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 REPORT

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# Israel's Government Aims to Redefine Who is a Jew

By Shira Sorko-Ram

PART TWO

When I became an Israeli citizen over 50 years ago, there were no more than a handful of Israeli Jewish believers in Yeshua. I personally knew only two Messianic couples in the 1960's; both were Jewish immigrants, one from Europe and the other from Tunisia. Their children became some of the very first Sabra (Israel-born) Messianic Jews in the young state of Israel.

As I mentioned last month, just before I arrived in Israel in 1967, the world witnessed

an astounding turn of events when Israel was attacked by five Arab countries, confident they would utterly destroy the newborn state. But in one of the greatest miracles of our lifetime, Israel pushed back the Arab nations in six days, and reclaimed all of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the Golan Heights, Gaza and the Sinai Desert—lands that God has promised would forever belong to Israel.<sup>1</sup> This promise began to be fulfilled after 2,000 years. (There is still more land that God promised Israel, but has not yet been returned to His people.)

1: It is unsure as to how much of the Sinai Desert has been promised to Israel by God. The Scriptures state that this desert land belongs to Israel up to the "Wadi of Egypt." Joshua 15:47

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In the natural, it is not uncommon to see a breakthrough for Israel coupled with a spiritual breakthrough elsewhere in the world. Sure enough, during that same period, something marvelous was happening. A wave of God's Holy Spirit blew across the youth in many countries. This historical time was dubbed the *Jesus Movement*. Hundreds of thousands came to believe that Yeshua saved them from their sins and gave them eternal life. Among this multitude were many Jews whose lives were turned right side up, and they became strong believers in Yeshua. Then for some, their hearts began to turn towards their ancient homeland.

## Messianic Jews Stopped at Israel's Borders

It didn't take long for Israel's religious officials to realize what was happening and take action. When our Ministry of Interior got wind that a Messianic Jew was applying for citizenship, he or she was immediately turned down. It didn't matter if other candidates for Aliyah (immigration to Israel) were practicing Buddhists, Hindi, atheists or Wiccan. The Israeli government was only looking to ban Jews who believed in Yeshua.

But many Jewish believers did slip into Israel undetected by the ultra-Orthodox officials. As Israel's actual Law of Return for new immigrants was usually on the side of Jewish believers, for years, **Maoz Israel Ministries** helped hundreds of Messianic individuals and their families receive their citizenship through counsel and financial help. Many of them are Messianic leaders in the land today.

*When you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will...gather you again from all the nations where He scattered you...He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it.*

Deut. 30:2-5

One of the first couples we helped immigrate came out of the Jesus Movement. They visited us while looking over the lay of the land. However, because they were some of the most well-known Messianics in the world, they were very concerned that the government would slam the door shut.

We encouraged them with—of course—the Word of God that promised to return His people to the land. And sure enough, their Aliyah process went smoothly for this family who has been a tremendous influence on the entire Messianic Body here and around the world.

Today there are an estimated 30,000 Messianic Jews in Israel—many of them already second and third generations. Unsurprisingly, they have gained a reputation of some of the best citizens in Israel, both in military and civilian life. Today, our nation knows what a Messianic Jew is, though they still don't fully understand it.

Jewish survivors of Buchenwald concentration camp arrive in Haifa only to be arrested by the British



Credit: To the Promised Land by Uri Dan (Doubleday, 1987)





Credit: Government Press Office

Photo from inside the plane sent to rescue Ethiopian Jews from Sudan in Israeli undercover mission

## Finding Lost Tribes

In those early years of the state, the fact that there existed a large Ethiopian community of practicing Jews, simply wasn't on Israel's radar. Though they sang of the mythical Jerusalem, Ethiopian Jews lived in such secluded areas that they were equally unaware that Jews lived anywhere else. But a few Ethiopian Jews began quietly arriving in Israel with solid proof that they observed ancient Jewish traditions that were clearly from the Bible.

