



Middle East Resources

INFORMATION FOR TEACHING ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST AT THE PRECOLLEGIATE LEVEL

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Israel: Diversity and Identity

A Homeland for the Jewish People



The Promised Land

The history of the Jewish people begins with Abraham, and the story of Abraham begins when God tells him to leave his homeland, promising Abraham and his descendants a new home in the land of Canaan. (Gen. 12). This is the land now known as Israel. But for a long time, this desire for a homeland was merely a vague hope without any concrete plans to achieve it. In the late 1800s, Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann founded Zionism, a political movement dedicated to the creation of a Jewish state in Israel. They saw the state of Israel as a necessary refuge for Jewish victims of oppression, especially in Russia, where pogroms were decimating the Jewish population.

Zionism was not a religious movement; it was primarily political. The early Zionists sought to establish a secular state of Israel, recognized by the world, through purely legal means. Theodor Herzl, for example, was a completely assimilated secular Jewish journalist. He felt little attachment to his Jewish heritage until he covered the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French military who was (unjustly) convicted of passing secrets to Germany. The charges against Dreyfus brought out a wave of anti-Jewish sentiment that shocked Herzl into realizing the need for a Jewish state. This need and longing is expressed in the theme song of the Zionist movement, Ha-Tikvah (hope). Today it is the national anthem of Israel.

As long as deep within the heart
The Jewish soul is warm
And toward the edges of the east
An eye to Zion looks
Our hope is not yet lost,

The hope of two thousand years
To be a free people in our own land
In the land of Zion and Jerusalem.
To be a free people in our own land
In the land of Zion and Jerusalem.

The State of Israel

After World War I, the land of Israel was part of Palestine, a British protectorate which included Israel and parts of Jordan and Egypt. In a letter from British foreign secretary Lord Balfour to Jewish financier Lord Rothschild, the British government expressed a commitment to creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This letter is commonly known as the Balfour Declaration of 1917. After the declaration, Jewish immigration to Israel

expanded rapidly, but little actual progress was made toward the establishment of a Jewish state until after the Holocaust destroyed a third of the world's Jewish population. In 1947, the British handed the problem of the Jewish state to the newly-founded United Nations, which developed a partition plan dividing Palestine into Jewish and Arab portions. The plan was ratified in November 1947 the new State of Israel was proclaimed on May 14, 1948 and British troops pulled out of Palestine.

The Right of Return

One of the principles upon which the State of Israel was founded in 1948 was the right of every Jew to live in Israel. During the first four months of independence, some 300,000 newcomers, mainly Holocaust survivors, reached Israel's shores. By the end of 1951, some 685,000 immigrants, half of them from Arab lands, had arrived, more than doubling Israel's Jewish population at the establishment of the state. Immigration to Israel has continued throughout the years. Recent waves of newcomers include the almost 30,000 members of the Jewish community of Ethiopia believed to have existed since the time of King Solomon, who were brought to Israel in Operation Moses (1984) and Operation Solomon (1991); and over 600,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union, who have arrived since 1990, having finally been permitted to emigrate after years of struggle. Today, the Jewish population has come from more than one hundred countries, making Israel a land of considerable ethnic diversity,

Aliya - Ingathering of the Exiles

Aliya (literally ascending) is the Hebrew word for the immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel. The meaning of ascent in this context is spiritual as well as physical; Jews are educated in the belief that this ascent is an essential part of Judaism. It is the ultimate form of identification with one's people, the Jewish people, whose life and destiny are inextricably tied to the Land of Israel.

Who Are They?

“They are Jews from dozens of countries on every continent speaking over 100 different languages. They came from Russia before the revolution, from Germany and Austria fleeing the Nazis and from Poland, Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia out of the ashes of the Holocaust. They came from Iraq, Syria, Yemen and North Africa expelled by Arab anti-Zionism. They came from Latin America and Turkey fleeing cruel military

juntas and from Iran fleeing the ayatollahs. There has also always been a steady stream of immigrants from the Americas, Britain, France, Benelux and Scandinavia, South Africa and Australia – immigrants motivated by Zionism and Judaism and the opportunity to rebuild Zion. Most recently they have come from the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Ethiopia. In May 1991 14,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to the country during “Operation Solomon.”

Who is a Jew?

