# WORLD JEWISH DEMOGRAPHY
## An Overview

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*Recent major demographic changes include the emergence of Israel as one of the most vibrant and largest centers of Jewish life in history, a concentration of Jews in major urban areas, and changing family patterns, most notably increased intermarriage and low levels of Jewish reproduction. These latter factors pose a significant challenge to Jewish continuity. These demographic trends should continue, with Israel possibly becoming the largest Jewish community during the first decades of the twenty-first century.*

It is hard to understand the long-term unfolding of Jewish history and the complexities of contemporary Jewish society without paying attention to its demographic aspects. The numerical size and population structure of the Jewish collective and the cultural identification and profile of its individual members are interwoven with a long array of sociodemographic transformations. Some of these quantitative and qualitative changes reveal a deep and mutual relationship between Jews and society at large, globally and within each region and country. Other changes reflect the original and perhaps unique character of the Jewish religious, cultural, and social experience. At the current time of significant global, political, economic, and cultural transformations, and in the light of the renewed debate on Jewish continuity, demographic patterns are a revealing indicator of the human resources available to cope with the present needs and the future challenges of world Jewry.

This article briefly reviews some major findings and problems that emerge from the current demographic trends of world Jewry. It also attempts to raise a few issues of interest to the Jewish community planner on the eve of the twenty-first century.

### HOW MANY JEWS AND WHERE?

#### From *Shoah* to Zero Population Growth

The total size of world Jewry cannot be stated exactly because of the difficulties that exist in defining the population and in creating an adequate data base for each country. However, research over the last decades greatly advanced our understanding of the major demographic trends and provided a wealth of information concerning the major Jewish communities worldwide. After World War II and the *Shoah,* the world Jewish population could be estimated at 11 million. As post-war recovery was relatively quick, it took about 13 years to add 1 million Jews to that total. It took, however, another 38 years to add a second million and to reach the currently estimated 13 million Jews globally. Thus, world Jewry is far from even approaching its pre-*Shoah* size of 16.5 million. Rather, the global increase of Jewish population has slowed down over the years and tended to reach zero or negative population growth toward the end of the 1980s. Very modest increases during the 1990s reflected a temporary "echo effect" of the post-war "Baby Boom," as well as some returns to Judaism connected with mass emigration from Eastern Europe (Table 1).

#### Regional Shifts

Significant regional differences in Jewish population growth generated sharp changes in the relative weight of Jewries in different regions of the world. The most notable change since the late 1940s was the emergence of Israel as one of the largest and most viable centers of Jewish life in history. Israel's Jewish population grew from less than 500,000 in 1945 to about 4.6 million at the end of 1996, and its share of world Jewry grew from

less than 5 percent to over 35 percent. The total Jewish population outside of Israel (referred to as the Diaspora) shrank from over 10.5 million in 1945 to less than 8.5 million in 1996. Part of these changes reflected the net transfer of over 2 million Jewish migrants from the Diaspora to Israel over the same years; part was related to the very different balance of Jewish births and deaths, as well as the impact of immigration and emigration in Israel and in other Jewish communities.

Further significant changes affected the regional distribution of Jews. The major Jewish population centers in the Middle East and North Africa became virtually depleted through mass emigration to Israel and to the Western countries, and a similar trend was still developing in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1990s. Jews in Moslem countries were reduced from over 850,000 in 1948 to about 20,000 currently; the Jewish population in the former Soviet Union (FSU) declined from an estimated 2,375,000 in 1948 to 595,000 at the end of 1996, and the numbers in other East European and Balkan countries declined from 850,000 in 1948 to just over 100,000 currently. The total in Latin America also diminished from 525,000 in 1948 to 431,000 in 1996, and in the African countries south of Sahara, mainly South Africa, from 120,000 to 96,000.

On the other hand, the Jewish population in the main Western countries tended to be stable or to increase. In the United States and Canada the estimated total passed from 5,235,000 in 1948 to 6,062,000 in 1996; in Western Europe, from 850,000 to 1,043,000; and in Australia, from 40,000 in 1948 to the current 95,000.

