

Alive and well

Judaism is enjoying an unexpected revival, says David Landau. But there are deep religious and political divisions, mostly centered on Israel

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JUDAISM IS FLOURISHING, both in Israel, where 43% of the world's Jews now live, and throughout the Jewish diaspora. The Jews as a nation are flourishing too. Israelis, for all their problems, are the 14th-happiest people in the world, happier than the British or the French, according to a recent global happiness report commissioned by the UN. In the diaspora Jewish life has never been so free, so prosperous, so unthreatened.

In America an observant Jew, Senator Joseph Lieberman, ran for vice-president in 2000. With Al Gore as candidate for president, he nearly made it. His Jewish faith was no drawback, he says; rather, it appealed to many Christian voters who take their own religion seriously. Mr Lieberman and his wife, Hadassah, "were dreaming of a large *suka*" (a rustic hut covered with branches in which Jews eat and entertain during the *Sukot* harvest festival) in the grounds of the vice-president's residence. "We felt we could be ourselves." Had he had gone on to run for the White House, as he hoped, "I'd have been observant there, too."

"Jewish is cool in America," says J.J. Goldberg, a writer. "Celebrities used to change their names to hide their Jewish identity. Now they talk on television about how they try to instil Jewish identity into their half-Jewish children. Take [the actress] Gwyneth Paltrow. Her father is a descendant of rabbis; her mother is a Protestant from middle America. She writes in her food blog about her favourite kosher recipes for the *seder* [the family prayer-dinner celebrating the Passover spring festival]. *Seders* are popular with non-Jewish people. *Bar-mitzva* [the coming-of-age-ceremony] has become stylish, too. Kids see it on television; they see their friends having it—and they want it as well."

In the smaller diaspora communities, too, Jews are prospering, though there is nowhere with quite that same sense of complete, seamless belonging as in America. In Russia and Ukraine, where Judaism and Zionism were repressed in communist times, Jews are

prominent in business. Jewish philanthropy is rebuilding community life for those who opted to stay rather than emigrate to Israel or the West.

Israel and the Jewish diaspora, moreover, are in strong and loyal alignment. Diaspora Jews, broadly speaking, love and cherish Israel. They support it against its enemies, real and perceived, they back its government and they resent its critics.

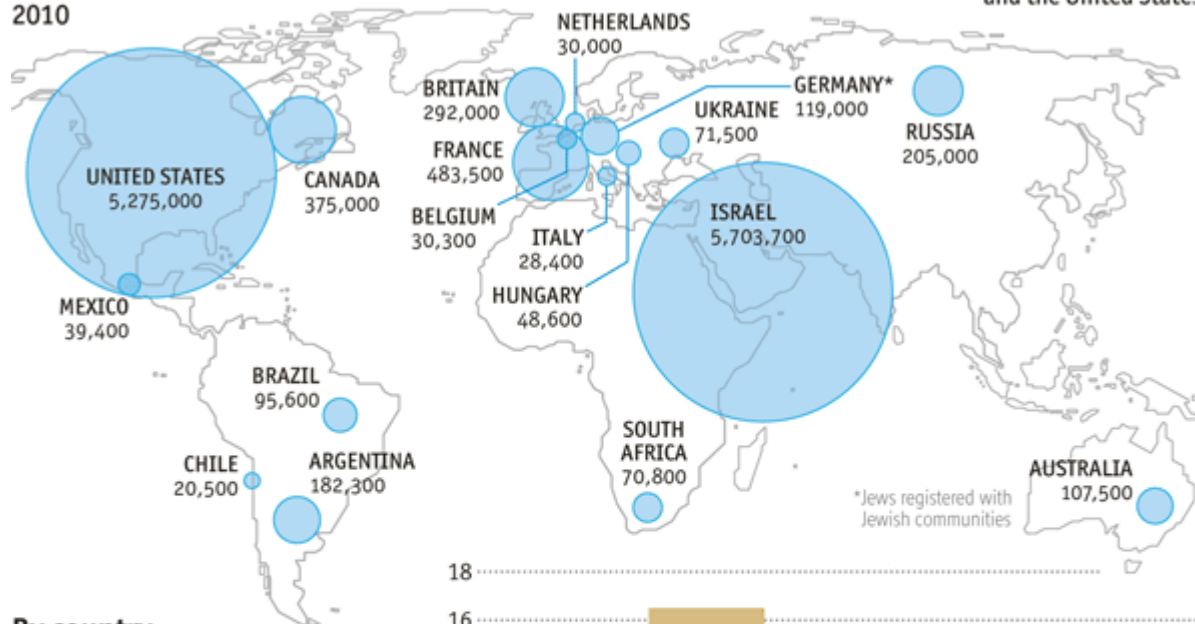
None of this could have been predicted just a few decades ago. Hitler had wiped out one-third of the Jewish people. A thousand years of Jewish civilisation in central and eastern Europe had been swept away. Fortunately for Jewish survival, the Nazis' "final solution" had been preceded by a flurry of pogroms across the then-tsarist empire that started 60 years earlier, sending waves of mass Jewish emigration westward. By the time Hitler struck, some 6m Jews were safe in North and South America and in Britain, with 3m more living in the Soviet Union.