Then, "out of the blue," Israel's government received a letter from Sudan, of all places, saying there were masses of Jews who had escaped from Ethiopia due to famine and persecution. They had walked to Sudan. Some actually walked all the way to Israel. Several thousand had died on the way.

The Mossad and IDF joined together in a series of secret and incredibly dangerous rescue missions, leading thousands of these Jews by the darkness of night to hidden planes parked in the desert. In the mid-1980's "Operation Moses" spirited 8,000 Ethiopian Jews

from refugee camps in Sudan to Israel.

All this was kept secret even to most Israelis. One evening, I went to visit a neighbor when the bombshell story hit the news. When I rang the doorbell, they yelled at me, "Come in! Come in! Look what's happening! They were all literally glued to the TV. On the screen it looked like a 'Moses' movie crossing the Red Sea. As far as we could see, an unending crowd of thousands of Ethiopians in their white gowns off-loading from their Israeli aircraft with children and animals in their arms.

From the latest count, 95,000 Ethiopian Jews have been rescued, and there are over 150,000 living in Israel today. Many of these Ethiopian Jews were, and are, believers in Yeshua the Messiah.

## Returning from the Corners of the Earth

When the first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, proclaimed Israel a state in 1948, there was a total of 650,000 Jews who had found their way to the barren Holy Land (then called "Palestine") under the rule of the British. Within three years of Israel's establishment the population nearly doubled. Most were Holocaust survivors.

The surrounding Muslim nations were furious at the establishment of a Jewish nation. Their rage was taken out on Jews who had been living in their midst for centuries. Ironically, these hostilities resulted in a significant increase of Israel's population as some 600,000 Middle Eastern Jews fled to safety in Israel as they were forced out of their homes and property all over the Middle East.





Cezary Wojtkowski / Shutterstock

Religious families in Israel have on average more than twice as many kids as the secular working population

*"Therefore behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "that it shall no more be said, 'The Lord lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,' but, 'The Lord lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north and from all the lands where He had driven them.' For I will bring them back into their land which I gave to their fathers.*

Jer. 16:14-15

Beginning in 1990 as the Soviet Union was collapsing, a tsunami of Russian Jews fled to Israel.

Over the next few years, more than 900,000 highly educated Soviet Jews poured into the Promise Land, greatly stimulating the State's industry, technology and economy. Because of the despotic atheistic government of the former Soviet Union which banned all religion, many Jewish citizens

from there had little knowledge of their Jewish heritage and were married to non-Jews. So, while their absorption into Israeli culture is considered an outstanding success, to Israel's ultra-religious community, their lack of affinity for the rabbinical Jewish way of life was seen as detrimental to the Jewish State.<sup>2</sup>

## Battle of the Birthrate

As ultra-Orthodox have consistently increased their percentage of the population, they have become more vocal of their vision to see Israel become a religiously ruled state (theocracy) rather than a secular democratic state as it is today. Their primary strategy appears to be to create this shift by sheer population increase which translates into voting power. According to the Minister of Education, up to 40% of today's children are being educated in Haredi or religious schools.

2: You can read more about these immigration waves during our pioneer years in the "How it All Began" series at [maozisrael.org/began](http://maozisrael.org/began)



The dramatic impact in demographics is due to the wooing of secular Jews into their rabbinical version of Judaism (which includes a government-subsidized lifestyle) coupled with the high birthrate of religious families (6-plus children per family). Secular families who must give up almost half their salary to taxes will only dare to have two to three children.

Currently, 50% of ultra-Orthodox men do not work. They declare the need to study their rabbinical writings in Yeshivas to be their “job” and service to the nation. They therefore depend on large stipends from the taxes of the working population—the more kids they have, the higher the stipend. Most refuse to serve the mandatory national service or military (those who dare to serve are shunned and shamed within their communities).

