

The Absorption of One Million Immigrants by Israel in the 1950s

Arie Lova Eliav

Background

From the time the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. until the establishment of Israel as a state in 1948, the Jewish people did not enjoy political or national independence. The large majority of Jews lived in various exiles, east and west. Only a few Jews remained in the Land of Israel, and their numbers declined over the years. The Jewish people's hope of returning to their land was anchored in the Bible, in the great prophecies of consolation, and in a thousand prayers and songs of yearning.

In the mid-19th century, fewer than 20,000 Jews lived in Israel, most of them in neighbourhoods resembling ghettos in the four "holy cities": Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias. These Jews, most of whom came to the Holy Land to die and be buried there, prayed to God, like their fellow Jews in exile, three times a day: "Bring us back to Thee and we shall return; renew our days as in the past."

From 1870 onward, a turnaround began in the lives of Jews in the land of Israel. In that year, the Mikveh Israel agricultural school was established on land near Jaffa. A few years later, the first Jewish agricultural villages arose, founded by young Jews who wanted to free themselves from the ghettos in the land of Israel, or who came from exile, motivated both by the desire to flee oppression and the aspiration to return to their ancestral homeland.

In 1897, Dr. Theodore Herzl founded Zionism as a modern national liberation movement whose purpose was the establishment of a state for the Jews in Israel. This original goal demanded that an increasing number of Jews immigrate to the land of Israel, or "make aliyah," a new expression

which became almost holy. The first condition which had to be met in order for the Land of Israel, which was then under Turkish rule and had Arabs living in it, to become a "state of the Jews"—that is, a political framework with a Jewish majority—was that Jews "make aliyah." Therefore, the Zionists made immigration their highest priority.

During the next fifty years, a few hundred thousand Jews came to Israel. These immigrants, who came in waves—or, more accurately, in spurts—had a difficult time of it. Many had to fight the authorities (first the Turks and, from 1917, the British), who occasionally closed the country's borders. Many Jews came as "illegals" via clandestine routes by sea or through the desert.

On the eve of the War of Independence in 1948, the Jewish population of Mandatory Palestine was 650,000. These Jews—who were still a minority among almost twice as many Arabs—maintained their own national, economic, and social institutions, and had close relations with the diaspora.

The Extent of Immigration During the First Decade

With the declaration by David Ben-Gurion of Israel's independence on May 15, 1948, the Jewish people's generations-old dream came true. The young state began in a bloody war for survival against the Palestinian Arabs and the armies of the surrounding Arab states. But from its very first day, even as the battles raged, Israel opened its gates to Jewish immigrants, because its leadership considered immigration the justification of the state's existence.

In its first session in 1949, the Knesset passed the Law of Return as a basic law—the equivalent of a constitutional article. This law states, in essence, that every Jew has a right to immigrate to Israel and become a citizen.

From the establishment of the state in 1948 to the end of 1958, close to one million immigrants came to Israel. Table 1 shows the rate of immigration by year.

Table 1: Number of Immigrants to Israel in Its First Decade (1948–58)

1948	101,828
1949	239,954
1950	170,563
1951	175,279
1952	24,610
1953	11,575
1954	18,491
1955	37,528
1956	56,330
1957	72,634
1958	27,290
Total	936,082

Source: Jewish Agency Immigration Department

In the subsequent discussion of the problems of absorption, we will emphasize the difficulties and obstacles that stood in the way of the young state—which had just emerged from a bloody war of survival—in dealing with hundreds of thousands of immigrants, most of them destitute refugees who, in a period of four years (1948–51), doubled the population.

In the pre-independence period, the Zionist leadership worked through the Jewish Agency for Israel. The Jewish Agency was a sort of shadow government and contained departments that were similar to government ministries: a Political Department, an Immigration Department, a Settlement Department. Of course, the subject of immigration received the highest priority. The Agency held frequent deliberations and proposed various immigration and absorption programs; but even the greatest optimists could not have foreseen such a large and rapid immigration coming at the very time of the state's establishment.

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No previously prepared solutions were available for coping with the main needs created by immigration—the problems of budget, housing and employment—and those who carried the burden of immigrant absorption had to improvise constantly.

