

RELIGIOUSLY DIVIDED STRUCTURE OF THE ISRAELI JEWISH SOCIETY

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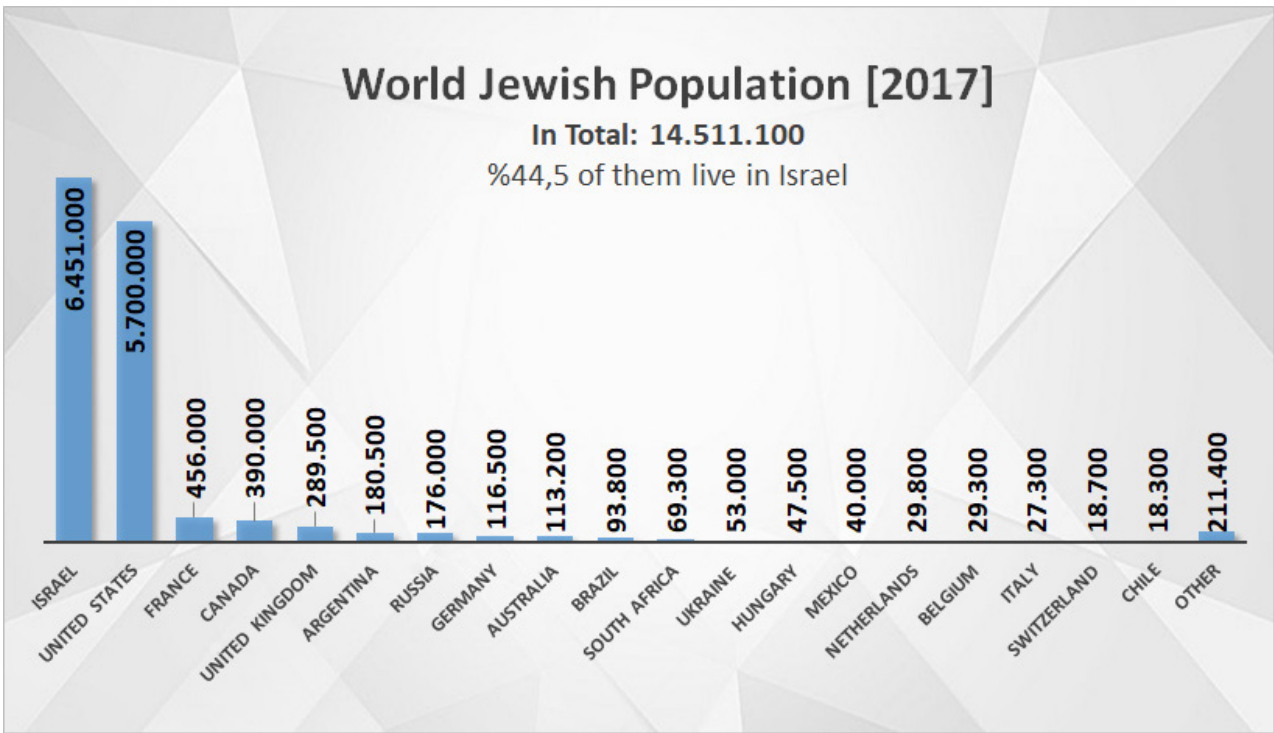
 Analysis

Israel is the country with the largest core Jewish population in the world; it is also the only country in the world where the majority of the society is composed of Jews. There are some different sub-groups in the Israeli Judaism which cause deep divisions within the society. These groups can be divided into four major categories where every single one of them corresponds to a different segment; they are *Hiloni* (secular), *Masorti* (traditional), *Dati* (religious) and *Haredi* (ultra-orthodox).¹ In this study, these categories that emerged within the Israeli Judaism are going to be examined regarding to their differences. The study is going to be limited to the groups that are represented in Israel and at the end of this study the impact of these groups on the Israeli social and religious life is going to be revealed.

