



Israel at 75

An amazing story of rebirth and
resilience: The best of the National Post
special project on the Jewish state

To mark the 75th anniversary of Israel’s founding this year, the National Post launched a months-long celebration of the Jewish state, detailing its remarkable rebirth and resilience against all odds. In this 24-page collection of stories, we toast the food, culture, and world-leading innovation of this “startup” nation.

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NATIONAL POST VIEW

Beacon of freedom and democracy

Seventy-five years ago, on the fifth day of Iyar on the Hebrew lunar calendar, which falls on April 26 this year, on the eve of Great Britain, a diminished superpower, pulling out of Palestine, the region's Jewish community declared "the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel." But the story of modern-day Israel begins nearly 2,000 years earlier, with a superpower unrivalled in world history.

In 70 AD, the Roman Emperor Titus laid siege to the Jewish city of Jerusalem to quell a rebellion in the Roman province of Judea. The troops razed the city and sacked the Temple, the cornerstone of the Jewish faith. According to Josephus, a Roman-Jewish historian who wrote an account of the events at the time, over a million people, mostly Jews, were killed, and tens of thousands enslaved.

Sixty-five years later, at the end of the third Jewish-Roman war, many of Judea's Jewish communities were massacred and Jews were forbidden from living in their historic capital of Jerusalem.

To further humiliate the beleaguered people, a temple dedicated to the Roman god Jupiter was built on the site of the demolished Second Temple (the first of which was destroyed by the Babylonians, according to biblical accounts) and later replaced with an Islamic shrine.



EMMANUEL DUNAND / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Judaism was fundamentally transformed from a religion centred around Temple worship and the priestly tradition, to a more diffuse faith governed by the rabbinate and the codified laws of the Talmud. The Jewish population scattered throughout the world in search of freedom and safety, but never found it. Since the fall of the Judean state of antiquity, the Jewish people have been the victims of pogroms and oppression virtually everywhere they went, culminating in the darkest chapter of world history, the Holo-

caust, in which six-million Jews were killed in Hitler's genocide.

It is from these roots that the Zionist movement was formed to re-establish the Jews' ancient homeland in the Land of Israel, as a refuge for a people who had faced centuries of persecution. Starting at the end of the 19th century, the World Zionist Organization began building the institutions that would form the basis of an eventual state. Following the Holocaust, Zionism came to be seen not just as a dream, but as a mortal imperative for a people who had just barely escaped being wiped out entirely.

Britain was granted a mandate for Palestine by the League of Nations following the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. The British, who had previously announced support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people," were intended to administer the region "until such time as (the territories of Palestine and Transjordan) are able to stand alone." Yet there was much opposition to British rule, leading to revolts by both the Jewish and Arab populations.

In 1947, the United Nations approved a partition plan intended to establish independent Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem falling under international control. The Jews accepted the plan and declared independence in 1948; the Arabs did not, instead choosing to go to war with the fledgling Jewish state. This ongoing conflict would come to define Israel and its place in the world, but it was another series of decisions that set the State of Israel apart from its neighbours, and established it as a beacon of freedom and democracy in a part of the world characterized by violence, oppression and authoritarianism.

The roots of Israeli democracy and pluralism started growing centuries before Jews began transforming the desert into a lush, arable paradise. Diaspora Jews, especially in eastern Europe, designed systems of self-governance to share power and resolve disputes in communities that lacked formal hierarchies. Throughout the world, Jews gained first-hand experience living in countries that respected liberty and democratic ideals, and learned hard lessons on how monarchical and dictatorial regimes can trample the rights of minority communities.

In his seminal text, “Der Judenstaat” (“The Jewish State”), Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, envisioned a country that respected labour rights, women’s rights and the separation of synagogue and state. “Shall we end by having a theocracy? No,” wrote Herzl. “We shall keep our priests within the confines of their temples ... they must not interfere in the administration of the state.”

Herzl was also a firm believer in minority rights, freedom of religion and the rule of law, arguing that, “Every man will be as free and undisturbed in his faith or his disbelief ... and if it should occur that men of other creeds and different nationalities come to live amongst us, we should accord them honourable protection and equality before the law.”

These sentiments were echoed in Israel’s Declaration of Independence, which promised that the State of Israel would “foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants”; “be based on freedom, justice and peace”; “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex”; “guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture”; and

“safeguard the holy places of all religions.”

Those vows later gained quasi-constitutional status when the country’s Basic Laws were amended to state that, “The fundamental human rights in Israel will be honoured ... in the spirit of the principles included in the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel.”

Equally as important, the Declaration of Independence pledged the

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“establishment of the elected, regular authorities of the state.” Israel’s founders modelled its 120-member parliament off the Second Temple-era Knesset ha-Gedola, which was made up of the same number of rabbis — a nod to the country’s democratic values and Jewish tradition.

Like in Canada, they modelled their legal and political systems off the United Kingdom, though they implemented a system of proportional representation to represent the broad spectrum of views found throughout Israeli society.

Although the country never developed a formal, written constitution, Israeli laws, and its strong

judiciary, have consistently served to protect the rights of its minority populations, including Arab-Israelis and LGBTQ people — making it a bastion of freedom and liberalism in a part of the world that does not have a history of respecting human rights.

It’s the only Middle Eastern country that grants full equality to women. The only one that is welcoming to the gay community and has strong anti-discrimination laws. The only country where Ahmadi Muslims are free to openly practice their faith, with people of all religious backgrounds enjoying equal protection under the law. Indeed, it is the only country that shares our western liberal values.

Despite this, Israel has become the favoured whipping boy of many in the West who claim to be liberals. The hate that is witnessed, on college campuses and in activist circles, and the double standard that is consistently applied to the Jewish state only serves to underscore the need for a Jewish national home that can provide safety and security in a world in which antisemitism is becoming increasingly normalized.

Although there is significant concern, in Israel and the diaspora, over the current government’s attempts to rein in the power of the judiciary, Israel’s strong, stable institutions and history of upholding liberal democratic values gives us faith that the Israeli people will be able to work through this impasse and that an equitable agreement will be reached.

For 75 years, Israel has stood as a beacon of freedom and prosperity in the Middle East. And thanks to the resiliency of its people, who have overcome incredible odds throughout history, it will continue to be a safe haven for the Jewish people and a model of democracy and liberty.

ANCIENT LOVE STORY

GIL TROY

On April 26, 2023, everyone toasted Israel's 75th anniversary, but the ancient love story between the Jewish people and their homeland, the Land of Israel, goes back 3,500 years to the Bible. The romantic story of Zionism reaches back a century-and-a-half. And the history of the State of Israel chronicles one of the few functional post-colonial democracies to emerge after the Second World War.

Although history has not always been kind to the Jewish people, the ongoing Israel adventure feels downright miraculous.

Invoking the Bible to explain a small high-tech democracy that has generated 92 of the world's nearly 1,200 billion-dollar unicorn startups may seem strange — but that's the Jewish story. Beyond revealing the Jews' deep roots in the Promised Land, the Bible explains the unique nature of Jewish identity.

Judaism is a religion, but the Jews are a people, too. That unique intertwining can produce non-religious Jews and a Jewish state that is a democracy, not a theocracy.

Jews lived for centuries without worrying that they did not fit conveniently into Western categories. They were Jews, fusing their national, religious, cultural and ethnic identities — praying toward Zion, Jerusalem, the Jewish people's forever-capital, wherever they lived.

Tragically, in the centuries following the Romans' destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jews worried about much more than labeling. The vast majority living under Christian monarchies in Europe, the expanding minority living under



DAVID ROBERTS PAINTING

Muslim rule in the Middle East and North Africa, and the smaller minority still living in the land the Romans renamed "Palestine," were often busy fighting persecution and poverty, while building a robust religious and ethical civilization.

Starting in the 1700s, modernity mugged Europe's Jews. The reason-based intellectual movement (the Enlightenment) and the freedom-based political emancipation movements freed some Jews from the ghetto. The few Jews who assimilated desired equality, acceptance and dignity, not just prosperity.

Alas, a renewed Jew-hatred shattered their hopes. Buoyed by the new, scientific-sounding term "antisemitism," Jew-haters proved that this ancient hatred was also the most plastic of hatreds — adjustable, artificial and often toxic. By the late-1800s, "the Jews" were bashed as communist and capitalist, as too rich and too poor, for fitting in too well and for standing out too much.

Zionism was one of many Jewish

responses to these shocks. While Abraham and Sarah spawned the Zionist idea that the Jews are a people with ties to a particular homeland, Theodor Herzl founded the formal Zionist movement.

