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ISRAEL AND THE JEWISH WORLD
The Land of Israel is the birthplace of the Jewish people and of Judaism. There, a significant part of the nation’s long history was enacted, of which about two thousand years are recorded in the Bible; there, its cultural, spiritual and national identity was formed; and there, its physical presence has been maintained throughout the centuries, even after the majority was forced into exile.

Over the centuries, Jewish communities in the Diaspora became an integral part of the societies in which they lived. Nonetheless, the Jews have remained bound by a common heritage and a collective commitment to the continuity of the Jewish people.

The spiritual bond with the Land of Israel has been an important component of Jewish life throughout the ages.

Similar to diasporas of other nations which maintain contact with their countries of origin, such as Italy, India and Turkey, Jews across the world contribute to the development of the State of Israel socially, politically and financially. A long tradition of mutual aid among world Jewry is manifested in a multifaceted network of solidarity and support.

Israel strives to ensure the safety and well-being of Jews worldwide and to offer them a wide array of experiences and opportunities.

Next year in Jerusalem

The seasons and agricultural cycle of the Land of Israel, are a prominent feature of Jewish festivals. Therefore, practicing a Jewish lifestyle anywhere in the world entails an inherent affinity to the land itself. Jewish liturgy also bears witness to the centrality of Israel: Wherever they are in the world, Jews face Jerusalem in their prayers, voicing a thrice-daily hope to rebuild the holy city, and reciting twice a year the words “Next year in Jerusalem” to express two thousand years of yearning.
The Origins of the Jewish Diaspora

Babylon: The First Diaspora

The Jewish presence in Babylon (today’s Iraq) began in 586 B.C.E. when Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the First Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and exiled tens of thousands of Jews to Babylon and Africa.

■ 720-597 BCE: Assyrian Empire. Exile and migration of Israelites to central Asia
■ 538-332 BCE: Persian Empire. Large-scale return of Jews from Babylon and construction of the Second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.
■ 332-164 BCE: Greek Empire. Migration of some Jews throughout the Empire.

Prisoners of Zion

“Prisoners of Zion” is the name given to Jews who were imprisoned and deemed subversive by the ruling power because of their aspiration to come to Israel. The most famous Prisoners of Zion were from the former Soviet Union. Many others, including Ethiopian Jews jailed for attempting to reach Israel, are also recognized.

Babylon: The First Diaspora

The Jewish presence in Babylon (today’s Iraq) began in 586 B.C.E. when Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the First Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and exiled tens of thousands of Jews to Babylon. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem’s Second Temple in 70 C.E. and brutally repressed a revolt in Judea in 135 C.E. Babylon thus became an important center of Jewish scholarship for many centuries. The Jewish community flourished for more than 2,500 years and played an important role in the modernization of Iraq, until its expulsion by the Iraqi authorities in the 1950s.
Jewish presence in the Land of Israel continued throughout the ages despite the mass expulsion of Jews during the first and second centuries C.E., with the main centers being the four ‘holy cities’: Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias.

For Jews dispersed throughout the world, faith in “the ingathering of the exiles” inspired initiatives of return to the ancestral homeland. Groups came back to Israel from Spain between the 12th and 16th centuries, followed by more from Eastern Europe, Yemen and Morocco during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The 19th century saw the rise of national movements in Europe, and with them the birth of modern Jewish nationalism - Zionism (Zion is another name for Israel), which called “to establish a home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, secured under public law.”

International recognition came in 1922, when the Mandate of the League of Nations (the precursor of the UN) officially supported the establishment of the Jewish national home in Israel, in recognition of the “historical connection of the Jewish people” with the land. That dream became a reality in 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel. Two years later, the special connection between the people and the land was translated into the Law of Return, granting every Jew worldwide the right to come to Israel.
A Visionary Woman

In the mid-16th century, after escaping the Spanish Inquisition, the wealthy Jewish businesswoman and philanthropist Doña Gracia Nasi moved to Constantinople. She appealed to the Ottoman Sultan to create a safe haven for Jews in the Land of Israel, and eventually secured autonomy for the city of Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee. Doña Gracia assured the existence of an independent and thriving Jewish community there, providing refuge and opportunity for many Jews.

