

## The Contemporary Jewish Diaspora<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines and seeks to account for major demographic, social and identificational patterns of the contemporary Jewish Diaspora, with the historical demographic evolution of world Jewry as a background. It concerns itself with the geographic distribution of Jews, especially between homeland (Israel) and the diaspora, international migration, definitions of group belonging, interfaith marriage, social and economic stratification, and attachment to Israel. These dimensions are dealt by means of quantitative data from various complementary sources.

### **Keywords:**

Jewish population, Diaspora, migration, interfaith marriage, identity

## **1. Introduction**

This paper examines and seeks to account for major demographic, social and identificational patterns of the contemporary Jewish Diaspora, with the historical demographic evolution of world Jewry as a background. It concerns itself with the geographic distribution of Jews, especially between homeland (Israel) and the diaspora, international migration, definitions of group belonging, interfaith marriage, social and economic stratification, and attachment to Israel. These dimensions are dealt with by means of quantitative data from various complementary sources.

## **2. Numbers, Geographic Distribution, and Migration**

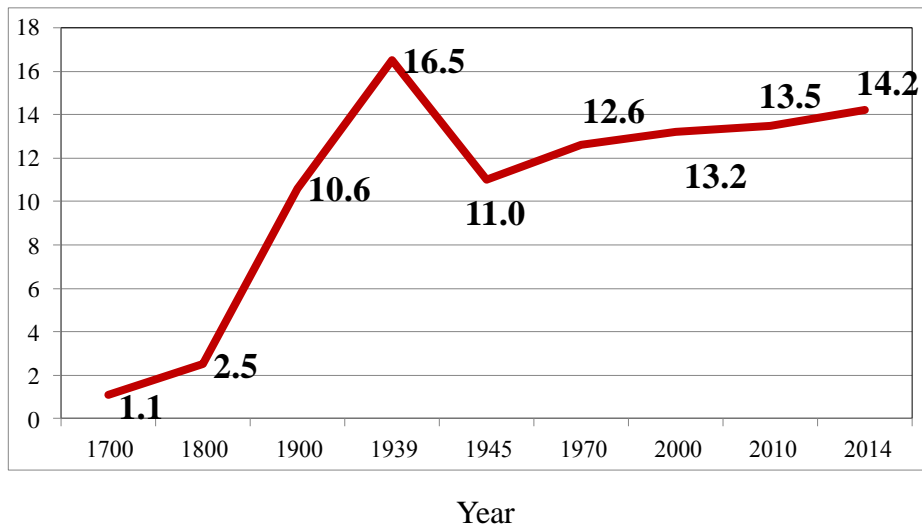
From an historical point of view, at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century world Jewish population was estimated at around 1 million. This number reflects stagnation in the size of the Jewish population in preceding centuries and the Jews' inability, mainly due to massacres, persecutions, and general ecological conditions, to increase demographically (DellaPergola, 1989).

Some of these factors were moderated over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Europe, as part of what is known as the "demographic transition," which comprised the lengthening of life expectancy at a time when the level of fertility was still very high. Accordingly, by the end of this century world Jewish population more than doubled to 2.5 million, and it further increased fourfold to reach 10 million by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were characterized by intensified processes of urbanization, secularization and the increasing tendency to acquire higher education, all of which operated toward the decrease of the number of children per woman and, subsequently, of family size. Despite these trends the number of Jews continued to rise reaching an all time peak of 16.6 million at the outbreak of WWII (DellaPergola, 1989). The Holocaust and the destruction of six million Jews diminished the Jewish population by one-third within only six years. In the history of the Jewish people, which was often accompanied by pogroms and alienation, there had never been such a short period which had such a strong influence, not only on the size of the Jewish people but also on its structure. This was true because a large proportion of one-fourth of those Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust were children. This undermined the demographic base which is responsible for intergenerational replacement (DellaPergola, 1991).

Since the end of WWII the Jewish population has increased to slightly more than 14 million people today. Most of the growth took place in the years immediately following the war and during the 1950s and 1960s, but also more recently, i.e. over the last decade,

it experienced a growth of one million. Overall, world Jewry did not recover from the demographic turbulence of the Holocaust and has never returned to its pre-WWII size (DellaPergola, 2014).

