

AN INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

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CHAPTER ONE

The Jews in the world

WHO ARE THE JEWS?

The Jews are a scattered people. They live in many different countries, and with one exception they are a numerically insignificant minority in all of them. They belong to many different ethnic and linguistic groupings, and many different cultural backgrounds. Even within a single country these differences divide the Jewish communities from one another. So what is it that binds them all together, and allows us to speak in general terms about ‘the Jews’?

One superficially attractive but actually misleading answer is that they are united by a common religion. There *is* a Jewish religion, and for very many Jews it is the focus of their lives and a strong cement binding them to other Jews. But it would be unrealistic to maintain that it is the Jewish religion that unites the Jewish people. In fact the Jewish religion divides the Jewish people today, perhaps almost as much as it divides Jews from non-Jews. And even the most pious Jews would probably admit that it is not their religion that defines them as Jews. They practise the Jewish religion because they are Jews, not the other way around.

What is it then that makes a Jew a Jew? In today’s world, although there are many ‘Jews by choice’, the overwhelming majority of Jews are born into Jewish families. Most Jews would answer the question ‘why are you a Jew?’ by saying ‘because I was born a Jew’.

This basic fact has important implications. It is sometimes said that ‘Judaism is not a proselytising religion’, meaning that Jews do not actively seek to make converts to Judaism. Yet this formulation is fundamentally misleading. Religious Jews are generally proud of their religion, they are happy to explain it to non-Jews, they welcome and are even flattered by the interest of outsiders. But since in their minds the religion is somehow secondary to Jewish identity, it is not conversion to Judaism that is the issue. In the relatively rare cases where a non-Jew does

opt to become a Jew, this is probably seen more in terms of joining a people than subscribing to a faith. Indeed, as we shall see, even within the Jewish religion belief itself occupies a somewhat secondary role.

Secondly, since the Jew's sense of being a Jew springs primarily from birth rather than from personal commitment, links to other Jews tend also to be based on birth at least as much as on other factors. In other words, the family tends to play a large part in the consciousness of Jews, and the sense of family is very broad, encompassing the most distant cousins.

This feeling also leads Jews to have a very intimate connection with the past of the Jewish people. This connection is reinforced by established religious maxims: all Jews should consider themselves as if they personally were led out of Egyptian slavery by Moses, stood before God at Mount Sinai and received the gift of the Torah. But it is a general, spontaneous feeling nonetheless, by no means limited to religious Jews, but shared by many who reject religious belief.

Nahum Goldmann, one of the outstanding Jewish leaders of the twentieth century in the political rather than the religious sphere, wrote these words in his memoirs about the Jew of the Lithuanian *shtetl* into which he was born:

Not only did he live on an intimate family footing with his fellow Jews, who were much more to him than members of the same race or religion; he experienced a heartfelt closeness to the past of his people and to his God. When, as a child, he learned about Moses, he saw him not as a mythical figure but as an important though perhaps somewhat distant uncle. When, as a student at the rabbinical academy, the *yeshiva*, he analysed Rabbi Akiba or Rabbi Judah, he was not an antiquarian studying history so much as a man engaged in a living discussion with an older, wiser relative.¹

The whole Jewish past, not the past of a single family or a local Jewish community, is in a sense part and parcel of the inner experience and identity of every single Jew. And since Jews everywhere share this sense of their history, they are all somehow part of the same huge, scattered family.

Note that the expression 'Jewish race', which is still occasionally encountered, is no longer appropriate. It came into use in a period when the definition of 'race' was much looser than it is today, and when one could speak, for instance, of the 'English race'. Antisemitism, a European political movement that gained many adherents from the

¹ Nahum Goldmann, *Memoirs* (London, 1970), p. 6.

early 1880s on, attempted to isolate the Jews from the rest of society by pretending that they were somehow genetically different from other people. In some European countries, traumatised by recent dramatic political and economic upheavals, the antisemites really did succeed in driving a wedge between friends, neighbours, business associates. (English-speaking countries have been largely immune to their efforts.) But this view of Jewish identity was never realistic. There are no racial characteristics that are shared by Jews and that distinguish them from non-Jews, and a moment's reflection will show that it would be extraordinary if there were, because the boundaries of Jewish identity have never been watertight. Throughout the recorded history of Europe individuals have joined or left the Jewish communities, and sometimes whole populations have changed their allegiance. Christianity at its inception spread among Jews, and all the churches have devoted strenuous efforts at different times to converting Jews, sometimes by force. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council, wishing to segregate Jews from Christians, ruled that they must wear special badges sewn to their clothing to distinguish them: apparently 800 years ago it was considered that Jews and Christians did not differ outwardly, and when the Nazi Germans in their race laws of 1935 revived the Jewish badge they were implicitly reaffirming the same belief, despite their strident racial mouthings. The Nazi laws define a Jew as someone with at least one Jewish grandparent, and this turned out to be a very unrealistic and haphazard definition in a Germany where Jews and Christians had been intermarrying for generations.

