History

Matt Beynon Rees

When I was a little boy in Wales, my great-uncle Dai used to get drunk at Christmas and tell us about his WWI exploits. Dai fought with the Imperial Camel Corps as it battled through Palestine. Cutting the Turkish supply lines before the British made their final push on Jerusalem, Dai was shot in the buttock. When he was well into a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label, he used to drop his pants and show the scar. This gave me an early fascination with the Middle East.

There's sure to be some part of the Holy Land's history that has touched your life already – even if not quite as viscerally as the naked backside of a 90-year-old war veteran. Whether it's singing Christmas carols about events in Bethlehem 2000 years ago; praying with your father in a synagogue, facing towards the Temple destroyed by the Romans; or shaking your head as you watch the news of an unfolding intifada on TV – in some way, the story of Israel and Palestine is part of your history. But the accepted accounts are constantly being revised by new historians and archaeologists who must grapple with the national and religious myths inscribed on almost every weathered chunk of local limestone.

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ANCIENT TIMES

In the Holy Land, ancient history is often determined by your view of contemporary politics. Some years ago, I visited the chief Muslim cleric in Jerusalem, Sheikh Ikrema Sabri, whose position carries the title mufti. The mufti told me that 'there's not one single stone in Jerusalem that proves the Jews were here' before Islam (a charge repeated by Palestinian negotiators at Camp David in 2000, to the consternation of US president Bill Clinton). Of course, Israelis have no problem finding stones that prove the mufti wrong. Archaeology involves a lot more opinion than you might think, but it's rather more intelligent guesswork than the politically motivated mythmaking that muddies the waters even at the negotiating table.

The history of Palestine during the British occupation is told through the stories of contemporary residents in the excellent *One Palestine, Complete* by Israel's best popular historian, Tom Segev.

Ancient Palestine was somewhat more physically hospitable than today's desert landscape. Between 10,000 and 8000 BC, a little later than in nearby Mesopotamia, locals switched from hunting to production of grain and domestication of animals. They didn't quite 'make the deserts bloom', as 20th-century Zionists proclaimed to have done, but the ancients did share something in common with today's residents: they fought a lot of wars. The first to conquer the land were Egyptian pharaohs, who controlled the Palestinian coastal plain when, around 1800 BC, Abraham led his nomadic tribe from Mesopotamia to what are now the Judean hills. Abraham fought a war over wells against indigenous tribes. His descendants were forced to move on to Egypt because of drought and crop failure, but in about 1250 BC Moses led them back. Battles with the Philistines and Canaanites pushed the Israelites to abandon their loose tribal system and unify under King Saul.

There's no archaeological evidence for much of the biblical story, but enough of the story matches the few fragments of evidence that its account can be taken seriously. For example, physical evidence of the military expeditions of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, backs the story in the Book of Kings.

In 1006 BC, the Philistines defeated Saul at Mt Gilboa. Saul committed suicide on the battlefield, and the Israelites were divided into two kingdoms. Israel was roughly the north of today's West Bank, while further south King David (r 1004–965 BC) ruled over Judah and conquered Salem (today's Jerusalem). David named the city Zion, from the Hebrew *ziya,* meaning 'parched desert'. At that time, Jerusalem was much smaller than today's Old City and stood downhill from its present southern edge. Later, Jerusalem moved up the hill, across, then down, then back up and across again, until the 16th century when it finally occupied the footprint of the current Old City (see p88). The city didn't expand much beyond there until the late-19th century and its growth – like many other things hereabouts – exploded in the last half-century.

Many Jews believe that when the Messiah comes the Temple will simply reappear on the Temple Mount. In the Old City's Jewish Quarter, there are artists' impressions of this 'Third Temple'. Muslims, of course, prefer to keep the mosques on the Mount.

Myth and history truly intersect on the large flat rock now contained beneath Jerusalem's golden Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount (p93). Originally an altar to Baal or some other pagan deity, the rock was known to Jews as the Stone of Foundation, the place where the universe began and Adam was born of dust. It's also said to be where Abraham bound his son Isaac in preparation to sacrifice him, as a sign of his obedience to God. David's son, Solomon, built the First Temple here to be the centre of the Jewish faith (as opposed to the Second Temple, which was constructed on the same site, was largely the work of King Herod the Great and was later destroyed by the Romans; see p30). Scholars believe the rock may have been the altar of Solomon's and Herod's Temples, because of a series of holes bored in it that might have provided drainage for water or sacrificial blood. It may also have been the Holy of Holies in the Temple, where only the High Priest ventured and where the Tablets of the Law given to Moses were kept.

After Solomon's reign (965–928 BC), the Jews entered a period of division and periodic subjugation. In the 8th century, Sargon II of Assyria (r 722–705 BC) captured Israel and forced Judah to pay a tribute. He also defeated the Egyptians at Rapihu, now Rafah in the Gaza Strip.

The best practical guide to the ancient origins of local sites is *The Holy Land* (Oxford Archaeological Guides) by Father Jerome Murphy O'Connor, a professor at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem.

There's a recent theory among archaeologists called the 'low chronology' school of biblical history, which suggests that it's only around this point – about 150 years after David – that Israel and Judah developed into anything more than rough collections of farming tribes. It's a popular but controversial theory, because traditionally David and Solomon were seen as rulers of broad kingdoms. If 'low chronology' theory is correct, then the Israelites got it together as a state only just in time to be subjugated.

And not for the last time. In 586 BC, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and exiled the people of Judah to what's now Iraq. Fifty years later, the Persian King Cyrus defeated Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to Palestine. At that point, it seemed to the Jews that their troubles were over.

REVOLTS & ROMANS

When Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, Ptolemy, one of his generals, claimed Egypt as his own, founding a line of which Cleopatra would be the last. He also took the Holy Land, but in 200 BC the Seleucids, another dynasty descended from one of Alexander's generals, captured it. The Seleucids displaced the Temple priests in Jerusalem and set about paganising the Jews. This 'Hellenistic' period – for the Greek origin of the Seleucids and the Olympian cults they promoted – is a key moment in the shaping of Jewish nationhood and is seen by many Israelis as a prototype for their recent military struggles against tough odds. In 167 BC, a Seleucid official arrived in the village of Modi'in, near what's now Ben-Gurion airport, and ordered the construction of a pagan altar and a sacrifice. The local priest, Mattityahu, refused to comply. He killed the Seleucid official and a Jew who was about to make the sacrifice, then fled to the hills with his sons. One son, Judah Maccabee, became military leader of a revolt that restored Jewish control to an area almost the size of David's and Solomon's kingdoms – including most of today's Israel and the Palestinian Territories, as well as the Golan and some land on the east bank of the Jordan River.

The first nonbiblical mention of Israel is on the Egyptian Museum's Israel Stela, which is carved with the victory hymn of Pharoah Merneptah from 1230 BC: 'Plundered is Canaan, Carried is Ashkelon, Israel is laid waste'.

The Hasmoneans – as the dynasty that followed Mattityahu was called – became a useful buffer for the Roman Empire against marauding Parthians. But the Hasmoneans fought among themselves and in

63 BC Rome stepped in. Rome sometimes ruled directly through a Caesarea-based procurator – the most famous of whom was Pontius Pilate – though the Roman Empire preferred a strong client ruler like Herod the Great (37–4 BC) who married into the Hasmonean family. It was a time of tremendous religious and nationalist upheaval in the Roman province of Palestine, not least between AD 28 and 30, when it's believed Jesus of Nazareth carried out his ministry. The tension culminated in AD 66 with the First Revolt against the Romans. Titus, the future emperor, crushed the revolt and destroyed the Second Temple in AD 70. Here, too, was a time to which Israelis often hark back – not only the religious Jews who fast on the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple each year on the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av (Tish'a BeAv; see p393), but also secular Israelis who mourn the loss of even nominal sovereignty.

While Jerusalem was being destroyed, a group known as the Zealots (for their total commitment to Jewish law) held out on the mountaintop fortress of Masada, formerly Herod's winter palace. On the eve of the final Roman assault in AD 73, the Masada Zealots killed themselves rather than be enslaved; for details, see p320.

The Temple was so central to Jewish life that some scholars estimate only 270 of the 613 Commandments to which religious Jews are supposed to adhere can actually be carried out without it.

Only 60 years after Josephus wrote his account of 'The Jewish War', another one broke out. The Second Revolt broke out under a leader named Simon Bar Kochba, whose guerrillas lived in caves near the Dead Sea and who some considered to be the messiah. The Jews rose up because they believed the Emperor Hadrian was paganising what was left of the Temple precincts. The Romans suppressed the rebellion with difficulty. Hadrian gave Jerusalem a new name, Aelia Capitolina, and barred Jews from living or visiting there. With the Temple destroyed, Jewish religious life was thrown into a confusion that, for many Jews, didn't end until the foundation of the State of Israel.

But even as Jews lost the centre of their faith, an era opened in which Christians would gain one for theirs through the Byzantine Empire, eastern successor to the defunct Roman Empire. In AD 313, Emperor Constantine legalised Christianity and his mother Helena set about identifying and consecrating sites associated with Jesus' life. Most of the important Christian sites, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Jesus is said to have been executed, buried and resurrected, are said to date from this period. The church was begun in 335.

ZEALOUS FOR ZION

Amid the painful memories of the destruction of the Second Temple, modern Israelis have found something to celebrate – at least, some have. Modern Zionists lauded the Zealots' defiance at Masada (p320), which contrasted with the way the majority of Jews trudged into two millennia of exile. It seemed to them a parallel with the heroic fighters of the Warsaw ghetto (the Zionists were scornful of the greater number of Jews who went without a fight to their death in Hitler's camps). Until recently, Israeli Armored Corps recruits were sworn in each year in a ceremony atop Masada, which included the oath that 'Masada shall not fall again'. Children were fed the story of the Zealots' defiance in compulsory school trips. Not until the late 1990s was the message of Masada challenged, when a Jerusalem school principal made the visit optional, saying that suicide was against Jewish law and, in any case, if everyone had taken the Zealots' way out there'd have been no surviving Jews to return to Zion and found Israel. Right-wing politicians were incensed. But the disagreement was all in the tradition of Masada. We wouldn't have the story of the Zealots at all if it weren't for internal Jewish conflict. It was recorded by Joseph ben-Matthias, governor of Galilee, who saw which way the wind was blowing, went over to the Romans and changed his name to Josephus Flavius. His record of the battle in *The Jewish War* is a vital, if self-serving source.

With the Temple no longer able to perform its role as nucleus of Jewish observance, rabbis set about writing down the old oral law, so that it could be observed uniformly in the scattered communities of the diaspora. Between the 1st and 5th centuries, rabbis wrote the Jerusalem Talmud (which is sometimes called the Palestinian Talmud because, after all, it was written in other towns in Palestine, not Jerusalem) and the more comprehensive Babylonian Talmud, written by exiled religious leaders.

From then on, good times were no more than glimmers for the Jews. In 617 a Persian general took Jerusalem and, facing a Christian revolt, allowed the Jews to rule for three years. Twenty years later, the Muslim armies arrived and the foundations of today's implacable conflict began to be dug.

The Talmud has two components. The Mishnah – a guide to Judaism's oral law, ethics, customs and history for judges and teachers – was compiled in Palestine between AD 200 and 220 by Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi. It forms the first part of the Talmud. The second part of the Talmud, the Gemara, is rabbinic commentary on the Mishnah and related Tannaitic writings.

MUSLIMS & CRUSADERS

Islam came to Palestine in 638 when Caliph Omar, the second of the Prophet Mohammed's successors, accepted the surrender of Jerusalem. Subsequent caliphs built al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, which had been a derelict trash dump during Byzantine times. With Christianity seen as a valued precursor of Islam the shrines of previous generations were preserved. Omar issued a famous promise to the Christians of Jerusalem that 'the security of their persons, their goods, their churches, their crosses' would be guaranteed. That is, until 1009 when the mentally disturbed Caliph Hakim destroyed many churches and persecuted the Christians.

The Temple Mount was holy to the invading Muslims as the site of Mohammed's night-time ascencion to behold the celestial glories of heaven. In the Quran, the ascension is described as happening in the 'faraway place', which Muslims interpret as meaning Jerusalem. The city is Islam's third-holiest city, after Mecca and Medina.

Israel's elite commando unit, Sayeret Matkal, takes its motto from the writings of Josephus Flavius: 'No great ventures without great risks.'

Christian pilgrimage to the holy sites in Jerusalem was permitted until 1071, when the Seljuk Turks captured the city. In 1095 Pope Urban II issued a call for a crusade to restore the place of Jesus' passion to Christianity. By the time the Crusades began, the Seljuks had been displaced by the Fatimid dynasty, which was quite happy to allow the old pilgrimage routes to reopen. But sadly, it was too late for the Christians to back out. In 1099, the Crusaders overwhelmed Jerusalem's defences and massacred its Muslims. It would be 200 years before the bloodshed came to a halt.

When the Crusaders took Jerusalem, they founded what even Arab chroniclers acknowledged was a prosperous state with an effective administration, based on the feudal system prevalent back home in Europe. The first King of Jerusalem was Baldwin I, who reigned from 1100 to 1118. Baldwin saw himself as restoring the kingdom of the biblical David (ignoring, of course, that David's kingdom was Jewish, rather than bloodthirstily Christian as was Baldwin's) and had himself crowned on Christmas Day in David's hometown of Bethlehem.

Arabs call the area atop the Temple Mount the Haram ash-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary). Al-Haram (the Sanctuary) is the same name they also give to the Grand Mosque in their holiest city, Mecca, in Saudi Arabia.

Baldwin narrowly avoided death at the Battle of Ramla in 1102, lying doggo in some reeds while the Arab army hesitated, failing to press on to take Jerusalem after its victory. Baldwin was more ruthless on the occasions when he won. In 1104, he offered the garrison of Acre safe passage if it surrendered, then massacred it as it marched out of the fortress.

Such deviousness seemed to come naturally to the Kings of Jerusalem. Some struck alliances with Arab princes against other Crusader counts. When the Crusader ruler of Antioch died, his wife tried to keep possession of the town by allying with a Muslim warlord against her own father, Baldwin II of Jerusalem. Sometimes the traitorous alliances got even more personal. The successor of Baldwin II, King Fulk, discovered

his wife having an affair with one of his knights. The knight fled and took refuge in the town of Ashkelon – courtesy of its Arab rulers.

The beginning of the end for the Kingdom of Jerusalem came with the death of the powerful King Amalric in 1174. He was replaced by his 13-year-old son, Baldwin IV, who suffered from leprosy. Baldwin wasn't able to match the energetic campaigning of the Saracen general Saladin (opposite), eventually becoming paralysed by his leprosy before his death, and the Muslim leader set himself up for the final push on Jerusalem. In 1187, Saladin defeated the new King Guy at the Battle of the Horns of Hittin in the Galilee and took Jerusalem.

For an alternative, highly readable look at the Christian invasions, try *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* by Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf.

Not that the lack of Jerusalem ever prevented anyone calling himself King of Jerusalem. Saladin freed Guy, who proceeded to break his promise not to continue the fight and laid siege to Acre. Eventually, England's King Richard I arrived, shipped Guy off into exile as King of Cyprus, and gave his nephew Henry of Champagne the throne of Jerusalem (though he couldn't, of course, give him Jerusalem itself). Sadly for Henry, he fell out of a window at the palace in Acre and never got to the Holy City.

Long after the Crusaders were expelled from Palestine, there were still claimants to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In the 19th century, the consuls of Austria and Sardinia in Jerusalem considered themselves viceroys of the King of Jerusalem, because their own rulers claimed to be heirs to the title. The nonexistent kingdom was also claimed at different times by the kings of Spain, England, France, Cyprus and Sicily, the German emperor, and the dukes of Swabia.

MYSTIC JUDAISM

The leading thinkers of Spain's thriving medieval Jewish community were rational philosophers, many of whom were also interested in science and medicine. When Spain's Christian rulers expelled all Jews in 1492, it caused a crisis of faith to which the rationalists had no answer. (The expulsion, after all, seemed deeply irrational, unless you were the Spanish king and queen, who confiscated property from departing Jews.) Instead, Jews developed a new, mystical understanding of why bad things happened to them. The centre of mysticism was in the backwater Galilee town of Tsfat, where many of those who fled Spain for Palestine settled, and its greatest figure was Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–72). Luria expanded an old form of mysticism called kabbalah so that it could provide answers to the spiritual questions wracking the Jews after their Spanish expulsion. (For more on Luria, see Ha'Ari Ashkenazi Synagogue, p278.)

Kabbalah, which means 'tradition', was inspired by some earlier texts, but Luria's adaptations had such an impact that many are now part of mainstream Jewish observance. Luria left no writings, but his assistant recorded the essence of his teachings. Luria asserted that in order to create the world the Infinite (the Eyn Sof) was damaged – to make a space in which to fit Creation. As a result, sparks from the Divine Light fell from their original position and were at risk of being used for evil purposes. Jews, he argued, could restore the Divine Light and repair the Infinite by performing the 613 Commandments (the 10 on Moses' tablets were only the beginning). It gave Jews a way to understand the horror of the Inquisition and the Expulsion, because it asserted that such evil was inherent in the Creation of the world. It also showed them that they should respond by looking inward to build a higher degree of spiritual awareness and in doing so could 'repair the world'.

Luria didn't intend for Jews to study kabbalah until they first learned the rest of Jewish law and observance, and he didn't think its power should be too widely distributed. Kabbalah was later barred to anyone but married Jewish men over the age of 40. Luria certainly wouldn't have approved of Madonna's recent attention to the subject. (Incidentally, it's pronounced ka-ba-*lah*, as opposed to the way its Californian devotees say it.) Even with those restrictions, kabbalah remains an important force in the Jewish life of Israel.

Though the Crusades generated long-lasting hatred between Christian and Muslim, they also were the origin of the romantic myth of the noble Arab, which was how Middle Easterners were generally viewed in the West until the more recent onset of terrorism gave rise to a new stereotype. Oddly, the romantic image was born largely in a figure who wasn't even an Arab. The greatest general facing the Crusaders, Saladin, as they called him (his name was actually Salah al-Din Yussef ibn Ayyub) was of Kurdish origin. As emir of Cairo he was chosen by the caliph in Damascus to lead the fight against the Crusaders. Even his enemies acknowledged his decent treatment of prisoners and the honour with which he observed truces – not something that could be said for the Crusader chiefs. One example of the contrast between Saladin and the fractious Christian leadership came with the Muslim capture of Jerusalem. Arab chroniclers noted Saladin's shock when he saw the Patriarch, the top Christian priest, leaving town with all his treasure. That wealth, Saladin said, should have been used to ransom the town's poor Christians, who instead were marched off and sold into slavery. The chroniclers noted, of course, that Saladin would never have allowed such a thing to happen to Muslims.

In 1118, the fanatical religious and military Order of the Knights Templar was founded in Palestine. The Templars later became a powerful financial force in Europe, until King Phillip IV of France executed thousands of them, so he could capture their wealth.

The final Crusader left the Middle East with the fall of Acre in 1291. But the bloody symbolism of the Crusades lived on. When Britain's General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem in 1917 to become its first Christian ruler since Saladin's victory, he read a proclamation that 'Now the Crusades are over.'

TURKS, BRITISH & ZIONISTS

The Ottomans captured Constantinople in 1453 and built an empire in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa. In 1516, Palestine became part of their empire, and two decades later, Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (r 1520–66) built the present massive walls around Jerusalem's Old City. For most of the 400 years of Ottoman rule, Palestine was a backwater run by pashas more concerned with capricious tax-gathering than good government.

During this time of Turkish neglect in Palestine, Christian sects were forced to find a way to govern themselves and maintain the holy places. In 1757, they formulated the 'status quo', pledging to adhere to the responsibilities each then held for the upkeep of churches and not to infringe on the rights of other denominations in the Holy Land. That's why, even today, if a Catholic priest sweeps the wrong step in a church in Bethlehem, he's likely to be set upon by Greek Orthodox priests convinced he's trying to change the status quo and claim that step for the Latin Church. It's not only Jews and Muslims who've frequently been at each other's throats in the Holy Land.