An assimilated Viennese journalist born in 1860, with piercing eyes and a striking black beard, Herzl embodied the Jews' faith in modernization. In 1895, Herzl claimed he had his Zionist epiphany. At the time, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish-French artillery officer, was being tried for treason — falsely. Rather than attacking him individually as a traitor, the Parisian crowds yelled, "Death to the Jews." Herzl realized that without a Jewish state, Jews would never be respected.

In truth, this *Judenfrage* — the Jewish question — had haunted Herzl since university. The Dreyfus Affair allowed his inner playwright to plot out the Jewish people's Zionist journey in three acts: we tried to fit in; they rejected us; we became Jewish nationalists, seeking to rebuild our historic homeland in Palestine.

In 1897, Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress. This launched the formal Zionist movement, after millennia of longing, centuries of prayers and decades of other attempts. After too many paralyzing leaps of faith, Jews finally took a leap of hope.

This was Herzl's great gift to his people. Hope inspired downtrodden Jews to believe that tomorrow would be better — while challenging them to roll up their sleeves to make it happen. And dreaming made Zionism more than anti-antisemitism. Zionism sought to rebuild the Jewish soul. Fittingly, the Jewish national anthem became “Hatikvah” — “The Hope.”

Beyond providing a script pointing to redemption — return home! — Herzl launched intense diplomatic initiatives. When he died at 44 in 1904, after only 11 active years as a Zionist, the Ottoman Turks still controlled Palestine.

By 1917, Zionist diplomacy had its great breakthrough. One leading Zionist, Chaim Weizmann, helped develop synthetic acetone, which was used for launching British shells. This positioned him to explain Zionism to British leaders.

When one aristocrat wondered why the Jews insisted on Palestine “when there are so many undeveloped countries you could settle in more conveniently,” Weizmann replied: “That is like my asking why you drove 20 miles to visit your mother last Sunday when there are so many old ladies living on your street.” Weizmann understood that your home offers identity, not just shelter.

Grateful for Jewish support during the First World War, Great Britain recognized the Jewish right to a homeland in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration was the most dramatic



Theodor Herzl
in Basel,
Switzerland, 1897

affirmation of the Jewish national movement's legitimacy. The 1920 San Remo Conference formalized Britain's mandate over Palestine. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George told Weizmann: “Now you have got your start, it all depends on you.”

As the British ruled a truncated Palestine, having hived off Transjordan, Jews trickled home. This immigration upset some local Arabs — even as wandering Arabs settled there, too, attracted by British order and prosperity. Yet a series of clashes sharpened Palestinian Arab identity against “Palestinian Jews.”

By the 1930s, some British officials deemed the territory ungovernable. Talk of partitioning Palestine into Jewish and Arab entities grew. Unfortunately, so did British efforts to

appease Arab rejectionists by imposing harsh immigration quotas — just as Adolf Hitler emerged.

The Nazi murder of six million Jews confirmed what Theodor Herzl and other Zionists had said decades earlier: the Jews were a people, and they needed a state on their own homeland.

On Nov. 29, 1947, the United Nations, which was founded to secure a postwar peace, agreed. Remarkably, both the Soviet Union and the United States approved Resolution 181, which recognized the Jewish right to a homeland in Palestine, but partitioned the land into a Jewish state and an undefined Arab entity.

Most Jews accepted this painful compromise. Palestine Jewry's provisional leader, David Ben-Gurion, accepted “half a loaf” as better than none, especially to a people reeling from so much loss. Spurred by the grand mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, Arab extremists rejected any compromise — and targeted Arab moderates. This rejectionism, historian Efraim Karsh argues, was the true “betrayal” of Palestinians.

Civil war erupted, as the British prepared to leave in May 1948. Back in November, as most Jews rejoiced, Ben-Gurion worried. He knew that many of the young people who were dancing with joy would not survive the upcoming war. And he knew

how much needed to be done.

His to-do list included a government, a constitution, an anthem, a name, a capital, a currency, a budget, airports, a police force, an army. After decades of infrastructure building, population growth and ideological development, the Zionist movement was ready.

“**NOW YOU HAVE
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David Ben-Gurion,
on Dec. 2, 1949,
in southern Israel.

DAVID ELDAN / GPO VIA GETTY IMAGES

By May, with over 1,000 Jews dead and chaos spreading, many advised the Zionists to delay declaring independence. America's secretary of defence, Gen. George Marshall, urged U.S. President Harry Truman not to alienate the Arab world by recognizing a clearly doomed Jewish state.

Zionist legend has one analyst warning Ben-Gurion that the Jews had no weapons, no bullets, no oil. Ben-Gurion responded, "But we have hope." Ben-Gurion loved defying naysayers. When a committee of experts concluded that the desert town of Beersheba would never grow much past its 28,000 inhabitants, he replied: "Appoint a new committee." Today, over 650,000 people live in the booming metropolitan area.

The provisional council debated whether to declare a state. When

Chaim Weizmann heard that after 12 hours, Ben-Gurion won and the state would be declared, Weizmann snapped: "What are they waiting for, the idiots." Two-thousand years of waiting was long enough.

At 4 p.m. on May 14, 1948, shortly before the Jewish Sabbath, David Ben-Gurion read the Israeli Declaration of Independence in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art — today known as Independence Hall. Ben-Gurion affirmed the Jews' biblical roots — and their pressing, legitimate right to establish a state in their homeland. Launching this Jewish democracy, Ben-Gurion offered "equality" to all the state's "inhabitants," despite the looming war.

Seven Arab armies attacked. Starting with only a population of 600,000, Israel would lose 6,000 people. By the 1949 truce, Israel

had secured more defensible borders, while 700,000 Arabs fled their homes — some voluntarily, awaiting victory; others in fear.

Israel's War of Independence established this old-new state. Despite the war's distractions, Ben-Gurion made another fateful decision: overruling his economic advisers, again, he welcomed every Jew who wished to immigrate.

Arab hostility throughout the Muslim lands and North Africa soon triggered an exodus of 850,000 Jews from Arab countries. These Jewish refugees became Israeli citizens on arrival — stabilizing the state the Arabs had tried to destroy.

Seventy-five years after these epoch-making events, it's important to remember that life in Israel has often been stressful. Since 1948, Israel has had to overcome numerous challenges.

While full peace remains elusive, since Israel won the Yom Kippur War in 1973, no Arab army has attacked Israel. The once-monolithic Israeli-Arab conflict is now a series of conflicts, largely due to peace treaties signed with Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco.

Along the way, Israel solved its water shortage, developed from a poor, primitive economy into a high-tech behemoth and ended its often vulgar and macho clubby culture. Although bigotry never fully disappears, the initial hostility against the Jews from Arab lands, the "Mizrachim," has abated, and Arab-Israelis, who were under military rule until 1966, have now built a thriving middle class with full legal rights.

Ultimately, the instability that had Israelis before the 1967 war joking that the last person fleeing the country should "turn off the lights" at the airport, is no more.

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Zionism can also toast seven miraculous Israeli achievements. First, after millennia of homelessness, the Jews re-established sovereignty over their homeland.

Second, Israel has integrated three-million immigrants since 1948, mostly refugees fleeing from persecution in post-Nazi Europe, the Arab lands, Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union.

Third, the Jews returned to history, as full participants, sometimes facing complex dilemmas, but no longer victims. Fourth, Israel's western-style capitalist democracy maintains a strong Jewish flavour, expressed in the holidays, the traditions and the Jewish national culture, while guaranteeing all citizens equal rights.

Fifth, Herzl's vision of "Altneuland," old-new land, balances traditional values with trend-setting culture. Sixth, the once-dormant Hebrew language has become alive again. And finally, for all its challenges, Israel revolutionized the Jews' image — and self-image — worldwide.

Israel remains a project-in-formation. Like Canada, Israel is one of the world's few democracies, guaranteeing regular votes and permanent rights to every citizen. And for most Jews, especially Canadian Jews, Israel remains a favourite destination, a point of pride and their greatest collective endeavour in the world today.

National Post

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Tel Aviv

ALEXANDER MAISTERN

WHY A DESERT COUNTRY THAT IS NEXT DOOR TO ENEMIES IS THRIVING

TRISTIN HOPPER

Among the dozens of new nations founded in the chaotic wake of the Second World War, it's safe to say that Israel did not make anyone's list of states most likely to succeed.

