The reinvention of Jewish space

Israel’s imminent emergence as the Jewish nation’s demographic center will revolutionize Jewish history

By Amotz Asa-El

THE JEWS have reached “all cities,” so much so that “it is hard to find a place in the habitable earth that has not admitted this tribe,” Greek geographer Strabo observed 2,000 years ago after having traveled from Ethiopia to Tuscany and from Armenia to Rome.

While exaggerated – the Jews were generally absent, then as now, from the Far East and most of sub-Saharan Africa – this observation has been valid in principle, and, in fact, echoed the Jewish nation’s most famous and fateful distinction – dispersal – the diffuse geography that has spawned weakness and power, awe and envy, curiosity and myth, genius and demise.

The Diaspora’s emergence 2,600 years ago revolutionized the Jews’ national space. The hills, valleys and towns that connected the biblical Israelites gradually gave way to the book, the synagogue, the yeshiva, the rabbi, the circumciser, the ritual bath, the kosher butchery and the cemetery, which connected an intercontinental archipelago of communities that ultimately ringed the entire globe.

Now, this disjointed geography is coming to an end amid a spectacular demographic transition.

No, the Jews have not yet offset the Holocaust’s blow as, even 72 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, world Jewry is still well more than one million people smaller than its prewar size. However, 120 years after the First Zionist Congress, the Jewish state is on the verge of becoming the home of most Jews.

“By 2030, and maybe already in 2025, most of the Jewish nation will be living in the State of Israel,” Hebrew University’s Sergio DellaPergola, the world’s senior expert on Jewish demographics, tells The Jerusalem Report. As social scientists do whenever discussing the future, he qualifies his forecast with the cautionary disclaimer: “unless an extreme event disrupts the trends we are witnessing.”

Yet, the trends are both glaring and momentous. Israel’s Jews are multiplying, the Diaspora is shrinking and the Jewish state is moments away from being inhabited by most of the Jewish nation for the first time since antiquity.

The political, religious, cultural and mental implications of this geographic revolution are seminal and complex, as this series will explain. The numbers, however, are relatively simple.

According to a 1940 report – authored by the Jewish Agency’s Arthur Ruppin and ominously titled “The Jewish Fate and Future” – 440,000 of the world’s 16.7 million Jews lived in British Palestine on the eve of the Holocaust. That was 3.6% of world Jewry. When the UN voted to establish the Jewish state, 600,000 of the world’s 11.5 million Jews lived within its future borders. That was 5.2%. By the Six Day War in 1967, there were 2.4 million Jews in Israel, which was just under one in five Jews worldwide. By the time the Cold War ended, Israel’s 4.8 million Jews were 30% of world Jewry.

In 2012, DellaPergola reported that Israel’s Jews numbered 5.9 million, or 42.9% of world Jewry. The following year, the Central Bureau of Statistics in Jerusalem reported that the number of Jews in Israel had crossed 6 million.

Few noticed the emotionally charged milestone of “six million,” yet these figures concealed an even more meaningful turning point – Israel’s emergence as home to the world’s largest Jewish community.

When first reported, in 2003, the claim that there were more Jews in Israel than in the US was disputed by DellaPergola who, at the time, said there were still 150,000 more Jews in the US than in Israel. A decade on, however, he, too, counted more Jews in Israel than in the US – 101,000 more, to be precise – more, as a matter of fact, than in the US and Canada combined.

Russian Jewry, the largest Diaspora throughout the 19th century and the second largest for most of the 20th century, now numbers fewer Jews than Jerusalem.
alone. Israel’s current share of world Jewry—roughly 45%—is more than twice the one-fifth of world Jewry that the Land of Israel inhabited on both sides of the Jordan when Titus laid siege to Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Although Jews constituted the majority of the Land of Israel’s population throughout the Second Temple period, and also well after it, historians agree that ever since 586 BCE most of the world’s Jews have lived outside their land. That observation was shared even by ardently Zionist historians such as Ben-Zion Dinur, who served as David Ben-Gurion’s education minister, and Isaac Baer, who headed the Hebrew University’s Jewish History department in its first decades.

THE JEWS tried to excuse their unique geography as far back as ancient times.

“One country will not contain the entire nation by reason of its great numbers,” argued Philo, the great philosopher, who lived in Egypt, wrote in Greek, journeyed to Jerusalem as a pilgrim and left no hint that he knew Hebrew. The gap in size between the nation and its land, he explained, was why the Jews “sent out colonies in every direction,” and also why “those dwelling in some other country do no wrong,” as Philo wrote in his “Life of Moses.”

Philo’s insight may have been valid in his days, but in our times it has been proven obsolete.