Baptist lay preacher Thomas Cook led a party of middle-class English tourists to Jerusalem in 1869. They camped outside the walls for tea. Criminals, at that time, were still being publicly decapitated by the sword at Jaffa Gate.

The lack of effective administration in Palestine was a reflection of the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire, which would eventually cease to exist at the end of WWI. But the final decades of the empire saw other forces taking shape in Palestine that are very much still with us. Zionism made its appearance largely in response to a combination of Eastern European pogroms and antisemitic literature in Germany. In 1896 Viennese Jewish journalist Theodore Herzl formulated his ideas in *The Jewish State* and, the next year, he opened the first World Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. Young Jews began migrating to Palestine, mostly from Poland and Russia. Zionist lobbying focused on London and, in 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, named for the Foreign Secretary who wrote in a letter to the Zionist Lord Rothschild

that 'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish People'.

For such a state to work, the Zionists knew there had to be more Jews living in Palestine. That meant money had to be raised to fund the new communities, and it also meant fighting for political control of the Zionist finances in the new land. The popular image of the Zionists who came to Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel, particularly the two waves that arrived before WWI, is of self-sacrificing pioneers. But in 1925, a European Jewish leader called the Palestine pioneers *kastkinder*, a derogatory Yiddish term for kids dependent on the support of parents – in this case financing from Europe. Among many recent scholars, the pioneering reputation has been tarnished by the way early immigrant leaders disdained those who weren't part of their ideological clique, keeping them away from political influence and the cash that went with it. A wave of immigration during the late 1920s was made up largely of middle-class merchants and tradesmen. The socialist leaders of Zionism kept the new arrivals away from sources of power in local councils and unions.

The freshest look at the early waves of Zionist immigration is in *The Founding Myths of Israel* by Hebrew University political scientist Zeev Sternhell.

Even so, the rise in Jewish immigration prompted anger among the Arabs of Palestine. By 1935, there were 355,000 Jews in Palestine. The Arab Revolt began the following year with attacks on Jews and British forces, which administered Palestine under an international mandate. The revolt, however, set up the dismal failure of the Palestinian Arabs to cope with political developments as Israeli statehood approached, because infighting wiped out most of their best leaders. In 1937, a mini civil war erupted between the Husseini and Nashashibi clans, the two most powerful families in Jerusalem. By 1939, the initial campaign against the British and Zionists had been replaced largely by roaming bands of Arab guerrillas preying on their own people's villages, a distasteful prefiguring of the gangs who controlled towns and refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by the end of the second intifada in 2005 (for more details, see p38).

Israelis call immigration to Israel *aliyah,* from the verb 'to ascend'.'

By 1947, the British government tired of the violence of Palestine and turned the problem over to the UN. The UN recommended partitioning the land between an Arab and a Jewish state. The Jews accepted, but the Arabs rejected the plan. When the British left in May 1948, a two-month Arab-Israeli War broke out between the new Israeli forces and the armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, who won fame for his North African desert campaigns during WWII, commented that Israel would survive no longer than three weeks. In fact, recent research has shown that much of the materiel of the Arab armies was outdated or unserviceable and the Zionist militias outnumbered the troops arrayed against them throughout. Even so, that Israel surprisingly came out on top wasn't entirely due to its own military prowess. The Iraqi commander of the Arab invasion forces was unseated by politicking officers who, he said, were more interested in jockeying for a higher rank than in winning the war. By the time a final armistice was struck, Israel was an independent country and those who had been Palestinian Arabs found themselves ruled either by Israel, Jordan or Egypt, or stateless in distant refugee camps.

Israel's only Nobel literature laureate SY Agnon wrote mostly about the early Zionist immigrants. His 1945 masterpiece, translated as *Only Yesterday,* is about the wave of immigration around the end of the 19th century.

EURO JEWS & ARAB JEWS

Israel's conflict with the Palestinians often obscures the fact that the country is riven by factional, religious and ethnic divides. One that has had a considerable effect on the way Israeli society and politics developed is between Jews of European origin – Ashkenazim – and those Jews who came mostly from Arab countries, known as Mizrahim, from the Hebrew word for East. Before Hitler set to his awful task, Ashkenazim made up 90% of world Jewry. Most Holocaust victims were European Jews, so the new State of Israel was forced to turn to the Arab countries (as well as Central Asia) for the immigrant workforce that was vital to its survival. The early Zionist leaders were from Poland and Russia. They favoured their compatriots even over Jews from other European countries.

For the Mizrahim, they had only contempt. In the mid-1960s, David Ben-Gurion said 'the Moroccan Jew took a lot from the Moroccan Arab. The culture of Morocco I would not like to have here' in Israel; for more information on Ben-Gurion, see Damning the State, p36). Arriving from Iraq and Morocco, Jews were sprayed with disinfectants and ordered to live in remote 'development towns', which were intended to secure Israel's new borders but provided few economic opportunities. Their religious traditions were suppressed, too.

By the 1970s, unrest in this 'Second Israel' was boiling. In a small apartment in Jerusalem a group of Mizrahim formed the Black Panthers. Styling themselves after the African–American group of the same name, the Panthers called for social justice in the name of 'all those who've had it' with discrimination. In 1977, it was the Mizrahi vote that overturned the Labour Party's monopoly on power and brought Menachem Begin to the prime ministry at the head of the Likud Party. Likud continues to be identified with Mizrahi voters and mostly hews to a highly nationalistic line, while Labour has been seen as the party of the Ashkenazim elite with a more dovish view of relations with the Palestinians. Even so, Likud's leader has always been an Ashkenazi Jew, while Labour was briefly led by Iraqi-born Binyamin Ben-Eliezer in 2002 and entered the coalition in 2006 under the leadership of Amir Peretz, who was born in Morocco and used to be mayor of Sderot, one of the most notorious development towns.

There's less discrimination against Mizrahim these days. More than 20% of marriages now are between mixed Mizrahi and Ashkenazi couples. Asserting their identity, some prefer to be called Arab Jews. But discrepancies remain: though Mizrahim are a slight majority in the Israeli population, only 10% earn a college degree, compared with 36% of Ashkenazim. The development towns, which now include new waves of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, are home to 17% of Israel's population but account for 40% of its unemployed.

INDEPENDENCE & CATASTROPHE

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War brought independence for Israel, a place of refuge for Holocaust survivors and a guarantee that, if such a horror were ever again to befall the Jews, there would be a country to which they could flee. But for the Palestinian Arabs the Arab-Israeli War is remembered as Al-Naqba, the Catastrophe. The previous year a Palestinian National Council in Gaza declared a state and an 'all-Palestine government'. King Abdullah of Jordan prevented this government operating in the West Bank, so that he could annexe it and the 47% of all Palestinians who lived there. At the start of the 1948 war, 940,000 Palestinians lived in what became Israel. By the end of the war, 150,000 Arabs remained in areas under Israeli control. Though Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion frequently said that 'Israel did not expel a single Arab', it's clear that many were forced to leave by Israeli military units.

One of Israel's best contemporary novels, Meir Shalev's *The Blue Mountain,* is about the early Zionists. It's a magic-realist novel set in an early kibbutz and is loosely based on the experience of Shalev's own family.

Much has been made of research over the last two decades by Israeli historians (often called 'Post-Zionists'), who debunked the national myth that Israeli forces never cleared Palestinian populations from their villages. These historians even acknowledged atrocities by Israeli soldiers. Some 60,000 Arabs were expelled from Lydda and Ramla by Israeli soldiers, for example, while those in Nazareth, the city of Jesus' birth, were largely left undisturbed to avoid angering Western Christians. But the researchers didn't go as far as some of the pro-Palestinian writers who latched onto these 'New Historians' would have you believe.

In rarer cases, Palestinian historians have dared to point the finger at Arab newspapers. Alarmist press reports of Zionist atrocities prompted

DAMNING THE STATE

Not all Israelis are Zionists, and not all Jews living in Israel even consider themselves Israeli. In 1947, David Ben-Gurion, leader of the most powerful bloc in the Zionist establishment, struck a deal with ultraorthodox Jewish leaders which exempted Bible students from many of the onerous demands placed on secular or moderately religious Israelis, such as army reserve duty. In return Ben-Gurion got the support of the ultraorthodox political party. He also gave the ultraorthodox control over kosher certification, marriage and divorce, and religious education. After Ben-Gurion was installed as Israel's first prime minister, his agreement with the ultraorthodox became law in 1949, when the number of ultraorthodox Jewish men was small. But as the population grew, the number of army deferments became an affront to ordinary Israelis who serve three weeks or more each year. It also kept ultraorthodox men in religious school until on average the age of 42, when they're too old to be called up. In the USA, where there's no incentive to stay in Jewish religious school to avoid a draft, students leave at age 25. Business leaders estimate that losing so many men from the work force costs the Israeli economy US$1 billion a year. The religious schools (yeshivot) also receive over US$170 million in government subsidies. Yet, to some ultraorthodox sects, taking money from the Israeli state would be blasphemy. Groups like the Neturei Karta – you can spot them in Jerusalem by the gold robes they wear on the Sabbath – believe Jews should wait for the Messiah to found a Jewish state in Palestine. So implacable is their opposition to the state that, during the 1990s, one of their rabbis was Yasser Arafat's adviser on Jewish affairs.

Zionism struck a heroic chord in Hollywood. Paul Newman starred in *Exodus*, based on Leon Uris's bestseller about a boat carrying illegal Jewish immigrants. Kirk Douglas played an American war hero who joined the war for Israel's independence in *Cast a Giant Shadow*.

hundreds of thousands to flee who might otherwise have remained in their villages. One such inflation of fear occurred with the story of Deir Yassin, a village on the approach to Jerusalem. In the standard account, right-wing Israeli militiamen fought their way into the village and killed 258 of the 700 residents. Recent research at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah suggests about 100 died, which is what survivors of the massacre told me when I went to their homes in the West Bank. But they also said there was no real fight and the Israeli soldiers killed in cold blood, intending to scare other Palestinians into flight – a tactic that worked on surrounding villages. (Deir Yassin's ruined buildings now stand in the grounds of an Israeli mental hospital, where tourists afflicted with the sudden apprehension that they are Jesus/the Messiah/a biblical prophet are incarcerated.) There were also at least six villages in the Galilee region and north of Jerusalem that were evacuated by order of the Arab command to clear the ground for military operations.

There are 20 refugee camps administered by the UN Relief and Works Agency in the West Bank. The Gaza Strip has eight, and there's one in East Jerusalem. Over 50% of Palestinians are listed by the UN as refugees.

Though Jewish attack – or the fear of it – were the main reason for Palestinian failure and exile in 1948, there were other causes that were rooted in the unchanging nature of their society, compared with the new, dynamic Zionist community. Nationalism was strong among town-dwellers, but the largely illiterate rural population had little idea of the political situation as it developed; it was, therefore, unlikely to join an organised campaign against the new developments and more likely to react with fear and flight when those changes occurred. Also, few Arab workers had access to unemployment insurance, so when they were ejected from Jewish businesses and farms at the start of hostilities, their only economic alternative was to go into exile.

Once in exile, conditions were harsh for Palestinians. Many tried to return, but were prevented by the Haganah (the forerunner of the modern-day Israel Defence Forces, the IDF). Others who would have fled, particularly from the Galilee, heard about the poverty of the refugees and stayed put.

WAR & TERRORISM

If the last few decades in Israel were times of terrorism, the state's early years were times of war. In 1967, Israel launched a pre-emptive attack on its Arab neighbours, devastating the armies of Syria, Egypt and Jordan. In less than a week (which gives the war its popular name, the Six Day War) Israel won control of the Golan Heights from Syria and the entire Sinai desert and the Gaza Strip from Egypt. For Jordan, the war was a particular disaster because Israel captured the West Bank and the jewel of East Jerusalem, including the Dome of the Rock. Syria and Egypt fought back in 1973, launching a surprise attack on the Jewish holy day, Yom Kippur. Unprepared, it seemed at first as though Israel might be wiped out, but it pushed the Arab armies back. Israel's situation had, for a time, been so desperate, however, that the Arab leadership portrayed the Yom Kippur War as a victory.

The most famous Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, has written many works of nostalgia for the lost homeland, its tastes and smells and place names. In one of his most well-known poems he writes: 'We have a country of words.'

For Israelis, political positions often are coloured by which of the nation's wars occurred during their youth. There are the nostalgic, old socialist Zionists of the 1948 battle for independence. The victors of the 1967 Six Day War contributed to the messianic zeal at the root of the settlements in the Palestinian Territories. Those who, by the skin of their teeth, defeated the surprise attack of 1973 felt heroic, but had a jaundiced view of the country's leaders for failing to foresee the onslaught. But by the time Palestinian guerrilla attacks across the northern border drew Israel into an invasion of Lebanon in 1982, young Israelis questioned the sense that their nation faced an existential enemy and argued for territorial concessions. Israelis also felt they'd been sucked into someone else's war when their troops failed to intervene to halt the massacre of Palestinians by Lebanese Christians in the Beirut refugee camp of Sabra and Shatila. Not all Israelis went along that more dovish path. Since the Lebanon War the country has been deeply divided between a nationalist right that focuses on the settlements of the West Bank and (until 2005, when they were evacuated) the Gaza Strip, and a left that put its faith in the 1993 Oslo Accords, setting up a Palestinian Authority (PA) to govern the towns and cities of the Palestinian Territories.

For Palestinians, warfare didn't bring any benefit: they soon realised that Arab armies wouldn't win back their land for them. In 1964, the Arab League, which is made up of representatives of 22 Arabic-speaking nations, set up the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). But it wasn't until the Arab defeat in the 1967 war that a Palestinian leader willing to defy the Arab League won control of the PLO. Yasser Arafat was born in Cairo in 1929 and was related to the powerful Husseini clan of Jerusalem. While working as an engineer in Kuwait, he founded Fatah, an Arabic acronym for the Palestine Liberation Movement and also the word for 'victory'. It was through the Fatah faction that he took over the PLO in 1969. He instituted a long campaign of terrorism designed to force the international community to recognise the need for a solution to the Palestinian problem – something war with Israel hadn't accomplished. Senior Fatah men were behind the fatal 1972 attack on Israeli athletes in the Olympic village in Munich and many other terrorist strikes. In 1987, an uprising called the intifada (Arabic for 'shaking off') broke out around the West Bank and Gaza. It was a spontaneous eruption of stones and Molotov cocktails by frustrated youths, but Arafat soon had control of it and kept it simmering for six years. Though Arafat kept the Palestinian question on the world's agenda, he made a mistake in supporting Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War. Kuwait and other Gulf nations cut off funding to the PLO and expelled Palestinians, on whose pay packets many families depended back

Arafat made his headgear, the traditional *keffiyeh*, famous. His was black and white, colours favoured by nationalist groups. The red-and-white *keffiyeh* is worn by members of the Marxist Popular Front.

PRAISING THE FIGHTERS

Israel's military is thought of as something around which the whole country can unite, largely because so many of its members are reservists, and because men and women serve a compulsory period after high school. But the army's role in Israeli ideology is revealing, too. The military has accounted for between 20% and 40% of Israel's budget throughout its history. One of the Israeli 'new historians', Benny Morris, writes that 'an element of that is by choice' rather than being forced on Israel by the aggression of its Arab neighbours. Zionist leaders wanted to create what one of them, Zeev Jabotinsky, called 'a new psychological race of Jew', which would be strong and aggressive, unlike the cowed minorities of the old European ghettos. That attitude led to the prizing of dramatic military operations, like the commando rescue of Israelis from a hijacked French plane at Entebbe airport in Uganda in 1976, but it also scorned less militaristic groups. Holocaust survivors arriving in Israel were disdained for having failed to rise up against the Nazis. They were called 'Soaps', a reference to the belief that the Nazis used their victims' fat to make soap. In 1959, Israel instituted Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day, highlighting in the choice of name the relatively small number of partisans who fought against the Nazis, along with the majority of victims who were unable to battle the massive machinery of the Third Reich. A leading Israeli philosopher, Yeshayahu Liebowitz, has criticised the machismo of Israeli life as being contrary to Jewish thought: 'In the Jewish sources, one can't find admiration for the fighting man…Since when is it praise to say of a man he was heroic in battle?'

in the West Bank and Gaza. The financial and political squeeze forced Arafat to consider peace negotiations, leading to the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Israel's Arab citizens – those who remained in their homes in 1948 and their descendants – lived under military law until 1966. They now number 1.2 million and live mostly in the Galilee, where Nazareth is their unofficial capital. (Arabs living in Jerusalem aren't Israeli citizens.)

PEACE &…ANOTHER INTIFADA

Yasser Arafat arrived in Gaza to head the new PA in July 1994. Israel gradually handed over the remaining Palestinian towns, both in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank, over the following few years. But a peace agreement didn't bring real peace. In fact, it drove those on both sides who opposed the compromises necessary for peace into greater acts of violence. Hamas and Islamic Jihad took their terrorism to new heights with the suicide bomb. (Arafat was culpable in much of the extremist violence, for he frequently released from jail those involved in terrorism when he wanted to pressure Israel in the often interminable negotiations over further territorial withdrawals.) Israel hit back by assassinating Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders.

Perhaps the biggest blow to the peace process came in November 1995, when a religious Israeli gunned down Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin after a Tel Aviv peace rally. It was the culmination of several years of incitement from nationalist Israelis over Rabin's agreement to give up part of 'the Land of Israel'. Right-wingers believed the biblical lands they call Judea and Samaria – the West Bank – ought never to be surrendered. Posters appeared all over Israeli towns showing Rabin's face surrounded by an Arab *keffiyeh* or the uniform of an SS officer. An extremist rabbi chanted an ancient Aramaic curse outside Rabin's residence and others argued that the prime minister was a 'persecutor of Jews' who was fair game for murder. Rabin's killing was a terrible shock to most Israelis, but it also robbed the peace process of an advocate whose background as army chief of staff gave him the trust of Israelis on security issues.

Arab men are often referred to as Abu (meaning 'the father of') followed by the name of their eldest son. Arafat was known popularly as Abu Ammar. But that wasn't because he had a son – he had a daughter Zahwa born in 1995. He chose the name of a follower of the Prophet Mohammed as his nom de guerre.

Rabin's death wasn't the end for the peace process. In fact, the election of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's coalition government in 1999 seemed to augur well. Barak said he wanted a 'separation' from the Palestinians and was willing to give up almost all of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. But Barak forced the pace of negotiations and went to Camp

HAMAS

In 1987 Islamic leaders in Gaza formed the Harakat al-Muqaama al-Islamiya, whose acronym, Hamas, means 'courage' and 'enthusiasm' in Arabic. They named their 'military wing' after Sheikh Izzedine al-Qassam, a Syrian preacher who founded a guerrilla group and was killed by the British in the Galilee in 1935. In its charter, Hamas set out its aims: 'Allah is its goal, the Prophet is its model, the Quran is its constitution, Jihad is its path, and death for the sake of Allah is its most coveted desire.'

By 1993, when its budget was as much as US$50 million – then mostly raised from Gulf countries, but later also from Iran – Hamas was gaining respect among Palestinians, not only for its opposition to Israel, but also for its funding of youth clubs, medical clinics and schools. The contrast with Arafat's Palestinian Authority (PA) was even more beneficial to Hamas, because where Hamas was seen as clean the ruling Fatah Party was corrupt to the core.

When Arafat signed the 1993 Oslo Accords, Hamas stepped up its violence. Much of the time, Arafat walked a careful line in his handling of Hamas, trying to convince the sheikhs that his mass arrests were only a show to keep the USA off his back. The Authority also made gestures of solidarity with Hamas that prevented the Islamists from giving up on Arafat completely. In 1996, after Israel assassinated Yihya Ayyash, the Hamas bombmaker known as the Engineer, Arafat paid a condolence call to a Hamas leader in Gaza and sent an honour guard of armed policemen to salute Ayyash at his graveside during the funeral. At a rally in the West Bank, Arafat lauded 'all the martyrs, with Ayyash at their head'.