The country's deficiencies are well-known: No oil, chronic water shortages and a total land footprint less than half the size of Nova Scotia. Even basic agriculture was a trial. "Soils had to be washed of salt, day after day, year after year, before crops could be planted," wrote a young Robert F. Kennedy in a 1948 visit to the new nation.

On top of everything was the fact that Israel's half dozen immediate neighbours all spent much of the country's early life trying to destroy it.

And yet, by virtually every indicator, the state of Israel as it turns 75 in 2023 keeps charting as one of the world's most dominant nations for its size.

This time last year, surging demand for Israeli exports drove the shekel to a 26-year high. Israel has the planet's highest rate of tech startups per capita. In 2021, Israel attracted a rate of venture capital that was 28 times higher than the United States.

As of last count, Israel's unemployment rate of 3.7 per cent is among the world's lowest, far outstripping the EU average of six per cent. Its life expectancy of 82.7 years is the planet's seventh highest.

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The most recent World Happiness Index saw Israel climb to number nine, behind only Luxembourg, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries.

It's a record that most of the developed world can only dream about, including Canada. Despite spending the last 75 years sitting peacefully atop a bottomless supply of everything from petroleum to farmland to hydroelectric power, Canada lags behind Israel on everything from national debt to health care wait times.

As to why, the simple explanation is that 75 years of constant existential threats have a way of focusing a country's attention.

"(A) sense of imminent disaster is real and deeply embedded in the national DNA," said Vivian Bercovici, Canada's ambassador to Israel from 2014 to 2016. She lives in Tel Aviv and runs the State of Tel Aviv news site. "So much of 'normal' daily life is saturated with an urgency you simply don't feel in most places," she added.

This was a phenomenon on keen display during the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic. Israel famously engineered a lightning-fast vaccine rollout that rapidly transformed it into the world's first — and for a time, only — country with wide-scale-immunity to COVID-19.

Israeli history is similarly peppered with instances where scarcity or crisis has forced the country to improvise.

The country's lack of reliable water sources has been called a "blessing in disguise" as it drove Israel to become a world leader in water management and conservation. With Israel now routinely dubbed a "water superpower," its technology and know-how is in high demand in the increasingly drought-stricken likes of California or Latin America.

Decades of near-constant armed



MAHMUD HAMS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

conflict with larger foes has forged the Israeli military into the international poster child for doing more with less. The country's defence innovations include everything from the Iron Dome — a missile defence system to intercept incoming rocket fire — to the EyeBall, a softball-sized robot that soldiers can throw into a room to electronically scout its contents before breaking down the door.

Israel does all this with an annual military budget that is about the same as Canada's. In 2021, both countries spent about US\$25 billion on defence. And Israel, unlike Canada, makes much of its military kit in-house.

This track record is part of why Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has cited Israel as a model for his own country's future. In April, Zelenskyy said that after the war with Russia is over, Ukraine should transform itself into a "big Israel": a country that is laser-focused on defence without the need for allies.

A brief bout of devastating hyperinflation in the early 1980s saw the Israeli currency hemorrhage value at a rate of up to 950 per cent. In a

set of emergency reforms designed to get the economy back on track, Israel scaled back government intervention in the economy and inaugurated a more independent central bank. Not only did it stem the hyperinflation crisis, but it laid the groundwork for the economic boom that was to follow.

Montreal-area MP Anthony Housefather is chair of the Canada-Israel Interparliamentary Group and in his pre-politics life was an executive with Dialogic, a tech multinational with a heavy presence in Israel.

Housefather credited the Israeli government with a very deliberate policy of fostering domestic innovation, either through military support or what is now called the Israel Innovation Authority. Initially known as the Office of the Chief Scientist, it's an arm's-length agency tasked with encouraging private-sector research and development. Housefather said the agency is key to generating new intellectual property, but also "sharing profit and forgiving failure and requiring manufacture of funded products in Israel."

On May 14, 1948, Israel's first day as an independent country, Israeli GDP per capita stood at roughly US\$4,500 — well within the range of what would be considered an “economic backwater.” In recent years it has topped \$40,000; roughly the OECD average.

At Israel's inception, exports were equivalent to just \$6 million. By the 2010s, they had grown by a factor of 16,000 to hit \$100 billion.

Of course, this was all occurring in an era that yielded no shortage of economic miracles. Singapore took just 50 years to transform itself from a nation of squatters into one of the richest countries on Earth. And China's turn towards a market economy has lifted an estimated 800 million people out of poverty.

But Israel's example has defied the notion that stability and peace is a prerequisite for economic growth. Much of the modern Israeli economy has taken shape under conditions of near-continuous armed conflict. By one count, Israel has fought eight wars and two intifadas, in addition to near-constant border skirmishes and terrorist attacks.

In 2022 alone, Israel was hit by nine deadly terrorist attacks, killing 24 people. Proportionate to national population, that's the equivalent of Canada losing 100 citizens in 36 terrorist attacks. And those are only the ones that killed people. According to regular English-language reports released by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, roughly every few hours yields a pipe bomb, rocket attack, stabbing or attempted vehicular attack.

These types of conditions are usually devastating to a country's

economy. In Northern Ireland, the violence and instability of The Troubles is estimated to have taken as much as a 20 per cent bite out of the country's GDP.

But since at least 2000, Israel has kept posting annual growth rates of 3.3 per cent. During the pandemic, its growth rates became the highest in the OECD.

And while many countries saw their rapid development shepherded in part by autocratic governments,

Israel's managed to take shape under a system of government that is democratic to the point of chaos. Often cited as the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel has an incredible 18 parties sitting in its 120-seat Knesset — and has

undergone 25 national elections since its 1948 founding.

When analysts attempt to figure out the secret to Israel's success, they'll often mention Israel's high rate of education. The number of Israelis who have completed post-secondary education is among the highest in the world, bested only by Canada and Japan.

The country's talent pool is constantly being enriched by fresh im-

migration. In particular, Israel benefited heavily from a massive 1990s influx of skilled, motivated Russian Jews who were fleeing the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Housefather pointed to Israel's unique system of compulsory military service; most Israelis (both male and female) must serve at least two years in the Israel Defence Forces. The policy “creates teamwork, trust and effectiveness and shared mission,” said the MP.

Culturally, Israelis are often labelled as being impatient. As one Times of Israel profile put it, queuing is basically non-existent, turn signals are a sign of “weakness” and arguments can very quickly escalate into screaming. Housefather didn't use the word “rude,” but he did say Israel benefits from an ample supply of “chutzpah,” “questioning of authority” and “lack of fear of risk.”

According to Bercovici, the answer may simply be that Israelis succeed mainly because they can't afford to fail.

“When something must be done, people try. And try. And just do not give up. This intensity has given rise to so much creativity and inventiveness that it often defies logic. Failure, really, is just another step on the way to success,” she said.

National Post

“**INTENSITY
HAS GIVEN
RISE TO
SO MUCH
CREATIVITY**”

Five things you might not know about Israel

- It ranks 11th in the world for Nobel Prize winners per capita.
- Cherry tomatoes were invented there.
- It is home to the world's largest ancient dog cemetery.
- The country is smaller than Vancouver Island.
- Israel has been called a “sushi mecca.”



JACK GUEZ / GETTY IMAGES

The secrets to Israeli longevity

SHARON KIRKEY

Rachel Kafri, 102, likes to keep busy and on top of the news. She recently had a pacemaker implanted in her body.

The device keeps her heart beating normally. Before surgery, her cardiologist, Dr. Shaul Atar, head of cardiology at the Galilee Medical Centre in Nahariya, Israel's northernmost coastal city, went over the risks, which weren't all that high. He's pleased the procedure went smoothly, he told *The Jerusalem Post*, and he wishes his patient "many more good years."

Kafri, who'd been feeling dizzy

and out of sorts, pre-pacemaker, but who tries to keep "my wits about me" when others are losing theirs, doesn't know what all the fuss is about. "I don't feel that old," she told *Israel's Ynet News*.

"Yes, indeed, Mrs. Kafri is a delightful person, one of the true founders of the state of Israel," Atar wrote in an email to the *National Post*. Her family was one of the founding members of Nahalal, the first moshav, or agricultural settlement, in Israel. As remarkable as her surgery sounds, she isn't the oldest Israeli recipient of a pacemaker. Over the last decade, Atar's team has

placed pacemakers inside the bodies of at least three others older than 100. The eldest was 107.

