



# A Reflection On An Imperfect Success

By Yosef Blau


**A**ny evaluation of Israel at sixty must weigh the reality of the State against the Messianic expectations of a large segment of Orthodox Jews. For those who envisioned that the State would herald the Messianic Era, there's bound to be disillusionment. After the tragedy of the Holocaust, the establishment of the State gave the Jewish people immeasurable hope; following Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, the mood in the country rose to euphoria. But these shining moments of unity and elation have been replaced by deep fissures within the Jewish people and contrasting visions of the future character and boundaries of the State. The establishment of the State of Israel has transformed Jewish history, but it has not succeeded in solving the problems that threaten the Jewish future.

It is difficult to speculate about political developments; the time lag between the

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*Rabbi Blau has served as mashgiach ruchani of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and Yeshiva University since 1977. He is president of the Religious Zionists of America and has edited Lomdut: The Conceptual Approach to Jewish Learning (New Jersey, 2006).*





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*Ethiopian Jews fly from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to Tel Aviv during Operation Solomon in 1991.*

*Photo: Nathan Alpert,  
Israel Government Press Office*

writing of this article and its appearance in print may make any predictions seem foolish. Accordingly, I will avoid discussing Israel's conflict with its Arab adversaries and will focus on internal accomplishments and failures.

Demography alone points to the centrality of Israel in Jewish life. In 1948 there were 600,000 Jews living in Israel and five million in the United States. Sixty years later, American Jewry has not grown significantly, but Israel's Jewish population has equaled—if not surpassed—that of America. No one would have predicted that thousands of Jews from Russia and Ethiopia would now be living in Israel; it is frightening to contemplate their fate if the State did not exist. In fact, all indicators point to a majority of world Jewry living in Israel in the foreseeable future.

Even to Jews throughout the Diaspora, the State of Israel is critical to preserving Jewish life. This is obvious in places with small Jewish populations, but it is also true in America, the second major center of Jewish life. Indeed, of all the ways to connect unaffiliated American Jews to Judaism, the most effective program in recent years to do so is Birthright, a program that takes young adults to Israel.

From a religious perspective, Israel's centrality is unquestionable. Indeed, in Israel there is significantly more Torah learning today than there was in the great centers of Eastern Europe. Today, yeshivah education has become the norm, while in the European shtetls of the past, only the best and the brightest attended yeshivah. The number of yeshivah students in Israel, in both the *Chareidi* and *Dati Leumi* camps, who devote themselves to full-time Torah learning has grown phenomenally. Ironically, this growth has been aided by the financial support of an Israeli government whose very legitimacy is questioned by much of the *Chareidi* community. But the growth of Torah in Israel is continuing to benefit even those outside of the State. In many communities in the Diaspora, it has become almost a given that upon gradu-

ating high school, both male and female students spend at least a year in Israel learning Torah.

For a religious Jew living in Israel there is both a quantitative and qualitative increase in Jewish observance.

Quantitatively, there is an entire group of *mitzvot* that can only be fully performed in Eretz Yisrael. Qualitatively, both Rashi and Rambam, among other commentators (Deuteronomy 11:18), explain that even with regard to those commandments that can be performed outside of Eretz Yisrael, the primary fulfillment takes place in Israel. While anecdotes describing secular Israelis' ignorance of basic Judaism are troubling, most secular Israeli Jews live richer Jewish lives than secular American Jews. Israeli Jews tend to be somewhat traditional—neither fully observant nor totally secular. In a recent study by the Guttman Center of the Democracy Institute, only 20 percent of Israelis described themselves as secular; this is less than half of the 42 percent who said they were secular in the Center's first study in 1974. Surprisingly enough, this shift toward religion occurred even while Israel was absorbing more than a million Russian immigrants who had been indoctrinated with atheism.

In contrast, the growing strength of American Orthodoxy masks the decline in Jewish identification among Jews in the United States. The number of secular Jews in the United States is greater than the number of those who identify with any religious stream, be it Orthodox, Conservative or Reform. While the very fact of living in Israel impels Jews to retain a Jewish identity, Diaspora Jews do not have this luxury.

The incredible accomplishment of *kibbutz galuyot* (the ingathering of the exiles) has created the enormous challenge of integrating such diverse groups into a common culture. Progress in this area, which has been slow, highlights the internal conflicts of Israeli society. Neither the diversity of Jews who have settled in Israel nor the complexity involved in melding them into a single society could have been anticipated.

Thus, creating a cohesive society remains a true challenge.

Even in the growing religious segment of the Israeli population, the relationships between Ashkenazi and Sephardi, *Chassid* and *Mitnaged* and Religious Zionist and *Chareidi* are not harmonious. Having a Jewish state may, in fact, intensify the need to preserve group identities; with so many Jews living together in one place, the fear of losing one's group identity is naturally heightened. Moreover, the Israeli climate seems to encourage extremism; its culture is not one of compromise and accommodation. While it is disappointing that with the advent of the State there seems to be less rather than more unity, ultimately, our divisiveness attests to our passion for our ideas.

