

The Israeli People: Dynamic Diversity

Israel's Diverse Population

Where They Came From; Integration Status and Rights in Israeli Society; Lifestyles.

Israel is home to a widely diverse population from many ethnic, religious, cultural, and social backgrounds. A new society with ancient roots, it is still coalescing and evolving today. Of its 7.1 million people, 75.8 percent are Jews, 19.9 percent are Arabs (mostly Muslim) and the remaining 4.3 percent comprise Druze, Circassians, and others not classified by religion. The society is relatively young and is characterized by social and religious commitment, political ideology, economic resourcefulness, and cultural creativity, all of which contribute momentum to its continuing development.

Aliya and Absorption: The Long Road Home

The ingathering of the exiles to their ancestral homeland is the *raison d'être* of the State of Israel. Aliya (literally

WEB RESOURCES:

Israel Association
for Ethiopian Jews:
www.iaej.co.il/

*"... Behold, how
good and how
pleasant it is for
brothers
to dwell in unity."
(Psalms 133:1)*



TOP: Beylanesh Zevadia, Israeli diplomat.

ABOVE: Ethiopian immigrant mother and child at Diplomat Hotel absorption center, Jerusalem, Operation Solomon.

LEFT: An event on the beach in Tel Aviv.

ascending) is the Hebrew word for immigration to the Land of Israel. The meaning of ascent in this context is spiritual as well as physical; all Jews are educated in the belief that this ascent is an essential part of Judaism. It is the ultimate form of identification with one's people, the Jewish people, whose life and destiny are inextricably tied to the Land of Israel. Since the beginning of the waves of aliya in the late 19th century, many hundreds of thousands of immigrants have arrived in the Land. The background, traditions and expertise brought by each wave have been of immeasurable value in the development of Israel's pluralistic, democratic society and modern economy. ♦

Faces of Israel

Ethiopian Israeli Diplomat Gives Israel a New Look.

Written by **Laura Wiessen**,
March 30, 2008, Israel 21c.

As a baby, diplomat Beylanesh Zevadia's first word was neither "mama" nor "papa." It was "Jerusalem."

"That's how our parents directed us," the Ethiopian-born Zevadia explains. "[As children] our play was to go to Jerusalem. It was the center of our lives that someday we could go there."

And, at the age of 16 Zevadia did go there, becoming, just nine years later, the first Israeli-Ethiopian member of Israel's diplomatic corps. ...

... Zevadia brings more than just her intelligence, humor and passion to her work in the diplomatic service. She also brings a new image of what it means to be Israeli to many of the people she meets. Today, the Israeli Deputy Consul General in Houston, Texas, Zevadia travels the Southwest region speaking on behalf of Israel.

"Most people, when they invite an Israeli diplomat, expect



to see an Ashkenazi Jew or a Sephardi Jew and here I am, an Ethiopian representing Israel. It's something unique we can contribute to the country."

"When I talk to people I say here I am. You may think something different of Israeli diplomats, but here I am. Or if they ask me negative things about Israel - I have an answer. I am the answer. I can tell you my story. I am educated in Israel, I represent Israel and I was born in Ethiopia. That's what I say."

Today, there is a second Ethiopian-Israeli diplomat in the Foreign Ministry, a junior diplomat who joined the diplomatic service 13 years after Zevadia, and is now stationed in South Africa. ...

...Today, living in Texas, Zevadia is often mistaken for African-American or Caribbean. And she's happy to explain her background to whoever is interested. ...

..."I most enjoy speaking about Israel, because most of the time people don't understand what Israel is. In most people's eyes, Israel is only the conflict. It's not true. It's a very diverse culture, very diverse society, and a very developed economy.

"I always say, wherever I go, and wherever I speak, I'm black and Jewish and a woman. Three minority identities. That's who I am, I represent Israel very proudly, and that's the message. ♦

Freedom and Tolerance

Israel Sets an Example

Written by **Ambassador Reda Mansour**, *Consul General of Israel*, (This article originally appeared in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 02/05/07)

My grandfather, who lived to be more than 100 years old, used to say, "I've seen them all, and there are none like the Jews."

Our small Druze town had remained virtually the same for hundreds of years under Ottoman and later British rule. When Israel was established in 1948, rapid development ensued, and for the first time, our homes

had electricity and running water and every child received a quality, free education.

Even amongst all that modernity and relative luxury, my grandfather's greatest praise for Israel came as a result of how the young state treated its less fortunate citizens. For the first time in his life, my grandfather, a retired factory worker, received a pension and had access to quality health care. He said that a society could be judged by the way it treats the elderly, sick and unemployed and that Israel had proved itself both strong and compassionate. Certainly, he would say, such a nation would prevail.