Immigrants' Countries of Origin

The immigrants came from over 30 countries, almost literally from "the four corners of the earth." But for the purposes of this discussion we will focus on two large groups: those who came from European countries and those who came from non-European countries. During Israel's first decade, these two groups were virtually equal in size (48 percent from European and 52 percent from non-European countries).

A. From European countries— approx. 480,000

1. Prisoners on Cyprus—Approximately 30,000 Holocaust survivors who reached the shores of Israel as part of the "illegal" immigration before independence. They were arrested by the British and placed in camps on Cyprus, and were released when Israel became independent.
2. Holocaust survivors—Approximately 130,000 immigrants from the refugee camps set up after the war in Europe, primarily in Germany.
3. Eastern Europe—Approximately 300,000 immigrants from countries that fell under Communist rule after the war, such as Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.
4. North and South America—Approximately 15,000

B. From non-European countries —approx. 520,000

Unlike their European counterparts, these immigrants arrived with large families and ways of life more rooted in religion and tradition.

The subdivision of the non-European immigrants reveals that approximately 270,000 came from Asia and

250,000 from Africa. From Asia, the main countries of origin were: Iraq ~130,000, Yemen ~50,000, Iran ~35,000, Turkey ~35,000, and India ~5,000.

From Africa, the main countries of origin were (approximate numbers): Morocco ~130,000, Tunisia ~40,000, Libya ~35,000, Egypt ~25,000, and Algeria ~5,000.

Absorption

The rate of immigration and the large number of immigrants (as well as their great variety) presented the government and the Jewish Agency with tremendous problems of absorption.

The problems were wide-ranging in scope, and included all areas of life: the budget, food, housing, employment, health, and education. For the decision makers of the time, however, they appeared as one and demanded simultaneous solutions.

1. Budget

At the end of the War of Independence, the new government was in a desperate financial situation. The vast outlays necessitated by the war in the 1948–49 fiscal year equalled one-half of the national income. Now the government faced the problem of immigrant absorption. The amount of aid received from abroad during the state's first few years was tiny. At the time, Israel received no assistance from the United States or other foreign governments, neither in grants nor in loans. Only in the mid-1950s did the war reparations from Germany begin to arrive. The only outside aid came from the fundraising appeals of the Jewish people (some \$200 million per year), but they covered only a relatively small part of the needs.

Thus, Israel had to pay for most of its needs, including immigrant absorption, from its own sources. It should be remembered that the country's exports at the time were minimal, and consisted mainly of citrus fruits.

The government chose to deal with its financial and economic problems by imposing an austerity regime based on two principles: equality in the distribution of essential goods, and full em-

ployment accompanied by economic growth.

2. Food

At independence, Israel's agricultural system could provide for only a small portion of the food needs of its rapidly growing population.

In its first few years, Israel had to import most basic foodstuffs, such as cereals, oil, sugar, meat, and fish. Even dairy products and eggs were mostly imported, in powdered form.

In order to ensure an equal distribution of food, the government instituted a severe rationing program. Products were distributed in equal amounts to long-time residents and new immigrants alike, with the criterion being family size.

To implement this program, the government set up a special ministry, which established rules for fair distribution, and issued coupons which were handed out to the entire population. Food could be purchased only with these coupons, at prices set by the government.

Naturally, along with this system there arose a black market, but it was generally insignificant.

3. Housing

In order to provide a roof for the hundreds of thousands of immigrants, the government had to find improvised, temporary arrangements, and also attempt to direct the immigrants to new towns and other settlements, in accordance with its master plan.

The very fast immigration rate of the first four years (1948–51) dictated unplanned solutions. The first was the use of the homes abandoned by Arabs during the War of Independence. Thousands of such homes that stood empty, primarily in the big cities of Jerusalem, Haifa and Jaffa, as well as in Lod and Ramleh, were occupied by immigrants during the first few years.

But already in 1949, the second year of massive immigration, the government (for purposes of this discussion I include the Jewish Agency in the term "government") began directing thousands of immigrants, for whom no

housing arrangements could be found, to army camps. Most of these camps had been built by the British army during World War II. Their large barracks now served as improvised housing for immigrants.

It quickly became clear that this temporary solution would not be enough. In 1950, the government began setting up large tent camps, adjacent to existing cities. The tents were initially provided by the Israeli army; at the same time, thousands of tents were purchased overseas, mostly from European army surpluses.