### Defining Jewish Population

A detailed overview of the world Jewish population distribution at the end of 1996 appears in Table 2, which also presents a synopsis of the major sources of data available for the 15 largest Jewish populations, including national population censuses and Jewish surveys such as the 1990 U.S. National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). Our estimates take into account the baseline figure provided by these sources, but also reflect a critical assessment of the quality of data, as well as any vital migratory and identificational changes since the last time of actual data collection.

A crucial problem in such assessment, as well as in the public debate around Jewish

*Table 1. World Jewish Population Estimates, 1945–1996*

| End-year | Jewish population[a] | Average yearly % of change |
|---|---|---|
| 1945 | 11,000,000 | — |
| 1950 | 11,373,000 | 0.67 |
| 1955 | 11,800,000 | 0.74 |
| 1960 | 12,160,000 | 0.60 |
| 1965 | 12,500,000 | 0.55 |
| 1970 | 12,633,000 | 0.21 |
| 1975 | 12,742,000 | 0.17 |
| 1980 | 12,840,000 | 0.15 |
| 1985 | 12,871,000 | 0.05 |
| 1990 | 12,869,000 | -0.003 |
| 1995 | 12,988,000 | 0.18 |
| 1996 | 13,025,000 | 0.28 |

[a]Revised estimates; see: Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population 1996," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 98 (New York, The American Jewish Committee, 1998).

*Table 2. Jewish Populations of Continents and Major Countries: Sources and Estimates*

| Continents and Major Countries | 1996 Estimates[a] | Percent | Last Official Census | Year | Last Jewish Survey[b] | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Grand Total** | **13,025,000** | **100.0** | | | | |
| ***North America*** | ***6,062,000*** | ***46.5*** | | | | |
| United States | 5,700,000 | 43.8 | – | – | 5,515,000 | 1990 |
| Canada | 362,000 | 2.8 | 356,300 | 1991 | – | – |
| | | | 351,700[c] | 1996 | | |
| ***Latin America*** | ***431,000*** | ***3.3*** | | | | |
| Argentina | 205,000 | 1.6 | 320,000 | 1960 | – | – |
| Brazil | 100,000 | 0.8 | 86,400 | 1991 | – | – |
| Mexico | 40,700 | 0.3 | 62,300 | 1991 | 40,000 | 1991 |
| ***West Europe*** | ***1,043,400*** | ***8.0*** | | | | |
| France | 524,000 | 4.0 | – | – | 530,000 | 1988 |
| United Kingdom | 291,000 | 2.2 | – | – | 308,000 | 1986 |
| Germany | 70,000 | 0.5 | 32,300 | 1987 | – | – |
| Belgium | 31,700 | 0.2 | – | – | – | – |
| ***East Europe*** | ***648,300*** | ***5.0*** | | | | |
| Russia | 340,000 | 2.6 | 408,000 | 1994 | – | – |
| Ukraine | 155,000 | 1.2 | 487,300 | 1989 | – | – |
| Hungary | 53,500 | 0.4 | 180,000 | 1948 | – | – |
| ***Asia*** | ***4,636,300*** | ***35.6*** | | | | |
| Israel | 4,567,700 | 35.1 | 4,459,700 | 1995 | – | – |
| ***Africa*** | ***104,400*** | ***0.8*** | | | | |
| South Africa | 94,000 | 0.7 | 65,406 | 1991 | 100,000 | 1991 |
| ***Oceania*** | ***99,600*** | ***0.8*** | | | | |
| Australia | 95,000 | 0.7 | 79,805 | 1996 | – | – |

[a]Core Jewish populations. Data for 15 largest Jewish populations are reported separately. Source: DellaPergola, *American Jewish Year Book,* cit.

[b]Or other estimates based on Jewish countrywide data.