During the intifada, Hamas took its suicide bombing to new heights and lauded ever more 'martyrs'. Israel hit back with 'targeted killings' against a series of Hamas leaders, until the group agreed with Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, to accept a role in parliamentary politics. In elections in January 2006, Hamas won a surprise victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council, the parliament. The victory was largely because voters were sick of Fatah's corruption. The new Hamas government refused to recognise Israel, found itself shunned by Western countries, and faced internal strife with Fatah gunmen who didn't want to give up their power.

David in summer 2000 wanting to strike a final peace deal, despite the fact that US diplomats told him Arafat wasn't ready to move that fast. When the talks failed, widespread violence broke out and a second intifada began. Most media at the time blamed Israel's Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon for the outbreak of violence, because he had made a visit to the Temple Mount. Palestinians called Sharon's visit 'a provocation', and it surely was insensitive. But in the Middle East those who claim to have been provoked usually are in fact champing at the bit for an opportunity to vent their rage.

That was true of the intifada. At first Arafat saw an opportunity to pressure Israel into more concessions, but he quickly lost control to young Fatah leaders who felt he hadn't given them enough power since he returned from exile – they accused him of giving all the top military and political jobs to corrupt old party hacks who'd been with him in Beirut and Tunis. The young Fatah leaders quickly allied with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, eventually launching a wave of suicide bombings. Israel hardened against the Palestinians, in 2001 electing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a former general who spoke privately of the intifada as an 'existential danger' to Israel. Sharon sent tanks to occupy all the West Bank towns previously ceded to Arafat and made frequent, bloody incursions into Gaza. He refused to guarantee that if Arafat left the West Bank he would be allowed to return, so the Palestinian leader stayed in his Ramallah compound. Depressed and sick, Arafat's command of events and – according to some aides – reality weakened until his death in November 2004. His autopsy has never been released, but he seems to have died of complications from a blood disease.

Hamas was founded in the living room of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in Gaza's Zeitoun neighbourhood. Yassin had been a quadriplegic since the age of seven, when he injured himself playing on Gaza's beach. He was killed by an Israeli helicopter missile in 2004.

In 1997 Israeli agents injected poison into Hamas activist Khaled Meshaal in Amman, Jordan. Jordan's King Hussein was furious about the operation on his territory and insisted Israel hand over the antidote. Meshaal, who lives in Syria, later became supreme leader of Hamas.

lonelyplanet.com

Palestinian leaders want to see Arafat's autopsy, but his wife Suha is keeping it secret. PLO insiders say she's making them pay for a dispute over Arafat's secret cash hoard. Meanwhile, Palestinians don't know what really killed him.

There were few long careers as Palestinian fighters during the intifada. At one point in 2003, 11 successive leaders of Islamic Jihad in the West Bank town of Jenin were either arrested or killed by Israeli troops within a week of taking their position – sometimes on the very day they were made leader.

With his old enemy out of the way, Sharon forged ahead with a plan to 'disengage' from the Palestinians, building a barrier along a defensible line near the edge of the West Bank and pulling out of isolated settlements. He completed the evacuation of all 7500 Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip in summer 2005. Sharon suffered a massive stroke in January 2006. His deputy, Ehud Olmert, won election as prime minister in March 2006 on a platform that promised a further pullback from much of the West Bank. It wasn't ever likely to be something Israel would negotiate with the Palestinians, and by the time Olmert was elected it was even less likely, since Palestinians had voted for a Hamas government. Now it wasn't only the Israelis who weren't speaking to the Palestinians: the European Union and the USA at first cut off aid unless Hamas recognised Israel and the peace deals the previous Palestinian government had made with Israel (the money began to flow once more a few months later, but donors still insisted on bypassing Hamas-run ministries and giving the money direct to institutions on the ground). There were almost continuous skirmishes along the fence between Gaza and Israel, sometimes dragging the Israeli army back into the very areas they had so recently evacuated.

With the Hamas government shunned around the world, Israel appeared to have a free hand for its unilateral West Bank withdrawal. But in summer 2006 Hezbollah guerrillas kidnapped some Israeli soldiers patrolling the border with Lebanon. Israel entered a brief war with the Lebanese militia, in which the Shia group launched thousands of rockets across the border and brought northern Israel to a terrified halt. The scale of Israel's bombing attacks on Lebanese towns was widely condemned and the war was a diplomatic disaster for Israel. Domestically, the Lebanon conflict set the government wobbling, because many of the reservists sent to fight there complained of being under-prepared and ill-equipped. It also put paid to the unilateral withdrawal for the foreseeable future, because of the fear that a similar missile barrage from a Palestinian-controlled West Bank would be even more devastating to Israel.

The situation was highly unpredictable, except in that there was no sign of an end to the bloodiness of the Holy Land's history.

The Culture

POPULATION & PEOPLE

Whatever preconception you may have about who is an Israeli or Palestinian, a Jew or an Arab, will surely end within a few days of travel in the country. Every colour is represented, thanks to the 'Law of Return' that has drawn Jews of diverse backgrounds to re-converge in the Holy Land.

It's impossible to make generalisations about such a diverse culture because your Tel Aviv peacenik, ultraorthodox Jerusalemite, Be'er Shevan immigrant, Eilat hedonist, Ramallah liberal and Gazan conservative will all have a different world view. Yet no matter what their background, everyone remains patriotic to their particular cause, war often having that affect on people. This contest of survival has emboldened all sides and as the generations pass the national psyche deepens for all. For a more in-depth look at the history that has shaped this region, see p28.

Relative to its population, Israel is the largest immigrant-absorbing country on earth. During the 1990s around 900,000 Russians immigrated to the country, boosting the population by 20%.

Jews

For more than 50 years Israel has opened its doors to the Jewish faithful. Economic opportunities and spiritual commitments have seen the entrance of Russians, Moroccans, Yemenites, and people from India and beyond. Other arrivals include Syrian, Ethiopian, Iraqi, French and American Jews.

No matter what their origin, most Israelis are united by Zionism and the belief that the state exists to be a haven for persecuted Jews. But Zionism has never come cheap and three generations have grown in a virtual state of war. This reality has shaped their character and Israelis themselves recognise their rather brusqu mannerisms: a native-born Jew is known as a *sabra* (a prickly pear).

Behind their macho, warrior image, Israelis identify closely with European culture, fashion and trends. They are global travellers, leaders in the high-tech world, and proficient in the English language.

The population growth rate among Jewish Israelis is just 1.4%. This compares significantly to Arab Israelis, who have a growth rate of 3.3%. Demographers report that in 20 years the Arab minority will increase from 20% to 30%.

ASHKENAZI

In classic Hebrew, Ashkenaz means 'Germany', and these Jews originate from Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Germany. They are also descendants of Ashkenazim who emigrated to North and South America, South Africa and Australia. Cultural, linguistic and genetic evidence suggests that Ashkenazi migrated to Europe from the Middle East around 800 CE. Church legislation banned Christians from lending money for interest so the Jews of Central Europe took up commerce and money lending. Some of them still use Yiddish (a combination of Hebrew and medieval German) as their common language, written in Hebrew characters.

In 1931 the population of Ashkenazi Jews in Europe was around 8.8 million. The Holocaust resulted in the loss of about two-thirds of this population. Despite this loss, Ashkenazi still make up around 80% of the world's Jewish population.

The early Zionist pioneers were Ashkenazim, Polish and Russian socialists, and they administered the setting up of the Jewish state and later organised the mass immigration of the Sephardim.

Ashkenazi Jews make up just 0.25% of the world population, yet they have won 28% of Nobel prizes for economics, physics, chemistry and medicine. Ashkenazim also make up half the world chess champions.

SEPHARDI

Sephard is the Hebrew for 'Spain' and these Jews are descendants of those expelled from Spain and Portugal in the 15th century. Most of the

Jews in Palestine until the 19th century were Sephardim. Others lived in Constantinople, Greece, the Balkans and northern Morocco, among other places. Wherever they settled the groups remained fiercely insular according to their hometown. In Constantinople, for example, there were congregations for Toledo, Cordoba, Evora, Lisbon etc. The Spanish Jews spoke Ladino, a mixture of Hebrew and Spanish, written in Hebrew characters. It's still spoken today by some older Sephardim.

MIZRAHI

The word Mizrahi means 'Easterner' and the term loosely defines those Jews who originated in Arabic countries such as Yemen, Iraq, Persia and Uzbekistan. The term largely came into use in the 1990s and is now accepted as a legitimate classification, replacing the outdated term Oriental. When speaking to a Mizrahi they will probably go into some detail about their heritage, identifying themselves as an Iraqi Jew or a Yemenite. Mizrahi Jews started arriving in droves after 1948, largely because Arab populations rejected them and in some cases threw them out of the country. In 1956, for example, 25,000 Jews were expelled from Egypt.

Among prominent Mizrahim are Defence Minister Amir Peretz (Moroccan origin), President Moshe Katsav (Persian origin) and transsexual singer Dana International (Yemenite origin), who won the Eurovision song contest in 1998.

Mizrahim suffered from racism in the early years of the Israeli state and many were dumped in settlements in the Negev or border areas, but recent years have brought them more into the mainstream. Intermarriage between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi has become common and pop culture equally includes both groups. The average income of an Ashkenazi family is still about 35% higher, but this chasm continues to narrow.

BETA ISRAEL

You may know Beta Israel better as the Ethiopian Jews. (They are sometimes also called Falasha, 'exiles', although this is considered a derogatory term). These Jews, who now number around 120,000, were airlifted to Israel and the Palestinian Territories from their famine-struck country in two massive operations in 1985 and 1991 (Operation Moses and Operation Solomon respectively).

No-one is quite sure how Jews got to Ethiopia in the first place, although it's possible they were converted by Jewish Yeminite traders. Another theory suggests they are descendents of the House of Solomon, who during his reign had an intimate affair with the Queen of Sheba. Others suggest they are descended from a group of Jews that separated from Moses and went south during the Exodus.

The transition to their new home has been difficult for Beta Israel and they are still among the poorest people in the country. Social and cultural differences have kept many out of mainstream society although the gap has narrowed in recent years as the younger generation becomes ingrained with Israeli society. The cultural heritage has still been preserved; this will be in evidence at an Ethiopian Heritage Museum, which is currently being planned for the city of Rehovot.

Palestinian Arabs

During the British Mandate, anyone living in Palestine was referred to as a Palestinian, be they Jew, Christian, Muslim or Druze. Since 1948, more or less, the term has been reserved for those Arabs living in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the refugees who fled past wars to other countries. Non-Jews who stayed in Israel proper are usually refered to as Arab Israeli.

The origin of Palestinian Arabs continues to be a major point of dispute between Jews and Palestinians, not to mention historians. Suffice to say that there has been much rough-handling of history by people with political agendas.

Many Palestinians claim to be descended from the Canaanites driven from the Promised Land by the arrival of the Israelites. Others contend they are descended from the Philistines, the biblical enemies of King David, who lived in Gaza and Ashkelon. A few Muslim Palestinians argue that they arrived in Jerusalem with the Caliph Omar, which would mean they have been on the land for 1400 years. Meanwhile, Palestinian Christians claim to be the descendents of the first Christians – those that guided Queen Helena on her tour of the Holy Land in the 5th century.

I Saw Ramallah (2003), by Mourid Barghouti, is a sentimental account of the author's return to his home city after a 30-year hiatus. The book does a wonderful job of humanising the bittersweet life in Palestine and does so with sincere and lucid language.

Palestinian identity was borne out of Arab nationalism against the Ottoman Empire, the British and the Jews. This identity was given a face when Yasser Arafat founded Fatah in 1959 and over the years he came to symbolise the struggle for Palestinian independence. The blood, sweat and tears that the Zionists have poured out are but a mirror image of what Palestinians have struggled for. As with the Jews, their identity is closely linked to their historical, personal and religious ties to the land. Islam, Arab culture and Christianity may guide Palestinians in their day-to-day rituals, but it is the struggle for a homeland that still binds all Palestinians.

MUSLIMS

Muslim Arabs (not including Bedouins) make up around 70% of the Israeli Arab population. The majority adhere to Sunni Islam. Although Jerusalem is considered the third-holiest place for Muslims (after Mecca and Medina), those who lived there were never fervently religious as these in Saudi Arabia and historically Palestinian Muslims have followed a moderate line in their faith. Gaza, on the other hand, has become a fundamentalist enclave in recent years, a main reason why Hamas (founded by the Muslim Brotherhood) and other Islamic groups have grown in popularity.

CHRISTIANS

The USAID in Gaza and the West Bank offers historical and cultural facts on Palestine on its website: www.usaid.gov/wbg/asalah.htm. Click on the link to 'Asalah magazine'.

Before the establishment of Israel, Christians made up around 10% of the population of Palestine. Yet their comparative affluence gave them the means to escape when things started going bad for the Palestinians and many fled to foreign countries. Today Christian Arabs number around 175,000 in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, about 2% of population.

As well as Christian Arabs, Israel and the Palestinian Territories are also home to Armenian Christians, foreign clergymen, monks, nuns and others working for Christian organisations. Most holy sites are in fact administered by overseas churches such as the Greek Orthodox Church. Armenians, Copts, Assyrians, Roman Catholics and Protestants also lay claim to various holy sites, and disputes arise frequently over how to share their stewardship.

BEDOUINS

The term 'Bedouin' is Arabic for desert-dweller and refers to the nomad-pastoralist groups that reside in the Negev Desert. Most of Israel and the Palestinian Territories' 150,000 Bedouin (who consider themselves Arab) live in the Negev, while 60,000 live in the Galilee area. Land disputes with Israel have pushed them onto ever-decreasing plots of land and only around 10% are able to maintain a traditional pastoral lifestyle. Others have found the transition to an urban life difficult and they lack the skills and education to succeed – Bedouin unemployment is high and they represent the poorest sector of Israeli society. Despite these problems, Bedouin maintain good relations with Israelis and have served in the

Israel Defence Force (IDF; although they are not required to do so). For more information see Negev Bedouin, p332.

DRUZE

The Druze are a distinct social and religious group who speak Arabic and practice a secret religion considered to be an offshoot of Islam. Like Muslims, the Druze believe in Allah and his prophets but they believe that Mohammed was succeeded by a further divine messenger. The Druze also hold the non-Islamic belief of reincarnation and for this reason headstones on their graves carry no name.

The symbol of the Druze is a five coloured star, with each colour symbolising one of its principles: green (the universal mind), red (the universal soul), yellow (the truth/word), blue (the antagonist/cause), and white (the protagonist/effect).

Within Druze society there is a select inner core made up of men and women who have passed severe tests and are considered to have led exemplary lifestyles of honesty and modesty. The men are identifiable by their white turbans, and only these *uqqal* (the wise) are permitted to read the Druze holy books and take part in the Thursday-night religious ceremonies. The rest of the community, *juhhal* (the ignorant), have to hope that they might qualify in their next incarnation.

Most of the Druze nation lives in Lebanon and Syria; in Israel and the Palestinian Territories they inhabit a few villages in the Galilee, on Mt Carmel, and in the Golan. One of their most important religious sites is the tomb of Jethro, located in Tiberias. Jethro was the non-Jewish father-in-law of Moses who assisted the Jews through the desert and accepted monotheism. Still today the Druze find ideological similarities with Jews and in 2004, the Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Mowafak Tarif called upon non-Jews in Israel and the Palestinian Territories to observe the Seven Noahide Laws (morally-binding commandments for non-Jews) written in the Talmud.

Having never had a state of their own, the Druze tend to hold allegiance to whatever country they live in. Most of the Druze are Israeli citizens and, like any other citizen, perform military service. They even have their own division in the IDF, the all-Druze Herve Battallion, which fought against Hezbollah in 2006.

The situation is a little different in the Golan, where until 1967 the Druze towns and villages were part of Syria. These Syrian Druze resent Israel's annexation and have remained fiercely supportive of Syrian claims to the area.

Samaritans

Samaritans are one of the world's smallest communities, numbering around 700 people. They claim to be both Palestinians and Israelites – they speak Arabic but pray in ancient Hebrew.

During their menstrual period, Samaritan women are obliged to remain separated from their families for seven days. After giving birth, a woman is considered to be unclean; if the child is a son, the impure state lasts for 40 days, twice that if it's a girl.

According to their history they are descendants of the tribes of Joseph, and until the 17th century they possessed a high priesthood descending directly from Aaron through Eleazar and Phinehas.

The Samaritans' faith is based solely on the first five books of the Bible, so the only prophets they recognise are Moses and Joshua. In contradiction to Jewish tradition, they consider Mt Gerazim (near Nablus) to be the place where Abraham brought his son to be sacrificed, not Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Samaritans had been based in Nablus for centuries until the British Mandate period, when the 150-member community split and half settled in Holon (near Tel Aviv). Following Israel's independence Samaritans in Holon became Israeli citizens. The small population, coupled with their refusal to accept converts, caused a history of genetic disease. To counter this, male Samaritans have been allowed to seek a non-Samaritan Jewish wife, a difficult task as few women are willing to accept their rules of sanitation. Nowadays, when weddings occur within the Samaritan community, they must first be given approval by a geneticist.

More challenges faced the Samaritans in Nablus during the first intifada and tensions with local Muslims forced them to abandon the city and take refuge on Mt Gerazim; they have been there ever since. For more on the Samaritans, see p310.

THE LAW OF RETURN

Theodore Herzl's dream was to create a place where all Jews could live without persecution. His Zionist goals were eventually made a reality with the Law of Return, a proclamation laid down by the Knesset in 1950 that guaranteed full Israeli citizenship to any Jew that wanted it.

More than granting a haven to Jews that suffered persecution, the law is basically an open invitation for Jews to return to their ancestral homeland. The process is simple – a prospective *oleh* (immigrant) first applies through the Department of Immigration and Absorption. Proof of being Jewish must be presented, often in the form of parents' wedding certificate. Once the *oleh* has become a citizen he or she has made *aliyah* (ascent) and is provided with the accompanying benefits, including Hebrew language lessons and a financial assistance package.

Since 1990 Israel and the Palestinian Territories has absorbed over 900,000 *olim* (immigrants) from Russia and 44,000 from Ethiopia. These new arrivals did much to fill the gap of Palestinian workers, whose numbers were reduced after the first intifada. The masses of immigrants have also played a key political function by keeping the Jewish voting block well ahead of that of Israeli Arabs, who tend to have large families.

Recent years have seen increasing *olim* from Western nations. The 1999–2002 political crisis in Argentina had 2000 Argentinean Jews make *aliyah*. Rising anti-Semitism in France had 11,100 French Jews make *aliyah* between 2000 and 2005. In 2005 more than 3000 Jews made *aliyah* from North America (largely for religious and ideological reasons, not financial).

Not all Jews approve of the law, however, and there are some ultraorthodox Jews in the Diaspora who consider that *aliyah* cannot be made until the return of the Messiah. Also disapproving are the Arabs who fled the country between 1948 and 1967; they are not allowed to return, although some still hold out hope that they will one day go home. This Arab 'Right of Return' is unthinkable for most Jews, as it would threaten the Jewish majority. This double standard runs counter to Israel's declaration of democracy, although the chances the policy will change is slim to none.

African Hebrew Israelites

The African Hebrew Israelites are black Americans who claim descent from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Such a concept developed in the late 19th century and several congregations in the USA started adhering to traditional Jewish practices, including the observance of Sabbath and the other biblical holidays. In 1966 Chicago-born Ben Carter, also known as Ben Ammi Ben Israel, had visions that he too was a direct descendent of the Israelites and began preaching of a return to the Holy Land. His flock reached Israel, via Liberia, in 1969 and has since been based in Dimona. Today they number around 3000 people and have recently been awarded permanent residency status, making them subject to mandatory service in the army. For more information, see Shalom Brother, p335.