A Jew is any person whose mother was a Jew or any person who has gone through the formal process of conversion to Judaism. It is important to note that being a Jew has nothing to do with what you believe or what you do. A person born to non-Jewish parents who has not undergone the formal process of conversion but who believes everything that Orthodox Jews believe and observes every law and custom of Judaism is still a non-Jew, even in the eyes of the most liberal movements of Judaism, and a person born to a Jewish mother who is an atheist and never practices the Jewish religion is still a Jew, even in the eyes of the ultra-Orthodox. In this sense, Judaism is more like a nationality than like other religions, and being Jewish is like a citizenship.

Secular and Religious

With the above definition in mind, it is important to understand the tension between Jews who consider themselves non-religious Jews and those who follow strictly orthodox traditions. The majority of Jews probably fall in between these two extremes. However many Orthodox Jewish groups wield a great deal of power, and from the formation of the state have received special privileges. Their men, and their families, may be supported by the government if they are studying in religious schools, and they do not have to serve in the army. They cause tension among the non-Orthodox by harassing people who are not behaving in what they believe is an Orthodox way. For example, those Jews who choose to drive on the Sabbath, who eat non-Kosher foods, or who do not dress modestly, are the object of verbal and sometimes physical abuse.

Ashkenazim

Ashkenazim (from the Hebrew *Ashkenaz* meaning Germany) are Jews and their descendants who lived in Germany and France before their migration eastward to Slavic lands (i.e. Poland, Lithuania and Russia) following the Crusades of the 11th to 13th centuries. After the 17th century, persecution in eastern Europe led many of these Jews to resettle in western Europe, where they assimilated, as they had done in eastern Europe, with other Jewish communities. In time, all Jews who had adopted the “Germanic rite” synagogue ritual were referred to as Ashkenazim to distinguish them from Sephardic (Spanish rite) Jews. Ashkenazim differ from Sephardim in their pronunciation of Hebrew, in cultural traditions, in their widespread use of Yiddish (until the 20th century) and especially in synagogue liturgy. Most of the early pioneers and post-World War II immigrants to the state of Israel were Ashkenazim, coming from Europe, England and America. By the time of the proclamation of the state, Ashkenazim were firmly

established as the dominant group. They held the balance of economic and political power for many years. Though new Ashkenazi arrivals did not fare well at first, after the transition period they managed to escape their dire conditions and move into a higher economic and social class, thanks to advantageous social networks, small families, personal reparations from Germany for Holocaust survivors and self and public images as Europeans. Over the coming decades further immigration from Arab lands and Ethiopia added many Sephardim to the country. In Israel today the number of Ashkenazim and Sephardim are roughly equal.

Sephardim

Sephardim (from the Hebrew *Sefarad*, (Spain) are Jews, or their descendants, who lived in Spain and Portugal from the Middle Ages until their persecution and mass expulsion from those countries in the last decade of the 15th century. The Sephardim initially fled to North Africa and other parts of the Ottoman Empire, and many of these eventually settled in such countries as France, Holland, England, Italy, and the Balkans. Salonika in Macedonia, and the city of Amsterdam, became major sites of Sephardic settlement. The transplanted Sephardim largely retained their native Judeo-Spanish language (Ladino) literature and customs. They became noted for their cultural and intellectual achievements within the Mediterranean and northern European Jewish communities. The Sephardim differ notably from Ashkenazi Jews in preserving Babylonian rather than Palestinian Jewish ritual traditions. Of the 700,000 Sephardic Jews in the world today (far fewer than the Ashkenazim) many now reside in the state of Israel.

Oriental Jews

Though the term Oriental Jews is perhaps more properly applied to Jews of North Africa and the Middle East who had no ties with either Spain or Germany and who speak Arabic, Persian or a variant of ancient Aramaic, the term Sephardim or Oriental frequently lumps together Jews from the Near East, North Africa, Yemen, Ethiopia, the Balkans, Iran, India, and the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. They usually hold strong traditional beliefs of the Sephardim and often their educational and living standards are lower than the Ashkenazi Jews. Oriental newcomers to Israel were more often channeled to the lower rungs of society. Most were housed in temporary accommodations where the services were poor, or sent to development towns in remote areas, with dead-end jobs and where unemployment ran high. These new immigrants were too weak politically and socially to resist this discrimination in the allocation of resources. Immigrants from eastern Arab states (such as Iraq) and from Iran, where the Jews had resided for more than two thousand years and had substantial centers of learning, fared better.

