



Israel 101

A Brief Introduction to History, Background and Customs



Israel. Along with Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, it is one of the pillars of Western Civilization. It plays a central role in the spiritual lives of Jews, and Christians, and Muslims. And it is a complicated, controversial place.

What follows is a brief introduction, providing a small amount of background and information about the history, complexity and common customs you may find.

Background Information

1. How “old” is Israel?

Israel as a modern state was founded in 1948. But it marks a return, and renewal. There was independent Jewish rule over this land in ancient days — on several different occasions and lasting for centuries. Jews were forcibly exiled from the land in 70 CE (when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple) and during the second century. But there were always some Jews who lived there, and many other times when there were movements of mass immigration, as well as attempts to return to the land.



2. What is “Zionism?”

The word “Zion” appears, in the Hebrew Bible, as a reference to a mountain in Jerusalem, or the city of Jerusalem itself. It came to refer to the entire land of what is now Israel. But the term “Zionism” refers to the movement, beginning in the 19th century, for Jews to return to the land, and establish a Jewish state there. The founder of modern Zionism as a political movement was Theodor Herzl.



3. What makes Israel a “Jewish” State?

This can be a difficult concept for Americans, who are used to separation of church and state and do not like the idea of a government endorsing any particular religion. Two things. First: the American model is fairly rare in the world. Most countries — even democracies — do have a special relationship with one particular church. *But*. Here is the more important idea. Jews are both a faith and a folk, a religion and a people. And it is in the “people” part of Jewish identity that Israel is a “Jewish” state. Israel is the state of the Jewish people, then, in much the same way that Ireland is the nation-state and ancestral homeland of the Irish people.

4. But how is that fair? Shouldn't everyone be equal?

Israel is a democracy. So, in its Declaration of Independence, it promises full equality to all its citizens, without regard to creed, color, national origin *or gender*! That does not mean that the promises of full equality are always realized. It is a young country and many of these issues are still being worked out.

5. Do those who are not Jewish really participate?

It is an issue; the national anthem refers to the Jewish heart and some non-Jewish citizens feel left out. Approximately 20% of the population is Arab— most of whom are Muslims, but a substantial minority of whom are Christians. This group was once called Israeli Arabs but is now often referred to as Palestinian Israelis. There are 12 members of Israel's Knesset (Parliament) who are from Arab political parties, and individual Arab members of Knesset in other parties as well. Israeli Arabs have represented Israel in sporting, cultural and diplomatic events. But what it means to be an “Israeli” is an active and ongoing discussion.

6. So what is Jewish about Israel?

This is complicated, too. Is it a *state for the Jews*, or a *Jewish state*? And what is the difference?

The first would be a place for Jews to be safe, and have nothing to do with values or culture or society. The second would be a place where Jewish learning and values and culture are emphasized.

Do you remember Dr. Doolittle? He could talk to the animals! There was one creature which was a horse with heads on both ends (and no backside). It was called a PushMe-PullYou.



In some ways Israel is both: it is a place for Jews to go in case we are “pushed” out of a place by persecution, discrimination or even slaughter. It is also a “pull,” a place where Jews can develop Jewish culture and a Jewish society and live by a Jewish calendar in ways we cannot do elsewhere.

7. So is Israel run by Jewish religious law?

Is it a theocracy? No. Israeli law has roots in many sources: Turkish law (it was part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries), British law (the area called Palestine was under British control from 1918-1948), Jewish law, Jewish history and modern law. Despite what some very religious (Orthodox or even “ultra-Orthodox) Jews want, the results are not always identical to what Jewish law would say.



8. We hear about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict all the time.

Is there a quick and unbiased summary of the conflict?

Well, no one is really unbiased on this one. Here is one attempt. This is really a situation of two peoples having legitimate claim to the same land. Jewish pioneers and refugees coming to Israel from the late 19th century on felt they were “coming home.” Palestinians felt they were being displaced by the newcomers.

Several attempts were made to divide the land, and share it. In 1947 the United Nations drew up a Partition Plan; that was accepted by the Jewish leadership at the time even though it did not include major Jewish historic and holy sites (including the Old City of Jerusalem). It was rejected by all Arab countries surrounding Israel. When Israel declared independence in 1948, armies of all surrounding countries invaded... and asked the inhabitants of Arab villages and towns to temporarily relocate, to get out of the way of the armies. The nascent Israeli army also cleared some villages. Everyone thought it would be temporary, and the new Jewish state would be destroyed.

When the straggling but scrappy army of the new country survived, however, and took new territory, there was no going back to the previously inhabited villages — thereby inadvertently creating the Palestinian refugee crisis which persists to this day.

In another war, in 1967, Israel, in Six Days, rather than being destroyed, captured a huge amount of territory: the “West Bank” of the Jordan River, the Gaza Strip next to Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula (since returned to Egypt in a peace treaty), the Golan Heights from Syria — and the Old City of Jerusalem. These are now called the “Occupied Territories.” Slowly, but then with greater intensity, some Israelis have gone to live in some of this territory. These areas are called “settlements” because they are not fully within “Israel” proper. Finally, the notion that these areas (or most of them) will be “returned,” and used to form an independent country called Palestine, is called the “Two State Solution.”

Customs, Phrases and Useful Information

Currency: The sheqel (or shekel).

Current value (as of November 6):

27 cents; 3.6 shekels to the dollar.

Language: Hebrew, written right to left, usually without vowels. There are two forms: block letters, and script.

No capitals letters.

English: most Israelis also speak English.

Both British and American spelling in use.

Arabic: was a third official language until recently. No distinction between block and script, but every letter has three forms, for the beginning, middle or end of a word.

Useful Hebrew words:

Sherutim: bathroom.

Shalom: hello, goodbye, and peace.

Today: thank you.

Anglit: English

Selicha: Excuse me.

B'seder: All right.

Sababa: Cool!

Yofi: Nice, pretty, cool

Aye-fone: iPhone