Jewish law has its own definition of Jewish identity: one becomes a Jew either by birth or by choice. In the former case the traditional law defines the child of two Jewish parents or of a Jewish mother alone as a Jew, but today the most liberal movements in Judaism consider the child of a non-Jewish mother to be Jewish if the father is a Jew and the child has been raised as a Jew. A non-Jew can become Jewish by applying to a court (nowadays usually consisting of three rabbis, although traditionally it was not necessary for any of the three to be rabbis), by studying, and by undergoing the rituals of immersion in water and (in the case of males only) circumcision. Some add that there must be a period of time spent within a Jewish family or community, and a commitment to continue to observe the commandments; but there is a contrary view, based on ancient rabbinic opinion, that only minimal study is necessary if the commitment is strong, because the process of learning will be more effective if it is pursued within the community after acceptance.

FACTS AND FIGURES

There are some thirteen million Jews in the world today, according to the most reliable estimates.² The Jewish people thus ranks among the smaller scattered peoples, and Judaism has far fewer adherents than any of the other main world religions.

Naturally it is impossible to obtain accurate statistics about the numbers of Jews, because of the lack of agreement over how to define a Jew. As has already been mentioned, definitions range from the very strict and narrow definition of the traditional law, the so called 'halak-hic definition', to various much broader and vaguer definitions. Some published statistics are based on people's own definitions of themselves, others are based on synagogue membership, and some are based on pure speculation.

Many countries, including some of those with the largest Jewish populations (notably the USA), do not keep official figures about the number of Jews in the population. In the statistics from Israel, where 'Jewish' is an officially recognised 'nationality', the figures are based on the halak-hic definition but are augmented by the non-Jewish members of 'Jewish' families, who sometimes outnumber the Jewish members.

Consequently all these statistics must be treated with reserve.³ Certain broad facts, however, are indisputable. First, although Jews are scattered among a very large number of countries, the vast majority are concentrated in very few countries. Of the thirteen million Jews in the world 5.69 million (43.6%) are believed to live in the United States and 4.55 million (34.8%) in Israel. No other country approaches anywhere near these figures: the next in rank is France with about half a million Jews.

Again, certain regions of the world are far more strongly represented on a map of Jewish populations than others. Outside Israel, most Jews live in North or South America, Europe, South Africa or Australia. In the rest of Africa and Asia Jews are few and far between, and even within individual countries the Jewish population tends to be concentrated in specific regions or cities.

Another way of looking at the figures is in terms of the ratio of Jews to the total population. Here, on a national basis, Israel is totally exceptional, with Jews constituting just over 80% of the population, whereas elsewhere only three countries (USA, Canada, and, among the smallest communities, Gibraltar) count more than ten Jews per thousand of the

² *American Jewish Year Book* 1997, p. 517. All the statistics given here are taken from that publication.

³ See *ibid.*, pp. 515ff.

Table 1.1. *Countries with the largest Jewish populations, 1995^a*

Rank	Country	Jewish population	% of population of country	% of world Jewish population
1	United States	5,690,000	2.14	43.6
2	Israel	4,549,500	80.97	34.8
3	France	525,000	0.90	4.0
4	Canada	362,000	1.22	2.8
5	Russia	360,000	0.25	2.8
6	United Kingdom	292,000	0.50	2.2
7	Argentina	206,000	0.59	1.6
8	Ukraine	180,000	0.35	1.4
9	Brazil	100,000	0.06	0.8
10	South Africa	95,000	0.22	0.7
11	Australia	92,000	0.50	0.7

Notes:

^a Source: *American Jewish Year Book* 1997, p. 543.

population, and elsewhere the Jewish presence is numerically insignificant.

The Jewish population is predominantly urban. This is in line with a general trend in the world, but Jews are more liable to live in towns, and particularly large conurbations, than the general population and, with the exception of a few countries where deliberate efforts have been made to settle them on the land, they rarely live in villages or isolated settlements. This is not a new phenomenon, although before the Nazi genocide it was common to see Jews living in villages or on rural estates and even farming the land in eastern Europe. Today the overwhelming majority of Jews live in large urban areas, and indeed more than half of world Jewry lives in ten large metropolitan areas in the United States, Israel and France.

