

Reconsidering Israel-Diaspora Relations

Edited by

Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Judit Bokser Liwerant, and Yosef Gorny



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

From World-Wide People to First-World People: The Consolidation of World Jewry

Jonathan D. Sarna

Jews imagine themselves to be an *am olam*, a global people spread “from one end of the world even unto the other.” The idea goes back to the Bible (e.g. Isaiah 11:12, “He will . . . gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth”), and is repeated in the liturgy (“bring us back in peace from the four quarters of the earth” (Sacks, 2009: 96). In the Jewish imagination, Jews are everywhere—in every corner of the world.

Since World War II, however, the Jewish world has been consolidating at an unprecedented rate. In 1939, just under half of the world’s 16.6 million Jews lived in two countries: the US and Poland. The top five Jewish communities that year were home to about three-quarters of world Jewry (*American Jewish Year Book*, 1938/1939: 544–551); I follow Della Pergola’s totals for world Jewry (Della Pergola, 1995, 17). Eleven years later, in 1950, following the Shoah, the Jewish population of the world, according to Sergio Della Pergola’s revision, had fallen to 11.3 million (Della Pergola, 2013: 21). By that point, the top two Jewish population centers—the US and the Soviet Union—had risen to incorporate almost 62% of world Jewry, and the top five centers were home to almost 77%.

More than sixty years have passed since then. In 2012—the most recent year for which data are available—the Jewish population had clawed its way back to 13.746 million. The top two Jewish communities—now the US and Israel—comprise fully 82.4% of the world Jewish population, while the top five countries are home to a whopping 90.7% of world Jewry (Della Pergola, 2013: 22).

The consolidation of world Jewry is likewise reflected in other statistics. In 1950, some 30 different countries had Jewish communities of 25,000 or more (Belgium, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, USSR, Turkey, Canada, USA, Argentina, Chile, Columbia, Nicaragua, Uruguay, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, South Africa, and Australia)—according to the *American Jewish Year Book* (*AJYB* 1951: 247–249). In 2012, only seventeen countries had Jewish communities of 25,000 or more (Israel, US, France, Canada, UK, Russian Federation, Argentina, Germany, Australia, Brazil, Ukraine, South Africa, Hungary, Mexico, Belgium, Netherlands, and Italy). Similarly, there were 44 countries that had

TABLE 2.1 *World Jewish Population: Top countries over time*

	Population	% World	Cumulative
1939 World Jewish Population¹			
USA	4,870,000	29.3%	29.3%
Poland	3,325,000	20.3	49.4
USSR	3,020,000	18.2	67.6
Romania	850,000	5.1	72.7
Palestine	445,000	2.7	75.4
1950 World Jewish Population²			
USA	5,000,000	44.26	44.26
USSR	2,000,000	17.70	61.96
Israel	950,000	8.40	70.36
Argentina	360,000	3.19	73.55
Romania	350,000	3.10	76.65
2012 World Jewish Population³			
Israel	5,901,000	42.9	42.90
USA	5,425,000	39.5	82.40
France	480,000	3.5	85.90
Canada	375,000	2.7	88.60
UK	291,000	2.1	90.70
Top 2 Countries as % of World Jewry		Top 5 Countries as % of World Jewry	
1939	49.4%	1939	75.40
1950	61.96	1950	76.65
2012	82.40	2012	90.70

¹ DellaPergola, 1995, "Changing Cores and Peripheries", p. 17.² AJYB, 1950, 249.³ DellaPergola, 2013, "World Jewish Population—2012", p. 22—if, as some claim, these figures underestimate the size of us Jewry, then world Jewry is slightly more concentrated than proposed here.

5,000 or more Jews in 1950, and only 34 today. In all cases, the numbers point toward growing consolidation. It is, moreover, worth remembering that over 99% of world Jewry today lives in countries with more than 10,000 Jews each; less than 1% lives everywhere else.