### World Jewish Population, 1700-2014 (In Millions)

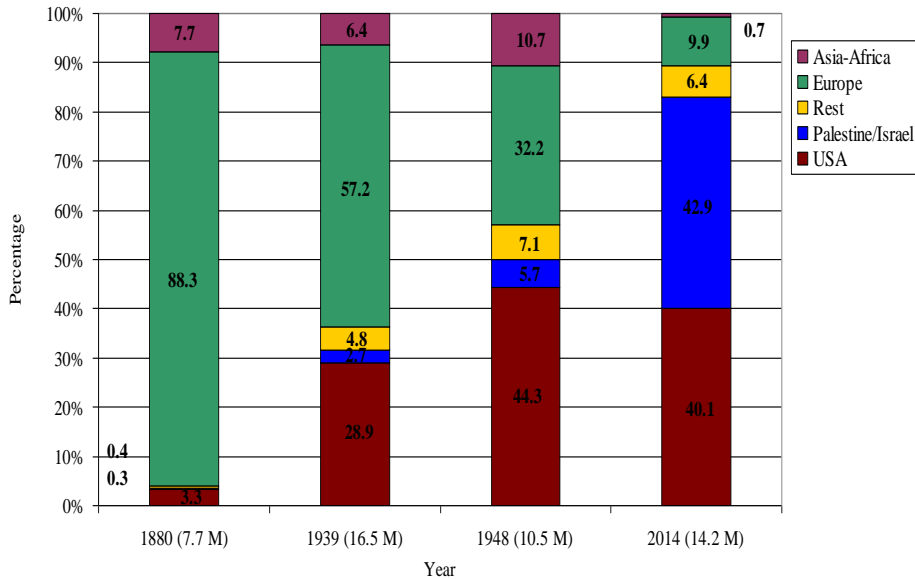


*Adopted from: DellaPergola, 1989; 2014.*

The spatial patterns of the contemporary Jewish population attest to a unique combination of concentration on the one hand, and dispersion on the other. The largest single Jewish community today is in Israel (43%) and the second largest concentration is in the United States (40%). Together, these two countries are home to 83% of world Jewry. Adding the next eight countries with the largest Jewish populations it is evident that 96% of world Jewry lives today in only ten countries. At the same time, the remaining four percent are distributed across some 75 countries with each one having a salient Jewish population of more than 100 Jews (DellaPergola, 2014).

These residential preferences differ widely from past spatial distribution. Follow-up over time reveals a substantial decline in the proportion of Jews in Europe, a decline and later emptying out of the Jewish communities in Asia and North Africa, and an increase in the relative shares of the United States and Israel (DellaPergola, 1989; 2014).

**Percentage Distribution of World Jewish Population, 1880-2014**



*Adopted from: DellaPergola, 1989; 2014.*

To a large extent, the changes in the geographical distribution of Jews may be attributed to their exceptionally high rate of international migration. From 1948, the year the state of Israel was established, to the present, more than five million Jews have crossed continental boundaries. Out of a total population that ranged between 11 and 14 million, this is undoubtedly an unprecedented rate of long distance movement. The Jewish international migration system has two major areas of origin, namely Eastern Europe, and Asia and North Africa, and two major destination areas these being Israel and the western countries, first and foremost the United States. Approximately two-thirds of the Jewish international migration flow was directed toward Israel; and slightly more than one-third to the western countries. These figures include also the exchange between Israel and the West and vice versa. These two opposing flows were very similar in size thus compensating one for the other (DellaPergola, 2011).

