

Where in the World are the Jewish People?

A Demographic Survey

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The sociological study of demographics, including migrations of people groups, is both fascinating and complex. Any number of factors can be attributed to why individuals may move from one area of a country to another, or from one continent to another: economic opportunity, family reunification, health conditions, better weather, or pure wanderlust may play into decisions to relocate. Communities may dwindle because members move away, or because birthrates decline. Identifying root causes of people group migrations is not always possible.

The proverbial transient nature of the offspring of Israel is summed up in the phrase “wandering Jew.” History books are replete with stories of the great demographic shifts of the Jewish people over centuries. More than merely having a disproportionate measure of wanderlust, massive migrations of Jewish people are often due to extremely negative circumstances. Some of these have been “natural,” or “acts of God.” One of the earliest recorded movements of the Hebrew people when Jacob and his family moved down into Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan (but at God’s urging; cf. Genesis 46:3).

More often, the displacement of Jewish people has resulted from human than natural factors. At times shifting political realities are the primary factor, as when the Soviet Union collapsed or Germany was reunified.¹

Many subsequent migrations throughout history have as their cause the ill intent of the nations against the Jewish people. Exiles, pogroms and edicts of expulsion forced many Jewish people to leave not only their promised homeland but also the lands to which they were dispersed. In the worst cases of anti-Semitism, the category in which the Holocaust stands as the epitome of evil, millions of Jews were not only displaced from their countries of residence, but altogether erased from the land of the living.

A detailed analysis of the purposes behind the movements of the Jewish people is beyond the scope of this paper. But it is fitting at the outset of this brief study on where Abraham’s descendants are living at the beginning of the 21st century to note God’s sovereign hand in faithfully preserving “a remnant” throughout the three millennia since the Lord promised to make him a great nation (Genesis 12:1-3).

CHALLENGES IN JEWISH DEMOGRAPHICS

Definition: One of the first steps in demographic studies is defining people groups. Every 10 years the United States government conducts a national census of its population. One of the census questions of greatest interest to politicians and marketers concerns ethnicity or “race.” Increasing rates of

¹ Even when human actions are seen as causes for migration, we should be aware of God’s sovereign hand in the affairs of His people. In examining the Exodus account, biblical theists would attribute the plagues which prompted Pharaoh’s expulsion from Egypt of his slave labor force as definite “acts of God.” Indeed, the return of Abraham’s offspring to the land of promise is foretold by the LORD in Genesis 15 – before the patriarch had even sired his first child.

intermarriage between various ethnicities has made identifying race a challenge for many. (I recently heard of a professor who counseled his students to complete the “race” question with the response, “human.”)

If Jewish people are to be enumerated, a clear definition of who fits into the group is essential. The question of “Who is a Jew?” is not only complicated by increased intermarriage with non-Jews, but also by religious considerations. An appropriate answer seems to be, “It depends on who’s asking.”

Counting is *herem*: For some people with carry-over superstitions from “the old country,” counting the number of Jewish people tempts the “evil eye.” Since taking a census of Israel got David into trouble², the view among the ultra-Orthodox is that such activity is forbidden (*herem*³). Without willing cooperation in the process, data gathering is hindered.

People are mobile: What is the Jewish population of Florida? The answer will vary depending on what season of the year in which the count is made. College students may be counted by the Hillel at their school, and counted again as part of their family’s household back in their hometown. Many people have two residences. A significant percentage of French Jewry owns property in Israel. Double counting (or being missed because one is at a different residence when a survey is taken) can easily happen.

Methodologies differ: Gathering accurate statistical data is painstaking and expensive. Personal home to home surveys require repeated visits to find someone a) at home and b) willing and able to provide the desired information. Phone or mail surveys may go unanswered. Membership rolls of Jewish institutions may not be freely available, and someone who is a member of a Jewish Community Center and Hadassah may be double counted. Sometimes “best guesstimates” of community leaders is as close as we get, and how closely those numbers approximate hard data is questionable.

SOURCES

A variety of sources of demographic information exist. Sometimes local communities will conduct their own surveys and make that information available. Finding comprehensive sources which deal with global Jewish populations is relatively easy on the internet. For the purposes of general comparison, we have selected five⁴, and narrowed the scope to four for more detailed analysis.

² David’s numbering of Israel (2 Samuel 24) brought divine judgment. “But David did not count those twenty years of age and under, because the Lord had said He would multiply Israel as the stars of heaven. Joab the son of Zeruiah had begun to count them, but did not finish; and because of this, wrath came upon Israel, and the number was not included in the account of the chronicles of King David” (1 Chron. 7:23-24).