That is the untold story of Israel, a nation that measures its strength not by its wealth or military prowess but by the vibrancy of its civil society and the diversity of its democratic system. In a country where the symphonic orchestra, the theater and the university were all built before the state's political institutions, there are now more than 40,000 independent civic associations. They strengthen our system of education, protect our environment and work to bring peace and justice to our region.

Israel is an immigrant society with a diverse population: 1.3 million of its citizens are Arabs belonging to various religious and ethnic groups. Indeed, some still suffer from poverty and lack equal investment in their communities from the government, but Arab-Israelis still have a standard of living higher than any of their brethren living in the region. They are full citizens who can vote and be elected to public office. They have the right to worship, assemble and speak freely without fear of intimidation or oppression. Since the establishment of our young nation, the freest Arabs in the Middle East reside in the Jewish state of Israel.

With all the challenges it faces, Israel remains the only democracy in the Middle East. This alone does not make Israel's political system perfect, but it is the endless pursuit of greater equality that sets Israel apart from its neighbors. In my hometown, I have seen the fulfillment of the Israeli Dream: young professionals of all faiths who have established successful careers in law, medicine, business and diplomacy. We all come from middle-class families that used the public school system and government universities to create a better future for our children. None of us would have had that opportunity were it not for the free and open society in which we live.

AMBASSADOR REDA MANSOUR

Appointed in August 2006 to serve as the Consul General of Israel to the Southeastern United States.

Prior to this post he served as the Ambassador of Israel to Ecuador, Deputy Ambassador in the Israeli Embassy to Portugal, and Deputy Consul General of Israel to the U.S Pacific Northwest, based in San Francisco.

Ambassador Mansour holds a masters degree from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and is a PH.D candidate in Haifa University's Middle Eastern History department, with his research focusing on Syria. He speaks five languages. In addition to his position as a diplomat, Ambassador Mansour is an accomplished author. He has published three books of poetry, as well as a number of short stories.



Today, our freedom is threatened by the vile ideology of hate spewed by Hamas, Hezbollah and other similar organizations. With the support of their backers in Tehran and Damascus, these extremists rain rockets down upon Israeli villages and send suicide bombers into our buses and markets. Their supporters espouse a false narrative of eternal victimhood, attempting to justify every act of brutality and blaming Israel for every hardship. This empty rhetoric does not change the fact that the shrapnel of their weapons knows neither age nor ethnicity. And the resulting violence affects every Israeli regardless of race or religion.

The defense against this onslaught requires military action, but the solution to the complex issues that have brought us to this point is found in the strong bond that has developed between Arabs and Jews in Israel. If we peacefully co-exist

in Haifa and Asifiya, why not in Gaza, Beirut or the rest of the region?

Recently, I attended a ceremony at Georgia's capitol commemorating the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Like Anwar Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin, he gave his life in defense of the dream of co-existence. Because of what my grandfather saw, my children and I are able to live this dream as citizens of Israel. Today, we look to our borders wondering when our neighbors will embrace the dream of peace rather than the nightmare of war. ♦

Rania Okabi:

Israel's First Bedouin Woman Doctor

Written by **Anat Bershkovsky**, *Yediot Aharonot*, 6/14/06



RIGHT: Okabi (center) with former University President Avishai Braverman (L) and current President, Rivka Carmi.

Among the 58 graduates of the Ben Gurion University Medical School who received their doctoral degrees Wednesday, Rania Okabi (26) stood out as the first Bedouin woman in the country to become a physician.

Dr. Okabi, who specialized in gynecology and obstetrics at the Rambam Hospital in Haifa in the past year, hopes that her achievement will set an example for all Bedouin girls.

Okabi is one of the first graduates of a project initiated by the Beer Sheva university, aimed at encouraging

high school students to enter paramedical fields, thus increasing their chances of being accepted to medical studies in university. Okabi hopes that more Bedouin women will follow in her footsteps and choose to become doctors.

Born and raised in the southern city, Okabi was moved by the ceremony and the new degree awarded to her. "This is really exciting. I feel that I have a mission, I hope to serve as a role model for a lot of Bedouin girls who wish to study professions that are unconventional in our society, such as law and engineering," she stated. ♦

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President Shimon Peres

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NA'AMAT USA is committed to creating a more equitable society and to broadening the rights of women throughout the United States and Israel.

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