It is estimated that by 2050, one in three Jewish Israelis will be ultra-Orthodox.<sup>3</sup> If the Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) continue to increase as fast as they now are, the nation’s economy will implode. It is simple math.

## The Wild Card

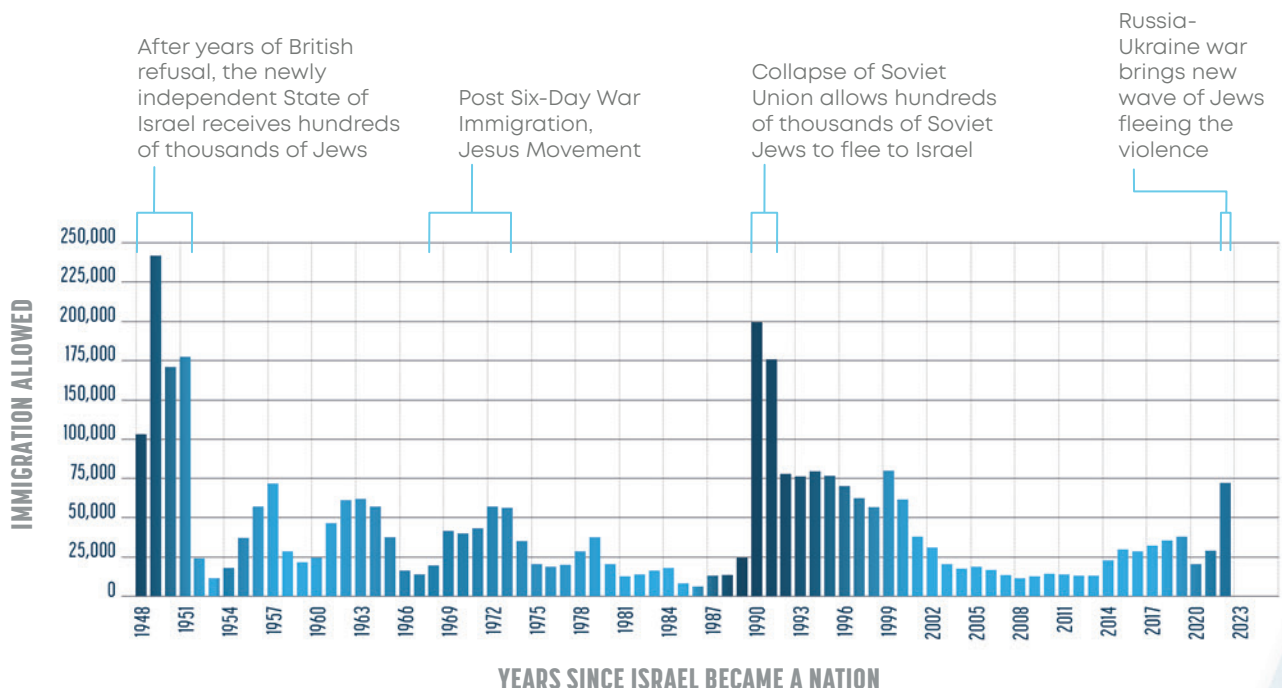
**While the religious Jews dominate the birthrate statistics, immigration is a wild card.** What would happen if thousands or tens of thousands of Jews began to flee persecution or disasters from other nations and head for Israel, as has happened in the past? Each wave would create a setback for the Haredi parties’ vision of creating a rabbinical theocracy.

Statistics suggest that for years religious officials in power have worked to slow down the return of non-Haredi Jews from making Aliyah. This is why controlling the Ministry of Interior has always been a coveted position for the ultra-religious parties in a coalition. To give one example of the influence of this position, despite most American Jews not being very religious, 75% of those who were approved to immigrate to Israel in 2021 were Haredi.