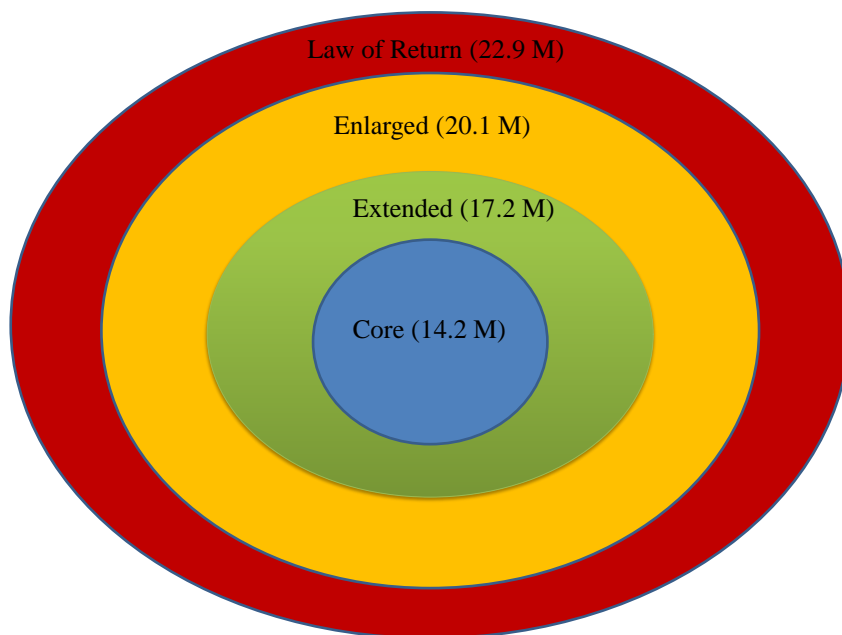
These directions of Jewish international migration resulted in the increasing share of Israel among world Jewry from six percent in 1948 to as high as 40% today. Still, the majority of world Jewry lives today outside the Jewish state, namely in the diaspora (DellaPergola, 1992; 2014).

### 3. Typology of Jewish Population

In the social and cultural context of many of the countries in which Jews reside today, group identity is not regulated by formal provisions. Hence, the definitions of collective boundaries and group belonging are complex and often confusing. The degree of ethno-religious identity may change during an individual's lifetime; one can cut the ties with one's origin group whether or not one adopts another religious faith, and these identificational alterations are reversible (Schmelz and DellaPergola, 1992). A growing number of people may have multiple bases (Lieberson and Waters, 1988). The dynamics of group identity are largely influenced by the changing role of religion and ethnicity in the country of residence, and in the west this seems to be developing towards a stronger demand for independence and self-autonomy on the part of several groups; yet it is debatable whether these observations reflect a revival of the ethnic factor or should be interpreted as symbolic identity (Alba and Nee, 2003).

Given such circumstances the very basic definition of group identity is complex. We distinguish between three types of belonging to the Jewish group. The first are the core Jews, who include all those who either regard themselves as Jewish or are identified by others from within the same household as Jews. This approach reflects subjective feelings and is not limited by any legally binding definitions (DellaPergola, 2010). A different group includes people with a Jewish background, many of whom have one Jewish parent, but currently claim identity with another religion. The core Jews, together with those having a Jewish background, comprise the extended Jewish population. Further, the enlarged Jewish population takes into account also non-Jews with no Jewish background who reside in households with at least one person who is Jewish; often these are the spouses or children of mixed marriages. Implementing this typology, while the core Jewish population is estimated at 14.2 million, this increases to 17.2 million for the extended Jewish population and to more than twenty million for the enlarged Jewish population (DellaPergola, 2014).

## World Jewish Population By Alternative Definitional Criteria



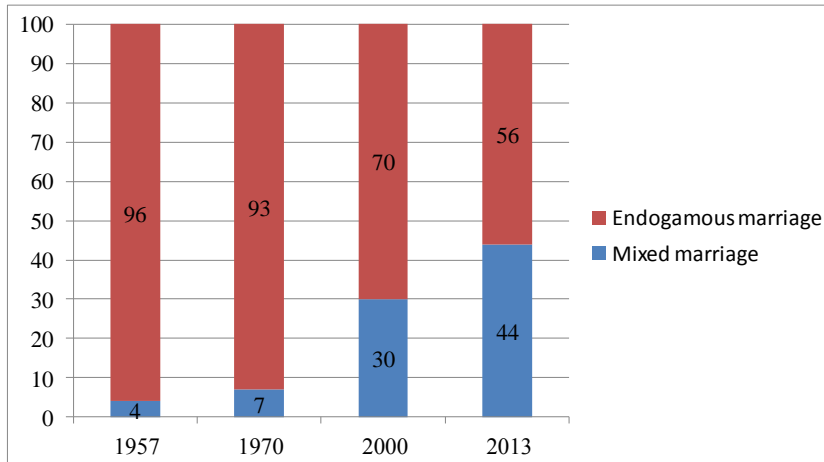
*Adopted from: DellaPergola, 2014.*

As for the homeland, Israel's Law of Return (LOR) guarantees the right to immigrate and receive citizenship to every Jew as well as to his/her non-Jewish spouse, their non-Jewish children and their spouses, as well as to the non-Jewish grandchildren of a Jew and their spouses. This wide definition of the LOR increases the population of those with a current of past attachment to Judaism, hence the right to immigrate to Israel. On the average, the number of people who meet the criteria of the LOR is one and a half time the number of core Jews (DellaPergola, 2014).