"We, the physicians (in Israel), do not consider age as a barrier to procedures," Atar wrote. There's a certain readiness to break the rules, so to speak. Doctors judge according to biological age, and not chronological age, considering factors like a clear mind, lifestyle and diet, normal or low blood pressure, kidney function, the absence or not of diabetes.

"All are predictors of longevity," said Atar, who estimates Mrs. Kafri — mother to five, grandmother to 14 and great-grandmother to 30 — is, biologically speaking, only 95.

"May you live until 120" is a traditional Jewish birthday blessing, and Israelis already enjoy one of the longest life expectancies in the world, especially men. The current, combined projected life expectancy for both sexes for 2023 is 83.49, according to *Macrotrends* — 81 for men and 86 for women — compared to 82.96 for Canada.

Recently, Israel took tenth place in a Bloomberg ranking of the world's healthiest countries in 2019, behind Spain, Italy, Iceland, Japan, Switzerland, Sweden, Australia, Singapore and Norway; Canada placed 16th. By the year 2040, Israelis are expected to be ranked seventh in the world in longevity, with an average life expectancy of 84.4.

From the Mediterranean diet and Mediterranean weather — sunny, warm, no extremes — to religiosity, mandatory military service and optimism despite decades of near-constant conflicts, all have been cited as factors contributing to Israel's longevity standing. Atar, the cardiologist, would also include “an excellent health system, with relatively high availability of medical services all over the country.”

Before the soaring tensions, strikes and mass demonstrations over the Netanyahu government's judicial overhaul plan, Israel was crowned the fourth happiest country in the world, behind Finland, Denmark and Iceland, in the UN-sponsored World Happiness Report released in March. (Canada was among the top 20).

Atar isn't sure about the current days, but “for decades, Israelis considered themselves as ‘happy’ persons,” and studies have shown that how happy people are can have a powerful influence over how long they live.

Israel's average household disposable income is lower than the OECD average of US\$30,490 a year. However, Israel outperforms the average in health, life satisfaction and strong social connections — 95 per cent of people in Israel know someone they could rely on in a time of need, above the OECD average of 91 per cent.

Other theories for its above-average lifespans have been offered up. The country could be benefiting from

genetic diversity. Most older Israelis immigrated to Israel, or the area that became the State of Israel, from 78 different countries around the world, sociologists wrote in the *Gerontologist*, and research suggests that increased genetic diversity in a population provides a survival advantage.

Resilience has also been associated with exceptional longevity. Thirty per cent of the oldest Israelis are Holocaust survivors, and scientists have found that, “against all odds,” men who lived through the Holocaust as teenage boys or young men lived 18 months longer than those who didn't experience the Holocaust,

“AN EXCELLENT HEALTH SYSTEM, WITH RELATIVELY HIGH AVAILABILITY OF MEDICAL SERVICES

possibly owing to a “genetic, temperamental, physical or psychological make-up” that kept them alive.

But does greater resilience explain Israel's longevity standing? A diet richer in fish than red meat? More doctors and nurses?

In fact, according to its most recent “State of the Nation Report” from the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel, Israel's share of active doctors is slightly lower than the OECD average. Its share of active nurses is lower, still. The country also ranks low, relative to other OECD nations, in MRI machines, CT machines and hospital beds. “During periods of pressure, like the flu season, hospitals and hospital wards are so full and it is likely to have a negative impact on the health of those in care,” the authors wrote. (Canada is

the only OECD country with higher hospital-bed occupancy rates than Israel).

However, unlike smoking — 21 per cent of its adult population smokes — Israelis drink less alcohol than most of the OECD. The country has fewer suicides per year, and its fertility rate is the highest, with three births per woman compared to Canada's lower-than-replacement fertility rate of 1.4.

While diet is almost certainly a factor in Israel's higher-than-expected life expectancy, when Israelis aren't eating a diet high in vegetables and fruits, they tend toward one heavy on animal fats, proteins and salt, “none of which are associated with longevity,” Taub's research director, Alex Weinreb, has noted.

“We also have a large population, 20-per-cent-plus is Arab, where the rates of diabetes are very high,” Weinreb said in an interview with the *National Post*. Still, the high life expectancy persists despite the diabetes rates.

Living in a nice climate helps. “We don't have people who die from cold, and there are very few people who die from excess heat,” Weinreb said from his office at the Taub Center in the middle of Jerusalem.

His team recently published a paper breaking down the causes of death in Israel, ranking the country relative to OECD countries on each of the major causes.

Where Israel does phenomenally well is on cerebrovascular disease. It has the lowest rates of death from strokes. “We're third lowest on heart disease,” Weinreb said.

The rates are surprisingly good for a country with as mixed a population's as Israel, and one that isn't super-wealthy, though its GDP per capita has climbed sharply over the last 20 years.

Those factors “point to things like early successful intervention — heart problems being caught in people’s 50s, not 70s — and fairly effective treatment,” said Weinreb.

Israel does worse, however, on breast and prostate cancer, the two leading forms of cancer. “There you get into the differences within Israel’s population,” Weinreb said. Israel’s ultra-Orthodox Jewish population isn’t big on medical testing, especially for breast cancer. And Ashkenazi Jewish women are much more likely to carry the BRCA gene mutation that predisposes them to higher rates of breast cancer. “So, that’s a particular problem there.”

The Israeli-Arab population now is also following the same health trends as Arab populations in other wealthy Arab states, leading to major problems with obesity and diabetes, especially among women and children, Weinreb said. “Those are problems which we’ll confront as a society in terms of health consequences in 10, 20 years,” when a large bulge of people hit their 40s.

But Israel is also an exceptionally family-centred society, and social connections are important to mental health, and human survival.

People live with, or close to, family. Israel has low levels of loneliness, Weinreb said. It’s reflected in all the international happiness surveys, “where, despite all its problems, and it has many, people in Israel always claim to be happy.” Even in areas of increased poverty, life expectancy is much higher than expected.

“People feel that their life has meaning,” Weinreb said. “There’s a lot of volunteering, a lot of inter-generational contact.” Israel also tends to have lower rates of dementia. There’s “ongoing cognitive engagement” with the world around them.

But none of this fully explains the



JAAFAR ASHTIYEH/JAAFAR ASHTIYEH
AFP / GETTY IMAGES

longevity edge for Weinreb. He wondered why there are such particularly good outcomes when it comes to heart disease, or stroke, both of which are known to be associated with physical fitness.

The State of Israel requires every citizen over age 18 to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, although Arab citizens are exempted if they so wish. Men are expected to serve a minimum of 32 months, and women 24 months (until quite recently, women didn’t serve in the same combat roles, so their training was not as physically demanding).

When Weinreb, an expert in demography, put together a dataset involving 130 countries, he found that, even after controlling for all sorts of variables, military service added more than three years to male life expectancy.

How to explain that? It may come down to a phenomenon known as the “healthy soldier effect.” At an age when, in most wealthy countries, people stop doing intensive physical stuff, in Israel, you have a large

share of people in their 20s carrying 30-kilogram packs uphill for five days, first during their mandatory service, and then during annual reserve duty.

Army training potentially sets a precedent for maintaining physical fitness throughout one’s life, Weinreb said.

“No one in public health wants to say there’s anything good about the military. It may be a necessary evil, but to have mandatory conscription is counter to the Anglo-Saxon political ideology of this era.” It runs counter to the norms of liberalism, he said, and people are loathe to admit there could be a positive health benefit.

Easier to embrace are the health benefits of a sea breeze. People who live close to the sea report better sleep, less mental distress and have more optimal levels of vitamin D.

Israel, ironically, also has low rates of violence. The murder rate is also quite low, “though those two have been climbing. We’re unfortunately converging to more standard norms for wealthy countries,” Weinreb said.

Serious things are happening in Israel, he said. The normally optimistic are relatively unnerved. “Right now, no one is feeling good,” he said. “But it’s quite possible by the end of the year enough of the population will be feeling good that the mean is going to pick up again.”

Rachel Kafri is also following the protests over judicial overhaul. She makes sure to read the “Saturday papers.” She credits genetics and having worked almost her entire life for her centenarian status. She’s reached a “fair old age,” she told Israeli journalists, is in relatively good shape and still has more to accomplish.

“I am probably not ready to say goodbye to the world yet.”

National Post

HOW ISRAEL RECLAIMED THE ANCESTRAL LANGUAGE

JOSEPH BREAN

In the summer of 1882, about a year after his parents migrated from the Belarussian hinterlands of the Russian Empire, a boy called Itamar Ben-Avi was born in Jerusalem, then part of the Ottoman Empire, though of course not for that much longer.