Well over half the Jews in the world live in English-speaking countries, and while it would be an exaggeration to say that all Jews speak or understand English it is probably true that English is the most important means of communication among Jews, and the largest number of books and periodicals aimed at a Jewish readership are in English. Hebrew is also an important language for Jews, both because it is the main official language of Israel and because it is used either exclusively or side by side with the local vernacular as a liturgical language in synagogues around the world. As the language of the ancient scriptures, Hebrew is uniquely

Table 1.2. *Metropolitan areas with the largest Jewish populations, 1995*^a

Rank	Metropolitan area	Jewish population
1	New York	1,917,000
2	Tel Aviv	1,878,000
3	Los Angeles	585,000
4	Jerusalem	470,000
5	Haifa	432,000
6	Miami	382,000
7	Philadelphia	314,000
8	Paris	310,000
9	Chicago	261,000
10	Boston	228,000

Note:

^a Source: *American Jewish Year Book* 1997, p. 544.

associated with the Jews: although non-Jews sometimes study it, they have only rarely used it as a medium of self-expression or communication. Russian is also spoken or understood by a large minority of Jews. In the past many Jews have spoken other languages, such as Arabic, Spanish, German, Yiddish and French, and all these languages are still spoken by some Jews today. Going back further in history an important place was once held by Aramaic (a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew) and Greek, but both these languages have very few Jewish speakers today; in fact Aramaic is almost extinct as a spoken language, although it still plays a part in Jewish worship and study.

NATIVES OR IMMIGRANTS?

Paradoxically, although Jews justifiably consider themselves as one of the oldest of peoples, a majority of Jews today would see themselves as newcomers in the places where they live. Relatively few Jews live where their grandparents or their great-grandparents were born. The story of the Jewish people over the past century or more has been a story of dramatic upheavals and displacements, and the map of the Jewish world has been subject to constant and kaleidoscopic change.⁴

If we look back to the beginning of the nineteenth century we detect a pattern of settlement that in its main outlines had not changed for cen-

⁴ See Nicholas de Lange, *Atlas of the Jewish World* (New York/Oxford, 1984).

turies. Most Jews lived either in the Christian countries of Europe or in the Muslim lands centred on the Ottoman Empire and stretching from Morocco in the west to Iran and Bukhara in the east. The Jews constituted a prominent presence in the towns of North Africa, but already an unprecedentedly dense concentration was building up on the territory of what had been (until the recent partitions) Poland. The Jews of North Africa and the Middle East mainly spoke Arabic or a distinctive form of Spanish, whereas in central and eastern Europe the majority spoke a form of German peculiar to the Jews and known locally as Yiddish (meaning 'Jewish'). Outside this main area of Jewish settlement there were some small and fairly isolated outposts, either old ones, such as those in India and China, or new ones, in the Dutch colonies, in the United States and in Canada. Some Christian lands were deliberately closed to Jewish settlement by the policy of their rulers: the most extensive of these were Spain and Portugal and their considerable overseas colonies, and the Russian Empire outside the frontiers of the former Polish kingdom. Russia kept its Jews penned inside those old frontiers, in what came to be known as the Pale of Settlement, which was to have an enormous impact on Jewish history and culture.

Within the Pale of Settlement the Jewish population grew in the course of the nineteenth century by leaps and bounds. In 1800 there were little more than a million Jews in the territories of what had been Poland, of whom three quarters lived under Russian rule; already Jews outnumbered Christians in some places. By 1880 Europe contained some seven million Jews, accounting for about 90% of the Jews in the whole world, and most of them lived in the eastern half of the continent, with about four million in the Pale of Settlement. Warsaw alone counted more Jews than the whole of Britain or France. And although there was a constant emigration westward into central and western Europe, and on to North America and other parts of the New World, the population of the Pale continued to grow dramatically. In the early 1880s, when to economic hardship was added anti-Jewish violence, the trickle of emigration became a flood. Between 1881 and 1914 (when the outbreak of war made travel difficult) some 2.75 million Jews left eastern Europe, more than a third of all the Jews in the region and more than a quarter of all the Jews in the world. Eighty-five percent of them settled in the United States, where they constituted one of the largest immigrant groups. Population movement on this scale was virtually unprecedented in Jewish history, and its consequences were enormous.

These eastern European Jews had a very strong and cohesive culture,

the main elements of which originated in the Middle Ages in the Rhineland, from where the Jews known as Ashkenazim began to migrate eastwards from the thirteenth century. Being strictly separated from the Christian population they maintained their own language (Yiddish) and their own distinctive culture over the centuries, and when in modern times they began to migrate westwards again they took their language and culture with them. Although Yiddish is now a dwindling language in terms of numbers of speakers, it can still be heard in many parts of the world, particularly among the older generation, as can the distinctive Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew in the synagogue, although it is rarer than it used to be.

When the Ashkenazim arrived in the cities of western Europe they encountered Sephardim, Jews whose families came from Spain and Portugal. So different were the religious customs and culture of the two groups that they tended to form separate communities, with their own synagogues, and intermarriage between the two was often frowned on. Today the two types of synagogue still exist, but there is generally a more open and friendly relationship. The term 'Sephardi' is properly reserved for Jews of Iberian origin, but in Israel it is applied (rather disdainfully) by Ashkenazim to any non-Ashkenazi Jews. Like the Ashkenazim, Sephardim too migrated in considerable numbers from the Ottoman Empire and Morocco at the end of the last and the beginning of the present century, many of them settling in Spanish-speaking countries of the New World.