In spite of these societal challenges, Israel's economic progress is remarkable. It is even more extraordinary in light of the State's hostile neighbors and a huge number of immigrants who do not speak Hebrew. Sixty years ago, Jews in most parts of the world lived in extreme poverty. In Israel itself, the early years were economically difficult and emigrants to the new State were in dire straits. Today, Israel's economy is today quite robust. Nevertheless, economic inequality persists and more needs to be done to improve the situation.

*A Yemenite family walks through the desert on the way to a JDC reception camp. Thousands of Yemenite Jews immigrated to Israel through Operation Magic Carpet in 1949.*

*In 1948, the Jewish population in Israel was 650,000. By 1951, with the immigration of Holocaust survivors and nearly all of the Jewish communities of Libya, Yemen and Iraq, the Jewish population in the country more than doubled.*

*Photo: Zoltan Kluger, Israel Government Press Office*

As a subculture, Orthodox Jews in Israel have shown growth in both numbers and Torah learning. Outreach has led to a substantial number of *chozrim beteshuvah* (formerly secular Jews who have returned to a life of observance). However, religious Jewry has not met the challenge of demonstrating the viability of a Torah-observant state that would be competitive in the modern world. There has been progress in finding halachic approaches to modern technology, but no clear proposals for running a state according to halachah. If we truly believe in the viability of Jewish law, then we should strive to create a halachic state. Ideally, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate should be a model for how Torah can mold and shape a healthier society. Tragically, however, many secular Israelis see the Rabbinate in a negative light. Moreover, the Rabbinate is in serious decline, a topic that deserves a separate analysis.

Secular Israel has not been successful in instilling in its youth the pioneering spirit of the founders of the State. The secular Zionist goal of the normalization of Israel has led to a loss of Jewish identity. Unfortunately, religious Jews are unable to counter this trend since they tend to live in insulated enclaves. The key to insuring a strong Jewish identity for all Jews in Israel is for the religious community to live a

- Recent estimates put the world Jewish population at more than 13 million. Of that total, 41 percent live in Israel and 42.9 percent live in North America.
- Of Israel's 7 million people, 76.2 percent are Jewish, 19.5 percent are Arab (mostly Muslim) and 4.3 percent are Druze, Circassian and others not classified by religion.
- Israel's non-Jewish, primarily Arab, communities have increased from 156,000 people in 1949 to some 1.6 million today.

Unless otherwise specified, all facts in this section are provided by the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

meaningful Jewish lifestyle in a way that will inspire others.

Orthodoxy's limited impact on the broader population is also related to the present system of religious parties, which causes many to equate religion with politics. As a result, Orthodoxy has unfairly become equated with ritual observance alone and with a lack of concern for the welfare of others. This has led many secular and even some traditional (*mesorati*) Jews to distance themselves from embracing observance.



The lack of inspired political leadership is yet another grave concern. Most Israelis have little trust in governmental officials. This is true whether the government is Left, Right or Center. Second-generation leaders rarely have the stature of founding fathers. Nevertheless, it's important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, and to differentiate between being dissatisfied with a particular government or political leader and the intrinsic value of having a Jewish state.

At sixty, Israel is an imperfect reality. While the elation following the creation of the State and the victory of the Six-Day War has long since subsided, we cannot allow disappointment or various failings to cloud our perspective. Even after the Sin of the Golden Calf and the Sin of the Spies, the generation of Jews who wandered in the desert did not stop celebrating Pesach. Similarly, Jews did not cease to celebrate Chanukah despite the failures of the kings who descended from the Chashmonaim.

Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog, the first chief rabbi of Israel, observed that our tradition states that Jews will experience only two exiles, and that we are currently towards the end of the second. His observation should strengthen our belief in the State of Israel's permanence. In the years since its founding, Israel has prospered; it is a major military and economic power, and has enormously enriched Jewish religious life around the world. Indeed, some of Israel's successes are greater than we could have imagined.

In 1948, the two-thousand-year-old dream of Jews returning to the Land of Israel was realized. After sixty years of creating and maintaining the State, this reality has become central to Jewish life. Events of such magnitude occur rarely in a nation's history and must not be taken for granted; focusing on the immediate problems and conflicts facing the state can lead to a loss of perspective. It is a great merit to be alive at this juncture in Jewish history, when we are privileged to have the opportunities and responsibilities that come with having our own State.

- The gross domestic product (GDP) of the Israeli economy is \$154 billion (51st place in the world), while the GDP per person is \$22,944 (44th place in the world). Israel's exports total some \$42 billion annually, while its imports total \$45 billion.
- Unemployment in Israel is at 8.9 percent.
- The Israeli economy's predominant sector is high-tech, which became the driving force behind the country's economic growth in the 1990s.



*Virtually the entire Jewish community of Ethiopia, believed to have been there since the time of King Solomon, was moved to Israel through Operations Moses, in 1984, and Solomon, in 1991. Some 110,000 Ethiopian Jews now live in Israel, 31 percent of whom were born in Israel. Another large wave of immigration, which began in 1989, consisted of one million Jews from the former Soviet Union. Photo courtesy of the JDC.*

Sixty years is not a long time from the perspective of Jewish history—perhaps we need to acknowledge that it is still *reishit* (the beginning) of the Redemption. We pray that Hashem will redeem us quickly while we continue to work on improving our role in the process. **IA**

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