Circassians

An independent group in the Muslim community, the Circassians number around 4000 people. They originated in the Caucasian Mountains of Russia and immigrated to Palestine in the 1890s. Mostly loyal to the state of Israel, the community is concentrated in the Golan villages of Kfar-Kama and Reyhaniye. Like the Druze, male Circassians are mandated for military service while females are not.

RELIGION

Israel and the Palestinian Territories are the birthplace of two of the three great monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Judaism. The youngest of this trio, Islam, considers Jerusalem to be its third-holiest city.

Around 80% of Israel is Jewish while Sunni Muslims make up around 15%. The remaining 5% is Christian and other sects. The Palestinian Territories is around 95% Muslim and 5% Christian, give or take a few percentage points.

Worldwide there are around 14 million people who either practise Judaism or are Jewish by birth, although this figure is disputed as there are ongoing debates about what defines a Jew. Some sources put the figure as high as 18 million.

Judaism

Judaism is the first recorded monotheistic faith and thus one of the oldest religions still practised. It differentiates itself from other religions in that its power is not held in a central authority or person, but rather in its teachings and the Holy Scriptures. Its major tenet is that there is one God who created the Universe and remains omnipresent.

It was Rambam, the 12th-century Jewish rabbi, who laid out the 13 core principles of Jewish belief. He stated, in sum, the belief in one unique God to whom prayer must be directed; the belief that God rewards the good and punishes the wicked; the belief that Moses accepted the teachings of God; and the belief in the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead.

Having said this, Judaism does not focus on abstract cosmological beliefs. While Jews certainly contemplate the nature of God, the Universe and the afterlife among other topics, there are no set definitions of these concepts, which leave plenty of room for debate and personal opinion (and no Jew is too shy to lend their own thoughts on the matter). Rather than a strict adherence to dogmatic ideas, actions such as prayer, study and performing *mitzvah* (adherence to the commandments) are of greater importance.

For a good grounding in Judaism check the website www.jewfaq.org, which holds answers to a number of basic questions on the faith.

One of the earliest beliefs among Jews is that God chose them to relay his messages to the rest of humanity. God's laws have been recorded in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The Torah contains 613 commandments, which cover fundamental issues like the prohibition of theft, murder and idolatry. There are other commandments to which Jews must adhere, such as eating kosher foods, reciting the *shema* (affirmation of Judaism) twice daily and resting on the Sabbath.

The remainder of the Old Testament (the prophetic books), along with the Talmud (commentary on the laws of the Torah written around AD 200), make up the teachings that form the cornerstone of Jewish study.

FOUNDATIONS OF JUDAISM

The Exodus Decoded, a documentary aired on the History Channel, attempted to prove the biblical account of Jacob's descent into Egypt, the enslavement of the Jews and the eventual liberation by Moses. The film-makers purport that a volcanic eruption in the Mediterranean triggered the ten plagues, plus the parting of the Sea of Reeds.

The patriarch of the faith was Abraham who, according to the calculations of the Hebrew Torah, was born 1,948 years after Creation and lived to the ripe old age of 175. According to Jewish belief he preached the existence of one God and in return God promised him the land of Canaan, but only after his descendents would be exiled and redeemed. Accordingly, his grandson Jacob set off for Egypt, where later generations found themselves bound in slavery. Moses led them out of Egypt and received the Ten Commandments on Mt Sinai.

Once they had returned to Israel, God assigned the descendants of Aaron (Moses' brother) to be a priestly caste. They became the Kohen (Kohanim), who performed specific duties during festivals and sacrificial offerings. God's relationship with the Jews has not always been one of blessing and when he saw his chosen people straying from their faith he laid down punishment. In one biblical incident God allowed the Philistines to capture the *mishkan* (portable house of worship) used by the Kohen.

JEWISH CUSTOMS

The most obvious Jewish custom you'll experience in Israel is Shabbat, the day of rest. It begins on Friday night with sundown and ends at nightfall on Saturday. No work of any kind is allowed on Shabbat, unless someone's health is at stake. Tasks such as writing or handling of money are forbidden. Starting a fire is also prohibited and in modern terms this means no use of electricity is allowed (lights can be turned on before Shabbat starts but must stay on until it ends). Permitted activities include visiting with friends and family, reading and discussing the Torah and prayer at a synagogue. Sex is also allowed; in fact it's a double *mitzvah* on Shabbat.

The word tzitzit (knotted fringes on the prayer shawl) has a numerical value of 600 based on gemetria (numerology of the Hebrew language). Each tassel has eight threads and five sets of knots (totalling 13). The combined total of 613 reminds the wearer of the Torah commandments.

Some Jewish sects are easily recognised by their clothing, although most Jews wear Western street clothes. The most religious Jews, the Hasidim (or *haredim*) are identified by their black hats, long black coats, collared white shirts, beards and *peyot* (side curls). *Haredi* women, like Muslim women, act and dress modestly, covering up exposed hair and skin (except the hands and face).

Many Jews, both secular and orthodox, wear a kippa (skullcap), generally thought to be more of a tradition than a commandment. It is sometimes possible to infer a person's background, religious or even political beliefs by the type of kippa they wear. A large crocheted kippa, often in white, is a sign that the wearer is either a Braslav Hassid or a Messianist, perhaps an extreme right-wing settler. (Don't confuse the large, white, Messianic kippot with the patterned all-white, crocheted skullcaps worn by Hajis – Muslims who have made the Haj to Mecca). Muted brown or blue kippot that are crocheted indicate strong Zionist beliefs; the IDF provides standard-issue olive kippot; and anyone wearing a kippa with a sports-team logo is probably American. Recently, very small kippot are worn by the hip and trendy.

Islam

Most Palestinians are Sunni Muslim and as such are required to pray five times a day. In Palestinian cities and Muslim areas of Israel and the Palestinian Territories the call to prayer hailed over loudspeakers will become a familiar soundtrack to your travels. The most important session is the midday prayer on Friday, when the sheikh of each mosque delivers a *khutba* (sermon).

In 1998 King Hussein of Jordan shelled out US$8.2 million to refurbish the golden dome covering the Dome of the Rock. The exterior is now covered by gold leaf.

Islam and Judaism have common roots and Muslims consider Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and Moses to be prophets. The prophet Mohammed was the last in the line of these prophets. As such, Jews and Muslims share a number of holy sites, including the Temple Mount, the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron and Mt Sinai. Because of their close links, Muslims consider Jews and Christians to be Ahl al-Kitab, the 'People of the Book'.

It is said that Mohammed was born in the Arabian city of Mecca in AD 570 and began receiving revelations from God in AD 610. He preached the word of God to his fellow Meccans, calling on them to renounce idolatry, believe in a single God and beware of the Day of Judgment, when all humans would be held accountable for their actions. Those who resented his preaching persecuted his followers and Mohammed was exiled from the city, later settling in Medina. The people of Medina were more forthcoming to Mohammed's preaching and accepted Islam. Later he and his followers attacked Mecca, took control of the city and converted its population.

The holy book of Islam, the Quran, is believed to be the word of God, transcribed through Mohammed in a series of revelations over a period of 23 years.

Among its scriptures are the five pillars of Islam:

- Haj – the pilgrimage to Mecca, which should be made at least once in a lifetime. The reward for a Haj is the forgiving of all past sins.
- Sala – The obligation of prayer five times a day (sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and night). Prayers are done facing Mecca and can be performed anywhere, except on Friday at noon when prayers are held in a mosque.
- Shahada – The profession of faith, the basic tenet of Islam: 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah'. It's usually heard as part of the call to prayer.
- Sawm – Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, commemorates the revelation of the Quran to Mohammed. During Ramadan nothing must pass through the lips (food, cigarettes or drinks). Sex is prohibited from dawn till dusk.
- Zakat – Muslims are required to give alms to the poor to the value of one-fortieth of a believer's income. The West Bank and Gaza have around 80 zakat committees that oversee the distribution of charitable donations.

If you are looking for a brief, straightforward primer on the Muslim faith, try *Inside Islam* (2002), edited by John Miller and Aaron Kenedi, or *Islam* (2000), by Karen Armstrong. For something with a political edge read a book by Bernard Lewis, such as *Islam and the West* (1994) or *The Crisis of Islam* (2004).

Christianity

Jesus of Nazareth had very little impact on the political currents of his era. During his life he was but one of many orators critical of the materialism and decadence of the wealthy Jerusalemites, and contemptuous of Roman authority. After baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus was said to have been led by God to the desert, where he remained for 40 days and nights, during which time he refuted the temptations of the Devil. His ministry was marked by numerous miracles, such as healings, walking on water and the resuscitation of the dead. At the age of 33 or so Jesus was accused of sedition and ordered to death by Jerusalem's Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

The followers of Jesus came to be known as Christians (Christ is a Greek-derived title meaning 'Anointed One'), believing him to be the son of God and the Messiah. Jews consider this belief to be heresy, mainly because he did not fulfil the Messianic prophesies of the Hebrew Bible. Muslims consider Jesus to be an important prophet and to have lived a life of non-violence and without sin, but Muslims do not believe that he was the son of God.

Within a few decades of Jesus' death, having interpreted and spread his teachings, his followers had formed a faith distinct from Judaism. A Greek-speaking Christian community emerged in Jerusalem in the mid-2nd century; they gained importance during the rule of Constantine when most of the holy sites were discovered. Today the Greek Orthodox Church is the largest denomination in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, having jurisdiction over more than half of Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre and a bigger portion of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity than anybody else.

Numerous other denominations claim bits and pieces of other holy sites and ownership is fiercely defended. When the Ottomans ruled Palestine they attempted to settle disputes by drawing up rights of possession for nine of the most important sites. This ruling is known as the 'Status Quo'and is still applicable today.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

While mainstream Israeli society is quite similar to that found in southern Europe, due care should be taken when interacting with Orthodox people – or even walking through Orthodox areas, such as the Jerusalem neighbourhood of Me'a She'arim. Women must wear modest clothing that covers their arms and legs, and outsiders should avoid these areas during Shabbat, unless invited by a local resident. While a handshake is a common greeting in Israel, Jewish rabbis don't normally shake hands, and in Palestinian communities, men should avoid shaking hands with women.

Dress modestly when entering mosques, churches and synagogues. Remember that in a church you should remove your hat but when entering a synagogue cover your head. Remove your shoes before entering a mosque and note that by the door a shawl is usually available for women to cover their shoulders.

LIFESTYLE

The 'melting pot' description tagged onto Israel and the Palestinian Territories is not wholly accurate. Although Jews of various backgrounds have reunited in Israel, many still adhere to their traditional lifestyles and life at home is quite different for the secular and the religious. Added to this are Palestinian Christians and Muslims, who enjoy a different lifestyle altogether.

The majority of people you can expect to meet are secular Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, whose lifestyle is not unlike that of any other Westerner from Sydney to Seattle.

Because Israelis go to the army until age 20 and often take a gap year to travel abroad, university students are often aged 21 to 24. As a result, urbanites tend not to marry until their late 20s or early 30s and generally keep families small (two or three children). Family life is important but it's not uncommon to encounter single parents or an older couple without children. Seniors are quite independent and often live alone or in retirement communities, although many are cared for by their children.

Average Israeli salaries are in the neighbourhood of US$20,000 to US$25,000, which provides enough disposable income for leisure activities. On weekends Israelis flock to beaches or take driving and hiking trips in the countryside. When they get around to settling down they may return to the kibbutz where they grew up, or otherwise move to the suburbs and commute to work. Homes themselves are spacious; apartments may have three or four rooms while many private homes may have five rooms and multi-levels. Most homes also come equipped with a bomb shelter/basement that may have been converted into a guest room.

Ultraorthodox communities are insular and more self-contained. Members of the community are free to travel as they please but dedication to study and commitments to a large family keep them close to home. Men often study in a seminary until marriage.

Average earnings are lower in these communities and thus families of six, seven, eight or more people have less space to share in the home. Homes are simple and while they may be crammed with religious books, you probably won't find a TV (although many do have radios and some computers for business purposes). Yiddish is still commonly spoken in the home as Hebrew is considered a sacred language not to be used in banal conversation.

The role of women is crucial in managing these large families and while many stay at home, some work in teaching, clerical and small-business jobs. Children live sheltered lives to maintain their strict religious upbringing. When they do travel, ultraorthodox Jews need to find restaurants and hotels that can cater to their religious obligations, which severely limits the places they can go.

Religious affiliation influences the role of Israeli women in society. Secular women participate in all areas of the workforce and enjoy a freedom

Ha Buah (The Bubble) is a 2006 film directed by Eytan Fox. The movie showcases Tel Aviv and the 'bubble' life that its residents lead. Things go topsy-turvy when one of the main characters becomes romantically involved with a Palestinian.

Haredi marriages are often created through *shidduch* (match), a practice by which eligible singles are introduced to one another. A *shadachan* (matchmaker) does his or her business as a hobby but is often paid for their service if the proposed *shidduch* is successful.

The kibbutz program was the largest non-government collectivist movement ever attempted. Despite a slight fall in numbers since 1990, there are still around 116,000 people living on 266 kibbutzim in Israel.

and prestige on par with European counterparts. Religious women, on the other hand, must abide by rules of modesty. They dress conservatively and do not socialise with men other than their husbands. The past three decades have seen changes within the conservative branch of Judaism, which allows women to participate with men in religious services.

Golda Meir was the world's third female prime minister and known as the 'Iron Lady' long before the nickname was bequeathed to Margaret Thatcher. She was born in Kiev, grew up in Wisconsin and then emigrated to British Mandate Palestine in 1921.

The rift between the religious and the secular has affected the demographics of the country. In particular, young secular Jews in Jerusalem are migrating to Tel Aviv while the ultraorthodox population in Jerusalem grows, thanks to a high birth rate. Relations between the two are not always kindly, particularly when a religious family moves into a secular neighbourhood. Family feuds have broken down into arguments, fighting, tire-slashing and the occasional deployment of riot police to keep order.

Orthodox Jews and the right-wing Zionists (sometimes one and the same) often choose to live in West Bank settlements. These enormous gated communities are self-contained suburbs with shops, restaurants and community centres. There was a time before the first intifada when settlers visited Palestinian cities but these days there is virtually no communication between the Jewish and Arab neighbours. In Hebron there are almost daily reports of violence and stone throwing, most of it instigated by the settlers themselves.

Zionist immigrants occasionally move to these West Bank settlements, but many newcomers are Russian Jews who end up in low-rent Israeli towns such as Be'er Sheva. Russian culture is still dominant in their communities and you'll spot Russian newspapers, magazines and TV stations. While many immigrants still arrive, a few have gone back to where they came from, discouraged by the conflict or lured by a more tolerant and prosperous Russia; an estimated 57,000 people have moved back to Russia.

Goal Dreams is a documentary about the Palestinian national soccer team as it attempted to qualify for the 2006 World Cup. Directed by British Palestinian Maya Sanbad and American Jew Jeffery Saunders, its Israeli premiere took place in Abu Dis, where the movie was projected onto the Separation Wall.

The Palestinian lifestyle is based on Levantine traditions, the Muslim faith and an attachment to the land. In urban areas there is a tendency towards the adoption of a Westernised lifestyle and the internet cafés of Ramallah are as crowded as they are in Tel Aviv. Kids kick soccer balls and shoot hoops, while their fathers gather in coffeehouses to gossip and talk business. Attitudes towards women remain traditional although Palestinian women do enjoy more freedoms compared with some neighbouring Arab countries.

Palestinian home life is centered on the dinner table and the daily gathering of the family to eat together. Friends and neighbours drop by for a chat and following the serving of tea may be invited for a meal. In towns and cities young people go out to movies and other social events, although interaction between men and women is conservative at best.

Homes in most West Bank cities are made up of the nuclear family of five or six people. Grandparents sometimes share the home and help out with the children while the parents work. Houses range in size from stone-surfaced concrete boxes with two or three rooms to multi-storey villas with balconies. Most homes are modest but generally do have a garden with fruit- or nut-bearing trees, or a nearby family olive grove.

Refugee camps are a rung below even the simplest village dwelling. Households are frequently small, poor and overcrowded and neighbourhoods lack green space and adequate infrastructure. There are high rates of illiteracy and a lack of skilled employment. Poverty has lured many to the mosque where they receive both charity and Islamic discourse, and in the case of Gaza a militant brand of Islam. Despite this, a visit to any Palestinian home brings smiling children who know of no other home, and a pleasurable welcome from adults for whom hospitality is a way of life.

The conflict with Israel has had dramatic effects on the daily lives of many Palestinian families. Rates of unemployment are high and many

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people have friends or relatives who have either died in the conflict or are now held in Israeli prisons. There is an increasing rate of 'absent workers', people who are able to leave the country, work abroad and send money home. Limited mobility has also become a serious problem as checkpoints and walls have blocked access to schools, work opportunities and even friends and relatives.

The Fifty Years' War (1999) by Ahron Bregman and Jihan El-Tahri is a comprehensive account of the Arab-Israeli conflict produced in an easily digestible format. It was produced by the BBC along with a documentary film of the same name.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Israeli Government

Israel is a secular, parliamentary and democratic republic with a prime minister that is the head of government. The national legislature, the 120-member Knesset, is elected by proportional representation every four years (although historically elections are called early). Israel also has a president but the role is largely ceremonial.

Although Israel has a secular government, church and state are not always separate. In fact, everything from the justice system, holidays and education, right down to the national anthem, is based on Judaism. A special government arm – the Ministry for Religious Affairs – is supposed to ensure no breaching of Jewish law, although many of the details tend to be overlooked.

The *Israel Insider* (www.israelinsider.com) is an online magazine with news comments and opinion on all things Israel.

Israel's leading party, Kadima (Forward), was founded in 2005 by Ariel Sharon following his sudden departure of the Likud Party. Kadima, which won 29 seats in the 2006 Parliamentary elections, is a centrist party that promotes a secular civil agenda. Its platform is based on partial disengagement from the Palestinian Territories, a reduction in the influence in Orthodox Jewish religious groups and a free-market economy with adequate welfare support. Sharon's stroke in January 2006 brought his deputy Ehud Olmert to the head of the party and government.

The left-leaning HaOvda (Labour) party came in second in the 2006 vote, winning 19 seats and an invitation to join Kadima in a coalition. Its leader, Amir Peretz, is the first Mizrahi Jew to lead a major party and was selected as Defence Minister in Olmert's cabinet. Its founding ideology was one of Zionist Socialism (this was the party of David Ben Gurion), but has recently turned more dovish and has been compared to the Third Way of British Labour under Tony Blair.

Israel's Ale Yarok (Green Leaf; http://elections.ale-yarok.org.il) political party, which advocates the legalisation of cannabis, gambling, prostitution and same-sex marriage, won just 1.3% of the vote in the 2006 election.

Israel's third big political force is the centre-right Likud party, headed by Binyamin Netanyahu. The conservative party performed miserably in 2006, winning just 12 seats. Netanyahu, nicknamed 'Bibi', served as Finance Minister under Ariel Sharon but resigned in protest of the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza. He now opposes disengagement from the West Bank.

Around 20 other parties battled for seats in 2006. One of the big winners was Shas, the Sephardi Religious Party, which won 12 seats. Perhaps the biggest shock was that the newly formed Gil (Pensioners Party), which many voted for on a lark, ended up winning seven seats.

Palestinian Authority

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was established in 1994 as an interim body that would rule for five years while a bona fide Palestinian government was established. According to the Oslo Accords the PA was to assume control over urban areas and villages in the Palestinian Territories (rural areas and roads were still to be under Israeli control). Ongoing failures at the negotiating table prevented the establishment of an independent state and the PA remains the governing body today.

You can read up on the latest news reports from the Palestinian Territories by clicking on the website of the Palestine Media centre: www.palestine-pmc.com.

The Palestinian Authority is headed by a president, elected once every four years. In January 2005 Mahmoud Abbas won the presidency with 62% of the vote.