### **4. Marriage and Demographic Dynamics**

As indicated earlier, this typology of Jewish population is mainly the result of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. Over the second half of the twentieth century there has been a significant increase in the tendency of Jews to marry outside the faith. While in the late 1950s less than five percent of American Jews had a non-Jewish spouse, this rate increased to approximately 10% by 1970 and up to 44% today in 2013 (Goldstein, 1992; Pew, 2013).

## Jewish Intermarriage in the United States, 1957-2013



*Adopted from: Goldstein, 1992; Pew, 2013.*

In fact, the tendency is still gaining strength as seen by comparing different cohorts according to period of marriage. In 2013, among Jews who married before 1970 some 17% had a non-Jewish spouse; this was already true for 42% among those who married in the early 1980s, and increased further to 58% among the most recent cohort (Pew, 2013). In other words, every second Jew who marries in the United States today does so outside his/her religious faith.

The rate of intermarriage of Jews in the United States reflects an intermediate level between Jewish communities in which this marriage pattern is slightly lower, such as France, the UK, and Latin America; and other Jewish communities in Western Europe such as Germany, Eastern Europe which are characterized by even higher levels of intermarriage (DellaPergola, 2009).

High rates of intermarriage attest to the acceptance and successful integration of Jews into the general population. At the same time they create a major challenge for Jewish cohesion and continuity. Indeed, intermarriage by itself does not pose a major demographic threat to the Jewish community because in the overwhelming majority of intermarriages each partner maintains his/her religious identity. Indeed, the number of

those who switch from Judaism to another religion is slightly higher than those who switch in the opposite direction. Further, less than half (36%) of the children of mixed parentages are being raised Jewish resulting in additional loss to the Jewish side (Pew, 2013).

A more crucial factor of Jewish population dynamic is the low fertility among all Jewish diapora communities which is below replacement level. The result of these processes is the reversal of the age pyramid to a narrow demographic base and widening toward the upper part of the pyramid. This attests to the aging of the Jewish population, and more deaths than births, namely negative natural movement, and the subsequent unavoidable diminution in the size of the diaspora Jewish population (DellaPergola, 2011).

Jewish intermarriage also influences the ability to maintain religious and ethnic vitality. In various expressions of Jewish identification such as rituals, institutional affiliation, or informal networks with religious peers, intermarried Jews exhibit weaker identification than do their counterparts in homogenous marriages. This is true after controlling for major demographic and socio-economic characteristics (Rebhun and DellaPergola, 1998; Rebhun, 1999).

## **5. Social and Economic Stratification**

The successful integration of Jews into the general society is also documented through their social and economic attainments (Pyle, 2006). These achievements reflect the high value that Jews attach to learning and the channeling of education into high rank positions. In this respect, Jews and many East Asian societies have much in common.

Already in the mid-twentieth century Jews in the United States were characterized by higher levels of education than non-Jews from the social mainstream, namely white Protestants. Over time, both groups have experienced upward mobility but the pace was faster among the Jews. Accordingly, the advantage of Jews has strengthened as evidenced by the index of dissimilarity which shows the percentage of members of one group, in this case white Protestants, that would need to change their level of education in order to attain an educational distribution similar to that of the other group, that is, the Jews. This index rose from 14% in 1957 to 33% in 2008.

Similarly, a distinction between four levels of earnings suggests that at both points of time, i.e. 1957 and 2008, Jews had higher earnings than white Protestants; and that this differential increased over time. These data show that the proportion of Jews at the lowest level of income diminished substantially, and approximately half of the Jews today are concentrated in the uppermost stratum of annual income: \$100,000 and above.