[c]Ethnic identification only.

population trends, concerns the statistical definition of "Who is a Jew?" All of the figures reported here relate to the *core Jewish population: all those who, when asked, identify themselves as Jews; or, if the respondent is a different person in the same household, are identified by him or her as Jews.* This is an intentionally comprehensive approach, reflecting *subjective* feelings. It is admittedly looser in the Diaspora than in Israel where personal status is subject to the ruling of the Ministry of the Interior. It broadly overlaps, but does not necessarily coincide with *halachic* (rabbinic) or other legally binding definitions. It does *not* depend on any measure of that person's Jewish commitment or behavior in terms of religiosity, beliefs, knowledge, communal affiliation, or otherwise. The core Jewish population includes all those who converted to Judaism or joined the Jewish group informally and declare themselves to be Jewish. It excludes those of Jewish descent who formally adopted another religion, as well as other individuals who did not convert out but currently refuse to recognize they are Jewish.

Concurrently, the concept of *enlarged Jewish population* includes the sum of (1) the *core* Jewish population, (2) all other Jews by birth or parentage who do *not* currently identify as Jews, and (3) all the respective further *non-Jewish* household members (spouses, children, etc.). The enlarged Jewish population clearly includes more people than the core population, and the ratio between the number of people covered by the enlarged and core definitions tends to increase in connection with growing rates of intermarriage. It is worth recalling that Israel's distinctive legal framework for the acceptance and absorption of new immigrants—the *Law of Return*—extends its provisions to all current Jews and to their Jewish or non-Jewish spouses, children, and grandchildren, as well as to the spouses of such children and grandchildren. As a result of its three-generation time perspective and lateral extension, the Law of Return applies to a population potentially wider than *core* and *enlarged* Jewish populations alike. The Law of Return as such does not affect personal Jewish identification, which, as noted, is adjudicated by Israel's Ministry of the Interior and rabbinical authorities.

Figures describing the total size of (core) Jewish population worldwide and in each country, though sometimes only providing rough approximations, were the product of the trends continually shaping the underlying changes. It is an understanding of those trends that may provide a better sense of the current and future directions of world Jewish demography.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MAJOR TRENDS

### Jews in the World-System

First, it is important to appreciate the intensive and multifaceted relationship that exists between Jews and contemporary society at large. International migration was a factor of great significance in Jewish society historically. Over the last 120 years, over 8 million Jews migrated from one country to another, mostly between continents. These movements took place in successive waves, each of which was prompted by political and economic crises in the Jewish communities in the respective regions of origin. The United States and to a lesser extent other Western countries were the main recipient of Jewish migration until the early 1920s. More diffuse migration patterns prevailed during the interwar period, in a context of increasing legal limitations placed on Jewish immigration. After independence, Israel became the main recipient of world Jewish migration, absorbing about 65 percent of the over 4 million Jews who moved from 1948 until now. In a long-term Jewish migration regime dominated by negative (push) factors and by the variable availability of ports of entry, three major peaks occurred: in 1905–6, at the time of mass migration from the Russian and Habsburg empires to America; in 1949–51, with the unrestricted opening of Israel's gates to Jewish immigration, and in 1990–91, at the beginning of the current exodus from the FSU. These major cycles, interspersed with minor ones, directly connected to major changes in the global economic and political system and clearly testified to the sensitivity—in fact, the dependency—of Jewish communities on the variable equilibrium between major powers globally and between social, political, and ethnoreligious groups within the respective countries of residence.

The Jewish migration experience was clearly and consistently compatible with the rational choice for economically better and politically more secure places. Thus, Jewish geography worldwide ostensibly shifted from locations in semi-peripheral and peripheral countries in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America toward countries in North America and Western Europe that were among the most developed in the world. Israel's central role as a major country of Jewish immigration would constitute the exception to this search for security. *Aliyah* might be explained by ideological reasons—namely Israel's centrality in the perceptions of many Jews—and the intervention of international organizations, primarily the Jewish Agency, in large-scale transfer and resettlement. De-

tailed observation of the intensity of *aliyah*, country by country, however, confirms the dependency of immigration on the varying incidence of negative factors abroad. The apparent inconsistency of Israel's role in Jewish migrations is further reduced when one observes that Israel has recently joined the leading group of more developed countries and thus has become an attractive location independent of ideological motives, at least for migrants from less developed or less politically stable countries.