In the present century the immigration just described continued, but other movements were added. For example there was massive emigration from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia during the period of Nazi ascendancy in the 1930s, and after the Second World War many of the few survivors of the Nazi genocide decided to leave Europe. During the 1950s, as Arab nationalism swept through North Africa, there was an exodus of Jews from the region, and whenever the authorities permitted it Jews also left the Communist countries of central and eastern Europe. After the collapse of Communism this trend became even more pronounced. Meanwhile, for various political reasons, the countries of the Middle East, with the exception of Israel, became almost emptied of Jews, and even in India, where there was no specific political cause, a similar phenomenon was observed. The result of all this movement was to reduce drastically or even obliterate the oldest Jewish communities in the world, and to swell the newer ones. Recently some of the new communities, such as those in southern Africa, have experienced an exodus too.

To take a few examples to illustrate all this movement, between 1930 and 1990 the Jewish population of Canada, Mexico and Sweden doubled, that of Australia and Brazil trebled, while in other countries such as Chile, Uruguay and Venezuela the Jews went from a barely significant to a much more noticeable presence. On the other hand, during the same period important European communities such as Austria, the Baltic republics, Bulgaria, Byelorussia (Belarus), Czechoslovakia, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland and Ukraine were reduced to a miserable shadow of their former selves, and the ancient Jewries of Aden, Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, India, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen virtually disappeared.

The main countries of immigration, notably the United States and Israel, have welcomed large numbers of Jewish immigrants from many different countries. This inflow has had a marked effect on the character of the Jewish communities within the various countries. In many, Jewish communal and cultural life has been enormously strengthened. However, massive immigration can alter the character of the community, as happened for instance in London with the huge wave of immigration from Russia between 1881 and the early years of the present century, in France with the North African Jews who arrived in the 1950s, or with the Russian Jews who came to Germany in the 1990s.

Israel has absorbed huge numbers of Jewish immigrants since its inauguration in 1948 as a state guaranteeing a refuge to all Jews, against a background of continuing economic and political difficulties. (However, large numbers have emigrated from Israel at the same time, to the great benefit of Hebrew teaching in other countries.) Great efforts have been devoted to teaching the newcomers the Hebrew language and helping them and their children to assimilate to the prevailing culture. At the same time, there is a strong tendency for Jews to maintain and express their distinctive identity, derived from their ethnic background or the country from which they came. It is not so much a melting pot as a fruit salad, particularly so far as the first generation of immigrants is concerned, since their children tend to adapt to a more homogeneous Israeli culture during their period of compulsory military service.

Israel holds a unique place in the affections of Jews around the world, whether or not they consider it to be the holy land or the Jewish homeland in a political sense. Israel itself views itself as different in kind from the rest of the Jewish world, which is called in Hebrew *galut* or *golah*, 'exile'. (In other languages Jews speak of 'Diaspora', from an old Greek term meaning 'dispersion', 'dissemination'.) To go to live in Israel is

termed in Hebrew *aliyah*, 'ascent', a term formerly reserved for journeying to the holy city of Jerusalem. Conversely, to emigrate from Israel is termed *yeridah*, 'descent', and is viewed negatively. Emissaries are sent out from Israel to the communities of the Diaspora to inculcate a knowledge and love of Israel and to encourage *aliyah*.

Although Jews tend to feel a strong bond with all other Jews around the world, they are likely to be unaware of the international organisations that bring together, represent, and to some extent protect and sustain Jews in the different countries. There is a multiplicity of such organisations, of which only a few can be mentioned here.

Six Jewish organisations have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The World Jewish Congress, founded by Nahum Goldmann, whose name has already been mentioned, first convened in Geneva in 1936. It is a voluntary association of Jewish bodies, communities and organisations from around the world, whose aim is 'to assure the survival, and to foster the unity of the Jewish people'. The International Council of Jewish Women, whose name speaks for itself, was founded in 1912. The International Council on Jewish Social and Welfare Services, the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organisations and the Consultative Council of Jewish Organisations are umbrella bodies representing different national and international agencies. Finally, Agudas Israel World Organisations, founded in 1912, is a traditional Orthodox body having as its aim 'the solution – in the spirit of the Torah – of problems which periodically confront the Jewish people in Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel] and the Diaspora'.

Of the other international organisations the most powerful is the World Zionist Organisation, set up by the First Zionist Congress in 1897. The moving spirit in the events leading up to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, it continues to work for the strengthening of Israel, encouraging *aliyah*, and promoting a distinctive (not necessarily religious) Jewish culture. The World Union for Progressive Judaism fosters the growth of Reform and Liberal Judaism, while the much more recent World Council of Synagogues does the same for Conservative Judaism, and the World Sephardi Federation deals with the religious, cultural and social welfare of Sephardi congregations. The Maccabi World Union is an amateur sporting association. There are many more specialised associations, as well as organisations serving particular groups of countries, such as the European Union or the British Commonwealth. These multifarious organisations reflect the many and

varied currents within World Jewry, as well as the high value traditionally placed upon communal service.

