Once upon a time: The story of ZIM

ZIM's story spans more than half a century. From its beginnings as a carrier of immigrants from war-torn Europe to the ports of the future State of Israel, ZIM has grown to become one of the world's leading shipping companies, operating in every part of the globe.

TSS Kedmah, ZIM's first ship, in 1947
The crew of Kedmah with ZIM flag, 1947

The beginning: A company with purpose

ZIM was established in 1945 by the Jewish Agency, Histadrut labor federation, and the Israel Maritime League. The company's first ship, the Kedmah, was purchased in 1947. The early fleet included ships that were refitted to carry immigrants from Europe and to bring much-needed supplies during the 1948 War of Independence, and the difficult early years of statehood.

TSS Kedmah arrives with immigrants on board, 1949
SS Artza, a painting by Paolo Klodic, 1949
SS Galilah, one of ZIM's early passenger ships

Expansion & Growth: 1953-1968

1953 began a 15-year run of global expansion for ZIM, during which the company acquired 36 passenger, cargo, bulk-carrier, and container ships, and launched a range of passenger and cargo services. ZIM discontinued its passenger services in the late 1960s, as air travel became more popular and widely accessible. Now, ZIM was ready to dedicate all its energy and resources to international cargo shipping.

Negbah 2, on her maiden voyage on the river Elbe
Pioneers of the Container Revolution

Advertisement for ZIM's groundbreaking Container Service

In 1969, approximately 50% of ZIM was acquired by the Israel Corporation. By ZIM’s 25th anniversary in 1970, the company owned 77 ships, chartered 70 ships, and operated 19 major cargo lines, carrying 4.3 million tons of cargo annually.

Next, ZIM made the bold move into container shipping. ZIM was a pioneer in this area, one of the first carriers in the world to adopt the technology that was new at the time, yet destined to dominate the shipping industry in the decades to come. To this end, the company acquired six specialized container ships, in addition to containers and shore equipment.

In 1972, ZIM introduced the innovative ZCS. The “ZIM Container Service” was a three-continent line, with a scheduled 100-day journey that originated in Israel and included ports of call in the Far East, Asia, America and Europe. During this period, ZIM also deployed tankers to carry crude oil from Iran to Israel, and finished goods from Israel to Europe.

During the late 1980s, ZIM embarked on a massive fleet renovation and expansion project. From 1990 to 1997, ZIM built 15 modern ships, enabling the company to offer a weekly fixed-day sailing schedule, positioning ZIM among the world’s top-ranking shipping companies.

In response to the global shipping crisis in 1997, a result of the financial crisis in Asia, ZIM launched a new effort to optimize the company’s operations through increased efficiency and focused expansion. The company added 13 new 5,000 TEU container ships to its fleet, increasing ZIM’s cargo capacity by a remarkable 50% within two years.

Privatization & Changes

In 1999, the Ofer Brothers Group became the controlling shareholder of the Israel Corporation. In 2004, the Israel Corporation acquired the remaining ZIM shares held by the government, completing ZIM’s privatization process. The current ownership structure was established following a large-scale financial restructuring in 2014.
The Meaning of ZIM: The Story Behind the Name

It was David Remez, Israel's first Minister of Transportation, who came up with the name "ZIM". Remez was inspired by a passage in the Bible (Numbers 24:24), in which the Hebrew word ZIM refers to a number of large vessels. This very appropriate, historic name therefore reflects one of the company's earliest goals: building a large merchant fleet.

ZIM: A Symbol of Strength

The ZIM company flag is based on an iconic pennant originally designed by Theodor Herzl in 1896. Herzl intended that this would one day be the national emblem of the State of Israel. Herzl's original banner featured seven golden stars on a white background. The funnels of ZIM's ships are also painted in these colors, making every ZIM vessel instantly recognizable at sea.