In the beginning of 2017, the world's Jewish population was assessed at 14,511,100 and approximately 44.5% of them live in Israel. The total number of Jews residing in Israel together with the occupied East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and Jews living in the West Bank is around 6,451,000 (77.1% of the total population). The countries with the highest Jewish population after Israel are the US (5,700,000), France (456,000), Canada (390,000) and the UK (289,500).² In addition, Israel rapidly increases its population with high birth rates (3.13 children per Jewish woman), new immigrants and limited number of religious conversions to Judaism (83.200 people between 1999 and 2014).³

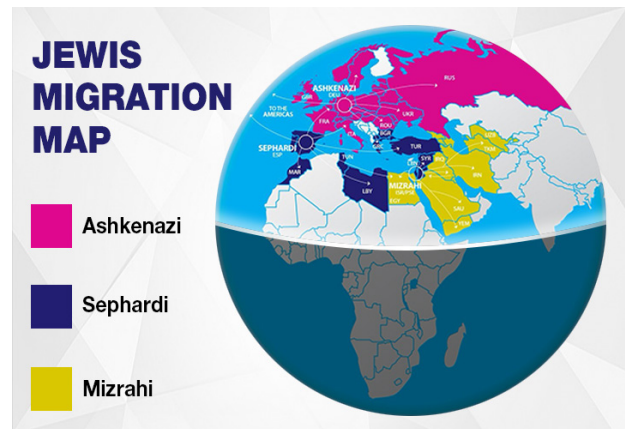


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After the genocide of Jews in Europe during World War II (1939-1945), a serious Jewish refugee problem emerged and in 1948, under the leadership of the Zionist ideology, the State of Israel (*Madinat Yisrael*) was established in Palestine to build a new homeland for the surviving Jews. Since its foundation, Israel has followed a repressive policy against the Palestinian Arabs and has hosted the migrations of various Jewish communities from different regions, who find it very difficult to reconcile among one another. The most important reason for this mass migration is “the Law of Return” which came into force in 1950. This law grants every single Jew from all around the world the absolute right to settle in Israel and gain automatic citizenship. All Jews who do not interfere in any activity against the interests of the Jewish community and who are considered not to endanger the security of the Israeli state and its citizens can benefit from this law. Moreover, there is another enactment called “the Nationality Law of 1952”. The Law of Return gives Jews the automatic right to immigrate to Israel, and the Nationality Law provides for the acquisition of citizenship in one of four different ways; the virtue of return, residence in Israel, birth and naturalization. These two laws are

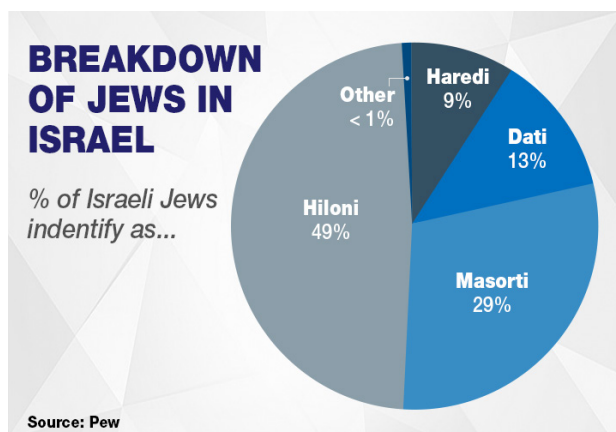
complementary pieces of legislation to support the right of Jews to move to Israel (making *Aliyah*) and receive Israeli citizenship.⁴