Let's look at another measure of consolidation: in 1950, the five largest Jewish metropolitan areas in the world were New York, Chicago, Tel Aviv, Philadelphia, and London, and their combined population was just over three million (3,029,000) or 26.8% of world Jewry (*AJYB*, 1950: 71–73). In 2012, the five largest Jewish metropolitan areas were Tel Aviv, New York, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, and Haifa, and their combined population amounted to almost 7.4 million (7,395,600) or 53.8% of world Jewry—about double (Della Pergola, 2013: 25).

Yet perhaps the most significant of all the statistics concerning world Jewry has to do with the percentage of Jews who now live in First World countries—an admittedly loosely-defined term that I am using here to mean the 25 or so countries with the most advanced economies, the greatest influence, the highest standards of living, and the greatest technology (*Nations: Online*, 2013). The term “First World” did not actually exist in 1950, but were we to estimate how many Jews actually lived under such favorable conditions back then, we would find that some 6.1 million Jews did, or roughly 54% of all Jews (Israel was not a First-World country in 1950). Today, by contrast, some 93% of world Jewry lives in the First World. Many of the countries outside of the First World, by contrast, are totally barren of Jews or house remnant communities far too small to be viable. The only sizable Jewish communities not in the First World are the Jewish communities of Latin America, the Former Soviet Union, Iran, and South Africa, with different degrees of stability.

The conclusion is then inescapable: where once (that is to say, in 1950 and to an even greater extent in 1939 and before) Judaism was truly a “world religion,” today it is increasingly a “First-World religion.” More and more Jews live in fewer and fewer places. The vast majority of the world's 196 or so countries—most of them third-world countries (the politically correct term today is “majority-world countries”)—either lay claim to having no Jewish community whatsoever, which is true of about half of them, or house communities so small as to be negligible.

More specifically, fully 162 countries in the world, including several where Jews had lived for millennia (Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia etc.) are now either completely devoid of Jews or house tiny communities of less than 5,000, and are unsustainable. Huge areas of the world actually have no Jewish presence whatsoever. For all that contemporary Jews to talk about “improving the world,”

(*tikkun olam*) the truth is that the vast majority of contemporary Jews no longer live in those sections of the world that most need improving (Africa, Asia, and most of Latin America). The bulk of the Jewish people has consolidated within the First World.

What are the implications of the fact that Jews, to a very great extent, have become a First-World people and Judaism a First-World religion?

To start with the good news: most diaspora Jews, as Sergio Della Pergola showed some time ago, have moved over the past sixty years to “economically affluent, politically stable and socially attractive environments” (Della Pergola, 1995: 36). They have abandoned underdeveloped countries (like Yemen), and unstable, dangerous ones (like Afghanistan), and now live in the world’s most economically advanced countries (like the United States, Israel, France and Canada.) As a result, Jews as a group are today wealthier and more secure than they were 60 years ago. Living in the First World has been a good milieu for continuing Jewish life in these places.

Second, because the vast majority of Jews live in the First World, they are far more interconnected than ever before. Not only do citizens of the First World travel a great deal, but today they are also “virtually” connected with one another through the internet. In the five countries where over 90% of all Jews live, internet penetration ranges from 70 to 90% (“Top 50 Countries with the Highest Internet Penetration Rate,” 2103). Overall, the consolidation of world Jewry means that it is easier than ever for Jews to meet, share, interact, learn from one another and help one another. The chasm between Israel and the diaspora has, as a result, been greatly reduced. More and more Jews are effectively transnational—at least to some extent.

Third, First-World countries tend to share both common values and elements of a common culture. The more than 90% of Jews who live in Israel, the USA, France, Canada, and the UK can all probably identify certain books and films and music and other media that they share in common (such as Harry Potter, CNN, and *The New York Times*). A huge percentage of Jews also speak a common language—English—and many of them have parallel university experiences. First-World Jews have far more in common with one another than was true, a generation ago, of First-World Jews who interacted with Ethiopian Jews, or Moroccan Jews, or Georgian Jews (all of whom could scarcely have been more different, culturally speaking, than their First-World counterparts.) Being in the First World promotes a shared sense of Jewish peoplehood, of *Klal Yisrael*. So much for the good news. There are also, however, significant problems associated with the fact that Judaism has become an overwhelmingly First-World religion.