It should be noted that the comparison between 1957 and 2008 takes into account changes in the Consumer Price Index.

## **6. Jewish Identification and Attachment to Israel**

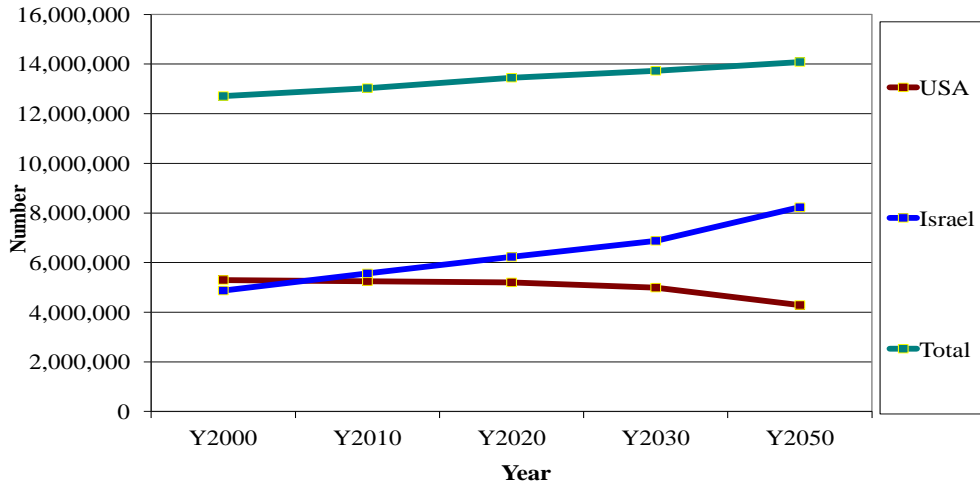
We have seen how intermarriage is significant for group identification. More generally, the trends in Jewish identification in the diaspora, as seen in the case of the largest diaspora Jewish community, namely that of the United States, lead to postulate that permanent behaviors and ongoing patterns that penetrate daily life, such as keeping the Jewish dietary laws, membership in parochial organizations, social relationships with other Jews, as well as the attachment of importance to being Jewish are all dimensions of Jewish identification which have declined over the last three decades. By contrast, the more intermittent aspects of Jewish identification, which occur at particular points of time over the Jewish calendar, maintained their stability (Rebhun, 2004).

In fact, one indicator, which is central to the diaspora-homeland relationship, namely visits to Israel, more than doubled: while in 1970 only 15% of American Jews had ever visited Israel, this was already true for 43% of American Jews in 2013. Another indication for the relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel is their subjective attachment to Israel. The proportion of American Jews who claim that they feel very attached to Israel hasn't changed much over the last decade. Although it has fluctuated somewhat, it is within a very small range of between 67% and 74%. Over the last three years it has been increasing steadily.

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

Only recently has Israel become the largest Jewish community in the world. If the current demographic patterns of Jews remain stable in the foreseeable future, namely low fertility levels and aging populations in the diaspora and a fertility level above replacement in Israel, somewhere in the second quarter of the twenty first century the overwhelming majority, namely more than half, of world Jewry, will reside in the homeland of the Jewish people (DellaPergola, Rebhun, and Tolts, 2000). Nevertheless, a large number of Jews will still be living outside of Israel with the demographic, social, and identificational ambivalence involved in this status.

### Jewish Population Projections, 2000-2050



Source: DellaPergola, Rebhun, and Tolts, 2000.

Finally, this study focused on Jews who constitute a small minority group in their country of residence in the diaspora. Previous studies, mainly in the United States, suggested that Jews have often been ahead of other ethnic and religious minorities in adjusting to the demographic and socio-economic patterns of the majority population (e.g., Goldschieder, 1967). Thus, an analysis of the patterns and trends of this rare population can help to assess the anticipated trajectories for other minority groups, including recent immigrants, and hence to contribute to the broader literature on transnationalism and diasporism.

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**Note**

- <sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the data are based on my own analyses of various sources including NJPS 1970, 1990, 2000, and 2013; American Jewish Committee Annual Survey of Jewish Public Opinion; and the 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Forum. And this paper's contents were presented at CISMOR research meetings of the project "Jews and Judaism in Japan" on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014.