With the establishment of the tent camps began the period of the "ma'abarot," or transit camps. In every such camp, each immigrant family was given its own tent. Each camp consisted initially of some 100-200 tents; as immigration continued, these camps

been intended for chicken coops and cow sheds.) On one wall of the shanty a door was cut open; on the sides, openings were made for windows. The roof was also made of corrugated iron.

Transit camps consisting of thousands of shanties covered the land, from Tiberias and Safed in the Galilee to Beersheba in the Negev. The shanties were burning hot in summer and ice-cold in winter; but, thanks to them, no immigrants were homeless.

In 1952, the construction of "tzrifonim"—wood shacks—began. Some of these were built in Israel, and some were imported ready-made from overseas. That same year, the building of planned permanent structures began, mainly in new villages to which immigrants were directed. These buildings were called "blokonim"—24-square-meter structures made of

grant population was employed in such public works, with salaries paid by the institutions employing the immigrants.

These public works can be divided into a number of categories:

Construction. Immigrants were employed as unskilled labourers by construction companies, to build their own homes. In this way, the immigrant both earned a living and learned a trade.

Land-clearing and Afforestation. Extensive tracts of land had to be prepared for farming. Many immigrants were employed in this difficult work. Many immigrants were employed in a large and impressive afforestation program conducted mainly by the Jewish National Fund. The program included both the maintenance of existing forests, mainly in the Galilee, and the planting of new forests around the country. Tens of thousands of trees were also planted along new and existing roads.

The salary paid for land-clearing and afforestation was very low, and often arrived only after long delays.

Agriculture. In 1952, when the various transit camps were full and the problem of employment among immigrants was severe, a new, additional channel was opened up. Under the initiative of Levi Eshkol, then the head of the Jewish Agency's Settlement Department, groups of immigrant families began to settle on unused land and establish agricultural villages in which they would grow food.

This was a new concept in the history of Jewish settlement in Israel. The large majority of the immigrant settlers had no background in agriculture; they needed constant supervision by volunteer agriculture experts from among the veteran population. Conditions were very difficult, as permanent housing did not yet exist, and there was a great deal of social tension.

Despite the difficulties, Eshkol and his colleagues persisted with the program. Within the first decade, about 250 such villages were established, with a population of nearly 100,000—over 10 percent of all the immigrants.

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got bigger, some housing a thousand families or more.

The tents were arranged in military fashion, in rows. Every 10-20 tents had a common outdoor latrine and water faucet. In the middle of each camp, public buildings such as a health clinic, classrooms, synagogue, and immigrant absorption office, were set up, made of large tents or wood huts.

In 1951, the supply of tents ran out. In a short time, structures called "badonim"—canvas huts—were improvised. Walls of these huts were made of wood frames, with patches of canvas sewn together from bits of torn tents pasted onto them.

But the raw materials for these huts soon ran out, too. In another quick improvisation, the government came up with "pahonim"—tin shanties. The shanty was like the canvas huts, but with sheets of corrugated iron nailed to the wood frames. (At the time, the country had a few thousand tons of corrugated iron, which had originally

been intended for chicken coops and cow sheds.) The toilet facilities and water were still outdoors, but this was the beginning of the orderly construction of permanent housing.

4. Employment

In accordance with the government's full employment policy, great efforts were made to find jobs for as many immigrants as possible.

Carrying out this policy was extremely difficult:

- Agriculture during the state's first few years was very limited. Only a small number of immigrants could be employed in agriculture; moreover, most of them had no background in such work.
- Industry was minimal, and in many areas nonexistent. Only in the mid-1950s did factories begin to be established with increasing momentum.

Therefore, the government adopted a policy of creating jobs in public works projects. A large portion of the immi-

5. Health, Education, and Religion

In every one of these areas, complex and unexpected problems arose. There was an urgent need to establish a network of health services in the camps and other places where immigrants were concentrated. This project, undertaken by the Health Ministry in cooperation with the Histadrut Labour Federation's health fund, Kupat Holim, made possible the opening of hundreds of new health clinics and an increase in the number of hospital beds. But the health system encountered problems unique to the immigrants. Many of the Holocaust survivors were in a poor state of physical or mental health, and needed special clinical and psychological care.