This boy was unique in linguistic history. Thanks to his father Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, whose life's work was to promote Hebrew as the common language of a Jewish nation, Itamar grew up as the first native speaker of Hebrew in the modern world.

He lived a long life and died in 1943. Five years later, when the State of Israel was founded, about half of its 650,000 resident Jews were, like him, native speakers of Hebrew, and another quarter used it as their main language. Today, perhaps nine million people worldwide speak Hebrew, more than half as their first language, most in Israel, where it is the only official language.

That's quite a resurrection, at least the second most amazing one ever to happen in the Holy Land. Hebrew in the 19th century was like classical Greek or Latin today. It had never been outright forgotten, and its cultural resonance remained strong.



Eliezer Ben-Yehuda
in his house in Jerusalem

WIDENER LIBRARY, CAMBRIDGE

Plenty of people knew it, in scholarly and liturgical circles, and some people even spoke it aloud in special contexts. But no one spoke it first. No one asked for his lunch in Hebrew, or thanked his mama, or, as the apocryphal story goes of Itamar's first words, told his parents to stop bickering. From this boy on (he was later a journalist), the Hebrew language was reborn.

"It was very helpful to have a language which every Jew was new to," said Mira Sucharov, professor and associate chair of political science at Carleton University, and author

of the recent memoir *Borders and Belonging*, which describes her own experience learning Hebrew from her father, in school immersion programs and at summer camp, and the thrill of going to Israel as a Jew among Hebrew speakers, but also the disorientation of feeling "partly of the group and partly not."

Like Ben-Yehuda and her own father, Sucharov tries to speak only Hebrew to her children, now older teenagers who have what she describes as "passive knowledge," which is to say they understand better than they speak.

But most of the time in bilingual Ottawa, that is enough to make this third language of Hebrew their private language, a “secret code” they use unless someone else is around and manners dictate English.

Her goal in this was that the children could attend public schools in Canada but not miss out on a linguistic connection to Israel, and so they can engage effectively and critically with their spiritual homeland, even as its existential struggles as a Jewish democracy continue after 75 years.

Languages bind people and divide them. Hebrew was the indigenous language of the Jewish people in Israel and Judah when the First Temple, Solomon’s Temple, was destroyed and the Jews exiled to Babylon in the 6th century BCE.

The first few books of the Hebrew Bible, the epics of Genesis and Exodus, were written down from pre-existing oral sources in a poetic, storytelling Hebrew that often shows an archaic syntax and unusual words, reflecting Hebrew’s origins in archaic Phoenician. But later books of the Bible are written from the perspective of royal court chroniclers, priests and administrators, whose language followed a distinct official style, pursuing an official purpose.

This is classical Hebrew, and it took shape in a period of Jewish history when the ancient covenant with God had to be reconciled with the political experience of military defeat, loss of the monarchy, and the imposition of a new language. Religious and cultural preservation was built into Hebrew from the beginning.

Hebrew was still commonly spoken after the Jews returned from the Babylonian Captivity and Palestine fell to the first Persian empire in the 6th century BCE. But Aramaic, roughly a Syrian language, quickly became dominant. The result was

a Jewish bilingualism at the deepest theological level, with a constant interplay between Hebrew and Aramaic.

The Babylonian Talmud, for example, a central part of Jewish scripture that was compiled between about 200 and 600 CE, includes the collection of oral traditions called Mishnah, mostly written in the mainly literary language known as Rabbinic Hebrew, and the commentary Gemara, completed later, much of which is in Aramaic.

By the time the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, Herod’s Temple, in 70 CE, Hebrew was well on its way

“
WHO AMONGST US
HAS SUFFICIENT
ACQUAINTANCE WITH
HEBREW TO ASK FOR
A RAILWAY TICKET.”

to being completely dead as a native first language. A language that was spoken for centuries was hidden away in liturgical texts.

It was hardly frozen in time, though. These texts were read, re-copied and commented on. There is a Jewish proscription on destroying any documents that contain the written word of God, and so these documents are traditionally stored in a synagogue vault called a Geniza, awaiting eventual ceremonial burial. Luckily, that burial sometimes does not happen, and one Geniza in particular, in Cairo, benefited doubly from a favourably dry climate and the historical continuity of a Jewish community there. So in the late 19th century, when the Cairo Geniza was not so much discovered as recognized by scholars for its significance,

Hebrew scholars suddenly had an archive of nearly 1,000 years of literary history. This is why, for example, so much detail is known today about the great medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, famous as much for his religious scholarship (some of it written in Hebrew but most in Judeo-Arabic) as for being royal physician to the Sultan Saladin.

That archive was still an exciting new discovery when Ben-Yehuda started promoting Hebrew as a language for modern learning and life. He had been inspired as a young student to see Hebrew’s potential partly by a translation of Robinson Crusoe. He had also seen the writing on the wall for the Ottoman Empire, which lost a war to the Russian Empire that ended with lost territory and the creation of new nations. Nationalism was transforming imperial Europe, which is usually a menacing development for European Jews, but it also offered the potential solution of Jewish nationalism.

Theodor Herzl, the driving force of 19th century political Zionism, thought the national language of the Jewish homeland would be German. Soon before he died in 1904, he said: “We cannot converse with one another in Hebrew. Who amongst us has sufficient acquaintance with Hebrew to ask for a railway ticket in that language?”

But languages, like people, all come from somewhere. Choosing German or Yiddish, for example, would exclude North African Jews, by placing a greater burden on them to learn a foreign language. The solution, of which Itamar Ben-Yehuda was an early success, was that they would all learn a foreign language, by reclaiming the language of their ancestors and equipping it with the new vocabulary demanded by the modern world.

“No country had ever attempted such a grand linguistic transformation, let alone an impoverished country fighting a protracted war of survival against a ring of foes,” wrote Lewis Glinert, professor of Hebrew studies at Dartmouth College and an expert on Hebrew linguistics, in *The Story of Hebrew* (2017). Bluntness was cultivated, and minimalism prioritized. Modern Hebrew was to be spare and precise.

“They called this mode of speech ‘talking dugri’ (from the Turkish/Arabic for ‘direct’), in contrast to the stereotype of the loquacious, jabbering Diaspora Jew, perpetually compelled to live by his verbal wits,” Glinert wrote. “This new way of speaking was suited to a tough, hardened nation of farmers and soldiers. Henceforth, what would matter (they believed) was not what Jews said but what Jews did.”

In 2019, Prof. Sucharov got a tattoo with her children’s Hebrew names and palm fronds. It illustrates how much meaning a language can carry, including personal significance, cultural heritage, theological resonance, but also for some people a political significance that eclipses all the rest. She has learned, for example, to cover this tattoo when travel or research takes her among Palestinians in Israel proper or the West Bank, not for her own sake but for theirs, as a gesture to avoid causing upset by displaying the language of the dominant nation in a lopsided intractable conflict.

“Hebrew, while it’s exciting and nurturing at a soulful level for someone like me, it’s not an enjoyable language for Palestinians. For them, it is a colonial language, the language of their oppressor,” she said.

In her memoir, she recalls attending a 2011 peace protest in Tel Aviv. “A pang of longing shoots

through me, as it always does when I recall my years at Hebrew summer camp. The intensity of the nostalgia soon gives way to a jolt of electricity as I embrace the moment of being surrounded by Israelis speaking Hebrew. I am partly of the group and partly not.”

There is a mirror-image contrary point too. With its multi-millennial scope, Hebrew somehow transcends politics.

Sucharov remembers realizing as a child how rare it was among Diaspora Jews to be fluent in Hebrew, and feeling a sense of superiority that insulated her against the interpersonal conflicts, familial and professional, that go along with being a progressive-minded Zionist in the second half of the State of Israel’s first century. In her memoir she describes the “rush of emotion” that came with returning to Israel and hearing the vocabulary of everyday Hebrew life: the brand names of candy, pop song lyrics, the names of pizza toppings.

Knowing Hebrew so well “was a convenient way for me to mentally defend my flank against those who might, consciously or inadvertently, remind me of my gaps in Jewish belonging,” Sucharov wrote.

Her experiences are just one illustration of how Hebrew has returned to everyday life.

As the author Ilan Stavans wrote in *Resurrecting Hebrew* (2008), a personal account of learning the origins of modern Hebrew: “Ben-Yehuda’s Zionism was linguistic. You might almost say he wanted Jews to create their own country so that they could speak Hebrew in it. The land was a stepping-stone for linguistic redemption, a way of moving into the future and back to Sinai at the same time.”

