

Understanding “Modern Israel” and the “Jewish State”

General Background and History

*“ ... And I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians,
and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land,
a land flowing with milk and honey,
to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites,
the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.”*

(Exodus 3:8)

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“Say to the people of Israel,

‘When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan,

then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you ...

and you shall take possession of the land and settle in it,

for I have given the land to you to possess it’.”

(Numbers 33:51-53)

- *Modern Israel is about 8,000 square miles of land designated by United Nations Resolution #181 which called for the partitioning of Palestine into two states: a Jewish State and an Arab State. The population of Israel is around 8 million. About 75% of Israelis are Jews, with Arabs accounting for about 20%. Others include Armenians, Greeks, Europeans, and a small number of Bedouin (Arab) tribes.*
- *Though the majority of Israelis identify with Jewish ethnicity and culture, many are secular and reflect experiences of living in non-Jewish communities around the world. Like the United States, Israel today is a very diverse nation with immigrants from more*

than 100 countries and a culture rich in the diversity of arts, literature, music, dance, foods, clothing and crafts.

- *What holds the Jewish nation together are the Biblical and secular histories of the Jews who, for the most part, have lived in a Jewish Diaspora since the Babylonian captivity of 587 B.C.E. These small Jewish communities within larger cultures and civilizations held together mainly by keeping the traditions as recorded in the Old Testament and passed on through generations of Jewish families over many centuries and in many countries.*
- *The arch-typical Israeli today is known as a “salera” or “a Jew born in the land of Israel.” “Aliya” (“ascending”) is the term given to a Jew immigrating to Israel, and “yeridah” (“descending”) is given to a Jewish Israeli emigrant.*

- *The largest number of immigrant Jews to modern Israel are the Ashkenazim who are mainly from Russia, Eastern Europe, Germany, and France (about 80% of Jews worldwide). Other immigrant groups include the Sephardim mostly from Spain, Portugal, and North Africa; and the Mizrahim who come from the Middle East countries. A few other Jewish communities include the Yemenite, Ethiopian, and Asian.*

- *The term “Jewish” today may refer to a Jew of the religious faith ... or it may refer to the ethnicity or culture of someone born to a Jewish mother. Among the practicing religious Jewish communities in Israel, there are the Ultra-Orthodox (“haredi”); Orthodox; Reform; Conservative; and Re-constructionist.*

- *Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel today call themselves “neturel karta” (“Keepers of the Gate”) and claim that “ ... the Jewish State can only be formed when the Messiah comes.” They hold significant political power, and enjoy a special status in society. These include special housing areas; private schools and buses; exclusion from military service; government funding; and their own restricted plaza near the Western Wall to pray.*

- *While Jews make up about 80% of the Israeli population, Muslims constitute about 18% and account for the fastest growing birth rate. Most Israeli Muslims are Sunni Arab, and the majority live in and around the capital city of Jerusalem.*

- *Christians make up about 2-3% of the Israeli population. Most are Arab Christians, though the largest single Christian community is the Greek Catholic (Melkite) ... about 40% of total Christians. Others include Roman Catholics; Maronites; Armenian Catholic; Chaldean; and several branches of Protestant faiths. A small number of Baha'is live in the city of Haifa near the Baha'i Faith's World Centre.*
- *The "Zionist" movement in Israel is almost exclusively associated with the Ashkenazim Aliyas to Palestine between 1882 and 1939. "Zionism" is a religious-political term referring to the movement led by Theodore Herzl to establish a permanent home for Jews in the Diaspora. ("Zion" is an ancient name for Israel). "Christian Zionism" refers to the unequivocal support of Zionism by Christian groups in the United States who believe in the Biblical prophecy of Genesis 12:3: "I will bless those that bless you and curse those that curse you." They claim that Jerusalem must be in the hands of the Jews in readiness for the "rapture" of the returning Christ.*