The convergence between major social patterns among world Jewry and more general trends toward development and modernization is confirmed by at least two other indicators. One indicator, building upon the traditional emphasis of Jewish communities on learning, is the uniquely high rates of higher education among Jews, even when compared with the total population of the most advanced countries. This emphasis has been translated into a nearly universal academization of the younger adult generation in the Diaspora. In Israel, too, access to post-secondary and academic education is rapidly expanding, though the all-inclusive Israeli economic system allows for a lower proportion of Jewish professionals and other university trainees among the labor force than is the case for occupationally selective Jewish minorities in the Diaspora.

Another indicator is the overwhelming concentration of Jews in major urban areas resulting from intensive international and internal migrations. The extraordinary urbanization of the Jews is illustrated by the fact that in 1996 twenty urban areas worldwide had an estimated population of 100,000 Jews or more and altogether comprised 70 percent of the total world Jewish population. Over one-half of world Jewry (7,597,000, or 58%) lived in only ten large metropolitan areas: New York (including Northern New Jersey), Los Angeles (including Orange, Riverside, and Ventura Counties), Miami-Fort Lauderdale, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston in the United States; Paris in France; and Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem in Israel. In these and many other central places of world economic and cultural significance, large numbers of Jews enjoy very favorable and perhaps unprecedented standards of living and could bring to fruition their high levels of professional specialization. But these are also the places where Jews face the challenge of intensive competition with, and easy access to alternative, non-Jewish cultures and social networks.

**Family Changes**

Although the family has long functioned as the cornerstone of Jewish society, the last few decades witnessed an unprecedented erosion in the role of the conventional family of marriage and procreation. Jews historically anticipated many other social, religious and ethnic groups in completing the transition from high to low and controlled mortality and fertility. In more recent years, Diaspora Jews more often followed the changing family patterns in Western societies, including delayed marriages, higher rates of permanent non-marriage, more cohabitation, growing rates of divorce, low birth rates, growing proportions of births out of marriage (though still uncommon among Jews), increasing numbers of single-parent households, and most significantly, increasingly high rates of intermarriage and comparatively low rates of Jewish identification among the children of intermarriage.

The debate about mixed marriage and its demographic consequences was stimulated by the NJPS finding of a rate of mixed marriage of 52 percent, after discounting for conversions to Judaism, for marriages performed in the years just before 1990. The argument was raised by Steven M. Cohen and other researchers that the NJPS Jewish sample erroneously included several cases that should instead have been classified as non-Jews, which in turn artificially raised the computed percentages of out-marriage. This reasoning, although technically plausible, hides a serious catch. Once the supposedly non-Jewish fringes were excluded from its analysis, the NJPS sample would indeed produce lower rates of out-marriage, but also a U.S. core Jewish population estimate lowered by half a

million, and closer to 5 rather than to 5.5 million Jews in 1990. One is left with the choice between a smaller and less assimilated Jewish population and a larger and more outmarried one. In any case, there is little doubt that in the United States, as in most other large Diaspora communities, intermarriage has reached historical highs after growing significantly since the 1960s. Under the prevailing circumstances, the majority of children of interfaith couples were identified with the non-Jewish parent or were given dual or no religious identification.

Significant gaps have emerged between family patterns in the Diaspora (with relatively minor variations) and in Israel. Among Israel's Jewish population, marriage continued to be nearly universal though it tended to be postponed, and divorce remained at moderate levels (15–18% of marriages). Fertility levels were stable—indeed unusually high and stable when compared with most other developed countries. The projected fertility level for Jewish women, regardless of marital status, was 2.6 children in 1996, enough to support continuing growth, as against current estimates around 1.5 children for several major Jewish Diaspora communities including the United States, Canada, France, and the FSU. In these countries, *effectively Jewish* fertility is even lower after allowing for children of Jewish parentage who are not raised as Jews. Such low levels of Jewish reproduction imply a net reduction in the size of generations, a narrowing of the younger bases of the age structure, and a progressive transformation in age composition usually defined as demographic aging. The unavoidable consequence, in the longer term, is a sharp decline in Jewish population.