National Post

Mike Fegelman’s top 10 reasons to celebrate Israel

1 Israel is a bastion of religious freedom where people of all faiths (and no faith) can practice (or not worship) as they see fit, without persecution.

2 Israel is a world leader in protecting natural resources and the environment, recycling as much as 90 per cent of its wastewater.

3 Israel is the only place in the Middle East with a growing Christian population, expanding by roughly two per cent annually.

4 Israel is the only place in the Middle East where members of the LGBTQ+ community can live without fear of oppression.

5 Israel is the freest country in the Middle East, according to Freedom House.

6 Israel is the only country to be home to more trees in 2000 than in 1900.

7 Israel is a world leader in high-tech and research and development, spending nearly 5 per cent of GDP on innovation.

8 The Israeli military has been called “the most moral army in the Middle East.”

9 Israel is the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people.

10 Israel represents not colonialism, but the return of an indigenous people to their own land.

To see 65 more reasons, check out the [full list online here](#).

GIL COHEN-MAGEN / AFPP VIA GETTY IMAGES

WHERE EVERY DAY IS A MIRACLE



VIVIAN BERCOVICI
Comment

“What’s it like living there?” is probably the question I am asked most frequently.

I have resided in Israel since 2014. For the first two-and-a-half years, I served as Canada’s ambassador to the country, having been appointed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Upon leaving office in 2016, I remained in Tel Aviv, which is among the most spectacular cities anywhere, by any measure — including cost. In 2021, the Economist ranked it the most expensive city in the world.

It is also among the safest, as the sort of crime that plagues many North American cities is much rarer in Israel. But there is a different sort of threat: terrorism and the occasional war. Having lived through terror attacks, wars and sporadic rocket fire, as impossible as it may sound to Canadians, I’ve adjusted to the en-

vironment, out of necessity.

Living in Tel Aviv, with a highly concentrated population and developed infrastructure — including bomb shelters — is a very different experience from the far north of the country, which borders on Lebanon, or the southern communities clustered along the border with the Gaza Strip.

For example, Sderot, a hardscrabble southern town of just over 25,000 that is a kilometre from the Gaza border, has been pelted with tens of thousands of rockets and mortars, most having been fired since 2005, following Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from the Strip. Following the election of Hamas to govern Gaza in June 2006, attacks on Israeli civilians intensified.

Residents have 15 seconds, if they’re lucky, to scramble to a shelter once an alarm sounds. There is no effective early warning system for incoming mortar rounds. People are left dead or traumatized; a 2015

study found that 40 per cent of children living in Sderot suffer from anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and related maladies.

In the mountainous north, the borders with Lebanon and Syria bristle with constant tension; Hezbollah and other hostile militias are dug in and heavily armed. During one excursion I made to the Golan Heights to meet with United Nations peacekeepers in 2015, we could see black ISIL flags planted on barren, wind-swept hilltops less than a kilometre away, in Syria.

As the ISIL lookouts noticed us with our telescope, within 30 seconds, scores of fighters appeared seemingly out of nowhere, likely emerging from tunnels and trenches. They watched us watch them, perceiving a possible threat.

We quickly ducked into a crude, cave-like dwelling half-carved into the hillside, half exposed. Warning shots from the ISIL fighters were not uncommon, I was told.

The whole “escalation” lasted about 90 seconds and passed without incident. Tempers are hot in the Middle East.

ISIL has since been replaced by other Syrian-based militias. Along with the very powerful Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, they are well-funded, trained and armed proxies of Iran. Cross-border attacks are rare but the threat level is always high.

The West Bank, which I visited a month ago, is a very different reality. Israel Defense Forces checkpoints are common but cars with Israeli plates are rarely stopped. In these areas, more common attacks include random car rammings at bus stops and raids on Jewish settlements, which tend to end in gore and carnage. For this reason, many Israelis living in this area are licensed to carry firearms, for legitimate self-defence.

In fact, shortly after the Nov. 1 election, Ayala Ben-Gvir, the wife of National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, attended a lunch in Jerusalem for the spouses of coalition party leaders, hosted by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s wife, Sara.

In a group photograph, it was clear that Ayala Ben-Gvir was packing heat, as her hip-hugging pistol was clearly visible. A minor stir ensued, with many clucking that this was inappropriate, to which she retorted, on Twitter: “I live in Hebron, a mother of six, sweet children and travel through terror-infested roads and

am married to the most threatened man in the country. So, yes. I have a gun. Deal with it.”

Israel — within its 1967 borders — is less than 15 kilometres wide at its narrowest point (called “the waist”), which happens to be in the centre of the country where the majority of the population is concentrated.

In the West Bank and Gaza, terror groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Islamic State, the

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and others oversee intensive training bases and terror operations. The long borders are porous and often breached. Much is made in the international press of the so-called “apartheid wall” separating Israel from the West Bank, but that bit of pernicious propaganda is particularly untrue.

The security barrier was only erected in several spots where Palestinian towns abutted highways or Israeli cities and

which became the preferred locations from which Palestinians would shoot at motorists or enter Israel to conduct terror operations. When the walls went up, terror attacks declined. Most of the border is an electrified fence adjacent to a patrol road, similar to how boundaries are demarcated in much of Europe and elsewhere.

And then — as was the case on Jan. 27 — there are periodic big attacks. This spring, a 21-year-old resident of a town on the outskirts of Jerusalem murdered seven Jews outside a synagogue before being killed by police.

He is being celebrated by his mother and Palestinians throughout the West Bank and Gaza as a martyr.

In celebration of his murderous rampage, Palestinians set off fireworks and indulged in sweets in spontaneous street gatherings. His family will receive a generous monthly allowance from the supposedly moderate Palestinian Authority, in appreciation of his resistance murders. “Pay for slay,” it is called in Israel.

What’s it like to live in Israel? Every day is a miracle. People live hard. Nothing is taken for granted. Every family, every person, knows people who have been touched by tragedy. We adapt.

At the end of each day, I feel wrung out, but not from security-related anxiety. Israel — and especially Tel Aviv — thrums with positive, intense energy.

Think Silicon Valley meets Miami meets New York meets Italy. Israel is a multicultural society with a vibrant economy, thriving tech sector, heavenly food and booming café culture. Meetings are more often taken on a restaurant patio than in an office tower. It’s Mediterranean, so the day starts late. Surf boards, electric scooters, bicycles, motorcycles. You name it.

Creative energy is exhilarating and exhausting. Most Israelis don’t obsess about their personal vulnerability. That would be paralyzing. We just hope for the best and live each moment as it comes.

National Post

Vivian Bercovici was the Canadian Ambassador to Israel in 2014-16 and is the founder of stateoftelaviv.com, an independent digital platform covering Israel and the Middle East. She resides in Tel Aviv.

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WHY ISRAEL IS THE TRUE INNOVATION NATION

TRISTIN HOPPER

It's often said of Israel that in a land devoid of natural resources, they had to build an economy based on their human capital.

Tack on a deliberate government focus on driving innovation, and it's part of why the country has long punched well above its weight in the tech field. Israel routinely ranks number one in the world for per-capita startups, and it has a rate of tech investment that has been as much as 28 times higher than the United States.

The USB stick was invented in Israel in the 1980s. Israeli agricultural scientists helped to popularize the cherry tomato. And any smartphone is inevitably going to be shot through with Israeli code, most notably if that phone has Waze installed.

But in addition to the country's overall talent at inventing things, there are a few very specific niches in which Israeli companies are curiously dominant.

Israel is a weird place, with any number of strange conditions that don't really exist anywhere else on Earth: Small size, lack of water,



IDE TECHNOLOGIES

An image from a desalination plant, which are key to the nation's need to for water.

heavy immigrant population, unusually hostile neighbours. The result is that the country's scientists keep inventing their way out of uniquely Israeli problems — while unwittingly creating technologies with global appeal.

Below, a few of the areas where Israel has become particularly dominant, thanks in large part to pragmatism.

COMPUTERS THAT CAN TRANSLATE IN REAL TIME

Only about half of Israelis are native-born speakers of the country's national language, Hebrew. All across Israel's borders, meanwhile, are speakers of everything from Arabic to French to Kurdish.

These factors might explain why Israeli tech companies have shown a particular interest in developing translation machines. In 1997, an Israeli company debuted Babylon, one of the first software programs to offer instantaneous translation of documents and web pages.

Another 1990s Israeli company, Wizcom Technologies, debuted pens that could scan words and translate them onto an LCD screen. More recently, an Israeli firm is also behind OrCam Read, a handheld device that can scan printed pages and read them aloud.