Not only is Israel’s current number of Jews, 6.48 million, already much higher than the entire world’s estimated 5 million Jews in Philo’s time, there are in Israel an additional 2.2 million non-Jews. Even so, Israel’s vast south, which is more than twice the size of its densely settled coastal plain, comprises but 15% of the population.

It follows that there is plenty of geographic room for the demographic growth that DellaPergola is both monitoring and predicting, and the growth of Israeli Jewry, indeed, seems set to continue.

After having been originally fed by immigration—first from postwar Europe and the post-colonial Mideast and then from post-communist Eastern Europe—Israel’s demographic mushrooming now reflects an entirely different factor—fertility.

“It’s a miracle,” says DellaPergola of Israel’s fertility rate of 3.1 children per family, which he says is the highest among the world’s 94 most developed countries.

Refuting conventional wisdom, he says this figure is not dominated by the particularly high birth rates of religious populations, both Jewish and Muslim, but by the secular Jewish population’s rate of nearly 2.5 children per family. “There is no equivalent to this trend anywhere in the world,” he says, noting that industrialized societies in countries like Japan, Spain, Germany, Italy and Russia have been steadily shrinking since the 1970s.

Israel’s exceptional fertility rate is visible not only in its bustling playgrounds, ubiquitous kindergartens and the countless baby goods stores that dot its shopping centers, but also in the biographies of successful secular women. The heads of Bank Leumi, Bank Discount, First International Bank and the Bank of Israel—all women—have between them a total of 10 children. A scene like the board meeting in 2013 where economist Yael Andorn, then a mother of two, was introduced as the Finance Ministry’s new director general while visibly pregnant—is unthinkable elsewhere in the world.

That includes the Jewish Diaspora.
While Israel swells, the Diaspora’s fertility is well under the rate of 2.1 children per woman, which is what it takes just to retain a population’s existing size, says DellaPergola.

Moreover, whereas Israelis, besides having more children, also steadily absorb immigrants, the Diaspora, in addition to having fewer children, also massively intermarries with the rates of “out-marriages without conversion” – as the demographers call them – this decade crossing 40%, 50% and 70%, respectively, in Western Europe, the US and the former East Bloc.

The pessimism that such numbers generate concern the future of American Jewry – the main Diaspora – is not new. Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz’s book, “The Vanishing of the American Jew,” lamented two decades ago what its title announced, while historian Arthur Hertzberg wrote in 1989 that “the momentum of Jewish experience in America” had been “essentially spent.”

Pessimism Concerning US Jewry’s future grew following a 1990 National Jewish Population Survey’s finding that 52% of recently married American Jews had married non-Jews. The numbers became even more dramatic in 2013, when a Pew Research Center survey indicated that US Jewry’s overall rate of intermarriage had reached 58%, as opposed to 17% in 1970. Moreover, 22% defined themselves as having no religion and fewer than one in three said they belonged to a synagogue.

At the same time, that same survey counted more than 7 million American Jews, by accepting as Jews those who said they did not belong to the Jewish faith but were of Jewish parentage and identified as “partly Jewish.”

Some American Jews responded to the report with alarm.

“This should serve as a wake-up call for all of us as Jews,” said Jane Eisner, at the time editor of The Forward. Others were inspired by the survey’s report that the children of most intermarried couples identify as Jews. “In a world where half-Jews like Gwyneth Paltrow, [baseball star] Ryan Braun, Scarlett Johansson and [Canadian rapper] Drake proudly identify as Jews – Jewish is cool,” wrote Forward columnist J.J. Goldberg.

The school of thought that says American Jewry is not shrinking and is, in fact, expanding is led by Brandeis University sociologist Leonard Saxe. However, even he agrees that a future in which most American Jewish children are products of intermarriages is problematic.

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American Jewry is, indeed, elastic and its eulogies are no more valid than last century’s common impressions that Soviet Jewry was in the process of disappearing or that the Holocaust had dealt ultra-Orthodoxy a blow from which it will never recover.

The story of American Jewry is not only about assimilation, but also about revitalization, as its most important historian, Jonathan Sarna, also of Brandeis University, has been saying for years, referring to the accomplishments of American Jews in religious innovation and organizational creation.

DellaPergola himself, while arguing that the fertility of Israeli Jews is a reflection of social optimism – and that infertility elsewhere in the West is a symptom of pessimism – agrees that the Diaspora, both within and beyond America, is by no means about to disappear.

“Even in Europe,” he says, “a critical mass” of its roughly one million Jews will stay put. Even so, in tandem with the shrinkage of American Jewry, European Jewry will age and intermarry rapidly and its institutions, in turn, will steadily lose their vitality, says DellaPergola.

Israel, by contrast, is demographically vibrant, and the vitality that is set to dominate the Jewish people is showing no signs of abating.