Immigrants from a number of countries (such as some of the immigrants from India, and others) were found to have diseases with which doctors in Israel were not familiar. Many immigrants were not used to the type of food available in Israel, and required periods of adaptation, or had to develop new habits.

The initial problem of education was the teaching of Hebrew to masses of immigrants, the large majority of whom did not know the language or used it only as a language of prayer. The Education Ministry and many volunteer organizations undertook this task. They established many classes, both large and small, in which they gave lessons in basic Hebrew to hundreds of thousands of immigrants. The army joined this effort as well, assigning hundreds of women soldiers to serve as teachers or teaching assistants in immigrant communities.

In addition, in the 1950s, vocational schools began to be developed and expanded. These schools trained young people in many fields necessary to a modern economy.

Matters of religion brought with them special problems. A large number of the immigrants were religious, and most observed tradition, but customs and rites differed greatly from one country of origin to another. Separate synagogues had to be quickly

established for each country—and, sometimes, city—of origin.

6. Sociological Problems

In addition to the many physical and economic difficulties connected with the absorption of a million immigrants, there were also tremendous sociological and psychological problems. First, there was the difficulty of being uprooted from one environment to another, from one climate to another, from one set of norms to another, from one language to another. These are problems faced by all immigrants, and they were not absent from the experience of the immigrants to Israel—even when their motivations for coming were mainly ideological or religious.

In Israel, as in other countries of immigration, there was a certain social distance—and, at times, even alienation—between the veteran population and the immigrants. It was said at the time that "Israelis love immigration but hate immigrants." Although there was no actual hatred, many veteran Israelis certainly exhibited attitudes of condescension and superiority.

Differences in income, housing conditions, and general standard of living between the veteran population and the newcomers living in the immigration camps also left their mark. The result was a social gap between "haves" and "have-nots," leading to the feeling among many immigrants that they were being discriminated against.

Another serious difficulty resulted from the different social structures among the immigrants. In general, those who came from European countries had small families (parents and an average of two children). This was a result both of the lifestyles in their countries of origin and of the Holocaust, which destroyed families. Many Holocaust survivors arrived in Israel with "broken families."

Most of the immigrants from non-European countries, on the other hand, came with large, multi-generational families with many children (grandparents, parents, and six or seven children). Many of these families were

organized into "clans" headed by an elder or patriarch. Such a clan might consist of dozens of extended families, including uncles, cousins, and many other relatives.

This social structure had existed for many generations, and contained a clear hierarchy and chain of authority. But it was not familiar to absorption workers, who had little knowledge of the lifestyles of the immigrants from non-European countries. This ignorance caused many ruptures in the relations between these immigrants and the workers. Many mistakes were made out of ignorance, especially when heads of families were turned into "social cases," thus undermining their authority and causing the breakdown of the family structure.

Another serious question that faced policymakers was whether to place the immigrants, who had come from such disparate countries of origin, in separate neighbourhoods and towns, or "mix" them together without considering where they came from.

The ideology of "the ingathering of exiles" also dictated a desire to "combine" the ethnic groups immediately upon their arrival, and create mixed communities. Soon, however, it became clear that forced integration created serious problems of incompatibility among neighbours, and brought about tensions and arguments along ethnic lines. In the mid-1950s, the immigration authorities switched to a policy of creating more homogeneous neighbourhoods and communities.

Conclusion

The discussion of immigration and absorption in Israel's first decade is, to a certain extent, arbitrary. The period's initial year (1948) is, of course, significant, since the establishment of the state was also a historic turning point for immigration; but immigration continued after 1958. It continues to this day, at rates that change according to national and international factors which dictate the size of immigration. (The immigration of nearly half-a-mil-