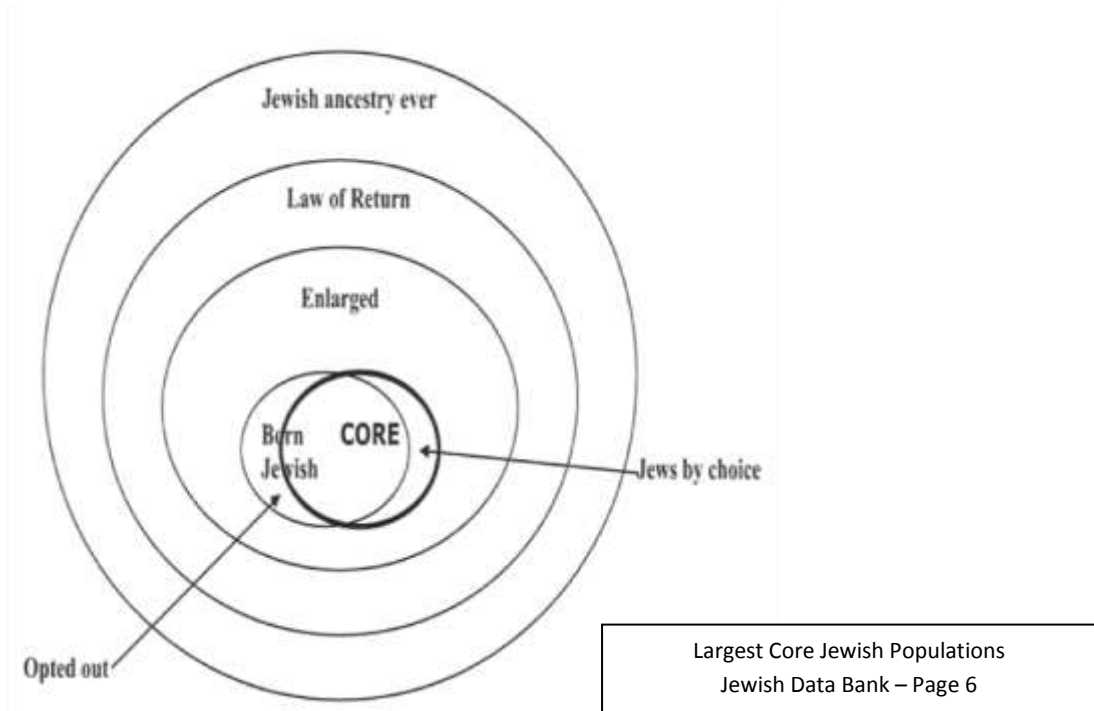
³ The Hebrew noun *הֶרֶם* (*herem*) appears 29 times in the Tenach; it is used for things “devoted” to the Lord or “devoted” to destruction. “Under the ban” conveys the idea that certain things (like the city of Jericho and all within it – Joshua 6:17-18 and 7:1) were to be restricted from acquisition. Things forbidden by God, like taking a census of the people, also are said to be *herem*. (But “counting noses” is acceptable, as that is how *kohanim* were counted; cf. Yoma 22b.)

⁴ American Jewish Yearbook, Jewish Databank, Operation World, World Christian Database, and Jewish Virtual Library (see Bibliography).

The variance in global Jewish population numbers we find when comparing multiple demographic sources reflects the realities of all the challenges in information gathering noted above. For example, current (2010, except as noted) world Jewish population totals are estimated as follows:

Source	Population
American Jewish Yearbook (2008) ⁵	13,160,700
Jewish Data Bank ⁶	13,348,000
Jewish Virtual Library ⁷	13,428,300
Operation World ⁸	14,525,039
World Christian Database ⁹	14,830,482

We have chosen to use the Jewish Databank as our primary baseline for three reasons: 1) they are focused solely on gathering and synthesizing data related to world Jewry; 2) they explain in detail their methodologies and provide helpful graphics; and 3) they tend to be the most conservative in their estimations (in part because of the way in which they define “who is a Jew”). This Venn diagram is quite helpful in visualizing their breakdown of population subsets.