The Jewish community in Israel is composed of Ashkenazi⁵, Sephardi⁶ and Mizrahi (Eastern / Oriental) groups in terms of their ethnic origins. In the Israeli society, Ashkenazi Jews constitute the most privileged group in social, political and economic areas.⁷ Jews in this group are of Central and Eastern European origin and include Jews who earlier migrated to North and South America, South Africa and Australia. These Jews migrated to Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁸ There were a lot of important politicians within this group who

played significant roles in the establishment of the Israeli State. The Sephardim is a Jewish group with a lower status than Ashkenazim and contains different sub-groups which are hierarchically listed within itself. Sephardim consists mainly of Spanish and Mediterranean Jews of North Africa. Mizrahim, generally seen as a group in Sephardim, is the name given to the members of the ancient Jewish communities living in Islamic countries such as Syria, Iran and Lebanon in North Africa and the Middle East.⁹ The Mizrahim includes the Jewish community of Yemen and the Ethiopian Jews, also called the Falashas. In Israel, there are also approximately 20,000 Jews who are the members of the Karaites Sect.¹⁰

In the early years of the establishment of Israel's secular Zionist government, due to the agreement with religious Orthodox Jews, the state of Israel only officially recognized Orthodox Judaism. This situation led the non-Orthodox Jewish organizations and denominations to gain informal status and to regulate religious rituals and practices in public sphere such as marriage, divorce, *Sabbath*¹¹ and *kasher*¹² according to the rules of *halakha* (the traditional Jewish religious law) within the framework of this preliminary acceptance.¹³ Today, although the state of Israel is founded by a secular group, its conditions allow the state to be questioned by religious authorities and religion plays an active role within the country. Moreover, the practical religious services such as the arrangements in line with the religious rules, the construction of the synagogue and salary payments of the rabbis are implemented by the state.¹⁴



Unlike other Jewish communities in the world, Israeli Jews are divided into groups according to their level of religiosity instead of denominational affiliation. Almost every Israeli Jew can be identified with one of the four categories, which are *Hiloni* (secular), *Masorti* (traditional), *Dati* (religious) and *Haredi* (ultra-orthodox). Hilonim include seculars that constitute the majority (49%) of the Jewish community in Israel. However, the seculars residing in Israel are more observant about the tradition than the seculars in the diaspora (outside Israel) and they regulate their lives according to some religious rules. While Datim correspond to the religious segment, the Masortim involve the traditional group. The proportion of Masortim in Israeli society is 29%, while Datim's is 13%. Haredim correspond to the ultra-Orthodox group and include only a very small proportion (9%) of the Israeli Jewish community.¹⁵

1. Haredim (Ultra-Orthodox Jews)

Haredim correspond to the most religious group among Israeli Jews. This group continues to exist by isolating itself from the society, and at the same time opposes marriage with other Jewish groups. Men belonging to this group receive religious education in state-supported religious educational institutions called *Yeshivas*. Haredim are exempted from military service for the Israeli government and this has been a recent topic of controversy in Israeli politics. Within this group, which consists of various congregations with different ideologies, there are a number of people who reject the existence of the state of Israel because of its establishment before the arrival of the Messiah, and there is also a considerable mass rejecting Zionism. Also, there are politicians within Haredim who play an active role in the political life of the country even though they share the same ideology.¹⁶



Hasidism, which is a sub-group within Haredim, is the most rigid group among the ultra-Orthodox Jews. For the children of the Hasidic Jews, religious life starts from the age of five and the heads of children are shaved in such a way that some of the hair is stretched from the sides according to the Hasidic traditions. They wear black hats and gowns and put fringes on the corners of a four-pointed garments. Married women cover their heads with the help of hats, scarves or wigs. The Hasidic Jews do not acquire a profession and they study Torah in *Yeshivas* throughout their lives. They tend to have more children than the other Jewish groups. Even when Hasidism adopted a more moderate attitude after World War II, it is still criticized by secular groups.¹⁷

2. *Datim* (Religious Jews)