In 1951 "Operation Magic Carpet" brought most of the Yemenite Jews to Israel. Though they had a reputation as superior craftsmen in silver, they were considered by some in the government as a threat to democracy and Israeli culture. A scandal was brought to light in recent years when it was learned that many Yemeni babies had been taken from their parents to be brought up by more 'Israeli' families. In 1984 a large influx of Jews were

rescued from persecution and hardship in Ethiopia in what was called "Operation Moses". Most of the remaining Ethiopian Jews, or *Falashas*, were airlifted out of Ethiopia in 1991 under 'Operation Solomon'. They too have suffered from second class treatment, remaining for years in neglected absorption centers. However, as the younger generations grow up as Israelis they are learning to use the democratic political system to gain their rights.

Jews from the Soviet Union

The impact of the huge influx of Jews from Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s hit Orientals hard. The cost of the absorption of a mass of new immigrants undermined the welfare state. Money from existing welfare budgets had to be transferred to services for the new arrivals. The opportunities for occupational and class mobility were greatly reduced since most Russians had high levels of occupational and educational skills making competition for jobs even more difficult. After years of Communist rule many of these immigrants had little knowledge of Judaism. Their names were often the only thing about them that would identify them as Jewish. Many had intermarried and had Christian wives. According to Jewish law in Israel, these children are not legally Jewish. Since March of this year, the Institute for Jewish Studies has run a pilot program with a network of conversion classes around the country aimed at the estimated 300,000 Russian immigrants who are not halakhically (according to Jewish law) Jewish. These conversion pioneers want "Jew" written in their new Israeli ID cards, just as it was in their old Russian papers.

Settlers in the Occupied Territories

Just three months after Israel's victory in the 1967 war and the capture of territory in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights, the Israeli Labor government began building Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. Initially confined to a few areas, the settlement movement grew rapidly after the right wing Likkud party defeated Labor in 1977. Most of Labor's settlements had been built with security in mind, but Likkud declared that Jews had the right to live anywhere in *Eretz Israel*, the ancient biblical land of Israel, including heavily populated Arab areas. The United States and most other countries, view these settlements as illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 which bars occupying powers from moving citizens to occupied lands. In 1991 Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir wanted a "big Israel" to accommodate the large influx of Russian immigrants. Today there are thousands of families living in Jewish settlements throughout the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip. Some are there for religious reasons, because they believe the land was given to them by God more than three thousand years ago. Others are lured by the generous government subsidized mortgages, free land and tax abatements. The communities have attractive housing with many amenities including swimming pools and specially built roads to avoid passing through Arab areas. Palestinians living in refugee camps, or villages without an adequate water supply, feel great resentment when they look up the hill at Jewish homes, with freshly watered lawns, built on their land. During the present *intifadah* the settlers and the local Palestinians are in constant conflict leading to murder and other criminal acts.

What is the place of non-Jews in a Jewish state?

The Question of Identity

The population of Israel by a July 2000 estimate is 5,842,454. This includes Israeli settlers in Israeli-occupied Palestinian land. There are about 171,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank, about 20,000 in the Golan Heights, about 6,500 in the Gaza Strip, and about 172,000 in East Jerusalem. In 1996 the ethnic groups were estimated as 80.1% Jewish and 19.9% non-Jewish (mostly Arab). Of the Jews, Europe/America-born made up 32.1%, Israel-born 20.8%, Africa-born 14.6%, and Asia-born 12.6%. Religions of the 19.9% non-Jews included 14.6% Muslim (mostly Sunni Muslim), Christian 2.1%, and 3.2% fell into other categories such as Druze, Samaritans and Bahais.

Palestinians in Israel

After the 1948 war, the Arabs in Palestine, most of whom are Sunni Muslims, with roughly 14% Christians whose families have lived there since the beginning of Christianity, found themselves a minority in the newly established state of Israel. The Israeli army had destroyed hundreds of Palestinian villages during the war, and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had fled the fighting, or been expelled, to become refugees in other Arab countries. Approximately 150,000 Palestinians remained. Although the Arabs who stayed were granted Israeli citizenship, they had tight restrictions placed upon them by the Military Administration (1948-1966) and were viewed with suspicion by Israeli society. They were restricted in movement, limited in job opportunities, had their land confiscated and put under state control, and generally were treated very much as second class citizens. Military rule was lifted in 1967 and Palestinians in Israel regained contact with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Most Israeli Arabs support the Palestinians drive for an independent state in the occupied territories. Israeli society accepts their identity as Israeli Arabs but their assertion of a collective national identity with all Palestinians poses problems for the Israelis who refuse to recognize Palestinians in Israel as having a separate national identity. Palestinians, on the other hand, will not accept this negation of their historical rights and collective memory. This has led to confrontations with the Jewish state in the form of strikes and demonstrations, which have sometimes been brutally repressed. The struggle now for Palestinians in Israel is no longer their survival as "Israeli Arabs" – polls have shown that if there were to be an independent Palestinian state most Israeli Arabs would choose to remain in Israel – but a struggle for the recognition of their Palestinian identity. In a state whose national anthem celebrates the yearning of the Jews to return to their ancient homeland, Palestinian Israelis feel like outsiders. In an award winning article on Israeli Palestinians published in the Jerusalem Report, Isabel Kershner, Senior Middle East editor, writes:

