CHAPTER 1

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

[1] Nahum Goldmann, *Memories* (London, 1970), p. 6.

political movement that gained many adherents from the 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 'halakhic 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 halakhic 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. 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 5.275 million (40.1%) are believed to live in the United States and 5.393 million (41.0%) 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, Australia or South Africa. In the rest of the world 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 almost 75% of the population, whereas elsewhere only three countries (USA, Canada, and, among the smallest communities,

[2] *American Jewish Year Book* 2007, p. 551. All the statistics given here are taken from that publication.

Table 1.1 *Countries with the largest Jewish populations, 2007*

Rank	Country	Jewish population	% of population of country	% of world Jewish population
1	Israel	5,393,400	74.95	41.0
2	United States	5,275,000	1.75	40.1
3	France	490,000	0.79	3.7
4	Canada	374,000	1.14	2.8
5	United Kingdom	295,000	0.48	2.2
6	Russia	221,000	0.16	1.7
7	Argentina	184,000	0.47	1.4
8	Germany	120,000	0.15	0.9
9	Australia	104,000	0.50	0.8
10	Brazil	96,200	0.05	0.7

Gibraltar) count more than ten Jews per thousand of the 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 (see Table 1.2).

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 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

Table 1.2 *Metropolitan areas with the largest Jewish populations, 2007*

Rank	Metropolitan area	Jewish population
1	Tel Aviv	2,799,000
2	New York	2,051,000
3	Jerusalem	675,000
4	Los Angeles	668,000
5	Haifa	657,500
6	Southeast Florida	527,500
7	Be'er Sheva	350,800
8	Paris	284,000
9	Chicago	270,000
10	Boston	235,000

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.

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 centuries. 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 per cent 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.

The 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 to any non-Ashkenazi Jews. Sephardim migrated in considerable numbers from the Ottoman Empire and Morocco at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, many of them settling in Spanish-speaking countries of the New World.

In the twentieth 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 pale 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 twentieth 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.) 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.

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'. 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. 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'. 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 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 Organizations and the Consultative Council of Jewish Organizations are umbrella bodies representing different national and international agencies. 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 5.6 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