### Linkages to Jewish Identification

Partly as the consequence and partly as the cause of the family trends just described, especially the increased number of children of intermarriage, the spectrum of existing patterns of Jewish identification is widening. Viewed through a broad lens of simplification and beyond the specific cultural traits of each local community, contemporary world Jewry essentially comprises four major types:

1. The *religious* includes those fully adhering to a complex of Jewish beliefs, norms, and values, as well as consistently performing traditional ritual practices. Active Jewish identification through religion necessarily involves belonging to an exclusive community of reference. The *religious* type, as defined here, despite being separated by deep internal rivalries and even disagreement on fundamental issues of a religious nature, is sufficiently different from the other types. Their total number is estimated at 2 million, half of which live in Israel.
2. The *ethnic-communal* typically includes those maintaining strictly or predominantly Jewish association networks, whereas in-group communication includes a great amount of nonspecifically Jewish cultural contents. A case in point is affiliation with Jewish organizations in which participants tend to be exclusively or mostly Jewish. It seems justifiable to include here many Jews whose main attachment to Judaism is through a religious congregation in which, as in the case of some contemporary non-Orthodox congregations, the sense of community is preserved, but the element of religious, or in broader terms, cultural exclusiveness is not. The total Jewish population such defined approaches 6 million, of whom one-half live in Israel.
3. The *cultural residue* includes those whose attachment to Judaism may persist independently of clearly recognizable personal Jewish behavior or associational involvement in a Jewish community. Curiosity and some knowledge of one's own Jewish historical past, tradition, and culture; knowledge of a Jewish language; extensive interest in Jewish scholarship, or even a sense of "home nostalgia" may characterize this type. Thus defined, culture provides a more ambiguous, less binding criterion for Jewish identification, typical of the unaffiliated, and does not create a mutually exclusive Jewish

bond facing outside society. About 4 million Jews globally seem to fit with this definition, most of whom live in the Diaspora.

4. A *dual Jewish/non-Jewish* identity was clearly documented in America through the 1990 NJPS, having its counterpart among those non-Jews who for a variety of reasons keep some links with Jews and Judaism. In practice, the increasing identification with other religious, ethnic, communal, or cultural frames of reference tends to be substituted for the declining intensity of Jewish identification—until the last remnants of Jewish identification fade away. One million Jews, mostly living outside of Israel, correspond to such a definition.

Clearly, Jewish society cannot be divided into discrete categories, but rather consists of a highly dynamic and fluid continuum. Boundaries among the four identificational types are obviously very flexible and mutable, and passages from any to any another type may be easy and frequent and in fact may be repeatedly experienced by the same individual in the course of life or even under the impact of specific circumstances.

Yet, this schematic representation of a cross-section of different situations among the present Jewish generation may provide a baseline for assessing the expected developments among a later generation. Different models of family formation and Jewish family size are currently associated with each Jewish identificational type. Belonging to each type implies a different probability of being Jewish at a later time, both for the population directly involved (as an aggregate, not necessarily for each single individual) and for their descendants in the next or a later generation.

## JEWISH POPULATION PROSPECTS

### Expected Trends

An attempt can be made to project the current sociodemographic trends among world Jewry, based on the assumption that no major changes will intervene to radically redirect these well-established patterns. The major findings worth noting concern the expected size, geographical distribution, and age composition of Jewish populations. Table 3 reports selected figures from a projection to the year 2020, based on the Jewish population size and structure in 1993.