⁵ American Jewish Yearbook – <http://www.ajcarchives.org>

⁶ Jewish Data Bank – [http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Reports/World Jewish Population 2010.pdf](http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Reports/World_Jewish_Population_2010.pdf)

⁷ Jewish Virtual Library – <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/jewpop.html>

⁸ Operation World – from Operation World DVD-ROM 2010, www.operationworld.org

⁹ World Christian Database – <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd>

JEWISH IDENTITY

“Core” Jewish Population: For sake of understanding, we will quote the definition provided by the Jewish Data Bank:

In most Diaspora countries, the concept of core Jewish population **includes all persons who**, when asked in a socio-demographic survey, **identify themselves as Jews; or who are identified as Jews by a respondent in the same household, and do not have another monotheistic religion.** Such a definition of a person as a Jew, *reflecting subjective perceptions*, broadly overlaps but does not necessarily coincide with Halakhah (Jewish law) or other normatively binding definitions. *Inclusion does not depend on any measure of that person’s Jewish commitment or behavior in terms of religiosity, beliefs, knowledge, communal affiliation, or otherwise.* The core Jewish population **includes all converts to Judaism by any procedure**, as well as other **people who declare they are Jewish even without conversion.** It is also customary to **include persons of Jewish parentage who claim no current religious or ethnic identity.** *Persons of Jewish parentage who adopted another monotheistic religion are usually excluded, as are persons who in censuses or socio-demographic surveys explicitly identify with a non-Jewish religious group without having formally converted out. [Bold and italic emphasis mine.]*¹⁰

It should be noted that the subjective approach described above applies to the Diaspora only. In Israel, a legal definition applies, which includes “matrilineal Jewish origin, or conversion to Judaism, and not holding another religion.”¹¹

The “Core Jewish Population” definition reflects the conclusion reached by those who wrestled with identification issues when creating the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey in America. Jews who self-identified as having multi-religious affiliations *could* be included the count under certain circumstances (that is, if the “other” religion was *not monotheistic*). [*Emphasis mine.*]¹² The term PJB (Persons of Jewish Background) was coined at that time, and they are counted in the core (unless they identify with a monotheistic religion, thus excluding Messianic Jews).

“Enlarged” Jewish Population: this category “includes the sum of (a) the core Jewish population; (b) all other persons of Jewish parentage who—by core Jewish population criteria—are not currently Jewish (non-Jews with Jewish background); and (c) all respective non-Jewish household members (spouses, children, etc.).¹³ One might think that Messianic Jews would be included in this slice of the diagram – but the addition of another layer confirms they are not.

Non-Jews with Jewish background: these, “as far as they can be ascertained, include: (a) *persons who have adopted another religion*, or otherwise opted out, *although they may claim to be also Jewish by*

¹⁰ World Jewish Population, Jewish Data Bank, pg. 9

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ WJP, pg. 10.

ethnicity or in some other way...; and (b) other persons with Jewish parentage who disclaim being Jewish.” [Emphasis mine.]¹⁴ And, just in case we didn’t understand how difficult it is for someone with Jewish heritage to get into this “last-and not-quite-Jewish” category, they reiterate, “As noted, most PJBs who are not part of the core Jewish population naturally belong under the enlarged definition.”¹⁵

The Jewish Data Bank survey recognizes two further categories that go beyond one’s immediate parentage, the “Law of Return” and “Jewish Ancestry Ever.”

Law of Return: Israel’s amended version of the Law of Return is as follows:

...a Jew is any person born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism (regardless of denomination—Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform), who does not have another religious identity. By ruling of Israel’s Supreme Court, conversion from Judaism, as in the case of some ethnic Jews who currently identify with another religion, entails loss of eligibility for Law of Return purposes.¹⁶

The provisions for making *aliyah* are extended for three generations (back to one’s grandparents), as well as to one’s non-Jewish spouse, thus creating a wider circle than the earlier categories include.

Jewish Ancestry Ever: this category includes “lost communities” like Beta Israel (the Falash-Mura) and the “Kaifeng Jews” who have a tradition of connectedness with Jewish roots. These “non-Jews of Jewish ancestry” must undergo conversion to Judaism to be eligible for *aliyah* or consideration as “true Jews.”

Though we may not be in agreement with how the circles are drawn in the diagram above, it is helpful to know the criteria being used for the survey. Admittedly, even careful definitions do not necessarily produce an exact survey. When surveys are taken over the phone or internet (or even in person), no documentation must be produced to prove one’s claim to Jewish ancestry. Depending on how a respondent answers the question, “Have you converted to another religion?” Messianic Jews may indeed be included in the “core Jewish” numbers (despite the best efforts of some to exclude them).