They live in a state they feel neglects them, and to which they must continually prove their loyalty. Their own cousins are marching toward independence, but they are still grappling with decades of discrimination. Alienated and resentful, Israel's million-strong Arab minority is in crisis.

The Druze

The Druze are a small minority in the north of Israel. They are a self-governing religious community that broke away from Islam in the eleventh century. They serve in the Israeli Defense Forces and have fought for Israel in all the Arab-Israeli wars.

Melting Pot or Salad Bowl?

Since the beginning of the waves of *aliya* by Jews in the late 19th century, many hundreds of thousands of immigrants have arrived, first in Palestine and, after 1948, in Israel. Each wave of immigrants provides many challenges, but also offers new opportunities for mutual enrichment. The background, traditions and expertise brought by each wave have been of immeasurable value in the development of Israel's pluralistic, democratic society and modern economy. This democracy now faces the challenge of becoming a country of all its citizens, Muslims and Christians as well as Jews, yet still maintaining its Jewish character. At the beginning of the 20th century, the United States often used the expression "the melting pot" to describe how immigrants eventually assimilated into American ways in a melting pot of nationalism. Today, people speak more of a 'salad bowl' society, in which groups celebrate their diverse ethnic heritages while still identifying themselves as American. Israel is still a very young country, just over fifty years old, and already they are grappling with the complex question of identity and ethnicity in a democratic country.

Acknowledgements

Information for this issue has been culled from the following sources:

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Questions for discussion....

1. What is the “right of return’ and why is it considered one of the principles on which Israel was founded?
2. *Aliya* (literally ascending) is the Hebrew word for the immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel. The meaning of ascent in this context is spiritual as well as physical. Jews trace their heritage in these lands of the Middle East from the promise God made to Abraham in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 12:1-3) of land and nationhood. Also on the fact that there was an Israelite Kingdom from c. 1030 BCE to 722 BCE, first united and then divided between Judah and Israel. Discuss how history, both ancient and modern, play such an important part in a national/ethnic identity. Consider other countries such as Yugoslavia, Ireland, the United States, Korea, and South Africa.
3. Israel is a nation in which Judaism is the ‘state’ religion. Other countries such as England (Anglicanism), Iran (Islam), and Ireland (Roman Catholic), also have a state religion. The United States, however, separates church and state. Yet, the United States is often said to be founded on Judeo-Christian principles. What is the basis for this claim? Could this still be considered the case today?
4. Identity is a big issue today on the United States Census forms. People have multiple identities. For example, President Bush might identify himself as: father; president; white; protestant; Texan; son; Republican etc. Discuss the ways members of your class identify themselves and what is the source of their identity, OR choose well known figures from sports, entertainment, politics etc. OR choose characters from books.

Research Activities....

1. Research the inscription written by Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty. Compare this invitation to immigrants with the “right of return” in Israel. Give a brief report to the class.
2. From 1948 to 1998 the state of Israel absorbed hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants. On a graph or chart compare these figures with the waves of immigrants to the United States in another 50 year period between 1890 to 1940.
 - Classify immigrants by the country from which they originated.
 - List predominate reasons for immigration.
3. Jewish immigrants came from many lands. Choose one country from the list below and write a report on the history of the Jews in that land.

• Russia	• France	• Iran	• Ethiopia
• Yemen	• Morocco	• Iraq	• Spain

4. Choose a national anthem of any country (you might want to select a country from which your relatives emigrated). In a brief report tell when it became the national anthem, and what it reveals about the country's history?
5. Select one of the following articles to read. Make up a fictional character – either a settler or an Israeli Arab – and write a letter about your life to someone outside Israel, describing your life.
 1. *From Generation to Generation* by Leslie Susser. Jerusalem Report. 11/22/99 (About the Settler Movement)
 2. *Blue and White Palestinians* by Isabel Kershner. Jerusalem Report. 10/25/99 (About Israeli Arabs)

Glossary

Falasha

Sephardim

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