As noted, Jewish population increase in Israel is practically offset by a decrease in the Diaspora, so that the world total tends to be rather stable. Expected increases or decreases of modest import may derive from varying combinations of international migration flows, fertility levels, and losses connected with outmarriage. According to these assumptions, in the year 2020 world Jewry would range between 12,854,000 and 13,821,000. The total of Diaspora communities would be between 6,340,000 and 7,887,000 and Jews in Israel would range between 5,534,000 and 6,863,000, thus representing between 41 percent and 52 percent of the world total. North American Jewry would constitute an even more dominant share of the Diaspora than is the case today.

Concerning the expected age distributions, the proportion of children under 15 is expected to range between 23 percent and 25 percent in Israel and between 9 percent and 14 percent in the Diaspora; the proportion of elderly people aged 65 and over would range between 13 percent and 14 percent in Israel and between 24 percent and 28 percent in the Diaspora. As a consequence of these trends, a majority of all the Jewish children in the world, ranging between 57 percent and 72 percent, would live in Israel, whereas a majority of the world's elderly Jewish population, ranging between 66 percent and 71 percent would live in the Diaspora.

### Some Implications

An important lesson emerging from the preceding analysis is that powerful and resilient sociodemographic trends have developed over time among world Jewry. The logic of some of these trends is deeply rooted in Jewish history, as in the case of international migration, or in general, global, diffuse societal

*Table 3. Jewish Population Projections, 2000–2020 (Thousands)*

| Jewish Population | With International Migration High | With International Migration Low | Without International Migration High | Without International Migration Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **2000** | | |
| World | 13,144 | 12,911 | 13,138 | 12,903 |
| Diaspora | 8,262 | 8,041 | 8,496 | 8,272 |
| Israel | 4,882 | 4,870 | 4,642 | 4,631 |
| | | **2010** | | |
| World | 13,442 | 12,954 | 13,405 | 12,905 |
| Diaspora | 7,605 | 7,200 | 8,182 | 7,759 |
| Israel | 5,837 | 5,754 | 5,223 | 5,146 |
| | | **2020** | | |
| World | 13,821 | 12,972 | 13,727 | 12,854 |
| Diaspora | 6,958 | 6,340 | 7,887 | 7,220 |
| Israel | 6,863 | 6,632 | 5,840 | 5,634 |

Source: Sergio DellaPergola, "The Jewish People Toward the Year 2020: Sociodemographic Scenarios, in A. Gonene, S.Fogel (eds.) *"Israel 2020" Master Plan for Israel in the 21st Century—The Macro scenarios: Israel and the Jewish People.* Haifa, The Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, 1996, pp. 155–187 (Hebrew).

trends, as in the case of changes in the family and intermarriage. The momentum of such trends makes sudden changes unlikely. Even in the case of significant change, it would take quite some time before the consequences alter the structure and dynamics of Jewish population. It is therefore important to realize what the inherent logic of a process is in order to be able to apply it to future developments under somewhat different circumstances.

The leading scenario for the future points to a Jewish people increasingly concentrated in North America and in Israel, with Israel possibly becoming the largest Jewish community during the first decades of the twenty-first century. The sharp age structural differences that have developed between Israel and the Diaspora already make Israel the largest reservoir of Jewish youth and the principal and most challenging target for Jewish education, whereas the problem of aging will become a crucial focus for Jewish community service in the forthcoming decades.

In the light of the preceding analysis, a significant challenge of Jewish continuity stems both from low levels of demographic reproduction and from the problematic, if any, outcome of cultural reproduction among a large periphery of the Jewish collective. An equally significant challenge of internal coherence and solidarity looms high in the near future in light of the very different sociodemographic trends that now prevail in Israel and in the majority of Jewish communities elsewhere and to some extent also within each Jewish community locally.

However, it is possible to develop Jewish community policies and interventions capable of stimulating processes favorable to a better demographic balance for world Jewry and to slow down if not reverse negative trends. With the help of continuing in-depth research on the causes and consequences of Jewish population trends, this will be one of the tasks—and not a minor one—of Jewish community leaders, planners, and educators in the twenty-first century.

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