Jewish population

By country
2010

13,580,000
World total

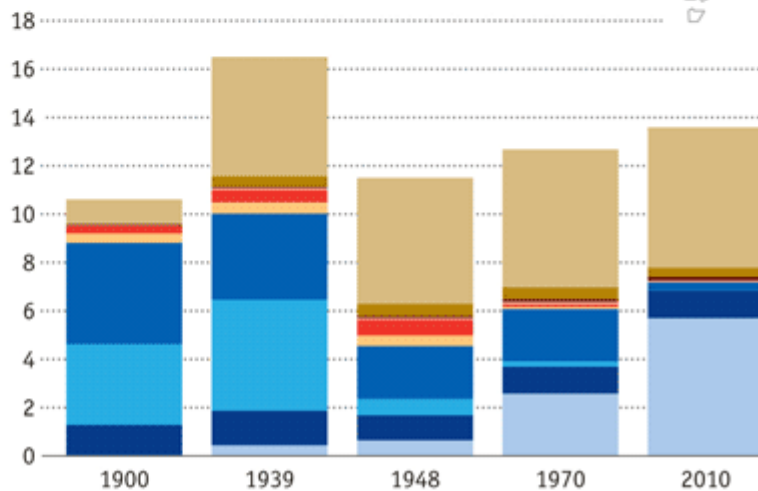
81%
of whom live in Israel
and the United States



By country
or region, m

- Israel (Palestine before 1948)
- Western Europe
- Eastern Europe and Balkans
- Former USSR
- Asia
- North Africa
- South Africa
- Oceania
- Latin America
- North America

Source: "Jewish Demographic Policies", by Sergio DellaPergola, The Jewish People Policy Institute



Traditional religious learning and observance had been on the defensive in central and eastern Europe for 150 years, since political emancipation in parts of the region opened the gates of ghettos and tradition in the *shtetls* (small Jewish communities) was shaken up. Now the old life was annihilated, along with much of modern, liberal Jewish culture. The Sephardic communities of north Africa and the Levant, long a minority within Jewry, gained new numerical significance. Together with the pitifully few survivors of Nazi-occupied Europe, they became the core population of the new state of Israel.

Ben-Gurion's error

Its founding fathers, socialist-Zionists in the main, thought that the vestiges of the old religion would soon disappear. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, held that the 2,000 years of diasporic Judaism were a deviation from the true fulfilment of the Jewish ethos. The Talmud (Judaism's ancient body of law and lore) was too casuistic, he felt; the new state must hark back to the Bible. But he agreed to exempt a few hundred Talmud students from army service, confident they were a dying breed.

Before the Holocaust, Zionism, the movement for Jewish independence in Palestine, had to struggle for Jewish popular support. Now it was vindicated, at least in its own eyes. But some Jews, especially in America, were still not convinced. Israel, fighting for its survival, flooded by destitute immigrants, looked precarious to them. In America assimilation was the watchword. Attenuated forms of religious practice that originated in 19th century Germany were embraced by the upwardly mobile children and grandchildren of the immigrant generation.



American Jews' standoffishness towards their Jewish nationhood shifted sharply after the six-day war in 1967. The collective experience of fear, and then relief and jubilation, produced an outpouring of solidarity with the beleaguered Jewish state. Mixed in with these emotions was a sense of unease, even guilt, over the ineffectiveness of American Jewish lobbying during the Holocaust to get President Roosevelt to rescue Jews.

Sociologists say that Israel—and fundraising and lobbying on its behalf—became American Jewry's "secular religion". A vocal grassroots campaign to free emigration for Soviet Jewry also attracted wide support, especially among younger Jews.

By the turn of the 21st century, moreover, post-modernism was cocking an unexpected snook both at dogmatic Israeli Godlessness and at diaspora assimilationism. "Post-modernism has been kind to all religions," says Moshe Halbertal, a philosopher living in Jerusalem. "Reason was dethroned; there's no large narrative out there any more." Hyphenated ethnicities and identities encourage people to enjoy and display their diversities instead of keeping them out of sight.

Many diaspora Jews today still drift out of Judaism or out of Jewishness, or choose to leave. But many others are consciously deciding to stay in, choosing one of myriad new ways to express their commitment. Exactly what defines Jewishness remains a matter of much debate. This special report will concentrate on those who formally identify with the faith (see table for the main denominations), but in Israel even the non-religious are influenced by Jewish culture and mores.