

ALIYAH – RETURN

Aliyah, the Hebrew word for the return of the Jews to Israel

Jewish people leave the countries they grew up in and move to Israel for a variety of different reasons. Some describe an inexplicable longing for home, others are threatened by social tensions and seek a more secure place to live, yet others are motivated by religious interests.

A look at history shows that new immigrants (Hebrew: Olim Chadashim) have been arriving in Israel, in greater and smaller numbers down the centuries, from over 150 countries around the world.

In the 17th century, large groups of Europeans, together with their respective rabbis, endeavored to move to Israel, motivated by their belief that the messianic kingdom was coming soon.

In the 19th century, antisemitism spread throughout Europe, especially in Russia, Germany, Austria and France, with the goal of excluding or expelling all baptized and socially integrated Jews, many of whom were struggling to combine their faith with their recently-acquired rights as citizens. During the anti-Semitic controversy in Berlin, the bourgeois and conservative Christian groups revealed their true colors, throwing into question the promise of liberal equality and tolerance. These anti-Semitic events finally culminated in the Shoah.

We are now living in the 21st century, yet many parts of the world are experiencing a dramatic resurgence of antisemitism, ranging from hate propaganda to vandalism and even physical attacks on Jews. Harassment of various kinds are everyday occurrences and the threshold for violence is sinking. This reality causes many people in Jewish communities to feel unsafe and has led to an observable acceleration of waves of return.

A brief history of return waves

200–500 B.C.

In late antiquity, Babylon and Israel were centers of rabbinic scholarship. However, returning to Zion still had priority for the Jewish people. For the first time in history, a people returned to its homeland and again lived as before the exile.

1200–1882 A.D.

The number of Jews returning to the land of Israel increased considerably from the 13th to the 19th century. This was due to a general questioning of the Jews' status in all of Europe as well as increasing religious persecution. This led to the expulsion of Jews from England (1290), France (1391), Austria (1421) and Spain (Alhambra Decree of 1492).

1882–1903

The wave of pogroms initiated by Czar Alexander III in 1881-1884, and the anti-Semitic “May laws” of 1882, resulted in massive Jewish emigration from the Russian kingdom. Between 1880 and 1920, over 2 million Jews fled Russia. The great majority went to the USA but some decided to return to the land of their ancestors.

1904–1914

During this period 40,000 Jews emigrated primarily from Russia to Palestine in order to escape the increasing outbreaks of antisemitism in their home countries. This group, of which many were imbued with socialistic ideals, founded the first kibbutz, Degania, in 1909. They also built up self-defense organizations like Hashomer. World War I ended this second Aliyah.

1929

During the British Mandate, the Jewish Agency for Israel was founded at the 16th Zionist Congress in Zurich. This institution remains an important mediator whose tasks include support for Aliyah. It links Jews with Israel, one another, their inheritance and their collective future.

1929–1946

The rise of Nazi Germany led to a new immigration wave, and many German professionals, including physicians, lawyers and professors were among the new arrivals. However, an ensuing increase in British restrictions forced immigration, known as Aliyah Beth (Hebrew: two), into illegality.

In 1939, in response to the increasing tensions between Arab and Jewish inhabitants of Israel who were struggling with various British restrictions, Britain produced the so-called “White Paper. This set a limit of 75,000 immigrants over a 5-year period (10,000 per year plus an additional 25,000 refugees).

Shortly after the Nazis came to power they negotiated the “Ha’Avara”, or “Transfer” contract, which stipulated that 50,000 Jews plus 100 million dollars of their assets were to be brought to Palestine.

The Youth Aliyah also took place during this period. It was an effort to bring as many children and youths as possible out of the Nazi German Reich to safety.

1949–50: Operation Ezra und Nehemia

This undertaking was named after Ezra and Nehemiah who led the return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylonia in the 5th century B.C., as recorded in the Hebrew Bible.

In 1941, the nationalistic regime under Rashid Ali al-Kaylani came to power in Iraq. This was followed by a violent pogrom during which at least 180 Baghdad Jews were killed over the course of two days. During the years following this massacre, most remaining Iraqi Jews emigrated to Israel. This spelled the end of the Jewish congregation in Iraq. During 1951 and 1952, Operation Ezra and Nehemiah flew 120,000-130,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel via Iran and Cyprus. The massive emigration of Iraqi Jews was a high point in the Jewish exodus from Arab and Moslem lands.

1975

After the Soviet Union rescinded the prohibition of Jewish emigration (Refusenik) in 1971, there was a mass immigration of Soviet Jews. More than 150,000 returned to Israel during this period to escape the religious or ideological unrest. These Soviet Jews were also motivated by economic opportunities in Israel and the desire to escape antisemitism and discrimination once and for all.

1984–1991: Operation Moses und Solomon

A massive airlift brought Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Within 6 weeks some 6,500-8,000 Jews were flown from Sudan to Israel. It is estimated that 2,000 to 4,000 Jews perished on the way to Sudan or in Sudanese refugee camps. Later, in 1991, 34 planes landed on one day in Addis Ababa to bring 14,325 Jews back to Israel. Today Ethiopian Jews continue to return to Israel.

1990: From the North

The Aliyah from the Soviet Union started up again at this time but was totally unexpected. More than one million Soviet Jews returned to Israel. The majority were Ashkenazi Jews but Mizrahi groups were also well represented along with mountain Jews, Georgian Jews and Buhara Jews. Although each of these ethnic groups brought their own culture to Israel they have integrated successfully into the Israeli economy.

1992: Rescue Operation

When the Bosnian war broke out most of the local Jews were evacuated to Israel. The majority chose to remain there after the war ended.

1999–2002

Around 200,000 Jews were affected by the political and economic crisis in Argentina. Attacks on the Israeli embassy (1992) and the Jewish Center AMIA (1994) were additional hard blows, prompting some Jews to seek their luck in Israel. Since 2000, several thousand Argentine Jews have emigrated to Israel and joined thousands of earlier olim (immigrants).

The crisis in Argentina was also felt in neighboring Uruguay where 500 Jews made Aliyah during the same period. Today, Jews still continue to emigrate from the lands of the Gauchos in large and small groups, seeking to escape unstable economies and the disturbing increase of antisemitism in Latin America in general.

Today

The Jewish people continue to return to their land. Jewish Agency data shows that in the last decade from 2010-2019, over 255,000 new immigrants arrived in Israel. The number of Aliyah applications from North America rose by 50% in comparison to the same month in 2019. An increase from South America and France is also expected. The Jewish Agency and other organizations expect 90,000 immigrants to arrive in Israel by 2021. Through "Operation Rock of Israel" a larger group of the Falash Mura community returned from Ethiopia at the end of 2020. Some of these Ethiopian Jewish people waited more than 20 years to make Aliyah! Around 2,000 people from this community are expected in Israel by the end of January 2021.