THE JEWS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

North America

It is convenient to group the United States and Canada together, despite their different histories and disparate size. Their six million Jews represent the powerhouse and centre of gravity of the whole Jewish world (with Israel providing something of a counterweight). They wield an influence out of proportion to their numbers, both within the Jewish world and beyond. Numerically not much more than 2% of the population, the Jews are self-conscious and self-confident, have well-endowed and well-organised institutions, and contain among their number some influential individuals. They thus have a disproportionate impact politically, religiously, culturally, and in terms of welfare aid and social issues both on their own countries and on the wider Jewish world.

The experience of Jewish immigrants in the United States, often arriving from countries of very limited opportunity for Jews if not outright discrimination against them, has not set them apart greatly from other immigrants, and has presented them with enormous opportunities for self-fulfilment and advancement, even if, inevitably, they have had to face serious hardships and challenges. Like other immigrant groups, the Jews have had to adapt to very new circumstances and to the demands of a cultural and social 'melting pot', which yet offers very distinct possibilities and even pressures to maintain their own distinctive identity and way of life. Jewish responses to these conflicting pressures have ranged very widely, from total assimilation and abandonment of Jewish identity at one extreme, passing through various modes of religious and social accommodation, to the maintenance of a very traditional and separate existence at the other.

Unlike the European countries from which most Jews came, the United States accorded religious and other freedoms to its citizens from its inception. The constitution of 1787 explicitly forbade religious tests for public office (although some states retained them until much later), and the Bill of Rights of 1791 guaranteed total freedom of religion. The numbers of Jews affected by this momentous change were very small at first, but they rose very quickly in the course of the nineteenth century, from a few thousand to more than a quarter of a million by 1880. The

Table 1.3. *American states with the largest Jewish populations, 1995^a*

Rank	State	Jewish population	% of total population
1	New York	1,652,000	9.1
2	California	921,000	2.9
3	Florida	644,000	4.5
4	New Jersey	435,000	5.5
5	Pennsylvania	325,000	2.7
6	Massachusetts	268,000	4.4
7	Illinois	268,000	2.3
8	Maryland	212,000	4.2

Note:

^a Source: *American Jewish Year Book* 1997.

period of really momentous immigration began after that date, with the outbreak of pogroms in Russia, and by 1900 the Jewish population had already quadrupled to one million; by 1910 it was estimated at over two million, by 1914 at over three million, and in the middle of the 1920s at four million. Whereas the pre-1880 immigrants came mainly from central Europe, the newcomers originated predominantly in eastern Europe, and were mostly very poor. Despite low wages, frequent unemployment and disease they gradually improved their position by hard work and self-help, and they were probably the most dramatically successful of all the immigrant groups of the period.

Today immigration continues on a relatively small scale, mainly from the former Soviet Union and Israel, helping to compensate for the very low birthrate of the native Jewish population. Nearly half the Jews in the US live in the north-east (as compared to less than one fifth of the general population)

The American Jewish community is served by a large variety of organisations with very different aims. One of the most venerable is the American Jewish Committee, set up in 1906, at a time of growing anti-semitism, by members of the Jewish elite, whose concern was spiritual and cultural as well as social and political. In its distinguished history of involvement in campaigns against discrimination and prejudice it has frequently met with opposition from other groups, particularly those of a socialist or Zionist complexion, such as the American Jewish Congress, a politically vocal and partisan organisation with a decidedly Zionist orientation. At the head of the many Zionist organisations is the Zionist Organization of America (founded 1897) and the women's organisation,

Hadassa (founded 1912). The B'nai B'rith, which began life in 1843 as a fraternal order of Masonic type, is now a broadly based organisation, particularly devoted to youth work, student counselling and combating antisemitism. The United Jewish Appeal (founded 1939) channels funds raised in a massive annual campaign into a wide range of deserving causes. Its foremost beneficiary is Israel, which has received enormous funds destined particularly for the absorption of immigrants, but help is given to humanitarian projects in many countries. Two other important organisations which continue the American Jewish tradition of rendering practical assistance to the less fortunate are the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS, founded 1880) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, founded 1914). HIAS is a worldwide migration agency, which does invaluable practical work in the resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees, while the JDC works to relieve hardship overseas, in Israel, North Africa, eastern Europe and elsewhere. While both these organisations concentrate their efforts on Jews they also help needy non-Jews.