SQUEEZING WATER FROM NOTHING

If you're holding a conference on water conservation, chances are good that your keynote speaker will be an Israeli. Maximizing scarce water resources was one of the first major technical challenges to face Israeli scientists: The country is largely desert, and almost all of the usual sources of surface water come by way of neighbours that are not particularly fond of Israel.

And now, as an increasingly drought-stricken world looks for ways to scrimp on water consumption, they're looking to an Israel that is now managing to produce 20 per cent more water than it needs. There's

three main ways Israel has been able to do that. Huge desalination plants that repurpose seawater into drinking water. A centralized water management system that repurposes wastewater, replenishes aquifers and moves water around on a complex system of canals, pipes and reservoirs. And the most famous is drip irrigation, a method of agriculture developed in 1950s Israel that – as its name suggests – waters crops using targeted drips rather than sprinklers.

UBIQUITOUS HOME SELTZER MACHINES

Food is one sector in which Israeli inventions have generally failed to obtain global appeal. The country's most popular packaged food is Bamba, a kind of bland Cheeto that has utterly failed to achieve popularity outside Israeli borders. Ditto with the national soft drink, Mitz Paz, a chemical-y brew whose appeal is a mystery to most outsiders.

But Israel can definitively claim title to one gastronomic revolution: Ubiquitous countertop carbonated water machines.

Home carbonation technology is not particularly new; the home seltzer bottle predates the creation of the State of Israel by several decades. And SodaStream itself was originally a British company selling home carbonation units primarily to the U.K. market.

But the Jewish diaspora has long played a hand in the worldwide popularization of seltzer, with the result that the world's only Jewish state quickly emerged as a safe customer base for any company selling fizzy water. In Israeli hands, SodaStream's key innovation was launching a global distribution network in which millions of consumers across more than 40 countries were within range of a place that could swap out their refillable CO2 cylinders.



SODA STREAM

GETTING TINY CAMERAS INSIDE THE HUMAN BODY

The Israeli medical technology that typically gets the most attention (at least on the Internet) is Rewalk, a robotic exoskeleton that allows paraplegics to walk again. But one facet of medical research that has become dominated by Israeli researchers is the rather futuristic goal of getting tiny cameras and sensors into the human body.

Tel Aviv-based ENvizion Medical has created a “smart” feeding tube that helps chart its own path down the esophagus — preventing healthcare providers from accidentally sending the tube into the lungs.

The Aer-O-Scope colonoscope is a particularly flexible and high-resolution means of sending in a tube to look around the human colon. And then there's PillCam, which is exactly what it sounds like: A camera-equipped pill that you swallow so doctors can take a look at the state of your intestines. Best of all, the PillCam's components are cheap enough

that it's disposable.

As to why robust tiny cameras are an Israeli specialty, it's largely an offshoot of the country's well-developed security tech sector. With surveillance cameras, drones and spy cameras a big part of Israeli defence technology, there just happened to be a lot of researchers around who knew how to see into hard-to-reach places.

SHOOTING DOWN MISSILES

Israel doesn't have a monopoly on technology that can bring down an incoming missile. Of late, Ukraine has been doing a fantastic job taking down incoming Russian missiles, and they've done it exclusively with technology from Germany, Norway, the United States and the former Soviet Union.

But Israel has been taking more incoming missiles — for longer — than anyone else on the planet. The result is a pretty advanced catalogue of technologies designed to shoot these missiles down. Iron Dome is the famous one; the latticework of sensors and interceptor missiles along Israel's border can block about 90 per cent of incoming rockets and artillery shells.

For larger threats — say, an incoming warhead from Iran — Israel has developed Arrow 3, a quick-reaction missile “designed to intercept and destroy the newest, longer-range threats, especially those carrying weapons of mass destruction.”

And they even have a tiny anti-missile system that can be attached to tanks and armoured vehicles. The Trophy countermeasure system is designed to detect an incoming anti-tank missile and then cripple it at the last second with a burst of small projectiles.

National Post



At Café Asif in Tel Aviv, they made late Israeli first lady Nechama Rivlin's guvetch (Balkan vegetable stew) with plant-based Redefine Meat.

PHOTO DAN PERETZ

When Bonnie Stern began leading culinary tours to Israel in 2005, the food wasn't exactly a draw.

"People used to laugh at us. There was a sign in the bus that said, 'Culinary Tour,' and people would stop and point and laugh."

But the Toronto-based food writer and cookbook author had a feeling that something exciting was bubbling beneath the surface.

Eighteen years and 11 tours later, people are no longer laughing.

Stern started travelling to Israel in her mid-50s, around 2003 — "that's late for Jewish kids."

On a first-timer's tour with family, her rabbi issued a warning: "Bonnie, the food is really terrible, and it isn't going to be a food trip at all."

For the most part, she was right, says Stern, but a phenomenal meal at a soup kitchen planted a seed.

There weren't many fine-dining restaurants in Israel at the time, but Moshe Basson's The Eucalyptus in Jerusalem had come highly rec-

How food became a dynamic cultural export

LAURA BREHAUT

ommended. Stern learned that the restaurant had closed temporarily but Basson was running a soup kitchen in Mahane Yehuda Market, making pay-what-you-can lunches using leftover produce from vendors. After some convincing, Basson agreed to host Stern and her group.

The Iraqi-born chef and forager is renowned for his use of biblical ingredients — such as the seven species mentioned in the Bible: wheat, bar-

ley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates (silan, date honey) — wild plants and herbs. "We had the most amazing meal," says Stern. "His food was so delicious and so different and wonderful. And everyone felt the same way, like they didn't know what hit them."

Stern has been taking groups to The Eucalyptus ever since.

Though she has enjoyed many of Basson's dishes over the decades, she still remembers some of the details of that first meal: red lentil soup and figs stuffed with chicken. "It sounds impossible, but red lentil soup was not common (in Canada) 20 years ago."

Chefs and cookbook authors including Adeena Sussman, Joan Nathan and Michael Solomonov have now led Israeli food tours. But Stern broke ground: "If not the first person, (I was) one of the very first people ever to lead a culinary tour there. I had never heard of it before, and we did it mostly because of that meal with Moshe."

In the country's 75-year history, food in Israel has evolved from being "culinarily challenged" to a dynamic cultural export.

"It's pretty remarkable," says Tel Aviv-based food writer, editor and cookbook author Janna Gur. "My famous first phrase in my first book (*The Book of New Israeli Food*, 2007) was, 'Nobody comes to Israel for the food.' I remember working as a flight attendant, and I was constantly hearing complaints about food in Israel. How basic it is. How uninspired it is. Not a single decent restaurant, the quality of the produce, et cetera, et cetera. And now, we have almost become synonymous with a culinary destination."

Gur founded the magazine *Al Hashulchan* (*On the Table*) in 1991. Coinciding as it did with "the dramatic revolution" of Israeli food culture, what started as a trade publication became the country's leading food magazine. The quality of food products such as dairy, olive oil, fruit and vegetables, and wine improved, says Gur, and a cuisine began to emerge.

The evolution of Israeli cuisine stands apart from other modern immigrant countries, says cultural anthropologist Nir Avieli, a professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev who has studied the food of his native country for the past two decades. Jewish immigrants brought kosher versions of poverty cuisines from the diaspora with them, and these food traditions have combined to create a distinct national cuisine. Though, as Avieli explains, certain diasporic influences are stronger than others.

"If you want to compare it to Canadian cuisine or American cuisine, or to Chilean and Argentine cuisine, or Australian and New Zealand cuisine, some ideas evolved about what it means to eat in a specific style. But the character of the cuisine is

less clear. In all these countries, it remained a kind of mixture," says Avieli, "while in Israel, Israeli cuisine has become Mizrahi."

The term Mizrahi was coined in Israel to describe the one million people who emigrated from the Middle East and North Africa in the 1950s — countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia.

In labelling the immigrants coming from these countries as Mizrahi, or Easterners, the Eastern European Jewish majority defined themselves as Westerners, says Avieli. "This was a value-laden political term that was forced over Jews that came from Middle Eastern and North African countries. At the same time, these people were relegated to the Israeli periphery."

For a small country of 600,000, absorbing a million immigrants was a challenge, he adds. Israel was simultaneously trying to maintain its newly conquered territory. The newcomers — from different countries with diverse cuisines, backgrounds, jobs and ideas of religion — were all designated Mizrahi and sent to the borders.