Datim corresponds to 13% of Israeli Jewish society. In terms of the religiosity level, they represent the segment after Haredim. The

most important aspect of this group that makes it different from Haredim is the adoption of Zionism. Members of this group are also called “Modern Orthodox Jews” because they strongly support adapting to the modern Jewish society. Approximately 90% of *Datim* have faith in God and almost all of the group members follow the *Sabbath* rules.¹⁸ Jews in this group have more ambition for success and career than Haredim. They play an active role in Israeli politics and are more integrated into Israel’s overall society than Haredim because they accept the modern Jewish state as the previous stage before the arrival of the Messiah.¹⁹ The majority of this group (71%) argues that the Arabs should be expelled from Israel. This corresponds to a very high percentage compared to the other three groups. At the same time, *Datim* are more likely to serve in the military than Haredim. Compared to the other groups, *Datim* also more likely to argue that building Jewish settlements in the West Bank helps Israeli government to keep itself safe.²⁰

3. *Masortim* (Traditional Jews)

Masortim represent the second largest group (29%) of the Jewish community in Israel and also the most diverse one of these four groups. This group also represents the middle ground between ultra-Orthodox Jews and secular Jews. Jews belonging to this group are separated from the other Jewish groups because they shape their religious understanding in a direction by taking the Jewish tradition into the center instead of the Torah and the *halakha*. Only 51% of the Jews in this group put religion in an important position for their lives, and it is observed that there is no consensus on religious and political matters in this group. For example, while 44% of Masortim favor shutting down public transport during the *Sabbath*, 52% of them oppose it. In addition, it was observed that this group is more open to communication with other groups and they also have friends from outside of their own sub-group than other categories.²¹

4. *Hilonim* (Secular Jews)

Hilonim, which correspond to approximately half of Israel's Jewish community, tend to be secular in their outlook. 40% of this group do not have the belief of God and only 18% of Hilonim are absolutely certain in their belief in God. Hilonim strongly favors the separation of religion from Israeli public life and members of this group fight against the Orthodoxy's control over marriage and divorce. According to Hilonim, the Israeli identity comes before their Jewish identity (59%). But this does not mean that they reject the claim that a Jewish state is necessary for the survival of the Jewish community.

The secular Jews belonging to this group also participate in Jewish religious rituals and prefer to observe some religious practices like maintaining *kasher*, lighting *Hanukkah* candles and fasting on *Yom Kippur*. What drives them is the cultural and ancestral dimension of such activities rather than being a matter of religion (only 4% think being Jewish is a matter of religion). Therefore, it can be said that the vast

majority of the secular group (83%) consider Jewish identity as a cultural phenomenon rather than a religious issue and therefore they partake in some religious (at the same time seen as cultural) rituals.²² Hilonim, which consist mainly of European Zionist Ashkenazi groups, have a small number of people who emphasize the Hebrew identity instead of ethnic, religious or cultural Jewish identity. There is also a left-wing segment within this group, such as the post-Zionists, who want to purify Israel from its Jewish identity and make it become a democratic and egalitarian state.²³

These groups contrast among one another in many ways. For example, religious Jewish groups (Haredim and Datim) argue that public transportation should be shut down during the *Sabbath*, while the secular segments strongly oppose it. Ultra-Orthodox Jews (89%) argue that the traditional Jewish religious law (*halakha*) should take precedence in the state administration, while secular Jews believe that the democratic ideals are more important than Jewish religious law. Moreover, 48% of the Jews think that the Arabs should be expelled from Israel while 46% do not agree with this idea.²⁴

The distinction among these categories also prevents group members to marry people from the other Jewish sub-groups. Almost all ultra-Orthodox Jews (95%) and secular Jews (93%) prefer to marry those only within their own group. This rate is lower in Masorti and Datim. In addition, these major social fractures of Israeli society are apparent in citizens' friendship preferences. For instance, while 90% of Israeli secular Jews mostly have friends within their own segment of Jewish society, 89% of ultra-Orthodox Jews and 72% of religious Jews stated that all or most of their close friends were members of their own sub-groups.²⁵

As a result, in Israel, all Jews can be identified with one of four major categories such as *Hiloni* (secular), *Masorti* (traditional), *Dati* (religious) and *Haredi* (ultra-orthodox). The members of these different sub-groups are in contradiction in many ways and very difficult to reconcile

with one another. The most important reason for this contradiction is the ethnically, culturally, politically, and religiously divided structure of the Israeli Jewish society that resulted from the mass migrations starting before the foundation of the Israeli state, reinforced by the “the Law of Return”, which grants every Jew all over the world the absolute right to move to Israel and gain immediate citizenship. When this situation

is considered together with Israel’s pressure on Palestinian Arabs, the contradictions of the heterogeneous and tense structure of the Israeli society is becoming more apparent. It can be stated that the only thing that holds this structure together is the discourse of anti-Semitism which is frequently emphasized with the so-called “Arab threat” in the region.

