



Israel 101

An essential guide for new
(and not so new)
Jewish professionals on everything Israel

For Jewish professionals working in Cincinnati, learning about Israel is essential to understanding the broader Jewish experience. **With only about half of Jewish professionals in Cincinnati identifying as Jewish, individuals enter their roles with varying levels of knowledge about Israel**—some deeply familiar with its history and culture, while others are just beginning to explore its significance.

Avraham Infeld, a leading Jewish educator, argues that Judaism is not just a religion or a nation, but a people—a global collective bound by shared history, values, and responsibility. He explains:

“Jews are not a religion, because you can be a Jew and an atheist. Jews are not a nation, because you can be a Jew of American, French, or Israeli nationality. Jews are a people. And the land of Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people.”

By learning about Israel—its history, people, and complexities—Jewish professionals strengthen their connection to this shared peoplehood. Israel is not just a country on the map; it is a central pillar of Jewish identity that unites communities across the world. Understanding Israel's role in Jewish life allows professionals to engage more meaningfully in their work, fostering deeper connections with the people and communities they serve.

Facts & Figures

Israel is a country in the Middle East, located at the east end of the Mediterranean Sea.

Population: 10,100,000 (2025 - Central Bureau of Statistics)

Capital: Jerusalem

(There is not broad international recognition of Jerusalem as the capital.)

Languages: Hebrew (official), Arabic (special status under Israeli law), English (most commonly used foreign language)

Head of Government: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

Head of State: President Isaac Herzog



History

The State of Israel is the only Jewish nation in the modern period, and the region that now falls within its borders has a lengthy and rich history that dates from prebiblical times. From about 1,000 BCE, Jewish people have lived in this land, and for many centuries, it was governed by the Jewish people. The area was then part of the Roman Empire and, later, the Byzantine Empire before falling under the control of the Islamic caliphate in the 7th century CE. During these time periods, many but not all Jews were expelled. Throughout the exile, there remained a Jewish community in Israel, primarily in these cities: Tiberias, Safed, Hebron, and Jerusalem. Although the object of dispute during the Crusades, the region, then generally known as Palestine, remained under the control of successive Islamic dynasties until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, when it was placed under British mandate from the League of Nations.

Despite being dispersed throughout the world during different points in history, the Jews maintained a strong connection to the land of Israel. Even before the British mandate, the desire for a Jewish homeland, fueled by the Zionist Movement, led a small number of Jews to immigrate to Palestine. Zionism, a nationalist movement advocating for the return of Jews to their ancestral land, gained momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in response to rising antisemitism in Europe. This migration grew dramatically during the second quarter of the 20th century with the increased persecution of Jews worldwide and subsequent Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany.

This vast influx of Jewish immigrants into the region, however, caused tension with the native Palestinian Arabs, and violence flared between the two groups leading up to the United Nations plan to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab sectors and Israel's ensuing declaration of statehood on May 14, 1948.

Israel has fought a series of wars against neighboring Arab states in the decades since, which have resulted in ongoing disputes over territory and the status of refugees. Despite continuing tensions, however, Israel concluded peace treaties with several neighboring Arab states during the final quarter of the 20th century.

On October 7, 2023, the terrorist group Hamas launched an unprecedented attack on Israel, killing over 1,200 people and taking hostages into Gaza. This led to a full-scale war, with Israel launching military operations in Gaza, escalating the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Geography & Landscape

Climate: Israel has a diverse climate that ranges from Mediterranean in the north to arid in the south. There are two distinct seasons: a cool, rainy winter (October – April) and a hot, dry summer (May – September).

Topography: Israel has four geographic regions with diverse topography.

- **Coastal Plain:** This runs parallel to the Mediterranean Sea and has sandy beaches.
- **Highlands:** The Galilee region in the north includes hilly terrain.
- **Deserts:** The Negev and Judean Deserts are in the south and cover more than half of Israel's land area.
- **Jordan Valley:** This runs along the eastern border and includes the Dead Sea.



Types of Communities

Cities: The largest cities in Israel include Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa.

Moshavim (Villages): Cooperative agricultural communities where members share some mutual assistance but maintain a large degree of economic autonomy.

Kibbutzim: Closely knit social groups, sharing all property and means of production and labor, while providing for all the needs of the members. While initially dependent mostly on agriculture, the kibbutzim later branched into manufacturing and services. Most have become less communal than they were at their inception, with some becoming privatized. They remain desirable communities with a high quality of life.