American Judaism is as dynamic, as varied and as unique as American Jewry. Its variety reflects the different waves of immigration and their experiences of adapting themselves to a free and open society. The few congregations of the Colonial period were Sephardi; then the 'German' immigrations of the nineteenth century brought Ashkenazi religious leaders from central Europe, schooled in the dominant forms of Jewish modernism (whether Orthodox or Reform). By 1880 there were over 200 congregations, and all but a handful were Reform. The huge immigration from Russia brought Jews who, even if they were avowed secularists, were accustomed to the old-style religion of the ghetto. Three hundred new congregations had been founded by 1890, and they were traditionalist in flavour. As the newcomers established themselves and adopted an American way of life they developed their own style of Orthodoxy, and meanwhile immigrants from the old Ottoman lands brought a style of Sephardi religiosity far removed from that of the established American Sephardi synagogues, so they too established congregations of their own. Later refugees from Nazi Europe included adherents of the more evolved forms of European Liberalism, as well as communities of Hasidim with a highly developed folk tradition strongly resistant to new external influences. The most recent waves of immigration, from Israel and the former Soviet Union, stem from highly assimilated societies in which religion has ceased to be a living force for most Jews.

The differences between these various strands of Jewish religion will be discussed in a later chapter. For the present it is important to note that religious pluralism is a real feature of the Jewish community in America, just as it is in the population as a whole. A survey of denominational preferences in 1990 showed that very similar numbers of Jews were attracted to Reform and Conservative Judaism (39% and 40%) respectively, while 6% expressed a preference for Orthodoxy. If those who are not members of a synagogue are omitted, the figures are respectively 35%, 51% and 10%.⁵ These three movements have their own separate congregational associations, rabbinical assemblies and rabbinic seminaries. A later offshoot is Reconstructionism, which has its own institutions, and in recent years there has been a proliferation of less formal, 'alternative' Jewish religious groups.

Canada's political history is very different from that of the United States, and Canadian Jews are more likely than those in the US to think of themselves as Jews first and foremost. Anti-Zionism, which has been quite strong at various times in the US, is all but unknown in Canada.

The Jews of Canada were granted full citizen rights in 1832 (well ahead of parallel developments in Britain), but their numbers at first were relatively small. As in the US, it was immigration from Russia after 1880 that laid the real foundations of the large present-day community.⁶ Between 1881 and 1921 the Jewish population rose from 2,400 to over 126,000 (out of a total population of nearly nine million). Most of the immigrants settled in Montreal and Toronto, where they tended to concentrate in dense voluntary ghettos, but many travelled across the plains to the growing towns of the west. Winnipeg soon established itself as the third largest community, with 14,5000 Jews by 1921. Some agricultural settlements were also established in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Recent uncertainty about the future of Quebec has led to a noticeable movement of English-speaking Jews from Montreal to Ontario and as far away as Vancouver. A survey in 1991 showed that 21% of the Jews in Montreal were Sephardi, and 70% of these gave French as their mother tongue.

Canadian Judaism conforms more closely to the British than to the American model, in that the large majority of synagogues are Orthodox and only a small minority are Conservative or Reform. The synagogal

⁵ B. Lazerwitz *et al.*, 'A Study of Jewish Denominational Preferences: Summary Findings', in *American Jewish Year Book* 1997.

⁶ See Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root. The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto, 1992).

associations and rabbinic bodies follow the American pattern, and tend to be associated with their American counterparts.

Like Britain, and unlike the USA, there is a single representative body, the Canadian Jewish Congress (founded 1919), which concerns itself with the welfare of the community and provides a unified voice for Canadian Jewry. A distinctive feature of Canadian Jewry is the strong emphasis on Jewish education. All communities of any size have at least one Jewish day school, and these schools are very successful in attracting pupils.

Israel

Israel is unique in the Jewish world, not only because the large majority of its population is Jewish, but because it defines itself as a 'Jewish State'. This concept is novel and to a large extent experimental. The Declaration of the State (1948) begins by stressing the place that the land of Israel (Eretz Israel) has always occupied in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people:

Eretz Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave the world the eternal Book of Books.

After being exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

The Declaration concludes:

We appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realisation of the age-old dream – the redemption of Israel.⁷

In keeping with this grandiose vision, the Law of Return (1950) begins: 'Every Jew shall have the right to come to this country as an *oleh* [immigrant].'

Thus, although Israel is a secular state with no established religion, Judaism has a central and strong place within it, and the Jewish majority have certain rights and privileges which are not shared by others.

⁷ For the text of the Declaration, the Law of Return and other key documents see Philip S. Alexander, ed., *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism* (Manchester, 1984), pp. 164ff. These texts can also, at the time of writing, be found on the internet at <http://www.israel.org/gov/laws>.