Did You Know?

For centuries, Jews used Hebrew mainly as a language of study, prayer and written communication. It was revived as a spoken language at the end of the 19th century by Eliezer Ben Yehuda, and was recognized as an official language of the Land of Israel under the League of Nations Mandate in 1922.
Throughout history, Jews in the Diaspora were industrious and contributed to the societies they lived in. However, as ethnic minorities, they were often subjected to discriminatory laws.

**From time to time, Jewish communities suffered periods of persecution, violence and expulsion**

In Western Europe, Jews suffered persecution from the Middle Ages onwards, including massacres and expulsions from England (1290), France (1394) and Spain (1492), until their emancipation in the 19th century. In the Russian Empire, violent pogroms continued into the 20th century. Nazi Germany was founded on extreme racial hatred, seeking ’a Jewish-free Europe’; the ensuing Shoah (Holocaust), in which over 6 million Jews were systematically murdered, stands out by far as the worst genocide in history.

In the Muslim world, Jews were considered second-class citizens under the “Dhimmi” status, and for many centuries suffered from institutionalized discrimination, mistreatment, harassment and more (for example, with regards to taxation and property ownership). The 20th century witnessed a rise in Arab nationalism, which resulted in severe persecution of Jews. Deprivation of rights gave way to violence and murder, the confiscation of Jewish property, and finally expulsion from Arab countries.

The Jewish community in the Land of Israel often assisted Jews in distress, and this became official policy following the establishment of the State in 1948. Israel welcomed Shoah survivors, and over the years has carried out missions to rescue Jews from danger zones, including airlifts from Arab lands and Ethiopia.

**Did You Know?**

It took seventy years after the decimation of the Shoah (Holocaust), for the global Jewish population to recover, at least physically. The current Jewish population slightly exceeds pre-Shoah numbers, with 16.5 million Jews worldwide. Israel is home to the largest population of Jews in the world (over 6 million).
The Lost Communities of Europe

More than 6,000,000 Jews were murdered by the Nazis in the Shoah (Holocaust) during World War II; hundreds of thousands more became refugees.

- Jewish population in 1933
- Jewish population in 1950

The Lost Communities of the Arab World

More than 800,000 Jews suffered persecution, violence and expulsion from their homes in Arab countries between the 1940s and the 1960s; many were murdered, while most became refugees.

- Jewish population in 1948
- Jewish population in 1968

Jewish refugees from Yemen airlifted to Israel in 1949
Solidarity and mutual aid between Israel and the many Jewish communities around the world has existed throughout the 2000 years of the Diaspora.

One of the practical outcomes of that connection is the establishment of organizations whose purpose is to assist Jewish communities worldwide, improve their living conditions and combat racism and anti-Semitism. Today, these organizations also share their experience and know-how to assist and empower developing nations around the world.

Did You Know?
The Jewish National Fund (JNF-KKL) was established in 1901 in order to develop the Land of Israel. One of its major efforts was afforestation – planting trees in previously desolate areas. Over the years, JNF-KKL has planted over 240 million trees, making Israel the only country in the world to enter the 21st century with a net gain in the number of trees.

Working For A Better World

Traditional Jewish values encompass the aspiration to contribute to the improvement of humankind, a concept known as "Tikkun Olam." Both in Israel and throughout the Diaspora, numerous humanitarian Jewish organizations work to improve the welfare and education of disadvantaged people throughout the world, both Jewish and non-Jewish. One of the oldest such organizations is World ORT, founded in 1880, which promotes education and vocational training in Israel and worldwide. In recent decades, the organization has empowered over 2 million people in 98 countries.
The Maccabi World Union is a global Jewish sports organization founded in 1895. In 1932, the organization held the first Maccabiah competitive sports event near Tel Aviv. Today, the Union brings together some 400,000 members from more than 60 countries. Every four years, Jewish athletes from all over the world come to Israel to compete, tour the land and join in cultural events. Beyond the masters’ competitions, the event includes programs for teens, an open division, and Paralympic games. Many famous Jewish names in sports, including swimmer Mark Spitz and gymnast Kerri Strug, have competed in the Maccabiah.
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