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Endnotes

- ¹ In Hebrew, the plural forms of these words are: *Hilonim*, *Masortim*, *Datim* and *Haredim*.
- ² In Turkey, the Jewish population estimated at 15.300.
- ³ S. DellaPergola, “World Jewish Population, 2017”, Mandell L. Berman Inst., North American Jewish Databank, www.jewishdatabank.org (Accessed April 13, 2019).
- ⁴ Yabuda Savir, “The Definition of a Jew Under Israel’s Law of Return”, *SMU Law Review*, 17/1 (1963): 125-126.
- ⁵ Also known as Ashkenazic Jews or simply Ashkenazim.
- ⁶ Sephardic Jews or Sephardim originally from Sepharad.
- ⁷ Salime Leyla Gürkan, *Yahudilik*, (İstanbul: İSAM, 2012), p.79.
- ⁸ Yusuf Besalel, *Yahudi Tarihi*, (İstanbul: Gözlem Gazetecilik Basın ve Yayın A.Ş., 2003), p. 299.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 299.
- ¹⁰ Salime Leyla Gürkan, *Yahudilik*, p. 79.
- ¹¹ Sabbath is the weekly day of rest which is observed from sunset on Friday until nightfall on Saturday. It is written in the Bible that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. He blessed this day and declared it holy (Gn. 2.3). This day is also mentioned in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20.8-11).
- ¹² Kasher means the food prepared in accordance with the Jewish dietary laws.
- ¹³ Salime Leyla Gürkan, *Yahudilik*, p. 80.
- ¹⁴ Mustafa Alıcı, “Yahudilikte Otorite Kurumları Üzerine”, *Akra Kültür Sanat ve Edebiyat Dergisi*, 7 (2015): 25.
- ¹⁵ Kelsey Jo Starr & David Masci, “In Israel, Jews are united by homeland but divided into very different groups”, *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/08/in-israel-jews-are-united-by-homeland-but-divided-into-very-different-groups/> (Accessed April 13, 2019).
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Baki Adam, “Yahudilik: Tarihsel Gelişimi, İnanç Esasları ve İbadetleri”, *Yaşayan Dünya Dinleri*, ed. Şinasi Gündüz, (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2010), p. 246.
- ¹⁸ Kelsey Jo Starr & David Masci, “In Israel, Jews are united by homeland but divided into very different groups” (Accessed April 13, 2019).
- ¹⁹ Yusuf Besalel, *Yahudi Tarihi*, p. 300.
- ²⁰ Kelsey Jo Starr & David Masci, “In Israel, Jews are united by homeland but divided into very different groups” (Accessed April 13, 2019).
- ²¹ Michael Lipka, “7 Key findings about religion and politics in Israel”, *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/08/key-findings-religion-politics-israel/> (Accessed April 13, 2019).
- ²² Kelsey Jo Starr & David Masci, “In Israel, Jews are united by homeland but divided into very different groups” (Accessed April 13, 2019).
- ²³ Salime Leyla Gürkan, *Yahudilik*, p. 81.
- ²⁴ Michael Lipka, “7 Key findings about religion and politics in Israel” (Accessed April 13, 2019).
- ²⁵ Caryle Murphy, “Religious groups in Israel keep themselves when it comes to marriages and friendships”, *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/04/religious-groups-in-israel-keep-to-themselves-when-it-comes-to-marriages-and-friendships-2/> (Accessed April 13, 2019).