Though defining “Jewish identity” and “Messianic Jewish identity” are beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that identity issues remain a sensitive area within the family of faith in Yeshua. In Jewish ministry we find ourselves wishing for a Venn diagram to help explain where we fit. Consider:

- 1) the diversity of expressions of faith in the Jewish Messiah (both in worship and lifestyle);
- 2) the desire of Yeshua’s followers to relate with the Jewish people (culturally for many gentiles, ethnically for those with some Jewish heritage, and religiously for some of both);
- 3) the felt need to distance ourselves from forms of “Christianity” that have strayed far from biblical faith and/or have latent or blatant anti-Jewish expressions; and
- 4) Yeshua’s prayer (John 17:11, 21-22) and Paul’s command (Ephesians 4:3) for us to have unity within the Body of Messiah.

¹⁴ Ibid.

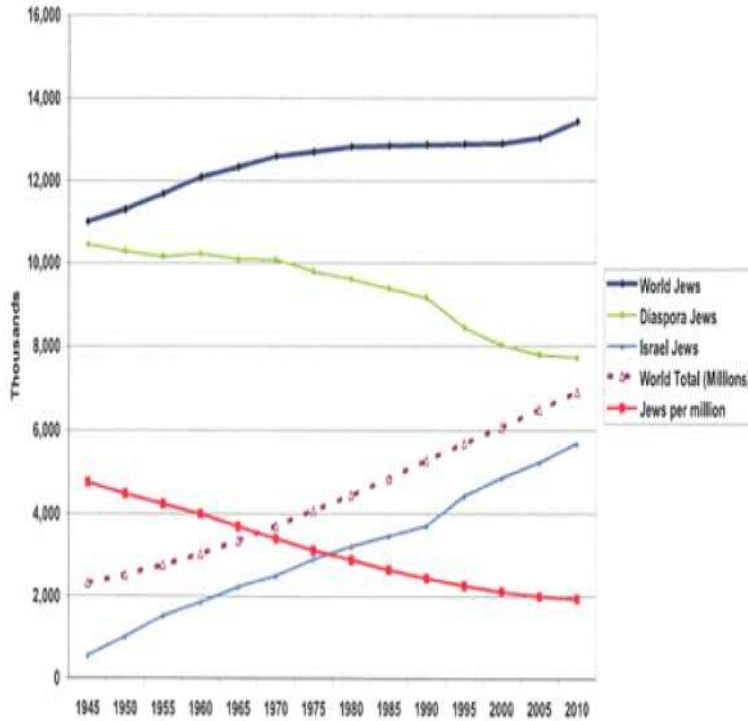
¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ JDB, pg. 11. NOTE: In recent years, Messianic believers whose fathers are Jewish but whose mothers are not (and thus not considered Jewish), have more readily been granted Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

It is no wonder that confusion and conflict are often present. May the Lord give us grace to better reflect His lovingkindness and forgiveness to one another.

REALITIES

1. Jewish people are diminishing in proportion to world population gains.



World Total and Jewish Populations
Jewish Data Bank – Page 4

As seen above, between 1960 and 1970 Diaspora Jewry virtually flattened out at 10 million, and was in steady decline for three decades. In the first decade of the new millennium, the decline slowed somewhat. In marked contrast, the trajectory of Jewish population growth in Israel has been almost inversely proportional.

Reasons for declining Jewish populations in the Diaspora are varied: regime changes in the Former Soviet Union and South Africa; the rise of anti-Semitism (concurrent with increasing Muslim populations) in western European countries; increased intermarriage rates in Brazil (and elsewhere); and economic and political instability in Latin America are cited.¹⁷ One may look long and hard for optimistic signs that the situations will improve in the near term in many of these countries.

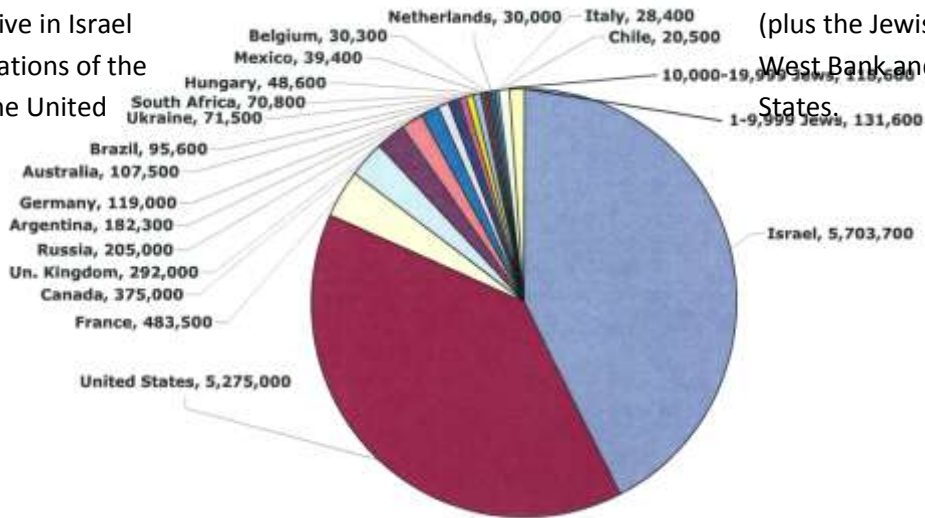
¹⁷ E.g., *American Jewish Yearbook 2007*, “Determinants of Jewish Population Change,” pg. 552.