Israel’s religious political parties have long expressed their concern that there are already too many

## TOTAL IMMIGRATION TO ISRAEL BY YEAR

Data drawn from: [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org)



3: *Times of Israel*, 23 November, 2021





Credit: Wikipedia

Yizhar Hess,  
deputy chairman  
of the World Zionist  
Organization, said:

*"A government that will, Heaven forbid, touch the Law of Return is a government that has forgotten what it is to be a Zionist. The Law of Return is the DNA of the Zionist movement and the basis for the idea that the State of Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people."*

To encourage a continued flow of immigration, tens of thousands of young Jews are recruited to visit Israel every year. The sign quotes the scripture Jer. 31:17, "...and your children will return to their borders."

immigrants who do not fulfill the halakhic (rabbinical) definition of "Jewish." As such, the current government is aiming to officially redefine who is a Jew and thereby change one of Israel's most foundational reasons for existence—the Law of Return.

In the early days of the State of Israel, all Jews were granted the automatic right to Israeli citizenship, as long as they had one grandparent who was Jewish. This standard seemed morally right as it had been the standard Hitler used for identifying and killing Jews. If this "grandchild clause" is changed to include only first-generation children of Jews, some 3 million people would not be Jewish enough to immigrate to Israel.

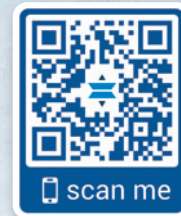
## Existential Crisis

Every year, "Connect-with-Israel" programs bring Jewish teenagers, especially from Russia, to experience Israel. **Birthright** brings some 50,000 visitors a year to Israel. Many eventually join the Israel Defense Forces and remain in Israel. Under the new law, teenagers who could only prove one Jewish grandparent would no longer be eligible for these programs.

As we've mentioned before, there is no one political party or group of parties that will serve as Israel's savior. For both Christians and Messianic Jews, **it is our calling before the Lord to pray that His promises and His will shall be fulfilled on earth as it is in Heaven. And so we pray for Israel's leaders to keep open the gates wide to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to return from the four corners of the earth. For it is here in the land that He promised to save them! And what will your world look like when Israel has a light to shine to the nations?** ■

*More on that in the final article next month!*





Shalom from Jerusalem!

March 2023

There are **three ways** the Body of believers grows in Israel. **Evangelism, growing families—and immigration of Jewish believers.**

**The Law of Return** currently gives Jews of **all walks of life the right** to establish their home here in the Land of Israel. One of the main reasons Maoz was founded in 1976 was to help Jewish believers **fulfill their calling and move to Israel by providing them with legal counsel and financial aid.**

It was a sort of underground railroad feel. My childhood memories are full of the constant flow of new immigrants who would spend a **few days, weeks or even months** living with us as they went through the process of **getting citizenship and then getting settled with a home, job—and of course, Hebrew language school.**

They filled the guest rooms and when those were full—occupied a mattress on our laundry room floor. It didn't bother me. We all understood it was **just as important to bring in mature believers from abroad into the Body as it was to add new believers from Israel's population.**

**That is why** Maoz spends tens of thousands of dollars each year **assisting new Jewish believers** to get their citizenship and settle in the land. **The more we raise, the more believers we help.**

Those in our government who oppose Yeshua are aware the law is on our side, and they are trying to change that. In John 9:4, Yeshua said it was important to work while it is still day—while the doors are still open.

- **Pray for those whose hearts want to come but have roadblocks in their lives.**
- **Pray for those who have put in applications and are at the mercy of committees.**
- **Pray that God would hinder the efforts of anti-Yeshua organizations who illegally collaborate with those in the Ministry of Interior to expose and reject Jewish believers.**

And consider a gift to help these immigrants with this move that is both life changing—and **a fulfillment of ancient prophecy!**

We would be honored for you to join us in the urgency of the hour.

For Israel's Sake,

*Kobi and Shani Ferguson*


Kobi and Shani Ferguson

**Kobi Ferguson**  
President & CEO

**Shani Ferguson**  
Chief Creative







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countless believers throughout  
Israel are lifted up and given strength.  
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