Mixed Cities: Cities where a significant number (10%+) of Jewish and Arab Israelis live, including Haifa and Jaffa/Tel Aviv. Although there are significant populations of both Jews and Arabs, they are not necessarily socially integrated.

Arab Towns and Villages: The Arab populations in Israel tend to live in small towns and villages, with more than half in the Galilee (north) and another quarter in what's known as the Triangle, along the Green Line (border to the West Bank). Other major areas are in the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, and the northern Negev.

People of Israel

Israel is a vibrant and diverse society, home to a mosaic of cultures, religions, and ethnic groups.

Jewish 73.5%

Muslim 18.1%

Christian 1.9%

Druze 1.6% (Ethnoreligious community who maintain Arabic language and culture as integral parts of their identity.)

Other 4.9%



Even within Israel's Jewish population, there is wide religious and cultural diversity. Religious Jews in Israel constitute a significant and articulate section of the population. As such, they are often at odds with a strong secular sector that seeks to prevent religious bodies and authorities from dominating national life.

Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox)

Dati (Religious)

Masorti (Traditional)

Hiloni (Secular)

Culturally, the Jewish population includes Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi Jews, as well as Ethiopian, Indian, and other Jewish communities, each with distinct cultural traditions, languages, and histories.

Ashkenazi: Jews from central and Eastern Europe and their descendants

Sephardi: Jews from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain, Portugal), the Mediterranean area, and North Africa and their descendants

Mizrahi: Jews of Middle Eastern ancestry

Politics

Israel is a **parliamentary democracy** with a multi-party system. Its government is divided into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial.

The legislative branch is the **Knesset**, a 120-member unicameral parliament. Members are elected through a system of proportional representation, meaning parties gain seats based on their share of the national vote. Elections occur approximately every four years, but political instability often leads to early elections.

The executive branch is led by the **Prime Minister**, who is the head of government and is typically the leader of the party that forms a governing coalition. Since no single party has ever won an outright majority, coalition governments are the norm. **The President**, elected by the Knesset for a seven-year term, serves a largely ceremonial role.



The judicial branch is independent, with the **Supreme Court** having the power to review laws and government actions. Instead of a formal constitution, Israel operates under Basic Laws that serve as a constitutional framework.

Israel's political landscape is highly diverse, with major parties including **Likud** (right-wing), **Yesh Atid** (centrist), **Israel Resilience** (center-left), and **Shas** (ultra-Orthodox). Other parties represent religious, Arab, and sectoral interests, making coalition-building a complex and defining feature of Israeli politics.



Food

Israel's cuisine is a fusion of global flavors, reflecting its diverse population. **Hummus** and **falafel** are staple street foods, alongside **shawarma**, a spiced, slow-roasted meat dish. **Couscous** from North Africa and **malawach** from Yemen add richness, while **schnitzel** from Austria is a favorite among families. **Challah** is a beloved Jewish bread, and slow-cooked dishes like **chamin (cholent)** bring warmth to Shabbat tables. Other favorites include **shakshuka** (eggs in spiced tomato sauce) and **bourekas**, flaky pastries filled with cheese or potatoes.



Start-Up Nation

Israel is often called the “Start-Up Nation” due to its thriving tech industry and high number of start-ups per capita. The country is a global leader in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and medical technology. Some of its most famous innovations include **Waze**, a navigation app acquired by Google, and the **USB flash drive**, which revolutionized data storage. Israel also pioneered **firewall technology**, essential for cybersecurity. In agriculture, Israeli scientists developed **cherry tomatoes** and **Israeli couscous** to enhance food production. Other groundbreaking inventions include **drip irrigation**, which transformed global farming, the **PillCam**, a swallowable camera for medical diagnostics, and **Iron Dome**, a missile defense system. With major industries in high-tech, defense, and biotechnology, Israel continues to be a hub of innovation and entrepreneurship.



Famous Israeli Contributors | History & Politics

Theodor Herzl – Founder of modern political Zionism, advocating for a Jewish state in the late 19th century.

David Ben-Gurion – Israel's first Prime Minister (1948-1954, 1955-1963) and a key figure in the country's founding, declaring independence in 1948.

Golda Meir – Israel's first female Prime Minister (1969-1974).

Yitzhak Rabin – Prime Minister (1974-1977, 1992-1995) who signed the Oslo Accords; assassinated in 1995 for his peace efforts.

Menachem Begin – Prime Minister (1977-1983) who signed the Camp David accords and peace treaty with Egypt.