First of all, this sets Judaism apart from Christianity, Islam, and Eastern religions, religions that are today expanding, while Judaism is contracting. Other religions and peoples are preaching the gospel of globalism and spreading their diasporas north, south, east, and west. Jews, who invented the very concept of a diaspora are actually reducing their exposure to the larger world and practicing consolidation. As a result, Judaism is no longer a world religion. Jews like to think of themselves as members of a world religion on a par with Christianity and Islam (the other "Abrahamic faiths"), but that is a delusion. Today, Christianity and Islam are world religions, and Judaism, overwhelmingly, is but a regional or First-World religion.

Second, being tethered to the First World means being unpopular with the majority of the world. The majority of the populations of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East are ambivalent and even contemptuous of the First World. They are jealous of its wealth and advantages, which they understandably but erroneously believe come at their expense, some are scandalized by its permissiveness and promiscuity; many of them, indeed, would happily see the First World destroyed. To the extent that Judaism is perceived as a First-World religion, Judaism too is hated. Indeed, in much of the Third World today, antisemitism and anti-Americanism march in hand ("Shylock meets Uncle Sam") (Wistrich, 2012). Many of the charges leveled against America, against the Jews, and against Israel are one and the same. In fact, there is a widespread belief in the Third World that Jews actually control the American government and the American media. With America emblematic of the First World and Judaism a religion of the First World, it should come as no surprise that the two are often conflated—and loathed.

Finally, in becoming a First-World religion, Judaism runs the risk of diminishing its own sense of perspective, its larger vision and mission. It is all too easy, as a First-World religion, to ignore the majority of the world, especially since, as we have seen, those folks do not like Jews very much. It is all too easy to read Judaism's social teachings exclusively within a First-World context. It is all too easy to confuse "seeing the world," with "only seeing the world where Jews currently live"—and ignoring the other 170 countries. In short, if Jews are not careful, Judaism could easily become a religion that is smug, self-satisfied and out of touch with the realities of the "majority world."

Sixty years ago, in 1950, such fears would have been inconceivable: Jews, back then, were still spread throughout all corners of the world. About half of the Jewish world lived in countries of great poverty, and the State of Israel itself was part of the under-developed world. Today, by contrast, one may continue to pretend that Jews live everywhere and form part of an *am olam*, but as we have seen, that is a fantasy; an ideal representation. The contraction of the

Jewish world, the fact that Jews have become overwhelmingly a First-World people, requires us to reimagine Israel-Diaspora relations, Jewish peoplehood, and Judaism itself. Jewish leaders and Jewish educators, in the years ahead, will need to confront these new and challenging realities.

Bibliography

American Jewish Year Book, (1938/1939), Vol. 40, in *American Jewish Committee Archives*, Available at: <<http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=10072>>.

———, (1950), Vol. 51, in *American Jewish Committee Archives*, Available at: <<http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=10084>>.

Della Pergola, S. (1995) "Changing Cores and Peripheries: Fifty Years in Socio-Demographic Perspective," in *Terms of Survival: The Jewish World Since 1945*, London: Routledge, 13–43.

———, (2013) "World Jewish population," in *Berman Jewish Policy Archive*. Retrieved from: <<http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=16432>>.

Nations Online (2013) Retrieved from: <<http://www.nationsonline.org/>>.

"Top 50 Countries with the Highest Internet Penetration Rate" (2013) in *Internet World Stats*, Retrieved from: <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm>> [Accessed 30 June 2013].

Sacks, J. (2009) *The Koren Siddur*, Jerusalem: Koren Publishers.

Wistrich, R. (2010) *A Lethal Obsession: Antisemitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*, New York: Random House.