The Palestinian Legislative Council (Parliament) is a unicameral body with 132 members, who are elected from 16 districts in the West Bank and Gaza. The leading party in the Council selects a prime minister and a government.

The oldest political party in the Palestinian Territories, Fatah (Conquest), was founded by Yasser Arafat and a handful of refugees in the late 1950s. Fatah is a secular, nationalist party that sits left of centre. For most of its early existence Fatah was a terror organisation that carried out attacks against Israeli targets in the Middle East and Europe in the 1970s. Attempts to reconcile with Israel brought it swiftly into the mainstream (for example, it outwardly renounced terror) and it ruled Palestinian politics until 2005, when its main rival Hamas won landslide victories in local elections.

Hamas, by Matthew Levitt, is essential reading material for anyone interested in Palestinian politics. The well-researched exposé details the rise of Hamas from terror network to political tour de force.

The charter of Hamas, written in 1988, calls for the destruction of the state of Israel and the establishment of a Palestinian Islamic state in what is now Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The party rode a wave of a popular support to victory in the January 2006 Parliamentary elections, winning 74 seats. Despite its rush into the international spotlight the party maintains its radical ideology, a decision that has kept it firmly on the terror watch list of most Western countries.

The Hamas government is led by Ismail Haniya, 44, the former Dean of Gaza's Islamic University. In the summer of 2006, following the kidnapping of Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit, several Hamas MPs were captured and imprisoned by Israel. For more on Hamas, see p39.

MILITARY SERVICE

Despite its military prowess, the Israel Defence Force (IDF) is one of the least disciplined armies in the Western world. Hang around any bus station across the country and you'll spot male soldiers with eyebrow rings, female soldiers glossing their lips and a lot of lounging about and smoking of cigarettes.

When military campaigns start to go badly, the soldiers bluntly tell reporters what a lousy job their commander-in-chief did in preparing for war and how their commanding officers really didn't understand about how to fight their enemy. And you can dismiss the Hollywood army image of barking generals and cowering privates; Israeli soldiers and their superiors hold surprisingly casual and open dialogue.

National service is compulsory for Jewish, Druze and Circassian men, and Jewish women, over the age of 18. Exceptions are made for people with physical or psychological problems, or those who will not join on religious grounds. *Haredi* men do not join the IDF, except for a select few who join Nakhal Haredi (p117). For most Israelis, the army is a rite of passage, something that their fathers, grandfathers and elder siblings all went through. Those who do not join are denied certain government benefits later in life, and this is enough to encourage the disinterested.

When a male Israeli finishes his assignment he is still liable for yearly reserve duty until the age of 43. This service usually lasts for one month and is done with the same group of soldiers year after year. The camaraderie of a reserve unit is a crucial experience for Israelis and many look forward to their one month of male bonding duty. There are however, refusniks: reservists who protest serving in the West Bank for ideological reasons. Reserve units are not always called up but when they are the IDF must pay the soldier for his time.

The IDF has housing for its soldiers but many simply live at home if their unit is nearby. Nearly all soldiers go home for the weekend and you'll find them flocking to discos on Friday nights (wearing their civvies). Soldiers also use public transport to get to and from home and their army base or whatever war happens to be going on nearby, so you can expect to see soldiers everywhere on your travels. No soldier is ever allowed to leave their gun behind so M16s are everywhere, somewhat unnerving when you first arrive, but a part of life, nonetheless.

ECONOMY

Despite it lack of natural resources, Israel has developed a robust and diversified economy. Images of kibbutz farms are, however, a little obsolete, and the country is now a world leader in the tech industry.

As a sign of the times, *Newsweek* recently named Tel Aviv one of the top 10 most technologically influential cities in the world. IBM is a major player but Israel has a total of 4000 technology companies, second only to California. IT spending is nearly US$4 billion annually.

Late Summer Blues (1988), directed by Renen Schorr, is a coming of age film about a group of seven Israeli high school students about to embark on their first year in the army. The film is set during the 1970 War of Attrition at the Suez Canal.

An extension of the tech boom is Israel's manufacturing sector. The country produces aeronautical equipment, electronic and biomedical equipment and construction materials. Iscar, a world leader in metal working and metal cutting tools, recently caught the attention of American investor Warren Buffet, who bought 80% of the company for US$4 billion.

Diamond cutting and polishing is also big business – the Israel Diamond Centre in Ramat Gan is the world's largest diamond exchange.

Israel's economic miracle is not entirely homegrown; the US$3 billion per year aid package (most of which is for military spending) it receives from the USA accounts for 10% of the GDP. The economy is also greatly affected by its security issues and confrontations with its neighbours. The second intifada (2001–2005) stymied economic growth, largely due to the implosion of the tourism sector. In 2000 the country received 2.4 million tourists; recent years have seen the number cut in half. War does not come cheaply either; the second Lebanon War in 2006 cost Israeli taxpayers US$1.36 billion.

One of the more unusual films about life in the Israeli military is *Yossi & Jagger* (2002), a film by Eytan Fox about two gay soldiers in the IDF. The film is short at just 65 minutes but packs in a lot of human interest amid tragic surroundings.

Problems aside, Israelis have enjoyed the growth and the national average earning is around US$21,000 per year, ranking Israel in the top 30 countries worldwide. Palestinians, however, have shared in little of this prosperity. Many Palestinians who worked in Israel have been cut off from work, and job prospects in their own territory are gloomy at best. The average Palestinian in Gaza makes an abysmal US$600 per year, while in the West Bank the figure is around US$1100. Poverty is estimated at around 50%. A remittance economy supported by Palestinians abroad helps to support hundreds of families.

The Palestinian economy includes a small-scale textiles industry, olive wood carvings and soap manufacturing. Olive and citrus farms still dot the countryside but land use has been affected by the construction of the Security Wall, which has slashed through open farmland. Palestinian farmers have also been severely affected by export restrictions to Israel and an inability to get their produce to market. This problem hit hard in Gaza, where vegetable growers had taken over the greenhouses left behind by departing settlers. The closure of checkpoint crossings prevented the farmers from exporting their crops and the incident became a media circus when the farmers staged a protest by throwing boxes of ripe tomatoes off the back of their trucks.

Israel is ranked number two in the world for venture capital funds after the USA, and outside the USA and Canada Israel has the largest number of NASDAQ-listed companies.

The biggest of recent blows to the Palestinian economy came in the aftermath of the Hamas election in January 2006. Hamas' refusal to recognise the state of Israel caused international donors (the USA and the EU) to suspend aid to the Palestinian Authority, while Israel cut the transfer of US$55 million in tax receipts. Civil servants were left unpaid while the cash deficit grew by US$110 per month. Heading off a humanitarian crisis, donors have circumnavigated the Hamas government by providing food and cash aid directly to charity groups.

If and when the borders are relaxed, Palestinians can expect a return to some form of normality. Before the military crisis of 2006 boiled over, Israel had arranged for 20,000 workers to enter Israel from the West Bank and a newly constructed passenger terminal at Erez is able to handle up to 35,000 commuters per day.

Palestinian men are the breadwinners in most families but in a typical household his wife runs the bank. After budgeting her husband's earnings, she hands him back some walking-around cash, called 'cigarette money'.

MEDIA

The 1990s brought changes in mass communication for both Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Until then, all Israeli TV and radio was partnered with the Israel Broadcast Authority. Now there is some competition from commercial TV stations, though radio is still state-run.

The British Mandate and the rise of Palestinian nationalism produced the heyday of Palestinian print news in Jaffa and Haifa, now in Israel. What remained was the official Voice of Palestine broadcasting and a handful of publications. After the Oslo Accords, however, dozens of independent Palestinian outlets emerged, more limited by their repetitive theme of Israeli occupation than by official censorship, though critics of the Palestinian Authority are not lightly tolerated. Since the intifada of 2000, Israel has bombed or otherwise destroyed broadcast stations and studios, including the Voice of Palestine tower. But the countless satellite dishes on Palestinian roofs continue to pipe news in from Israel and the Arab world. And the independent **Palestinian News Network** (www.pnn.ps) has a multilingual news website as a base for its satellite broadcast news.

Jerusalem Media & Information Centre (www.jmcc.org) offers polls, services to journalists and documentarians and the *Palestine Report* (www.palestinereport.org). Surf or subscribe to http://electronicintifada.net for news digests of the region with headlines rephrased. The Alternative Information Center gathers and uploads video and audio news of the Territories (www.alternativenews.org).

Israelis are avid news consumers, as much to see how their young nation is reflected in the international eye as to get the latest from their own reporters. Genuine strides are made in sustaining first-rate broadcast production values and upholding journalistic standards. However, some efforts in the name of combating bias and strengthening democracy are exercises in framing dissent. Certain coverage is automatically subject to censorship, such as military issues and Jewish immigration. Nevertheless, news unfavourable to the administration does exist. In fact, Israeli newspaper reports on the conflict with the Palestinians frequently resemble Palestinian reports more closely than those of major US outlets, the global-village gold standard.

Considered Israel's liberal paper, *Ha'aretz* publishes an English-language daily and website (www.haaretz.com). Balance that with the *Jerusalem Post* (www.jpost.com).

At the height of violence in 2002, a Reporters Without Borders press freedom index showed Israel ranking at number 92 and the Palestinian Authority 82 out of 139 countries and territories. Northern Europe and Canada were in the single digits, while China and North Korea scraped the bottom. Arab countries in general got poor marks, with none making it into the top 50. Australia, the USA and the UK appeared in the top 22 in that order.

By 2005, the Palestinian Authority had dropped to 132, while Israel climbed to 47 out of 167. In both indexes, Israel lost points for violent and restrictive treatment of journalists (both foreign and domestic) in the Palestinian Territories. The Territories lost points in 2002 for squelching the voices of Islamic fundamentalists, and later kidnappings of journalists in Gaza tipped the scales against them.

For a mini media guide see p384.

Israelis have been found to do more newspaper reading than most of the rest of the world. Hebrew-language dailies of note are the ever-popular *Yedioth Ahronoth*, with an English-language website (www.ynetnews.com), and also *Maariv*. The pinkish financial daily *Globes* has an English version online, too (www.globes.co.il).

ARTS

For such a small region, Israel and the Palestinian Territories churn out a surprisingly varied assortment of films, books and musical styles, many of which make it to the international arena. Israel's biggest arty festival is the **Israel Festival** (www.israel-festival.org.il), held annually in May and June in Jerusalem. Modelled on the Edinburgh festival, and with 40 to 50 events at a host of appealing venues, it's well worth checking out.

Although events in the Palestinian Territories are not held on quite the same scale, the **Popular Art Centre** (☎ 02-40 3891; www.popularartcentre.org) in Al-Bireh has been running the Palestine International Festival annually since 1993. Plagued by problems of securing sponsorship, the event, held throughout the West Bank, nevertheless summons an impressive mixture of international and local musical and dance performers.

The Bethlehem Peace Center (p291) offers a broad range of interesting cultural activities year-round, including lectures, film screenings, exhibitions, and dance and theatre performances.

Literature

Spend time in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem and you'll probably encounter several of the grand pioneers of Israeli literature, since many central city streets are named after them. Hence, Haim Nahman Bialik, Shaul Tchernikowsky and Yosef Hayim Brenner, all of whom contributed to Palestine's blossoming literary scene in the early 20th century, may sound curiously familiar.

The novels and poems of Brenner, who died in the 1921 Arab riots, show both his passion for, and his criticism of, Zionism; his novel *Breakdown and Bereavement* deals with the lives of young Jewish pioneers under Ottoman rule and makes a vivid, haunting read. Rachel Bluwstein (1890–1931), known in Israel simply as Ra'hel, is the nation's second greatest–loved poet after Bialik; many of her poems have also been incorporated into songs, and the collection *Flowers of Perhaps: Selected Poems of Ra'hel* is available in English translation. More recently, Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000) captured the public's imagination with his gently ironic explorations of daily life. Acclaimed British poet Ted Hughes translated several of his collections, including *Amen*.

For modern Israeli poetry, dip into *No Sign of Ceasefire: An Anthology of Contemporary Israeli Poetry*. Featuring the work of 11 well-known Israeli poets, themes cover war, peace, spirituality, family and contemporary life in Israel.

In the mid-20th century, Israel's first Nobel Literature Prize winner, SY Agnon, emerged as a powerful force on the international literary scene. His works are often concerned with the dichotomy between traditional Jewish and modern life; the novel that secured his stellar reputation was *The Bridal Canopy* (1931). The three contemporary Israeli prose writers most widely available in translation are Amos Oz, David Grossman and AB Yehoshua. Almost all of Oz's works paint bleak but compelling pictures of an Israel few visitors encounter; *My Michael* tells the captivating, melancholy story of a young woman's life during a grey Jerusalem winter. Haifa native Yehoshua, described by *The New York Times* as an Israeli Faulkner, particularly shines in *The Lover,* a tale of a man's obsessive search for his wife's lover, against the backdrop of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Until recent years, poetry remained the most common form of literary expression in Palestinian circles, and politically orientated poet Mahmoud Darwish is its leading force. Many of his works have achieved almost hymn-like status in Palestinian society; two recent collections, *Unfortunately, it was Paradise* and *Why did You Leave the Horse Alone?* are typically lyrical and nostalgic.

Israel's major literary festival is the International Jerusalem Book Fair (☎ 02-629 7922; www.jerusalembookfair.com), held biennially since 1963. Now a large international event, with over 40 countries in attendance, it's here that the prestigious Jerusalem Prize for Literature is awarded.

It wasn't until the '60s that works of narrative fiction really began to filter into the Palestinian literary scene. Emile Habibi and Tawfiq Zayad, Israeli Arabs who served as long-term Israeli members of parliament, both wrote highly regarded works of fiction. Habibi's *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pesoptimist* is a brilliant, tragi-comic tale dealing with the problems facing Palestinians who took on Israeli nationality after 1948. Meanwhile, the late Ghassan Kanafani's stunning debut work *Men in the Sun* contains a novella and a collection of short stories delving into the lives, hopes and shattered dreams of a number of Palestinian characters. In 1972, Kanafani was killed by a car bomb in Beirut at just 36, leaving behind just a handful of works.

The books of Edward Said (1935–2003), Palestinian literary theorist and essayist, are good to delve into for non-fiction; his famous 1978 study *Orientalism* remains a fascinating and controversial work. Also look out for his acclaimed autobiography, *Out of Place: A Memoir.*

In recent decades, great efforts have been made to bring the work of young Palestinian literary talent – especially female novelists – to the international public's attention. The Project for Translation from Arabic, established in the '70s by poet Salma Khadra Jayyusi, has aided the dissemination of works by female authors like Sahar Khalifeh, whose 2005 novel *The Inheritance* provides a frequently chilling insight into the lives of Palestinian women, both in the Palestinian Territories and abroad.

Music

Aside from the tinny Arabic pop direct from Cairo that you'll encounter every step of the way around the Palestinian Territories, you might also stumble across traditional folk music, dominated by the sounds of the oud (a kind of lute), *daf* (tambourine) and *ney* (flute). Thanks to a tenacious desire to stay close to their roots, Palestinians have managed to keep these melodious folk tunes alive and well, though their performance is limited largely to private events and small, local festivals.

To listen to some genuine Palestinian folk music, go to www.barghouti.com/folklore/voice/. Many of the songs were recorded live at Palestinian weddings, where the art form continues to be practised at its best.

A phenomenon currently sweeping the Palestinian Territories is locally produced rap music. From Gaza's first hip-hop group, PR (Palestinian Rappers), to the genre's main exponents, **Dam Rap** (www.dam3rap.com), the music, which frequently deals with themes of occupation, difficulties of daily life and resistance, exists alongside the work of Palestinian rappers living abroad, such as the US-based Iron Sheikh. Dam Rap actually consists of a group of Israeli Arabs from the impoverished city of Lod, not far from Ben-Gurion airport. Identifying both with Palestinians and Israelis, they rap in a heady mixture of Hebrew, Arabic and English.

Though Israelis remain Eurovision-mad, and if you visit at that time of the year there's no escaping it, the country's output is far more diverse than its Eurovision entries. Around half of what you'll hear on the radio in Israel is homegrown Israeli fare, which can be divided into several distinct categories. First, there's Mizrahi, or Eastern, music with its roots in the Arabic melodies of Yemen and North Africa. Usually sung in Hebrew, it has unmistakably Arabic undertones; Israeli singer Zahava Ben is one of the most famous of the genre, with a huge following in Egypt as well. Second, there's Israeli rock, the same as rock the world over but with Hebrew lyrics, the territory of old, established bands like Machina – once Israel's answer to Madness – and the extremely popular singer Shalom Hanoch. Third, and most prevalent, there's the mainstream, anthemic music that Israelis really love. If you're travelling by car with the radio on, you'll know you've heard it when you've picked up several uplifting choruses within just a few hours; greats include Shlomo Artzi, Arik Einstein, Judith Ravitz and Matti Caspi. Newcomer Idan Raichel is well worth listening to, having made Ethiopian melodies popular to a mainstream audience by incorporating them into more conventional pop tunes. Israeli rap, too, has a good standing, artists including Subliminal, The Shadow and Shabak Samech.

MUSICAL YOUTH

Continuing in the spirit of keeping Palestinian musical production alive and well, recent years have seen a massive revival in music teaching by Palestinian musicians concerned that it was rapidly falling off school curricula. A number of organisations have sprung up dedicated to getting Palestinian children immersed in music. The largest, most established of these schools is the **Edward Said National Conservatory of Music** (☎ 02-627 1711; http://ncm.birzeit.edu/; YWCA, Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem), with branches in East Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem, which trains young people in both traditional Palestinian instruments and in Western woodwind, string instruments, brass and piano. The school's Palestine Youth Orchestra hosts excellent regular concerts in Ramallah and Jerusalem, well worth attending if you are in the area. Likewise, **Al Kamandjati** (www.alkamandjati.com) school in Ramallah and the **National Centre of Music** (☎ 09-239 5202; www.ncomusic.com) in Nablus offer music classes to the poorest children living in camps across the West Bank; many of the kids acknowledge that music has transformed their spare time from throwing stones at Israeli tanks to practising a discipline that offers a release and a future. The Belgian-based **Music Fund** (www.musicfund.be) also supports these activities by frequently arriving in the region with supplies of donated instruments, to allow more and more children to join in this musical revolution. All of these organisations can be contacted if you're interested in getting involved.

VOICE FOR PEACE *Michael Kohn*

Smadar Levi knows that her voice won't solve the Middle East conflict, but recognises that a little bit of positive energy won't hurt either.

The Israeli singer-songwriter is building a name for herself as a voice of reason in a troubled landscape. She hails from Sderot, the small town in the Negev that has seen a constant barrage of Qassam rocket fire. But rather than dwelling on the negative, her lyrics describe peace between peoples, and she performs jointly with Arab and Israeli musicians. Her haunting voice is also a mixture of cultures – she sings in Arabic, Hebrew, Greek and Spanish, occasionally throwing in a bit of Ladino (Judeo-Spanish).

Levi's mixed Moroccan-Tunisian ancestry and upbringing in Israel supplied a multicultural base that was musically enhanced by her father, a singer himself. Her worldly outlook grew after her IDF service, when she packed her bags and set off for Europe. Wherever she went Smadar was attracted to music, and upon reaching New York in 2000 she assembled likeminded folk to work on a multiethnic music project.

What evolved was a group of Israelis, Turks and Arabs playing a mix of Mediterranean and Gypsy sounds. Peace and unity are the main themes, with politics nowhere to be found. But the irony of an Israeli singing in Arabic does not go unnoticed and seems to be a political message in and of itself. See www.smadarlevi.com for details.

For an inside look at the lives of Palestinian rappers, check out the film *Slingshot Hip Hop*. For information log on to www.slingshothiphop.com.