The question of freedom of religion in Israel is a complex one, and this is an area in which there are many tensions. In principle Jews are free from any external constraint, and can practise their religion in whatever way they see fit, indeed this is proclaimed as one of the advantages of living in Israel over life in the Diaspora. In reality it has to be said that many Jews, and particularly immigrants from western countries, where non-Orthodox (Conservative, Reform and Liberal) forms of Judaism predominate numerically, feel frustration at being deprived of certain basic religious freedoms, hampered in the free exercise of their religion, and denied access to the official structure of religious life in the religious councils. This is due to the privileged position accorded to Orthodoxy in Israel for political reasons. In the 1996 elections the three religious political parties increased their representation from sixteen to twenty-three seats, and controlled four ministries, including the Ministry of the Interior. The religious parties at once presented a number of demands, insisting on implementation of Orthodox law in such areas as public observance of the Sabbath and forbidden foods, conversion to Judaism (which as we have seen has a bearing on civil rights), homosexuality, public decency and even archaeology. At the same time, the strong place accorded to religion in general in Israeli public life weighs very heavily upon those citizens who are not religious at all: for example, there is no civil marriage or burial. Constant public controversy focuses on all these issues.

Israel must be considered a country of Jewish immigration, in that the overwhelming majority of Jews are from families that have immigrated in the present century, even though, as we have already seen, Israel has also experienced, and continues to experience, considerable Jewish emigration. The original Jewish inhabitants before the first Zionist *aliyah* in the 1880s were mainly pious Jews who lived in the holy cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias and Safed, keeping the flickering flame of Judaism alive through the dark centuries of Muslim and Crusading Christian rule. They are known as the 'Old Yishuv [settlement]', to distinguish them from the 'New Yishuv' that followed. Their numbers were very small. Zionist immigration, before and after the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the granting of the British Mandate by the League of Nations in 1922, completely changed the nature of the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel. The first census held in British Palestine, in 1922, recorded 84,000 Jews, 11% of the total population, whereas in 1995 there were 4,549,500, forming 81% of the total. As with other countries of immigration, successive waves have come from different coun-

tries. In the early part of this century the immigrants were mainly ideologically committed Zionists from Russia who came 'to build the country and to be built by it'. They instituted the distinctive form of co-operative agricultural settlements known as *kibbutzim*. Later they were joined by Jews from Poland, Germany and other central European countries, whose culture was rather different. The declaration of the state in 1948 was followed by the arrival of Holocaust survivors from displaced person (DP) camps in Europe and later, in the 1950s, by massive immigration from Arab lands. More recently there has been an airlift of Ethiopian 'Falashas', and a vast influx of Jews from the countries of the former Soviet Union. Naturally all this immigration has given rise to massive social problems, but what is particularly interesting for the observer is the way that in the midst of a 'melting pot' groups successfully strive to retain something of the flavour of the places from which they came, including distinctive religious traditions.

All recognised religious institutions in Israel fall under the authority of the Ministry for Religious Affairs. The Jewish religious establishment consists of chief rabbis, state rabbis, religious councils and rabbinic courts. Under a system inherited from the British and ultimately from the Ottomans, there are two chief rabbis, one Ashkenazi and one Sephardi. The main cities also have a dual chief rabbinate. The election of the chief rabbis has caused repeated problems, and the dual chief rabbinate has led to serious and sometimes apparently absurd conflicts. The district rabbis and other local rabbis with official positions are appointed, with the approval of the chief rabbinate, by local religious councils, which also pay their stipends. The religious councils, another heritage from the period of the British Mandate, are effectively part of the structure of local government. They are appointed jointly by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the local authority and the local rabbinate, and are totally under the influence of the National Religious Party. Each rabbinic court (*Bet Din*) consists of three judges (*dayyanim*) who are appointed formally by the president of the state with the approval of both chief rabbis. The positions are well paid and highly sought after. The Supreme *Bet Din* is headed by the two national chief rabbis.

The chief rabbis, the *dayyanim* and other officially appointed rabbis are state functionaries, and their authority derives from the state rather than from the consent of the Jewish community or their personal powers of spiritual leadership. A few chief rabbis have commanded widespread respect, but they constitute the exception. By contrast other holders of

religious appointments have earned public ridicule and have contributed to the very obvious alienation of many young Israelis from religion. In contrast to most diaspora communities, the image of the rabbinate in Israel tends to be a negative one, particularly among secular Jews. This is not merely a matter of anticlerical prejudice. The state rabbis rarely involve themselves in pastoral care or religious instruction, as their diaspora counterparts do, and so are not treated with the respect and affection accorded to some religious figures who are outside the state system. The authority of the chief rabbis is not recognised by the more extreme Orthodox groups or by the non-Orthodox movements.

The Reform and Conservative congregations are not recognised by the Ministry for Religious Affairs and are not entitled to government funds. The growth of non-Orthodox Judaism has been met by fierce opposition from the Orthodox establishment, and at one point it was seriously suggested that Reform and Conservative Judaism should accept the status of non-Jewish religions, so as to qualify for state aid on the same basis as Christianity and Islam. The growth of both movements was slow at first, but they are now well established and increasingly vocal, mainly thanks to immigration from the United States.

