

# IMMIGRATION

Despite their dispersal throughout the world, the Jewish people never abandoned the ideal of resurrecting their national home in the land of Israel.

The longing to return and settle in this homeland was also never lost. Throughout the centuries following their expulsion by Rome in 70 CE, Jews maintained a presence in the Land and uninterrupted contact with Jews abroad enriched the cultural, spiritual and intellectual life of both communities.

When the [State of Israel](#) was established in May 1948, its [Proclamation of Independence](#) stated:

"The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and the ingathering of the exiles; it will foster the development of the country for all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel"

In his speech opening the inaugural [Knesset](#) in 1949, Israeli President [Chaim Weizmann](#) echoed this sentiment and made clear that the aim of the Jewish state would be, before everything else, "to gather in the exiles from all parts of the world."

Since that time, Israel has absorbed millions of Jewish immigrants from all over the world, creating an immense melting pot of cultural heritage and societal traditions.

## The Law of Return

Passed by the government of Prime Minister [David Ben-Gurion](#) in 1950, the [Law of Return](#) is one of the most important, and sometimes controversial, piece of legislation probably ever passed by an Israeli [Knesset](#).

The [Law of Return](#) grants every Jew in the world the automatic right to [immigrate](#) to Israel - in [Hebrew](#) called *aliyah* - and immediately become a citizen of the state. The first line of the legislation read thus:

*"Right of aliyah\*\* 1. Every [Jew](#) has the right to come to this country as an oleh (immigrant).\*\*"*

After a number of court cases and amendments, the law was changed in 1970 under the stewardship of Prime Minister [Golda Meir](#) to stipulate what exactly the government meant by "[every Jew](#)." The amendment stated that those born to a Jewish mother, those with a Jewish maternal grandmother, those who had converted to Judaism, or those married a Jew by those distinctions could be accepted for the immediate citizenship.

The law has come under international scrutiny from pro-Palestinian groups for claims that it runs counter to democratic ideals, but the legislation is consistent with international law including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination Article I(3) which allows for preferential immigration treatment of some groups, provided there is no discrimination against a specific group. In general, the Law of

Return is a form of "positive" discrimination and the Israeli government does nothing to discriminate or disqualify non-Jews wishing to gain Israeli citizenship.

## **Absorption/*Klita***

Because Israel has had to absorb millions of immigrants from all sorts of economic, cultural and regional background, various institutions and programs have helped, or tried to help, integrate immigrants into Israeli society.

Following independence, was in a grievous economic condition, was still very bruised from the [War of Independence](#), and found it difficult to provide for the hundreds of thousands of immigrants flooding the country after being exiled from neighboring Arab countries. Much effort was devoted toward absorbing the immigrants: [ma'abarot](#), or transitional immigrant camps, were erected in areas in the country. These camps were first made of only tin shacks and tents though they were later supplemented with permanent dwellings. The ma'abarot also helped create employment opportunities, schools taught [Hebrew](#), and the educational system was expanded and adjusted to meet the needs of children from many different backgrounds.

The *merkaz klita*, or absorption center, was developed in the late 1960's to accommodate the increased immigration that occurred during that time and to replace the more squalid ma'abarot. These centers combined Hebrew language immersion with long-term accommodation for families. With representatives of all the major ministries ideally on hand or on call, these centers were supposed to cushion the entry of the new immigrant into Israeli society. By the late 1970s, at the height of immigration from the United States, there were more than twenty-five absorption centers housing almost 4,000 new immigrants.

The most ubiquitous absorption program is *ulpan*, or intensive [Hebrew language](#) school. Some ulpan's were funded by local municipalities, others by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, or the Jewish Agency. Because they were heavily subsidized, ulpan's were free or charged only nominal fees to new immigrants. Today, ulpan's are still a key element for immigrants to become integrated as full members of Israeli society.

## **Rescue Operations**

Upon establishment, Israel immediately became a beacon of hope and freedom for Jews around the world suffering from persecution. Unfortunately, the Jews in this areas either lacked the financial capability or the legal ability to leave their country of origin and emigrate to Israel.

Israel, therefore, determined that it would not only welcome any Jew who came but it would also go and rescue Jews from wherever they were oppressed as this was the main reason behind the establishment of the state in the first place.

In 1949, Israel led [Operation "Magic Carpet"](#) which airlifted more than 45,000 Jews out of Yemen, representing practically the entire Jewish population in the Arab nation. Upon hearing of the mission, Jews trekked to the Yemeni capital of Aden from all over the area in order to be taken to Israel. This operation, and others like it to bring Jews from Arab lands to Israel, nearly bankrupted the country, but proved that Israel would do everything to save Jews.

In 1951, Israel airlifted nearly 100,000 Jews out of Iraq in [Operation "Ezra & Nehemiah."](#) While many of these Iraqi Jews were wealthy businessmen and professionals, the Iraqi government only allowed those to leave the country who agreed to forfeit all of their worldly possessions. Despite having to liquidate their bank accounts and close their businesses, the Jews proudly left Iraq for Israel.

Years later, from 1985 to 1991, Israel completed the most unprecedented rescue operations in history when they airlifted thousands of Ethiopian and Sudanese Jews to safety in Israel. Operations ["Moses,"](#) ["Joshua,"](#) and ["Solomon"](#) led more than 40,000 of these Jews out of [Africa](#) and marked the first time in world history that blacks had been taken out of Africa for the purpose of granting them freedom.

Around the same time, the flood gates of emigration out of the former Soviet Union were finally opened to Russian Jews after immense pressure was put on the regime by the United States and Israel. From 1990 to the end of 2010, more than 987,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union had made their home in Israel.

## Immigration Statistics

Between 1948 and 2011, 3,092,729 people [immigrated into Israel](#).

This number is made up of people from [more than seventy countries](#), including: Former Soviet Union (1,209,264); [Morocco](#), [Algeria](#) and [Tunisia](#) (354,852); [Romania](#) (276,586); [Poland](#) (173,591); [Iraq](#) (131,138); and the [United States](#) (94,753).

Israel has absorbed immigrants from every continent. The largest [single year immigration](#) from each continent are as follows:

- Africa: 45,281 immigrants in 1956 (1,937 in 2010).
- America & Oceania: 12,885 immigrants in 1971 (4,151 in 2010).
- Asia: 103,396 immigrants in 1951 (1,415 in 2010).
- Europe: 189,650 immigrants in 1990 (9,127 in 2010).

In 2010, Israel took in [16,633 immigrants](#). Among these were 1,652 from Ethiopia; 266 from South Africa; 351 from Argentina; 523 from the United Kingdom; 1,775 from France; 2,801 from the United States and Canada; and, 7,158 from areas of the former Soviet Union.

Overall, immigration to Israel has been associated with ["growth waves"](#) which hit high points during the immigration of Jews from Arab countries between 1948 and 1952, immigration from Ethiopia in the 1970's and 1980's, and immigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990's.