Israel also has a strong classical music tradition, largely the result of an influx of Jewish European musicians, fleeing from the spectre of Nazism prior to the outbreak of WWII. The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, housed in Tel Aviv's unimposing Mann Auditorium (p159), is world renowned, and if possible while in Israel, try to attend one of its 'Philharmonic in Jeans,' concerts, which offer a less stuffy ambience, free beer and snacks in the foyer, and an Israeli celebrity host between performances.

Recently, traditional Jewish 'soul', known as Klezmer, has experienced something of a revival. Born in the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe, its melodies can take you swiftly from ecstasy to the depths of despair and have their origins in traditional Jewish celebrations. The annual Klezmer festival in Tsfat (p281) draws around 10,000 to 15,000 visitors, mostly young people, in a uniquely mellow atmosphere, where secular and religious Israelis mix, listening to music in shady courtyards and alleyways.

The Boombamela, held annually in March or April (www.boombamela.co.il) is an alternative beach music festival, with a distinctly New Age flavour. *Dear beloved people,* announces its website, *We invite you to severance for a few days from the shrinking reality… In Boombamela land.* See p390 for more details.

Theatre & Dance

Huge numbers of Israelis flock regularly to the theatre, especially in Tel Aviv where there's a proliferation of companies and venues, and Jerusalem, where there are frequent festivals, both large and small. Most performances are in Hebrew, Russian or Yiddish, and especially popular are the late, great Israeli playwrights Hanoch Levin and Nissim Aloni, as well as contemporary writer, playwright and director, Yehoshua Sobol. The oldest and best-known theatre company is probably Habima (see p178), founded

Israel's best festivals include the Abu Ghosh Vocal Music Festival (www.agfestival.co.il) in June, with liturgical music performed in two beautiful churches; Eilat's Red Sea Jazz Festival (www.redseajazzeilat.com/EN/) in August; and, for dance music, Tel Aviv's October Love Parade (www.layla.co.il/loveparade/).

by a group of Russian actors performing in Hebrew, who moved to Israel during the 1920s and '30s.

Israeli theatre fare can generally be divided into one of four distinct forms. First, there's the perennially popular all-singing, all-dancing big budget production, usually imported, and consisting of standard musical fare direct from the West End or Broadway, albeit usually translated into Hebrew. Local musicals, such as Ha'lehaka (The Band) are surefire hits across the board. Next come solid, classic works-in-translation: Ibsen, Miller, Tennessee Williams, and a good bit of Shakespeare thrown in, and third, the manifold stand-up comedy and satire shows to which Israelis young and old flock on Friday nights. Finally, and most significantly, there's the 'social commentary' play – in which Israeli theatre has its roots, and which is just as prevalent and relevant today – tackling the hot political topics and social issues of the moment. In recent years, refuseniks, the West Bank occupation, suicide and homosexuality within Orthodox Judaism have all been thoroughly explored onstage; *Phallus HaKadosh* (The Holy Phallus), a male response to the *Vagina Monologues* starring Yuval Cohen, and the internationally acclaimed Plonter, directed by Yael Ronen and examining Israeli-Palestinian relations with a mixed Jewish and Arab cast, are two successful examples of viewing contemporary Israeli society from within the confines of the black box.

The fantastic fringe Akko Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre (www.accofestival.co.il) hosts Israeli plays, kids' performances and street theatre every year in October, during the Sukkoth holiday.

Throughout the last century, Palestinian theatre has suffered a series of setbacks, first due to the British Mandate, when English-language plays were promoted and local works frequently censored, through to today, when travel restrictions and a poor economy mean that many have neither the opportunity nor the resources to attend the theatre. Nevertheless, theatre struggles on, and the Palestinian National Theatre (www.pnt-pal.org) in East Jerusalem, founded in 1984 by the El-Hakawati Theatre Company, is one of the largest centres for Palestinian theatre, with regular performances. Al-Kasaba Theater and Cinematheque (see p301) in central Ramallah is the only professionally equipped theatre in the West Bank with a main auditorium and a smaller studio theatre.

Despite the problems, some important Palestinian playwrights have still emerged in the last century. One of the most prolific Palestinian playwrights was Jamil Habib Bahri, who worked largely in the 1920s, and produced popular tragedies such as *The Traitor* and *For the Sake of Honour*.

The International Centre of Bethlehem (Dar Annadwa; see p294), hosts a wide range of dance, theatre and arts events, as does the state-of-the-art Ramallah Cultural Palace (p303), built in collaboration between the UN, the Palestinian Authority and the Japanese government.

Gaza City hosted its first international theatre festival in the summer of 2005, but was unable to repeat it in 2006 due to travel restrictions on Palestinians within Gaza and on foreigners coming to the area from elsewhere. Organiser Sami Abu Salem (abusalem_s@yahoo.com) is working hard, however, to ensure the festival in coming years.

There are several renowned professional dance troupes working in Israel, and smaller groups produce a large amount of experimental dance. The Bat Sheva company founded by Martha Graham and housed at the Suzanne Dellal Centre (see p178) in Tel Aviv is probably the best known. Acclaimed choreographer Ohad Naharin is the company's house choreographer. For something completely different, Israel's answer to Stomp is Jaffa-based Mayumana (see p186). Catch one of their noisy, raucous, energetic shows if they're not off on tour. Another dance form popular in Israel is *hora,* a form of folk dancing with its origins in Romania. The best place to see this is at the **Carmiel Dance Festival** (☎ 04 988 1111; www.dancefest.karmiel.israel.net), held over three days in early July. Palestinian dance, too, largely consists of folk dancing, the main type being *dabka*.

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THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Most images of Israel's contentious 'security wall', which snakes for several hundred miles across the West Bank, show faceless grey stretches of dismal concrete panelling, topped by armed guards perched in precarious watchtowers and flanked by a rubble-strewn 'exclusion zone' writhing with barbed wire. But, just like the Berlin Wall of the 1980s, it has developed a second face, metamorphosing into a blank canvas for artistic outpourings, most of which appear on its eastern – Palestinian – side.

Some of the myriad messages painted on its smooth surface speak of hope; others are angry; still more are defiant or ironic. There are graffiti projects by international professionals, simple painted murals created by schoolchildren, and visitors' spray-canned protests in a spectrum of languages. Some Palestinians think the 'writing on the wall' is an important form of communication with the outside world; others feel that painting on it legitimises its existence and simply shouldn't be done at all. The most heavily decorated section of wall is to the left of the Bethlehem checkpoint as you enter from Israel, and further on to the right, towards Aida Refugee Camp. British graffiti artist **Banksy** (www.banksy.co.uk) is one of the most well known to add his mark, along with Pink Floyd's Roger Waters, who appropriately added his own lyrics from 'The Wall' to the real thing.

One of the best groups to catch performing while in the area is **El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe** (☎ 02 240 2853; www.el-funoun.org), based in Al-Bireh in the West Bank.

Al Rowwad theatre group (☎ 02 275 0030; www.alrowwad.virtualactivism.net) in Aida Camp is an excellent children's theatre troupe that frequently tours internationally. With a number of theatre and educational projects on the go at any one time, director Abdel Fattah Abu-Srour welcomes volunteers.

Visual Arts

In 1906, the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Crafts was established in Jerusalem to encourage young Jewish artists to study in Palestine. Today it remains one of the most exciting forces on Israel's art scene, with its Masters program now located in Tel Aviv. From 1910, Tel Aviv became the Israel's main centre of artistic production and innovation, with young artists depicting exotic Middle Eastern themes in a primitive style.

During the 1930s, art became more heavily influenced by the bold forms of German expressionism, with German Jewish artists fleeing to find refuge in Palestine. Then, after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the influential New Horizons group emerged, which strove to create art in line with emerging European movements and stayed the dominating force on the Israeli arts scene until the '60s. From New Horizons came Marcel Janco, an immigrant from Romania, who studied in Paris and with Tristan Tzara became one of the founders of Dada. A museum of his work is in Ein Hod (see p208), the artists' village he established in the '50s. Meanwhile, the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion (see p159), annexed to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, hosts exhibitions of innovative contemporary Israeli art.

Nahum Gutman, whose intimate Gutman Museum (www.gutmanmuseum.co.il) is situated in Neve Tzedek, Tel Aviv, was a major figure on the Israeli art scene throughout the 20th century.

Due to the sad necessity for monuments to those killed throughout Israel and the Palestinian Territories' turbulent history, sculpture is also a prominent art form in the country. From Avraham Melnikoff's huge stone lion at Tel Hai (p265), to Dani Karavan's *Monument to the Negev Brigade* outside Be'er Sheva (p331), you're sure to see memorial sculptures in stone or metal, or even utilising fragments from a tragedy, almost anywhere you go in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Contemporary Palestinian art, which became a force apart from traditional Palestinian craft-based art during the 1960s, is a rapidly growing international force. The late Ismail Shammout and his partner Tamam Shammout were a renowned artist couple working in Jordan (see www.shammout.com). The best places for exhibitions of Palestinian visual art

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Ein Hod, 20km south of Haifa, is an excellent place to dip into Israel's home grown arts and crafts scene (www.ein-hod.israel.net), as are the 'old city' districts of Jaffa and Tsfat, both of which have close-knit resident artistic communities.

in the region are at the Arts & Crafts Village in Gaza City (p361), the Bethlehem Peace Center (p291) and Dar Annadwa (p294) in Bethlehem, and the Khalil Sakakini Centre (p303) in Ramallah. On the international scene, artist Emily Jacir recently exhibited at the Venice Bienniale, while Rana Bishara and Larissa Sansour were both shown at the Tate Modern in London.

One distinct visual art form particularly strong within Palestinian society is the political cartoon. Female Palestinian cartoonist **Omayya Joha** (www.omayya.com) and the late Naji al-Ali are two of the best-known creators in the genre. Their work is characterised by bitter criticism of Israel, the USA and, in the case of Omayya, Palestinian society itself. Her husband, an alleged Hamas operative, was killed in an Israeli army raid in Gaza in 2003. Al-Ali was assassinated in London in 1987, but his work seems just as timely today.

Cinema

Two good websites to explore contemporary Palestinian artists are www.jerusalemites.org/artist/index.htm and www.sakakini.org/visualarts/visualarts.htm.

Israeli cinema has come a long way since the light, comic *borekas* movies that dominated big screens during the '70s. Nowadays, Israeli films have hit international headlines, from the Oscar-nominated 2002 documentary *Promises,* portraying the lives of seven Israeli and Palestinian children, to the Cesar-nominated 2004 *Walk on Water,* which deals with the relationship between the young, gay, German grandson of a Nazi war criminal, and an Israeli Mossad agent. In 2005, Israeli actress Hannah Laslo also won the Best Actress accolade at the Cannes Film Festival for her role in Amos Gitai's *Free Zone*. During filming, co-star Natalie Portman caused uproar among the ultraorthodox community by filming a kissing scene near the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

A number of other worthwhile recent movies delving into worlds not often encountered by the visitor include *Campfire* (2004), in which a 42-year-old widow and her daughters attempt a fresh start to life in a settlement, *Ushpzin* (2004), family drama *Broken Wings* (2002), and *The Syrian Bride* (2004), in which a young Druze woman is set to leave Israel forever, to marry a Syrian TV star she has never met.

Chaim Topol, of *Fiddler on the Roof* fame, can be frequently spotted sipping cappuccinos in the cafés around Ben Yehuda St in Tel Aviv. Sit next to him, and you'll find it impossible to prevent yourself from humming 'If I were a rich man…'

The Palestinian Territories have recently had their own share of international acclaim with the controversial, Oscar-nominated *Paradise Now,* directed by Hany Abu-Assad, which puts a handsome human face to Palestinian suicide bombers. Feature-film production within the Palestinian Territories, however, is hampered through lack of financing, film education and resources. Thus, most of its well-known movies, such as *Divine Intervention* by director Elia Suleiman and *Attente* by Rashid Mashrawi, are international productions shot, but not completely produced, in the region. The **AM Qattan foundation** (www.qattanfoundation.org) is hoping to change all this, having embarked on an ambitious Palestinian Audio-Visual Project to give a group of promising young film-makers a professional film education, in order to hopefully one day truly situate cinematic production within the Territories.

Israel and the Palestinian Territories provide the backdrop for a host of extremely powerful documentaries. Worthwhile watching are Mohammed Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin* (2002), Juliano Mer Khamis's *Arna's Children* (2003), the hard-hitting *Death in Gaza* (2004), which resulted in the death of its UK director James Miller, and Yoav Shamir's *5 Days,* which documents the 2005 Israeli pullout from Gaza.

To take the edge off these tension-filled flicks, check out Ari Sandel's zany *West Bank Story* (2005; www.westbankstory.com), a modern spoof on the musical West Side Story.

Architecture

Modern Palestinian architecture is largely functional and uninspiring; refugee camps across the West Bank and Gaza gained an air of permanence, which many Palestinians dislike, when temporary shelters began to be replaced by poor-quality, quickly built accommodation designed to house as many people as possible. On the other hand, the preserved or restored structures of bygone eras, exemplified in and around Bethlehem, show the beauty of Palestine's traditional architecture; the **Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation** (☎ 02-295 8187; www.riwaq.org) in Ramallah works hard to preserve and document traditional Palestinian buildings, from rural stone farmhouses to ancient mosques.

Two active Palestinian community film projects are the Balata Refugee Camp Film Collective in the West Bank (www.balatacamp.net/website/balata.htm) and Qisat Nas Community Film School in Gaza. (www.qisatnas.org.uk/home/). Both have excerpts of their documentaries viewable online.

Similarly, with the exception of the ancient cities such as Jerusalem and Akko, and restored early settlements like Rosh Pina and Metula, modern Israel isn't known for its terrific architecture. Across the country you'll see dull utilitarian structures filling kibbutzim and tightly packed concrete apartment blocks built to cater for the immigration boom of the '50s and '60s. Soulless new developments such as Modi'in blend into the rocky landscape between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem about as well as Caeasarea's looming electricity plant does on its stretch of idyllic Med coastline.

But look behind the modern mess and decrepitude and there are still treasures to be found. Tel Aviv is a bastion of glorious Bauhaus design, so much so that in 2004 Unesco saw fit to bestow the title World Heritage Site upon the city. Not all the Bauhaus treasures have yet been renovated; many remain tumbledown and unkempt. But gradually, scaffolding has started to go up across the city as more and more developers see the potential in restoring these buildings to their former glory.

Tel Aviv's large documentary festival, DocAviv (www.docaviv.co.il), is held at the Tel Aviv cinematheque in April and May. In mid July, the prestigious Jerusalem International Film Festival (www.jff.org.il) at its Cinematheque attracts around 50,000 visitors each year.

A few new modern buildings are bucking the trend: the Azrieli Towers in Tel Aviv, the Sail Building in Haifa and, somewhat surprisingly, the Hekhal HaTarbut in Ashdod.

Environment

Professor Alon Tal

NATURAL DIVERSITY

There is very little that is 'normal' about Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Even ecologically and environmentally, the place is fairly extraordinary – for better and for worse. Anyone who opens a Bible cannot help but notice that the land of Israel, relative to its size, is teeming with life: nature served as a central inspiration and motif for psalmists, prophets and subsequent pilgrims.

Professor Alon Tal founded the Israel Union for Environmental Defense and the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, and has served as chair of Life and Environment, Israel's umbrella group for green organisations. For more biographical information, see p16.

The land's location as the meeting point of three continents made it a strategic asset for conquerors for millennia, but it also created an ecological smorgasbord. African-tropical mammals such as the hyrax exist next to oriental-tropical mammals such as the porcupine, and the relatively rare European marten. In the arid southlands, travellers can feel an African influence in the isolated acacia stands, the nimble antelopes and the ornate horns of the ibex. It takes patience and luck to see them, but hyenas and leopards still prowl the night while a wide variety of reptiles are evident during the day, notwithstanding the harsh conditions of the Negev Desert. To the north, Mediterranean forests with their gnarled oaks, almonds and sycamores can be found in the Carmel and Meron regions. They offer what may be the most authentic examples of the original wooded vistas that provided the scenery in such biblical tales as the slaying of Absalom in Gilead or the imagery for Isaiah's prophecies. Today's inventory shows that Israel and the Palestinian Territories are home to almost 700 vertebrates, including 518 bird species, more types of bats than all of Europe, and 2600 plant species, including 130 that are endemic.

It wasn't always so. The introduction of firearms during the 19th century soon led to the devastation of several populations of large mammals and birds. Cheetahs, bears, ostriches and crocodiles were just a few of the animals hunted out of existence. Yet a determined policy of conservation during much of modern Israel's history has stemmed this tide.

Forty years ago, an initiative known as Hai Bar (literally 'wildlife') returned several species of animals that appear throughout the Bible, but later disappeared, unable to withstand the heavy hand of human hunters. Hai Bar involves collecting a small pool of rare animals and patiently breeding them until they can be gradually returned into a natural habitat. In a parallel initiative, birds of prey whose populations were ravaged by profligate pesticide usage during the 1950s were also gradually returned.

In *The Natural History of the Bible* (2006), Daniel Hillel, a world-renowned soil physicist and expert in water management, brings a lifetime of passion for nature in Israel and his eclectic personal knowledge to illuminate local ecology's influence on the people and world of the Scriptures.

While some zoologists question the authenticity of a few of the mammal species, the program has largely been a success. Starting with the wild ass, a favourite specimen in Isaiah's prophesies, other animals were quietly reintroduced to the country's open spaces. A small group of Persian fallow deer was secretly flown in from Iran in 1981 on the last El Al flight to leave before Khomeini's revolution. These shy animals have taken hold in the breathtaking Galilee reserve of Akhziv and around the hills that lead to Jerusalem. The lovely Arabian oryx, whose straight parallel horns gave Crusaders the impression that they were unicorns, are also back. The two Hai Bar centres are being downsized, having completed most of their reintroductions, but are still well worth a visit for animal or Bible fans.

Much of the natural wetlands that once characterised the central and northern parts of Israel and the Palestinian Territories have long since been drained and disappeared, erasing much of their unique flora and fauna. But small sanctuaries such as Ein Afek and Huleh preserve the feel of the original local swamps, with a rich assortment of birds and even lumbering water buffalo.

Plants, like animals, have benefited from Israel's conservation policies. An aggressive national campaign during the 1960s convinced the public to refrain from picking the astonishing assortment of wildflowers. From January through to March, the hillsides explode with carpets of blossoming colours that more than justify a ride to the countryside. The anemones and cyclamens at the Be'eri Forest in the northern Negev and the Beit Keshet forest near Nazareth are particularly astonishing. Irises can be found in the Gilboa reserve, and native orchids in the Jerusalem hillsides.

For good leads on ecotourism destinations, have a look around www.ecotourism-israel.com.

Israel's 128 surviving indigenous mammal species for the most part hold a steady-state condition, due to the strong regulation of hunting and a system of nature reserves comprising some 25% of the land. However, nature reserves are no panacea for biodiversity loss. Many are miniscule in size and isolated, providing only limited protection for local species. Moreover, many of the reserves in the south are also used as military firing zones. Sometimes this overlap works to nature's advantage, as the army can be sensitive in setting aside buffer zones, and civilian visitors are only allowed in on weekends and holidays. But the heavily armed soldiers, tanks and bombers are hardly innocuous for many of the non-human inhabitants of these lands.

FOR THE BIRDS

A common misconception is that birds migrate because they can't take the cold. In fact, their feathers warm them enough to survive brutal winters. Rather, birds 'fly south' to find food. When frozen ground starts to limit insect supplies and vegetation, they leave chilly Europe and Asia for Africa each autumn. But it is unwise to stay there beyond the winter. The competition for food is simply too stiff to find the extra calories needed for breeding. So they head back home where they can feast on the once-again abundant insects.

The transition back and forth means that twice a year, half a billion birds of every conceivable variety soar along the Syro-African rift, the largest avian fly way in the world. Compressed into a narrow corridor along the eastern edge of Israel and the Palestinian Territories, the topography creates astonishing opportunities for bird-watchers.