At the other extreme, various very traditional groupings have also remained outside the state system. The Jews of the Old Yishuv, both Sephardi and Ashkenazi, mostly held aloof from Zionism, and opposed the creation of the Jewish state. Their ranks were swollen after the Second World War by obsessively traditionalist immigrants from Hungary. They live in voluntary segregation in their own close-knit communities, mainly concentrated in the Mea Shearim quarter of Jerusalem. There they maintain the lifestyle of the old ghetto, with their own schools and yeshivot (Talmudic colleges). Their numbers are small, and they would remain a quaint curiosity were it not for a streak of religious zealotry which has often led to clashes with the secular powers. Ambulances answering emergency calls on the Sabbath have been pelted with stones, buses have been attacked by rioters complaining of obscene advertisements, and there have been violent demonstrations against sporting, social and cultural centres open to both sexes. Some of these outbreaks are spontaneous, but often they are organised by the Eda Haredit, an umbrella organisation of all the traditionalist groups, and they tend to exacerbate the delicate co-existence between the officially sanctioned religious authorities and the secular organisms of the state.

Former Soviet Bloc countries

Eastern Europe was, as we have already seen, an area of dense Jewish population before the First World War. It was also one of the most active theatres of that war, in which European Jews suffered heavy damage both as combatants and as civilian victims. The end of the war brought a new beginning to the Jews of this troubled region. In Russia the Revolution of February 1917 brought citizen rights to the Jews at last, and the removal of the many disabilities from which they had suffered under the autocratic monarchy. In the other countries of central and eastern Europe the postwar peace treaties incorporated specific guarantees of the Jews' rights as a minority. The hope of progress was short-lived, however, as the triumph of Bolshevism in Russia and later of German state antisemitism made their condition much worse than it had been before the war. While the Jews of the Soviet Union had some hope of being spared the extermination policies of the Germans, they suffered terrible privations during and after the Second World War, while in the territories annexed or occupied by the Germans the Jews were butchered with a brutality that still has the power to shock and haunt us today. The imposition of Communist regimes in most of those countries after the war condemned the survivors to further suffering, both material and spiritual, and hardly anything now survives to remind us of the teeming Jewish life and the glorious cultural achievements of the region.

The sudden and unexpected collapse of the Communist regimes in eastern Europe put an end to a system which, while it had been felt as repressive by many Jews, and particularly by their religious leadership, had also generally respected their ethnic integrity and protected them from the worst effects of popular antisemitism. The restoration of freedom of speech made life easier for Jews in some ways, but also gave greater freedom to the Jews' enemies. Emigration, which had proceeded by fits and starts in response to volatile political opportunities, now became a spate. According to the 1979 Soviet census, based on a national definition of Jewish identity and on respondents' own replies to enumerators' questions, there were 1.81 million Jews in the Soviet Union, of whom 700,000 were in the Russian Federation and 634,000 in Ukraine. In 1995 according to the most reliable estimates there were only 360,000 Jews in Russia and 180,000 in Ukraine.

We have already seen the enormous growth of the Jewish population

in the Pale of Settlement in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their inferior status, poverty and overcrowding in the Pale and a lack of opportunities for self-improvement created a feeling of frustration and despair. In the period of reaction following the assassination of Emperor Alexander II in 1881 the government adopted an openly anti-Jewish policy, and there were savage pogroms that drove many Jews to emigrate or to embrace revolutionary movements. The Revolution of February 1917 was welcomed with enthusiasm. The provisional government abolished all legal restrictions on Jews, and Zionist, socialist and religious parties attracted a mass following. The triumph of Bolshevism led, however, to the abolition of existing autonomous Jewish institutions, and Jewish religion, in common with all religions, came under attack. The Jews were treated as a nation, and when internal passports were introduced in 1933 children of Jewish parents were classified as being of Jewish nationality. Unlike other nations, however, the Jews have no territory of their own in Russia, apart from Birobidzhan, an 'Autonomous Jewish Oblast' established in the far east in the 1920s, which even at its height in the middle of the 1930s never achieved more than 23% Jews in its population. This is not the place to document the hardships suffered by Jews as individuals and as a group under successive Soviet governments, but what it is relevant to underline here is the virtually total disappearance of religious and educational resources before the introduction of new freedoms. With the abolition of the old restrictions, and the facilitation of relations with organisations abroad, there has been a striking revival in Jewish religious and cultural life in these countries. New synagogues have been created, including some non-Orthodox ones, and many educational initiatives have been implemented.

The formerly Communist countries of Europe which were within the Soviet ambit have experienced a similar resurgence of Jewish life.

In no other country was the murderous effect of the Nazi German genocide felt in a more dramatic form than in Poland, both because of the numbers involved and because the killing machine, intended to rid the whole world of Jews, was cynically centred by the Germans in this country, where they calculated there was less likely to be humanitarian protest or resistance than in Germany. Before the Second World War there were more than three million Jews in Poland, nearly 10% of the population, and in some places they formed a majority. At the liberation barely 50,000 remained, and several hundred of these were subsequently killed by their Christian neighbours. Emigration and assimilation have since reduced the number of Jews to a few thousand.