2. Jewish people are disproportionately distributed across the world

Jewish Population	# of Countries	# of Jews	%
1,000,000+	02 (+ Palestine)	11,045,504	74.4
100,000-999,999	10	2,882,855	19.4
10,000-99,999	23	737,110	4.9
1,000-9,999	41	144,381	0.9
1-999	62	20,632	.01
	139	14,830,482	

While the above Christian Databank nations with 100,000 or less, up to only one-world Jewry. Jews live in Israel populations of the and the United

chart (using World figures) shows 136 Jewish populations of their populations add fourth of the total of Three-fourths of all (plus the Jewish West Bank and Gaza) States.



Largest Core Jewish Populations
Jewish Data Bank – Page 6

- 3. Jewish people are disproportionately concentrated in a few metropolitan areas.** According to the Jewish Data Bank:

Changes in the geographic distribution of Jews have affected their distribution not only among countries, but also within countries. The overwhelmingly urban concentration of Jewish populations globally is shown by the fact that in 2010 more than half (**52.5 percent**) of world Jewry lived in only **five metropolitan areas**. These areas—including the main cities and vast urbanized territories around them—were **Tel Aviv, New York, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, and Haifa**. Over two-thirds (**67.5 percent**) of world Jewry lived in the **five previous areas plus the South Florida, Be'er Sheva, San Francisco, Paris, Chicago, and Philadelphia** areas. The **24 largest metropolitan concentrations** of Jewish population encompassed 80.2 percent of all Jews worldwide. [*Emphasis mine.*]¹⁸

- 4. Major shifts are taking place in the largest demographics.** If world population shifts continue on their current trajectory, the balance of world Jewry likely will continue to move from the Diaspora to Israel. This is both based on birth rates (increasing in the Jewish homeland, decreasing outside) and emigration.
- 5. Some shifts are counterintuitive.** Despite the increase of anti-Semitism in Europe, French Jewry showed a net gain of over 19,000 from 2005 to 2010.¹⁹ This likely cannot be attributed only to double counting those with residences in both countries. It remains to be seen what will happen with Jewish population growth (or continuance) in the West Bank if Palestine is formalized as an independent state.
- 6. God knows where He is leading His people.** We love the stories of divine appointments that the Lord arranges in the strangest (and at times most remote) corners of the globe. Whether it is the massive migration of Jewish people out of South Africa or Russia, or the single Jewish person who senses the urge to strike out for a new destination, God keeps track of each individual. (And He has no problem identifying who the offspring of Jacob are!)

IMPLICATIONS

What can be gleaned from this brief overview? The following questions are meant to foster further discussion among us:

¹⁸ Jewish Databank, pg. 20.

¹⁹ World Christian Database, 2005 and 2010 statistics.

1. Given the reality that more than half the world's Jewish population is concentrated in five metropolitan areas, to what extent should gospel proclamation be centered in those cities?

2. What more should we be doing in Israel, given the realities that:
 - a. The population shift likely will continue to increase the percentage of world Jewry in the Land?
 - b. The percentage of observant Jews (Orthodox and Hasidim) continues to rise?
 - c. Active opposition to the gospel is growing (in terms of preparation and training, as well as methodologies)?

3. How much should population data influence our strategic plans?
 - a. Is it true that smaller Jewish communities tend to be less gospel resistant?
 - b. Is it true that transient people tend to be more open to the gospel (e.g., new immigrants, backpacking Israeli youth)?

4. Is there more we should be doing together to tackle the larger and more difficult challenges in Jewish evangelism?

May the Lord be pleased to grant us His wisdom, and to direct our steps in both the macro plans and the moment-by-moment obedience to His still small voice. We don't want to lose a single opportunity to reach every individual whose heart He is preparing to hear and receive the Good News of Messiah's atoning work.

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