A number of sites offer rewarding experiences even for those who are not inclined to rise before the sun, binoculars in hand, to identify arcane avian species:

- In the northern Galilee, a project to reflood a small corner of the Huleh Valley attracts thousands of cranes that stay the winter months in this lovely reserve, along with pelicans and other creatures. For more information, visit www.zimmer.co.il/agmon-hahula.
- The **International Center for the Study of Bird Migration** (www.birds.org.il) in Latrun sports a radar system that allows children around the world to track birds on their migration routes.
- The lovely desert community of **Kibbutz Lotan** (www.birdingisrael.com) has a wonderful guesthouse and ecological education programs that include introductions to birding See p344).
- Perhaps the most impressive initiative is the **Eilat International Bird Center** (www.birds-eilat.com), run by ornithologist extraordinaire Reuven Yosef. An old garbage dump has been restored as a lovely salt marsh with replanted natural flora and small reservoirs. The myriad of exhausted birds that survive the perilous flight over the Sahara and then cross the Red Sea refuel here before continuing on their journey to the north.

HUMAN SETTLEMENT

The term 'wilderness' in this ancient land is something of a misnomer. People have literally roamed the seemingly empty desert regions from

time immemorial. There is hardly a corner of the countryside that does not show some signs of human activity, as can be seen in the countless archaeological remains, some going back 120,000 years.

This ecological footprint was not always a destructive one. For example, researchers have pretty strong evidence suggesting that pastoral activities have been a net contributor to the area's biodiversity, especially the rich variety of winter plants. Not only did the grazing flocks of sheep and goats leave behind fertilisers, but they also seem to have checked the unfettered spread of other dominant species. This may be one of the reasons why dry lands in Israel and the Palestinian Territories support many times more the species density of climatically comparable areas in the American southwest.

The Environment in Israel (2002) by Shoshana Gabbay was produced for the Ministry of Environment's submission to the World Summit for Sustainable Development. It contains all the data any policy wonk could dream of, written clearly and coherently. It's available online at www.sviva.gov.il.

The litany of conquerors also had an impact. For much of the past 2000 years, the land of Israel and the Palestinian Territories was relegated to colony status. Distant governments squeezed maximal taxes from the poor local population, with little interest in restoration or stewardship. The local Arab peasant population (known locally as 'fellaheen') was pushed into a subsistence poverty that often left them without the resources to maintain the terraced agriculture and crop rotation that were part of a sustainable biblical farming system. A steady process of deforestation and loss of land cover was accelerated by overgrazing and woodcutting.

When American novelist Mark Twain visited the country in 1867, his bestselling travelogue, *The Innocents Abroad,* documented a barren, desertified countryside: 'Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country. No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem'. The Ottoman military felled huge wooded swaths during WWI as its military beefed up the railways to supply troops who faced the approaching British army. Aerial photographs from the period confirm that the destruction of local oak forests was almost complete.

Yet, in contrast to many countries in the region that seem resigned to perennial land degradation, the Israeli landscape today reflects an impressive national restoration effort. Long before Zionists gained the upper hand politically, its European settlers were involved in an afforestation campaign that led to the planting of over 260 million trees during the past 60 years.

The Jewish National Fund (JNF) is technically a corporation, owned by the Jewish people through the World Zionist Organisation (WZO). Over a century ago it was given a mandate of 'redeeming the Land of Israel'. With the completion of the country's 1948 Arab-Israeli War (p35), real estate acquisition ceased to be a priority, so Israel turned its attention to afforestation. The JNF's aggressive campaign to create pine forests across the country was for many years the subject of criticism by ecologists, who disliked the mechanically planted conifer monocultures, and of resentment by Arab citizens, who saw the forests as symbols of Jewish domination. During the past decade, however, the organisation has grown far more sensitive and sophisticated ecologically, diversifying its plantings and relying largely on local species while preserving native vegetation.

Today a statutory master plan has zoned some 10% of the countryside as forests, which serve a variety of recreational and ecological functions. These parks dot the roadsides of Israel and are popular picnic sites for millions of Israelis. For Jews around the world, planting trees has become synonymous with expressions of solidarity with the State of Israel. Most of the forests lack the authenticity of old-growth woods. But afforestation nonetheless constitutes a significant achievement in landscape restoration, most notably in the desiccated south, where pine stands thrive in areas with as little as 100mm precipitation.

lonelyplanet.com

Afforestation and a controlled grazing program were crucial parts of reversing desertification trends that for so long appeared unyielding across the region. But it is agricultural production that truly made 'the desert bloom'. During its first 60 years, while the country's population grew sevenfold, agricultural production expanded 16-fold, largely in the semiarid and arid regions.

WATER MANAGEMENT

In the hydrological equivalent of socialism, as soon as Israel declared independence it began to plan the transport of water from the wealthy (and wet) Galilee to the dryer south. These infrastructure projects were incredibly ambitious for a newborn, developing nation, burning much of the available foreign currency. But by the 1960s, prodigious quantities of water were piped down to the Negev Desert and the farming settlements flourished. Nisan Tsuri, the octogenarian curator of the somewhat obscure Museum of Water & Security in Kibbutz Niram, near Ashkelon, offers fascinating insights into the effort. Mekorot, the country's national water utility, runs visitor centres at Merkaz Sappir on the Sea of Galilee and in the centre of the country, which are worth the time for the hydrologically curious.

At the same time, the country was also technologically ambitious. The Israeli public once overwhelmingly voted drip irrigation to be the greatest Israeli invention in its history – ahead of even the Epilady hair removal system and ICQ computer chat software. When coupled with an uncommon alacrity for recycling sewage, drip irrigation transformed large areas of the parched southlands into a new agricultural heartland.

Statistics suggest that Israel's drinking water quality has improved over the years and is potable, but a growing number of Israelis put their trust in bottled mineral waters.

Not that these bold water projects were without environmental ramifications. During the 1950s, the Huleh wetlands in the northern Galilee were drained to create farmland, and with them a natural wonderland and key nutrient sink for the Sea of Galilee was obliterated. The water from the Jordan River basin and the Sea of Galilee are naturally quite salty, exacerbating the problem of overpumping that has salinised groundwater along the coast. Lacking their natural flow, the country's streams became perennial conduits of sewage, which even today are not treated at a sufficiently high level to serve as aquatic habitat. The priority given to providing water for agriculture came at the expense of many natural ecosystems that became parched or disappeared altogether. Some of the polluting side effects have been mitigated through upgrading of waste treatment, new-generation subsurface irrigation and a general heightened environmental sensitivity. But some have not.

The most conspicuous victim of Israel's water management initiatives has been the Dead Sea (see Dead Healthy?, p323). Present flow into the world's lowest and saltiest lake is one billion cu metres of water less than reaches it naturally. As a result, the sea is rapidly disappearing, with water levels dropping at 1.2m per year. Sinkholes have begun to form around the banks, posing a safety hazard and undermining agriculture and the tourist trades. Proposals to return flow via a 'Red-Dead' conduit that would bring water from the Red Sea, although enthusiastically supported by Jordan, remain unfunded and environmentalists are ambivalent about possible impacts.

Water harvesting and desalination also contribute to Israel's water management strategy. Years ago, the ancients channelled the rare desert cloud bursts to support agriculture. Today, travellers can visit a reconstructed ancient Nabatean farm, founded by a local legend, the late Professor Eben Ari, just south of Sede Boqer in the Negev. In recent years the JNF has invested heavily in constructing reservoirs that now harvest some 7% of the country's water resources from rains.

THE PALESTINIAN ENVIRONMENT

In many ways, Palestinians face a 'developing nation's' environmental profile. Quantities of available fresh water lag behind Western standards and existing infrastructure is often defective. For example, in many Palestinian cities, as much as half the water is lost to leakage. Drinking water purification is not uniform and the incidence of water-borne intestinal disease is high, especially among children. Sewage treatment in major cities, such as Hebron and Nablus, is virtually nonexistent, although grants from international donors are beginning the process of upgrading.

The West Bank's ecological situation, however, is quite reasonable compared with that of the Gaza Strip. Nitrate levels and salinity in Gaza's aquifers were already excessive during the period of Egyptian control before 1967 and have reached crisis levels. Dozens of unlicensed wells, dug after Israel evacuated the region, exacerbate the massive seawater intrusion. Very little land that can be called open space remains in the Gaza Strip. Wadi Gaza, its only freshwater stream and wetland system, has largely become a garbage dump.

In contrast to the general Palestinian economic destitution, some of the traditional fellah pastoralism and old agrarian culture still survives and makes for scenic vistas. Local architecture retains much of its traditional charm, with sensitively sited stone homes, flowing with the ancient lands. The olive tree remains more than a national symbol, but a cultural and economic resource. And the absence of heavy industrial infrastructure has an upside in terms of environmental health.

Ongoing tensions have made it virtually impossible for Palestinian environmentalists and government agencies to meaningfully address their enormous environmental challenges. The present dynamics have left a perception that issues such as nature conservation and even air pollution are something of an irrelevant luxury. There are undoubtedly transboundary environmental aspects to the conflict. For example, disagreement over water rights to the mountain aquifer remain unresolved. (Much of the rain recharging the aquifers falls in the Palestinian West Bank, but the wells have historically been located in pre-1967 Israel.) Palestinian sewage contaminates Israeli streams and groundwater and Israeli air pollution wafts eastward to the West Bank. The separation wall being constructed by Israel has been criticised along ecological lines for fragmenting habitats. The unspoken demographic race between the Israeli and Palestinian nations creates population densities that are almost unbearable in Gaza and undermine progress elsewhere.

The years of Israeli occupation have created a robust culture of nongovernment organisations, many of which do superb work in the environment. Most Palestinian universities have environmental science departments with highly qualified faculty. The Palestinian National Authority's Ministry of Environment and Palestinian Water Authority have extremely meagre resources and their regulatory presence, predictably, is woefully insufficient.

There is a strong sense that most Palestinian environmental problems will have to wait for a final resolution of the broader conflict. It is quite possible that negotiations surrounding a final settlement may produce environmental dividends, and there is a strong history of environmental cooperation between professionals on each side. Spurred on by years of creative funding by international aid and philanthropy, several collaborative environmental projects between Israelis and Palestinians, particularly in research, persist even during the worst periods of friction.

This is a small percentage relative to that provided by reverse osmosis technology, which will soon manufacture 20% of Israel's water supply. A breakthrough in the efficiency of the membranes through which sea water is filtered allowed for a substantial drop in prices. For 50¢, new drinking-water plants along the Mediterranean coast can produce 1000L of water. The Ashkelon Desalination Plant, the world's largest reverse osmosis facility, makes a fascinating visit but security is tight; groups can call the **Israel Water Commission** (☎ 03-636 9710) in advance. The energy demands of these facilities are prodigious, and their discharged brine, which contains concentrations of chemicals and metals, may have its consequences when returned to the sea. Generally, there is prevailing optimism that innovation will resolve the chronic water scarcity and sustain the country's agricultural community.

DEVELOPMENT PERILS & SUCCESSES

The population of Israel and the Palestinian Territories has grown by over a million people a decade since 1948, making today's population roughly seven times larger than it was at the time of Israel's independence. Simultaneously, Israel, initially a poor developing nation, has given rise to a moderately prosperous Western economy. The ensuing industrialisation, construction and enthusiasm for highways have generated pollution and sprawl comparable to those of other Western countries. However, because of the country's small size, they are often felt more acutely. If Israel has been innovative in water management, it has fallen far behind in other areas.

In the great Israeli tradition of shameless self-promotion… If you liked this chapter, you'll love Alon Tal's *Pollution in a Promised Land: An Environmental History of Israel* (2002), a comprehensive and inspirational ecological journey through Israel's past century.

For example, air pollution in Israeli and Palestinian cities periodically reaches dangerous levels. On the solar energy front, little has improved since a 1970s building code required that all homes install solar panels to heat water, though the Ben-Gurion National Solar Energy Center at the University's Sede Boqer campus offers a fascinating technological tour. (Reservations can be made by calling Shoshana Dann at ☎ 08-659 6934.) Local waste management is surprisingly 'retro', with recycling rates modest. Trash burial at inexpensive and municipal landfills is the default option, despite the dwindling reserves of real estate available for landfills.

Sprawl has also emerged as a serious problem, as a more affluent Israel has begun to generate inefficient land-use patterns. In the past, most residential structures involved apartment buildings, but Israelis' aspirations to move out into 'villas' have led to a proliferation of low-density communities based on two-cars-per-family lifestyles. Open spaces have given way to roads and suburbs. Environmentalists have fought hard to stop this trend, but with only isolated success. During the late 1990s, a major campaign to curb the construction that encroaches on the beaches produced results. A law now protects the coastline, banning construction within 300m of the sea and guaranteeing access along the beach.

Israel's environmental movement has grown more powerful in recent years. At local government level, green parties have begun to find a constituency, with deputy mayors in Haifa and Tel Aviv hailing from the local Greens. As the country begins to adopt European standards and many industries become more environmentally conscientious, progress is becoming more conspicuous. For example, shipping practices and oil tankers used to make swimming in the Mediterranean a dreadful experience, with bathers' feet clogged by ubiquitous black tar. After 32 years of new standards and oversight, the problem has largely disappeared. However, the sheer increase in population continues to make sustainable development a critical national challenge.

ROAD MAP TO THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

The following is a brief green 'who's who' in Israel and the Palestinian Territories and how to find them on the internet. Depending on specific circumstances, most of these organisations are happy to accommodate volunteers.

Adam Teva V'din (Israel Union for Environmental Defense; www.iued.org.il) Israel's premier advocacy organisation takes advantage of the local court's liberal standing policies to sue polluters and lethargic government agencies. Lots of information about pollution indicators and environmental health.

Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (www.arij.org/) An independent research institution with a strong advocacy bent, whose publications tend to be somewhat polemical, with an overtly anti-Israel orientation.

Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (www.arava.org) This centre for teaching and research at the lovely oasis Kibbutz Ketura brings together young Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians.

Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research (http://bidr.bgu.ac.il/bidr/) The epicentre of research and training about desertification and sustainable living in the dry lands.

GREEN TEAMS

The **Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel** (SPNI; www.teva.org.il in Hebrew, www.aspni.org in English), which is charged with the conservation and protection of antiquities, wildlife and the environment, is an excellent source of information for travellers. At the main offices in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem you'll find outdoor shops selling a range of nature and wildlife publications. The SPNI also runs field trips and tours, and operates 10 field schools, where enthusiastic specialists can provide information on local hikes, wildlife and accommodation. For a complete list of addresses, contact one of the main offices:

SPNI Haifa (Map p196; ☎ 04-855 3858; 90 Jaffa Rd, Haifa)
SPNI Jerusalem (Map pp114-15; ☎ 02-625 7682, 052-386 9485; 13 Heleni HaMalka St, PO Box 930, Jerusalem 96101)
SPNI Tel Aviv (Map p162; ☎ 03-638 8653; 2 HaNegev Hashfela St, Tel Aviv 66183)

Friends of the Earth Middle East (www.foeme.org) This regional organisation has Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian offices; its website contains a variety of studies and position papers on transboundary ecological issues. Also see Dead Healthy? (p323).

Galilee Society (www.gal-soc.org) Israel's leading Arab-Israeli environmental activism group; it also maintains considerable public health initiatives.

Heschel Center for Environmental Leadership (www.heschelcenter.org) This organisation has established itself as a unique think-tank for considering sustainability issues within Israel and innovative environmental education.

House of Water & Environment (www.hwe.org.ps) An up-and-coming Ramalah-based NGO with strong professional staff and expertise in water.

Israel Nature & National Parks Protection Authority (☎ 02-500 5444; www.parks.org.il; Am Ve'olamo St, Givat Shaul, Jerusalem 95463) This authority manages the numerous national parks and archaeological sites in Israel.

Jewish National Fund (www.kkl.org.il in Israel, www.jnf.org in the USA) Serving both as the Israeli forest service and as a sustainable development organisation, the JNF has a long history of fundraising for 'land reclamation' in Israel. Although it has a strong fundraising flavour, this website is still the best place to go if you want to plant a tree in Israel.

Life & Environment (www.sviva.net) This umbrella group for some 90 environmental organisations has little to offer for the non-Hebrew speaker, but is a valuable portal for reaching dozens of Israel's grassroots environmental groups.

Ministry of Environment (www.sviva.gov.il) Founded in 1989, the ministry is responsible for the regulation of air, water, wastes and a variety of other topics. Its website, by far the most extensive in Hebrew, has an English component that is a treasure chest of information.

Neuman Center (http://desert.bgu.ac.il) The Blaustein Institutes also oversees the Neuman Center, a virtual resource centre on the topic of deserts and desertification.

Palestine Hydrology Group (www.phg.org/) A very professional, water-oriented NGO that conducts research and projects, primarily in the West Bank. English website contains periodic local hydrological news.

Palestine Wildlife Society (www.wildlife-pal.org/index.htm) An educational and research centre with a particular expertise in birds, based in the West Bank, whose website largely describes organisational activities.

Palestinian Ministry of Environmental Affairs (www.mena.gov.ps) Still largely under construction, but English menus promise to offer a major source of relevant information. An excellent database of other leading organisations and personalities working in the environmental field can be found at www.pal-efc.org/english/Institutions-Database.htm.

Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) The largest and oldest of Israel's environmental organisations, the SPNI began after local scientists failed to stop the draining of the Huleh swamp. Since then, literally hundreds of conservation campaigns and a strong educational network have made this organisation a household name. See Green Teams, above.

Food & Drink

In this region, food is home. It's identity. It's security. Considering the weight of those elements in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, it's easy to see why inhabitants cleave to the familiar. Culinary surprises here are subtle.

The repertoire of complex, time-honoured Middle Eastern dishes is adored worldwide, but Palestinian cuisine is not given to tremendous strides in the way of gustatory innovation. And with immigration playing a defining role in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, the result is an orchestra of uniquely tuned culinary instruments in search of unison on a new stage. Borrowing from the indigenous cuisine shared by Middle Eastern Jews and Arabs alike, contemporary Israelis swing from *baba ghanooj* to bagels and sometimes harmonise the two.

Breaking the subject of Yahood food into bite-sized pieces means first identifying what is Sephardic (Mediterranean/Middle Eastern Jewish) and what is Ashkenazi (mainly eastern European and German Jewish). Historically, Palestinian Jews prepared essentially the same food as Palestinian Arabs, with the exception of pork occasionally eaten by Palestinian Arab Christians. Each religious group has always had its own holiday food traditions as well, but historically, these delicacies were shared across religious boundaries.

With the influx of Jews from abroad, Israel's food economy developed to accommodate the production of edibles associated with the cultures they came from. *Blinis* and *blintzes,* for example, are Russian, Polish and German crepes of various flours that are filled most often with cheese or fruity delights. Ashkenazi Jews have carried the European recipes with them. Hungarian Jews brought Hungarian goulash, for example. Even the USA with its cross-bred culinary identity has made its mark on Israeli commercial style, given the number of bi-national citizens calling both places home. Wherever pork is traditionally used in central and Eastern European recipes, observant Jewish cooks around the world use meat and fat replacements.

Meanwhile, the Sephardim contributed the lemony aromatic preparations referred to broadly as 'Mediterranean' cuisine. Jews from Yemen have made a dramatic impression on the culinary landscape with their steamy sweet *kubaneh* bread and honeyed seasonings to accompany the ever-popular grilled meats of the region. While their ancient traditions are appreciated for their Levantine roots, the Yemenis have yet to perfect a locust recipe that appeals to most other Israelis.

In the Palestinian Territories, traditional agrarian cultures still hold to the practice of making lunch the biggest meal of the day. But urban industrial work habits have altered that practice, so the idea of 'main meal' varies from village to city and from one household to another. Stewpots start clanging any time after breakfast and might still simmer after sundown.