Israeli Culture and Traditions

- *Israeli culture is characterized by ancient religious and historical traditions mingled with contemporary cultures from more than 100 different countries. The diversity of secular and religious lives provides yet another layer of uniqueness.*
- *Modern Israel might be said to still be in the process of defining itself. While some Israelis claim Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish state, the more than 75 country embassies remain housed in Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv is recognized internationally as the capital of Israel and is considered the hub of Israeli secular society.*
- *Jerusalem represents the religious center of Israel. Many Israelis claim Jerusalem as their capital and refer back to the Period of Kings in Jerusalem between 1000 - 587 B.C.E. However, the international community does not recognize this claim because of the unresolved controversies surrounding the 1967 War.*
- *However ... there can be no doubt that Jerusalem represents the most sacred geography on earth for more than half of the world's religious people. It is said to be "... the place where*

heaven and earth meet” and is the cornerstone of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. Its history, literature, and architecture are reminders that:

- *Abraham was led here by his faith in the One God and was willing to offer his son as a sacrifice here on Mount Moriah.*
 - *The Jewish Kings of Israel, including the beloved King David and the Wise King Soloman ruled from here.*
 - *The Jewish temple was completed by King Soloman here between 970 – 931 B.C.E.*
 - *Jews returning from Persia rebuilt the destroyed temple here beginning in 538 B.C.E.*
 - *More than 2000 years ago Jesus, as a Jewish son, studied in the temple here.*
 - *The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus all took place here.*
 - *Peter preached the first Gospel Sermon here on the Day of Pentacost.*
 - *Muhammad was transported here on a winged horse, escorted by the angel Gabriel, in his visionary “Night Journey” to Mount Moriah (now known as the “Dome of the Rock”)*
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- *Modern Israel is recognized by the Western World as the most democratic of any other Middle Eastern country. Because of Israel’s strong relationship with the United States, perceptions from the Arab World about the Western World is that Israel is an extension (or “foothold”) of the Western World (namely, the United States) into Arab lands.*
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- *Politics within modern Israel plays a vital role in all of Israeli society. Many fear for the future of the Jewish State and have varying opinions about how to resolve them.*
 - *Israelis are brought together from their diverse countries of origins through two important aspects and requirements of Israeli citizens: to learn and speak the Hebrew language; and to serve in the Israeli Armed Forces. (This applies to men and women).*
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- *The pluralistic character of Israeli arts reflects the background origins of its pluralistic society. For example, Russian culture provides a rich background for the development of literature, classical music, arts, and dance; German immigrants leave their mark on the beautiful early architecture and designs of Tel Aviv’s fine buildings; Persian and Syrian styles abound in the visual arts; and Arab cultures probably has the greatest impact on Israeli mannerisms, customs, and cuisines.*

- *Tel Aviv boasts the world famous Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and is home to hundreds of musicians, artists, writers, and dance companies. Many schools for the arts and other cultural studies are housed here.*
- *The emergence of Hebrew theater first appeared in Palestine around 1905 and continues to draw huge audiences who enjoy plays and other performances written and performed by Israeli and other artists. Cinema has grown very popular since the 1950's and now competes at many of Europe's top film festivals*
- *Marriages between Jews in Israel are registered with the Chief Rabbinate, and the ceremony follows traditional Jewish practices. Civil ceremonies are not performed and marriages between religious groups are not recognized. Though many earlier immigrants came from Muslim cultures where a plurality of wives was common, Israel reinforces a one-wife policy.*
- *Jewish communes known as "kibbutz" were once dominant throughout the Israeli countryside, but are fewer now than a few decades ago. These "socialist" inspired living communities were influenced by socialist theories in Russia and Eastern Europe, which had the main emigrant populations of the early 20th century. These "kibbutz" brought new life and purpose into the early years of modern Israel and provided many new and innovative systems for irrigation and farming ... all of which contributed greatly to Israel's early economies of agriculture and fruit orchards.*
- *About half a million Israelis now make their homes in settlements sprinkled throughout the Palestinian West Bank. Israelis justify these settlements as security measures and land development, but are met with strong resistance by Palestinians who find their farms and pasturelands interrupted and feel most squeezed by lack of water for their own lands.*