Shimon Peres – Former Prime Minister (1984-1986, 1995-1996) and President, instrumental in Israel's nuclear program and the Oslo Accords.

Full List of Israeli Prime Ministers



Famous Israeli Contributors | Literature & Arts

Omer Adam – Israeli singer blending Mizrahi music with Western pop.

Paul Ben-Haim – Israeli classical composer, known for mixing Mediterranean and Oriental elements with Western style.

David Grossman – Israeli writer whose works have been translated into more than 30 languages.

Ofra Haza – Legendary Israeli singer known for bringing Yemenite music to an international audience.

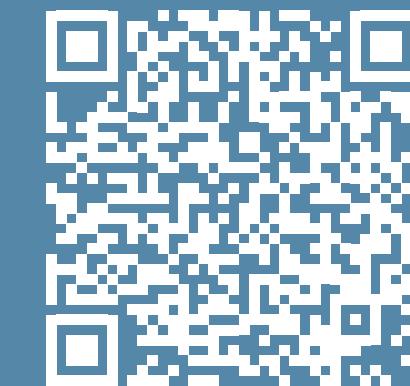
Noa Kirel – Pop singer and performer, representing Israel in Eurovision and gaining international fame.

Amos Oz – Acclaimed writer and peace activist, known for books like *A Tale of Love and Darkness*.

Izhak Perlman – World-renowned Israeli-born violinist.

Idan Raichel – World-renowned musician blending traditional Middle Eastern, African, and Western music.

Israeli Music Playlists



Famous Israeli Contributors | Pop Culture

Miki Berkovich – Considered one of Israel's greatest basketball players of all time.

Ilana Dayan – Prominent investigative journalist and TV anchor in Israel.

Gal Fridman – Israel's first Olympic gold medalist; he won a bronze medal in windsurfing in 1996 (Atlanta) then gold in 2004 (Athens).

Gal Gadot – International actress famous for playing Wonder Woman and promoting Israeli culture globally.

Daniel Kahneman – Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and economist, co-author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

Omri Casspi – First Israeli-born player in the NBA. He played basketball for several teams, including the Golden State Warriors, where he won an NBA championship in 2018.

Maccabi Tel Aviv Basketball Team – One of Europe's top basketball teams, bringing multiple championships to Israel.

Maccabi Tel Aviv Football Club – Soccer club that has won the most championships in the Israeli Premier League.

Want to Learn More?

Reach Out in Person

Did you know we have Israelis on staff in our community? Reach out to the **Chaverim M'Israel** or our **Community Shaliach/Schlichah** at the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati. They are all emissaries from Israel that educate our community about Israel and create engagement around it.

Podcasts to Dive Into

Unpacking Israeli History *(Unpacked) | A deep dive into key moments in Israeli and Jewish history, breaking down complex topics with storytelling and historical analysis.

The Times of Israel Daily Briefing (The Times of Israel) | A short, daily update on Israeli news, politics, and international relations.

Israel Policy Pod (Israel Policy Forum) | Focuses on Israeli politics, U.S.-Israel relations, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Essential Reading List

Israel: A History – Anita Shapira | A well-researched and engaging history of Israel from its founding to the modern day.

To the End of the Land – David Grossman | A powerful novel exploring Israeli society through the lens of a mother whose son is in the military.

Israel: A Simple Guide to the Most Misunderstood Country on Earth – Noa Tishby | A passionate, accessible, and informative guide to Israel's history, politics, and global perception.

The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land – Donna Rosenthal | A vibrant portrait of Israeli society, including diverse communities and their stories.

Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor – Yossi Klein Halevi | A personal and heartfelt exploration of Israeli and Palestinian narratives.

Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle – Dan Senor & Saul Singer | Explains how Israel became a global leader in innovation and entrepreneurship.

News of the Day

The Times of Israel (Centrist, Reliable, Diverse Opinions) | Provides balanced reporting on Israeli politics, security, and society.

The Jerusalem Post (Center-Right, Mainstream, Established) | One of Israel's oldest English-language newspapers.

Haaretz (English Edition) (Left-Leaning, In-Depth Analysis) | Offers investigative journalism, long-form analysis, and in-depth reporting.

Ynet News (English Edition) (Centrist, Broad Coverage) | The English version of Yedioth Ahronoth, Israel's most widely read newspaper.

i24 News (English Edition) (Centrist, Global Perspective) | An international 24-hour news channel based in Israel, often compared to CNN or BBC.