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- summary record of the 5th meeting of the Advisory Commission and the Director with the Conciliation Commission, held in Beirut, 26 January 1951, p. 4; PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/44, 14 December 1951, summary of discussion between the Israeli Ambassador, London, and the British Secretary of State; NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box14/Folder 571(PRWA)/5 June 1952/From: U.S. Ambassador, Tel Aviv, to: Secretary of State.
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 18. PRO/FO371/91404/EE1822/24, 30 March 1951, *Finances for United Nations Relief and Works Agency*, Memorandum by Sir Henry F. Knight, United Kingdom Delegation, Advisory Commission, UNRWA, Beirut.
 19. PRO/FO371/82595/EE1461/11/G, 4 July 1950, Top Secret Foreign Office memorandum.
 20. PRO/FO371/91404/EE1822/6, 17 January 1951, enclosing an UNRWA inter-office memorandum of 8 December 1950, p. 3; PRO/FO371/98489/EE1805/2, 18 July 1952, From: British Legation, Tel Aviv, To: the Foreign Office, London.
 21. *op.cit.*, p. 8.
 22. PRO/FO371/91411/EE1828/1, UNRWA monthly report for November 1950; PRO/FO371/91411/EE1826/6, UNRWA Haifa monthly report for December 1950; NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box14/Folder 571(PRWA)/5 June 1952/From: the Ambassador, Tel Aviv, To: the Secretary of State; ISA/FM2406/17A/Israel Foreign Ministry/31 December 1952/Treatment of former Arab refugees in Israel, a report covering the period 4 September 1952—15 December 1952 by the International Organizations Section of the Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem.
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 24. cf. PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/14, 26 January 1951, UNRWA summary record of the 5th meeting of the Advisory Commission and the Director with the Conciliation Commission, held in Beirut, 26 January 1951.
 25. PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/44, 14 December 1951, summary of discussion between the Israeli Ambassador, London, and the British Secretary of State; NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box14/Folder 571(PRWA)/4 April 1952/From: [Keeler], Tel Aviv, To: the Secretary of State.
 26. PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/45, 19 December 1951, From: the Ambassador, UK Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, Paris, To: the Foreign office, London; NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box14/Folder 571/20 December 1951/From: the Ambassador, Tel Aviv, To: the Secretary of State.

27. PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/42, [5 December 1951], suggested approach to Mr. Sharet; it is evident that the British Government shared these views.
28. UNRWA officials shared this rather positive picture of cooperation, see: PRO/FO371/91411/EE1828/14, UNRWA Haifa monthly report for January 1951; PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/14, 26 January 1951, UNRWA summary record of the 5th meeting of the Advisory Commission and the Director with the Conciliation Commission, held in Beirut, 26 January 1951, p. 12.
29. PRO/FO371/91401/EE1821/71, 9 May 1951, From: Sir Henry F. Knight, United Kingdom Delegation, Advisory Commission, UNRWA, Beirut, To: the Foreign Office.
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37. ISA/FM2445/1/Israel Foreign Ministry/8 September 1952/minutes of the Ministerial Refugee Affairs Committee.
38. ISA/FM2445/2A/Israel Foreign Ministry/9 November 1952/Internal memorandum of the International Organizations Section of the Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem.
39. ISA/FM2444/19/Israel Foreign Ministry/15 June 1949/From: Gershon Meron, Tel Aviv, To: Walter Eytan, Lausanne.
40. ISA/FM2445/2A/Israel Foreign Ministry/12 November 1952/comments of the Prime Minister's adviser on Arab affairs on the Internal memorandum of the International Organizations Section of the Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem.□

lion Jews from the former Soviet Union in the past four years is a clear example.)

Nevertheless, the arrival of one million immigrants during the first decade was revolutionary in every respect. It was a demographic revolution, increasing the country's population by 250 percent. It was a psychological revolution, because it gave the young state a feeling of power. This immigration also brought about a social revolution, changing the composition of the population and making Israel more heterogeneous, less "European," and more "Mediterranean" and "Middle Eastern."

The arrival of one million immigrants also gave Israel a jumping-off point for the development of a large, modern agricultural sector and for the beginnings of modern industry.

The immigration made possible the establishment of hundreds of new villages and some 30 new towns. In this manner, the government was able to carry out its policy of distributing the population to all areas of the country.

We also discussed the enormous difficulties of immigrant absorption, as well as the mistakes whose scars remain to this day. It is an achievement, however, that the absorption of the immigrants was accomplished while maintaining rapid economic growth, with relatively low levels of inflation and unemployment.

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, made immigration and its absorption the highest national priority. He used his authority to make the subject a most prestigious cause, and turned immigration into the flagship of the state of Israel. ■

Soviet-Jewish Emigration and Resettlement in the 1990s

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