Israel has its own Jewish-identity dilemmas, with 300,000 “semi-Jews” stranded in the gap that yawns between the Chief Rabbinate, for which a Jew is the child of a Jewish mother, and the Law of Return, which grants Israeli citizenship to an intermarried Jewish man’s wife, children and grandchildren.

The mysteries of Jewishness are challenging Israel and the Diaspora in similar ways, but the dynamics at play are inverted: the Diaspora’s semi-Jews are being drawn away culturally, and drawn in institutionally, especially by the Reform Movement and increasingly also by the Conservatives; Israel’s semi-Jews are being pushed away by the religious establishment, but drawn in socially and culturally.

Asked why he left the ultra-Orthodox parties out of his government in 2003, Ariel Sharon told this writer one reason was that they stood in the way of Israel’s absorption of semi-Jews. “I don’t speak as a rabbi,” he said in typical understatement, but “to me,” whoever moves to Israel and “sees himself as part of the Jewish people” and “serves in the [Israeli] army and fights” with us – is a Jew.

It was an intuitive but accurate definition that most Israelis share to this day, and it reflects the reality whereby speaking, reading and writing Hebrew, attending Israeli schools, serving in the IDF, and getting sucked into the Jewish state’s society, economy, culture and landscapes are far more effective shapers of Jewish identity than whatordinarily awaits a semi-Jew’s offspring in the Diaspora.

Between them, Saxe’s and Sharon’s insights imply that there are two types of Jews: one solid, the other liquid. The solid Jews’ Jewishness is obvious to them and to their surroundings and is, in some form, active – for instance in granting Jewish education to their kids, belonging to a synagogue, donating to Jewish causes,
celebrating Jewish holidays or taking classes in Judaism or Hebrew.

Most tellingly, the Diaspora’s liquid Jews inhabit no Jewish space – not a Jewish neighborhood, not a Jewish school, not a synagogue seat, and not a Jewish cemetery’s grave. In Israel, Jewish space is inherent. Between them, these inverted realities are steadily leading Jewish space away from its historic, religious formula toward a new, national realm.

In the future, the Diaspora will have more and more liquid Jews and Israel will have fewer and fewer. That is why the 51% majority of world Jewry that DellaPergola envisages in Israel by next decade will not stop at that ratio, but will immediately continue expanding. It is, therefore, not unthinkable that a century from now some two-thirds of world Jewry will be living in Israel.

**EVEN IF** it takes longer for the Israeli majority to grow that big, its very emergence next decade will be for Jewish history what the Reformation, the fall of communism and the disappearance of the American frontier have been for the histories of Christianity, Russia and the US.

The nation that has been so famous for its dispersal will still have a large Diaspora, but it will now be a people solidly anchored in its ancestral land – a landed nation whose offshore islands will be inhabited by a minority of the Jewish people, while the majority inhabits what will become the Jewish mainland.

For the first time, not since the days of Jesus and Titus but since the days of Jeremiah and Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews will cease to be what the biblical Haman described contemptuously as “a certain people scattered and dispersed among the other peoples.”

St. Augustine’s triumphalist description of the Jews as a people “torn from their abode and dispersed throughout almost the whole world” will become obsolete. Historian Arnold Toynbee’s scornful dismissal of the Zionist enterprise as a “child, protégé, pensioner” and “by-product of the Diaspora” – will be an anachronism.

The People of the World, as historian Simon Dubnow celebrated the landless Jewish nation in its sojourns, will be back in its land. And the wandering knight, who is “more faithful to his country when he roams abroad,” as philosopher Franz Rosenzweig glorified the Wandering Jew, will at last end his galloping and let loose his horse in Israel’s realm.

In its first six centuries, the Diaspora was spiritually inferior to the majestic Jerusalem that was a splintered Jewish nation’s spiritual heartbeat, judicial lighthouse, scholastic wellspring and ritual shrine.

The loss of that Jerusalem with Rome’s conquest resulted in a religious revolution that remolded the Jewish faith by creating ways to practice Judaism without Judea. Thus, the Diaspora was granted new Judaic relevance and, in due course, also prominence and authority.

At the same time, the dispersed nation became associated with intellect, commerce and enterprise, while an invisible hand repeatedly distributed it on both sides of geopolitical fault lines, such as those that ran between Greece and Persia, Rome and Parthia, Christianity and Islam, the Old World and the New and, most recently, the East Bloc and the West.

What fault lines will succeed these in the new Jewish geography – the one whose Israeli center of gravity will overlook a Diaspora dominated by the Anglophone Jews of North America, Britain and Oceania, and adorned by smaller communities in an assortment of Latin and Slavic lands?

What might await the faith that united the Diaspora, the hatred it so often encountered, the genius it inspired and the solidarity it cultivated once DellaPergola’s forecast materializes and the Jews become a landed nation?

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Jewish is cool. Gwyneth Paltrow arrives at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute Gala in May.