The cultural implications were unexpected, says Avieli. Mizrahi identity continued to develop, gaining prominence in politics, religion, literature, music and theatre. "There is a struggle between the previous Eastern European culture defined as Western and the contemporary elites, which are Mizrahi. But there is one realm in which the victory is ... complete, and this is food. Israeli cuisine is Mizrahi."

Regardless of where their ancestors emigrated from, Israeli Jews associate Mizrahi dishes such as North African couscous, Libyan mafrum, Iraqi kubbeh, and local Palestinian/regional Levantine falafel and hummus with Israeli food, he adds. (Avieli delves into the "Hummus Wars" and the battle over ownership of the dish in his

book, *Food and Power*, 2017.)

Some of the most successful ambassadors of Israeli food around the world — including Eyal Shani of Miznon (who recently launched his first Canadian location in Toronto), Assaf Granit of Michelin-starred *Shabour* in Paris, Einat Admony of New York's *Balaboosta*, and Michael Solomonov of the James Beard Award-winning *Zahav* in Philadelphia — serve variations on this theme.

Ashkenazi food such as chicken soup and gefilte fish is almost gone in Israel, says Gil Hovav, a Tel Aviv-based author and TV presenter. (Though it is making a comeback, says Avieli — in the guise of North American-style Jewish deli food. For example, *pas-trami* on rye with a dill pickle.)

"We're a Middle Eastern country and it's natural that these would go if we don't have the right climate for it," says Hovav. "And, step-by-step, we're losing the link to the European background that we used to have."

When Hovav started writing about food in the mid-1980s, the culinary scene was already becoming interesting. "Israeli food and wine were very, very basic, even less than basic — basic is a polite word — until the '80s. But then, in the '80s when everybody got rich, people started getting interested in food and there was the wine revolution."

There were only two winemakers in Israel until the '80s, says Hovav. Now, there are roughly 400. People travelled and became interested in foods other than what they knew from home. "And Israel wasn't a socialist country anymore. So, it wasn't impolite to eat outside as it used to be when I was growing up."

Today, Israeli food culture is booming, says Hovav. He attributes its popularity to how colourful, fresh and seasonal it is — and its adventurous nature.

“Israelis are notorious for not obeying rules. Try to drive in Israel and you’ll understand. But when it comes to cooking, it’s the same. We really have the highest disrespect to any tradition.” You might find combinations of Mexican and Japanese food, or Turkish and Yemenite food. “In some cases, it’s disastrous, but when it’s successful, it’s really good.”

Israeli chefs think out of the box, according to Naama Shefi, founder of the Jewish Food Society in New York and Asif: Culinary Institute of Israel in Tel Aviv. Israel may be small, she says, but it’s fertile ground. Being exposed to so many food cultures is as inspiring for chefs as it is for home cooks.

Shefi believes that Israelis have much to offer the world in terms of food, whether it’s the casual way meals are enjoyed, their take on the healthful and sustainable Mediterranean diet, or innovations in agricultural technology.

Asif has a role to play in bringing together innovation and tradition, says Shefi. As part of their inaugural exhibition on the late Nechama Rivlin, researcher and former Israeli first lady, for example, they made *guvetch* (Balkan vegetable stew). In adapting Rivlin’s recipe, which dates back five generations in Jerusalem, they used plant-based Redefine Meat. “It involves hundreds of years and something from the future in the same place.”

The idea for the Jewish Food Society was born at the first Shabbat dinner Shefi shared with her now-husband’s family. Taken by the stories behind the dishes on the table — each one reflecting their journey from Turkey, Greece and Zimbabwe to Israel — she was determined to preserve their culinary heritage.

Researching and archiving Jewish family recipes is as important today as it was when she started the



Tel Aviv-based Asif has a rooftop farm.

PHOTO DAN PERETZ

non-profit in 2017, says Shefi. And though the two organizations are connected, Asif is an Israeli project, she underscores, not a Jewish one. “I have always believed that there is something unique about the food culture in Israel — the result of a unique combination of people, history, land and climate. The French would call it ‘terroir.’”

Gur also highlights the importance of the immediate environment, a merging of people and place. “A reconnection to the cuisines of our grandmothers was part of the acceptance that Israel is a diverse, immigrant society and there is no reason whatsoever to be embarrassed of your culinary roots — just the opposite. Just as in order to create varied local cuisine, you need to reconnect to your terroir. And your terroir is another way of saying Palestinian/Levantine cuisine. And without these two — Jewish immigrant cuisine and Palestinian/Levantine cuisine — Israeli food is unimaginable.”

As for the question of where Israeli cuisine might be headed as the country approaches its 75th anniversary on April 26, Avieli and Gur believe it depends on what happens politically. Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu’s plan to overhaul Israel’s judiciary has “sparked the biggest protest movement in Israeli history,” according to the Guardian.

“The present government attempts to change the basic structure of the political system here and remove the democratic aspects of it. So, if they win, if they will be able to do what they are doing, then the creative powers will leave,” says Avieli.

When we spoke on a “national disruption day,” during which police fired stun grenades and a water cannon in Tel Aviv, Gur felt that talking about food “was almost frivolous.”

Israeli cuisine flourished, in part, due to the economy. For an inventive food culture to exist, people need to have the means and inclination to enjoy it, says Gur.

“Israeli chefs did create something extraordinary, on par with the recreation of Hebrew language, of Hebrew music, of Hebrew literature — there are so many fields in which we built or rebuilt or recreated cultural products. And for me, food is part of culture. Food and wine is definitely something that we must be very proud of. But we need a functioning, democratic country to enjoy it.”

National Post

The truth behind Israel's curiously high fertility rate

DANIELLE KUBES

Israel's fertility rate is 2.9, which is nearly double's Canada's fertility rate of 1.5. Few other countries in the OECD even reached replacement level fertility. Israel's fertility rates are more closely aligned with its Middle Eastern neighbours — Jordan, Syria and Egypt — but it's an outlier among developed countries with advanced economies, educated populations and high female workforce participation.

While you may be tempted to point a finger at religious Jews or Muslims for Israel's high fertility rate, that doesn't tell the whole story.

The real story here is the high birth rate of traditional and secular Jewish couples in Israel, who make up most of the country. Observant Jews (religious but not ultra-Orthodox) have an average of four children, while secular women have an average of two.

Find the full story online here.



RONALDO SCHEMIDT / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

From desert economy to Startup Nation

VIVIAN BERCOVICI

Israel was an isolated country, far from markets that would facilitate traditional trading, and had virtually no natural resources of any value. But it did, of necessity, have a well-developed defence and security sector in which significant technological expertise was nurtured and developed.

Intellectual capital, former U.S. secretary of state George Shultz and leading Israeli officials determined, was the country's main asset, and they set about planning how to leverage and monetize it.

Find the full story online here.

I'm a Muslim and I love Israel. Here's why

RAHEEL RAZA

My father, who was an army doctor, always encouraged me to read and think outside the box. He instilled in me the concept of inquiry. I could discuss my questions with him, and he would give me an alternate point of view.

Thanks to my father's support, I came upon *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Exodus* and other books. I was instantly captivated by the stories and the people. When I read about the Holocaust my heart stopped as I pondered the cruelty that humanity can stoop to, as well as the courage and resilience of the survivors.

Armed with this knowledge, we travelled to the Arab world in the late 1970s, where I discovered the mass hysteria against Israel. There we met many Palestinians, most of whom were vehemently opposed to the Jewish state.

I was curious to know more.

Find the full story online here.

Why Israel is the only answer to antisemitism

AVI BENLOLO

Israel might not be able to eradicate antisemitism, but after 2,000 years of persecution, finally there is shelter. The recent surge in violent antisemitism in France for instance and even in Russia and Ukraine has brought a torrent of Jewish immigration to the Holy Land. Instability in Chile, Venezuela and Argentina is also leading more Jews to the safety and security of Israel. Even in Canada and America, the con-

tinued rise of antisemitism is making many Jews contemplate their future.

Israel's existence is no longer in peril. Antisemitism and internal satisfaction is pushing its population closer to 10 million. Its GDP per capita stands as among the highest in the world, matching most western nations, and it has been ranked among the 10 most influential and powerful nations on Earth by U.S. News & World Report. The

same report ranked its military among the top five. Exports have increased dramatically in the past few years, with exports to Canada rising by 95 per cent in 2022. The Abraham Accords have opened new markets for the Jewish state with massive trade deals signed daily with the United Arab Emirates, Morocco and Bahrain.

Find the full story online here.

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