culture, activities, and nightlife.

How strong is Tel Aviv's education system and what role is it playing in developing the next generation of leaders?

At the international level, people have criticized the achievements of our education system. But I'm heavily involved in our education system, and I can see the city is doing better every year in all of the parameters used to measure success.

More of our students graduate, final exam scores are higher, and according to our surveys, parents are very happy with the educational system.

When people challenge our education system, it's because we are sometimes ranked lower in comparison to developed countries. However, we have had to adapt to the number of young people between the ages of 18 and 35 in our city, which has doubled over the past 15 years; I had 250 kindergartners 15 years ago, and today, I have 500.

What investments have you made in infrastructure?

We have done everything, top to bottom: paved hundreds of streets and sidewalks, completely redone the sewer system, and doubled our green-space areas. We have had a dramatic reduction in air pollution, and a complete renovation of the parks, boulevards, and squares. In addition, we've updated the Boardwalk along the beach, and we've cleaned the beach and the main river.

We have invested \$500 billion in 20 megaprojects in the city of Tel Aviv including the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the historic train station, and historic city hall.

These have added up to a real change for the city – today, it's cleaner and greener; it's completely different.

As you look to this coming term and the next term, what are you most focused on to make sure this city continues to grow?

The city of Tel Aviv is not just the city itself, but it is the center of the metropolis for which we play a very important role, as well.

We face four main challenges: the first is the absence of an efficient and sufficient public transportation system. We are in the process of starting to dig the first two lines of a light rail that is partially underground in the middle of the city. This project is beginning to address the main challenge of this metropolis.

The second challenge is the high cost of living, and especially the high cost of real estate, and the challenge of providing affordable housing within this metropolis. We can't overcome the problem by just addressing it in the city of Tel Aviv, as this is a national issue; nevertheless, we are now in the process of offering more affordable housing in the city for the first time. We have not been in this business in the past, but now we have to be.

The third issue is addressing the high number of illegal labor-seeking people who have come to this country. They account for 15 percent of the residents of the city of Tel Aviv today.

The fourth issue is to empower and strengthen the emerging technology and high-tech industries. We are second after Silicon Valley for start-ups.

We also see ourselves as a model of adapting technology for the service of our people.

Do you ever take time to appreciate all that you have accomplished?

I'm always looking at what is next, but when someone stops me in the street and says "Good work," it makes my day. If you ask me how I would like to be remembered 30 years from now, the answer is simple: as a good Mayor. ●