Because of the time involved in producing the traditional recipes of the region, much of the socialising among Palestinian women takes place in the kitchen, where an aunt or neighbour will share the burden of rolling cabbage or grape leaves or stuffing squash and eggplant. Modern working women, however, are leaning more towards the chicken-and-rice pot or simple salads, stews and baked meats. But you're not a Palestinian mama if you can't make a certain suite of dishes: *maqlubbeh, mlukhiyeh, mjadarah, mahshi, msakhan* and *mensef*. Mmmm...

PALESTINIAN MOTHERS MUST MAKE…

Maqlubbeh: 'Upside down' chicken or lamb in rice with fried eggplant or cauliflower

Mlukhiyeh: Lemony-tasting chicken soup named for the leaves (Palestinian spinach), giving it a viscous consistency and tang

PALESTINIAN MOTHERS MUST MAKE…

Mjadarah: Rice and lentils in one pot topped with sautéed onions

Mahshi: Stuffed anything – eggplant, squash. the stuffing is hashweh

PALESTINIAN MOTHERS MUST MAKE…

Msakhan: Sumac-laden chicken on flatbread with simmered onions

Mensef: Lamb on rice served beside a salted broth of lamb stock and dissolved dried yogurt

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Reading the holy books set in this region will tell you what grows here. Olives and grapes not only sustain the people of the land but also provide beautifully scenic backdrops for some of the most oft-told allegories and historical accounts known. Romancing the markets today are seasonal crops including apricots, peaches, oranges, lemons, plums, almonds, berries, figs, pears, pine nuts, watermelons, apples, persimmons, bananas, pomegranates and dates.

The low-budget, fast-food choice from the Arab cookbook that is enjoyed universally is felafel. Fried balls of mildly seasoned chickpea meal are stuffed into a pita (to use the anglo-familiar word for pocket bread) then doused with liquid sesame paste and a selection of salads. Those salads are the accoutrements to any Middle Eastern meal and include cucumber and tomato with lemon juice or sesame sauce, cabbage slaw, assorted pickles, brined turnips and the all-time favourite: hummus (which just means 'chickpea' in Arabic). Hummus doesn't fit easily into the salad category, being a thick spread of mashed salted chickpeas with *t'haniyeh* or tahini (sesame seed paste), olive oil, lemon and garlic. But it is central to the array of small dishes that make up mazza or mezze, a meal in itself, huge in variety. Always included are olives and various preparations of eggplant or aubergine, some of which are closer to spreads than salads, such as *mtabbal* (aka *baba ghanooj*), which is roasted eggplant pureed with garlic and tahini. No mezze is complete without tabouleh or tabouli, chopped parsley with chips of tomato and dots of softened bulgar wheat moistened with olive oil and lemon. Hot red chilli sauce called *shatta* jazzes anything up nicely. Israelis make their green or red version and call it *zhoug* or *hareef*.

The carnivore's affordable sandwich is shwarma, which can be accompanied by any of the same salads and rolled in thin bread. A stack of salty seasoned meat is vertically skewered and spun slowly in front of a roaster. It is often beef with a layer of melting lamb fat dripping from the top, but turkey and lamb meat are popular, too.

An alternative more often seen at Israeli sandwich stands is *shakshuka,* a Moroccan dish of eggs poached in tangy stewed tomatoes, which makes a good breakfast but is eaten any time. In fact, the foods that make up a meatless mezze also make a traditional breakfast of the region with the addition of goat's-milk cheese in salty or mild variations, yogurt both dense and liquid, and eggs any style. Everything is eaten with brown or white flatbread.

There are some snacks you might only find at someone's home, although at some chic new restaurants in the West Bank they'll bring it to the table with olives and pickles. One of these is *zeit ou za'atar* or *douka*. Sometimes it's the simple things that hold the most appeal. *Za'atar* is a blend of dried wild thyme, salt and sesame seeds. Pinch off a swatch of fresh bread, dip it in a puddle of local olive oil, drag it through the greenish-brown powder, and you're in the club. This with a steamy cup of sugared spearmint tea is a combination inspired by the *douka* divine.

ISRAELI MOTHERS MUST MAKE…

Chicken soup with matza balls: Like a security blanket, the salted broth and matza meal dumplings make it all better.

Kreplachs: Same soup, different dumpling; High Holiday ravioli aka Jewish wontons.

ISRAELI MOTHERS MUST MAKE…

Beef brisket: A mother from Italy might stir in mushrooms and wine, where a Moroccan mama prefers olives and tomatoes, but they all know the secret is slooooow.

'Meat' to a local means red meat, not chicken. 'Barbecue' implies grilled lamb chops, beef, chicken or *kefta* (seasoned ground meat) and possibly pigeon. Offal anyone? Organ meats are less available but popular.

DRINKS

There is a minimum drinking age in Israel and the Palestinian Territories (18). Although alcohol abuse is not high on the list of illnesse, consumption of alcohol is on the rise, especially as the wine industry grows and wine production matures. Over the last decade, Israelis went from drinking 3.9L of wine per person annually to 8L or 9L per person. Compare

THE FAMILY TREE

To a Palestinian family, their olive trees are like great aunts and uncles. It wouldn't be surprising if the trees had names, given the centuries-old relationships that are formed with the life-yielding entities. Light and heat, soap and wood-art, food and oil all culminate with the harvest of *zeitoun* – olives.

The Palestine Fair Trade Association (p296), recognising olive oil products as main ingredients in the local economy, has set up partnerships in the USA and Europe with distributors dealing in fairl trade products. Take part in the harvest or simply learn more at these websites.

- www.afsc.org/israel-palestine/Ziyarat-az-Zeitoun.htm
- www.afsc.org/pacificsw/middle-east.htm
- www.palestinefairtrade.org
- www.zatoun.com

that to the USA (11.5L), England (7.5L) and France (60L). Scotch and tequila have become trends but not crazes.

But it's good stuff! In the early '80s a revolution began with the planting in the Upper Galilee and Golan of Cabernet, Merlot, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and other popular varieties. Now prospectors have their collective eye on the Judean Hills. The first Sauvignon Blanc was released in 1984 to good reviews, and the efforts continue to pay off for Israeli winemakers, most of whom are trained in Europe and California. Of the hundreds of wineries that exist in Israel, most are boutique operations. But the largest puts out more than 10 million bottles per year. The top three producers are Carmel Winery (p209), started in the 19th century by Edmond de Rothschild, Barkan Wine Cellars and Golan Heights Winery (p274), producer of Yarden Wines. For more winery reviews, see A Connoisseur's Delight (p274), the Judean Hills wine route (p147) and A Drop in the Desert (p329).

Go to www.inmamaskitchen.com and select Jewish Cooking. Contributors to this thoughtful site will take you from the history of the Diasporas to a recipe file that spans the globe.

Israeli kegs don't share a shelf with the fanciest names in Bordeaux or California, but they're on par with many respectable labels from Australia and parts of Italy.

Not competitive but duly celebrated is the little wine that comes out of the Cremisan convent in Bethlehem-Beit Jala built on the site of a 7th-century Byzantine monastery (p298). The countless restaurant-bars in the West Bank have Cremisan on the menu as a matter of course, and even eateries with intelligent wine lists include it as the budget choice.

The first kibbutz forced to privatise due to economic pressures and population decreases was Gesher Haziv in northern Israel. Most missed is the communal dining that gave way to shopping and cooking at home.

Beer is another locally produced refreshment in both Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Israel's Maccabee has won awards, but some prefer a can of the dark draught Goldstar. Nesher is the soft version of these alcoholic suds for the non-drinker.

In the northern West Bank preservative-free Taybeh Beer is the native golden brew that also comes in light and malt-heavy dark varieties (see p303). Rumour has it that they also make a green-label, alcohol-free halal version in honour of Hamas. The Palestinians may have only one brewery, but they make up for it with the arak they produce, a powerful ouzo-like liquor made of grain or beets and flavoured with anis.

Alcoholic beverages don't always top the charts for what folks are requesting, even if Palestinian restaurants list prices for hard liquor by the glass or bottle. Juice stands in Israel and the Palestinian Territories squeeze up some delightful concoctions that give a vitamin thrill and fluid rush. Carrot juice is terrifically popular, but any fruit or vegetable that can be juiced is fair game. Also seen in markets and snack shops is a sweetened tamarind drink.

More often than a liquid-produce treat, however, locals are sipping something hot. The cardamom-laced fine-grind coffee served in tiny shots is a time-honoured tradition as well as a pick-me-up. Known by Europeans as Turkish coffee, Arabs call it *qahwah arabiya*. For the superstitious, reading the muddy residue can be as true a telling of the future as tea leaves.

Tea is drunk in two ways in the Territories, depending on the season. In summer, the sugared brew is touched with spearmint (*na'ana*). In winter, the mysterious aroma of sage (*maramiya*) infuses the air. When invited to these local customs, forget about how you like your tea at home. Unless you're diabetic, let them sweeten it. You can always have your second cup a different way.

Some Israeli coffeehouses will make you wonder if you've gone to Italy or France. Ordering there is a breeze if you come from any espresso-charged culture. But ask around Ben Yehuda St in West Jerusalem for the place that serves hot chocolate that starts as a tall glass of steamed milk with big shards of chocolate bar tossed in. Not your everyday cocoa.

In winter Palestinian street vendors offer hot soothing cups of *sahlab*, a thickened sweet milk with your choice of toppings including pistachios, almonds, cinnamon, raisins and shredded coconut.

In 2001 an Armenian chef saw two Israeli chefs and two Palestinian chefs working together at a food event in Italy, and he got an idea: Chefs for Peace. Tens of culinary stars have joined to facilitate coexistence through special events and benefits. Contact chefs forpeace@shabaka.net.

CELEBRATIONS & SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Israel

The Jewish Passover or Pesah is celebrated even by the non-devout, which comprises the majority of Israelis. As much for social traditions as spiritual significance, the holiday and all its rituals call people together and conjure happy memories. The prohibition of leavening in wheat products is only part of it. While two pieces of *matzah* (unleavened cracker bread) on the table are customary for the Sabbath, three are required for Passover so one can be broken at the start of the Seder meal, emblematic of the sustenance of downtrodden slaves who make their escape to freedom in too much haste for bread to rise. The number three also symbolises the portions it is believed Sarah baked for the three angels appearing to Abraham and the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Ha'aretz wine and restaurant critic Daniel Rogov is fond of saying, 'Recipes cross borders far more easily than people.' His factual frolic *Rogues, Writers and Whores* is a worldwide odyssey of culinary mythology. Grape enthusiasts count on the annual *Rogov's Guide to Israeli Wine*.

Candles are lit during the Passover Seder, and four glasses of wine are poured. Candles and wine are part of every Shabbat dinner as well, with the woman of the house doing the lighting. Attending a Shabbat dinner in Israel can be as easy as being invited by Jewish Israeli friends – as it is their spiritual imperative to do – or as difficult as finding a shop open in an ultraorthodox neighbourhood. There's simply so much variety in the culture, while some grown children are on their way to their parents' home for this weekly meal, others are renting a movie. A slowly cooked heavy stew called *cholent* is one Sabbath tradition widely enjoyed in Israel. Fatty meat, beans, grains, potatoes, herbs and spices stewed over hours in a big pot will heartily serve the family as well as their guests. Since work is not allowed on the Sabbath, slow cooking can begin on Friday for a midday meal on Saturday.

Arrange a tasting and tour or take a course at Binyamina Wine Cellars (☎ 04-638 8643; visitor@binyaminawines.com; 🕒 8am-5pm), named for the town south of Haifa. The visitors centre offers demonstrations of the winemaking process and looks at wine's history in the region.

Of course, Hanukkah is all about candles, and rededicating the temple comes with light from oil, and oil is good for frying, and what's good to fry are *latkes*. The tradition of potato pancakes could stem from the unavailability of cheese for poor Jews in Eastern Europe who might have preferred cheese pancakes for poignant symbolism over potato. Historically, cheese represents the widow Judith's commitment to keeping kosher by carrying the aged milk with her to the camp where she cut off Holofernes' head and saved the town. On the lighter side, Israelis make special jelly doughnuts (*soofganiot*) during Hanukkah.

Ringing in the High Holy Days and a new year with Rosh HaShanah means eating sweet foods like apples, carrots or braided challah bread dipped in honey. Then a substantial pre-fast meal is prescribed prior to the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

When Jews mourn the dead in Israel, as elsewhere, religious dictates urge them to sit *shiva* around the deceased for seven days and then have a solemn meal of such things as bread to signify sustenance and boiled eggs and lentils, which are round in shape and invoke a sense of the continuation of life.

Palestinian Territories

Ramadan is the Muslim faithful's fasting time, when the observant abstain from eating during the daylight hours of each day for an entire month (see p48). Many awaken before sunrise to have a meal, because they won't eat again until the sun goes down. To make matters more tempting, aromatic confections prepared especially for Ramadan waft through the Palestinian marketplace in preparation for the *iftar*, the breakfast at dusk, when everyone sits down to a satisfying meal at home or with relatives and friends. If you're invited, find out the precise time of sundown, and be politely punctual.

Mariam Shaheen and George Baramki Azar paired up to create *Palestine: a Guide,* a historical look at the crafting of Palestinian culture that includes food and cooking with spectacularly tantalising photographs. It's available at the Educational Bookshop (p84) in East Jerusalem.

The best-known treat of the season is *qatayif,* a pancake folded over a cluster of crushed nuts or small mound of cheese and drizzled with sugar syrup. For savoury significance, lamb is served during the feast of sacrifice Eid al-Adha.

Sweets are passed out on many occasions, including births, marriages and circumcisions, which also call for *baklaweh,* known around the world as baklava. Christians and Muslims both celebrate the origins of their respective faiths with special sweets. In Christianity the occasions are Christmas and Epiphany, while in Islam, it's the birth of the Prophet Mohammad and the start of the Islamic calendar.

For Christians, lamb is a traditional Easter dish. Stuffed lamb or stuffed ribs can be accompanied by stuffed *kibbeh,* a pointed meatball encased in cracked wheat and fried, symbolising the spear that pierced Jesus' side.

During periods of mourning, bitter Arabic coffee replaces the sugared variety. Muslims may serve dates as well, while Christians bake *rahmeh,* a type of bun commemorating the soul of the departed. But traditions vary from one locality to another. For some, a North African Arab dish, named *mughrabiyeh* (from the Maghreb), is made when someone dies. Larger than couscous morsels, this Arab pasta is created by rolling wheat grains in flour until they form small round beads. Not only do the practices vary, but so do the names. This dish is also called *marma'on* or *kesskesson*.

When a baby is born, relatives might prepare *mughly* for the mother and guests alike. It's a rice pudding made with nuts and spices that is said to aid in lactation.

Touching food directly is proper form at *mensef* (lamb-and-rice dish) feasts. A ball of rice is formed with the fingers, then flicked into the mouth with the back of the thumb never touching the lips.

For the big holidays and celebrations, certain things are givens: grainy cookies made of buttery semolina stuffed with dates or nuts called *ma'amoul*. And a host of honeyed pastries baked with almonds, cashews, pistachios or walnuts in variously shaped *millefeuille* pastry (filo dough), including baklava, are carried into host homes in wrapped bakery trays by invited guests.

Big celebrations call for big meals. If it has chicken and rice in it, it's a party food. But the true sign of a special occasion is *mensef*. This lamb-and-rice dish is the ultimate memory maker. And the primo pastry to top off a Palestinian feast is the famed *kunafa,* most notably from Nablus. Some compare the warm stretchy cheese treat to pizza (only topped with

NOT ONE MORE FELAFEL! A GUIDE FOR VEGETARIANS

Experienced vegetarians know their way around a Middle Eastern menu. There's no secret to finding a meatless meal in these parts. But some options are less obvious, such as the dairy restaurants sanctioned by Jewish religious law (see p69). Specifically with the vegetarian in mind, Tel Aviv has Taste of Life (p171), 24 Rupees (p173) and Buddha Burger (p173), and in West Jerusalem, there's Village Green (p136).

Gaza's critically depressed economy has given rise to tasty recipes for meatless dishes such as all manner of lentil stew, including one with pumpkin and garlic (*qare'a ma adas*), one with chard *(saliq wa adas)*, and one with potatoes (*fukharit adas*). A twist on hummus is *bisara,* puréed fava beans with dried Palestinian spinach, chilli pepper, garlic and dill seed. A salad known in these parts is *dagga,* a zesty combination of crushed garlic and tomatoes, hot chillies, dill, olive oil and lemon.

If you're in the Upper Galilee, check out Moshav Amirim (p283) for a total New Age experience, including an exclusively organic vegetarian culture.

In the Negev, an African Hebrew Israelite community (see p334) goes beyond kosher with their vegan lifestyle, and some kibbutzim in that region specialise in growing organic produce.

This book uses the (V) icon to let you know that a restaurant is exclusively vegetarian. If it's also vegan, that's indicated in the text.

a crispy layer of matted wheat shreds and laden with sugar syrup – and minus the tomato sauce and oregano). For a milder flavour and texture, find a bakery that sells warm *mtabbak*. The flaky triangular turnovers are filled with a custard-like cheese that is soft and delicate.

During the week of Sukkot celebrating the autumn harvest, Israelis take their meals, when possible, in the sukkah, a frail structure outside the house representing uncertainty and divine protection.

WHERE TO EAT

At about the time fine wine came into play in Israel in the mid-80s, star chefs came into culinary orbit and raised the bar forever. Not previously known for its abundance of good restaurants, Israel has maintained its mediocre mainstream, but what had been the baseline has lost a notch on the aesthetic measuring stick to places in Tel Aviv where you can have risotto with smoked green wheat and imported prosciutto, but don't tell the rabbi. Worth repenting for. Offend everyone and order the foie gras (fattened goose or duck liver).

In general, restaurants in the region feel like restaurants in the West, minus the polish. The charm is in the one-of-a-kind aspect of each outfit. You rarely sense that there's a corporation imbuing the place with prefabricated theme icons. By the same token, interiors are rarely the work of a professional decorator.

Cafés are meant to be in these sunny climes, especially when evening conquers the relentless light of day. Posers and poets take their seats and sip away the hours casting aloof glances at the passing crowd.

Question: Why do Israeli grocers sell braided bread loaves every Friday?

Answer: Because every Saturday is a national 'challah' day.

The air along pedestrian-dense commercial stretches carries aromatic invitations to stop for barbecued chicken or a shwarma sandwich. Felafel makes a good walking companion, too. A bread vendor might suggest you have your felafel with *ka'ek,* resembling an elongated sesame bagel.

Yet in the Palestinian Territories chefs do best what chefs there have been doing for centuries. That is not to say that noteworthy novelty doesn't exist. Palestinian restaurateurs who are native-born and educated abroad carry the concepts back home, gracing tables with gratis starter dishes that barely imply their local origins. In Ramallah, Darna (p301) makes a fork-tender clay-pot lamb stew with the intensity of slow home cooking, yet a gourmet flair befitting the white table cloth it's served on.

Menus that include everything from fajitas to felafel are usually overreaching. One exception is Al-Kala'a/Citadel (p295), a traditional but

TIME TO EAT

Israeli Hours

Kosher restaurants Noon to 11pm Sunday to Thursday, one hour before Shabbat Friday, after Shabbat Saturday.

Non-kosher restaurants Same as above, but open seven days; some close Sunday when it's slowest.

Cafés Many cafés go past midnight, and a handful of Tel Aviv restaurants are open 24 hours.

Palestinian Hours

Restaurants 11am to 10pm or later (or earlier for breakfast) seven days, though some Christian owners close on Sunday and Muslim owners may close at least part of the day on Friday, especially in Hebron and Gaza.

Cafés Stay open until midnight in Ramallah; some later.

new restaurant in Beit Sahour's old city. The renovated stone schoolhouse is atmospheric enough to be a good place to go just for drinks, but the Chinese choices are as satisfying as the excellent indigenous grilled meats and mezze. Nevertheless, if you come from a place with terrific *taquerías* (taco shops) or perfect Pad Thai, Israeli and Palestinian restaurants eager to serve you those things more-often disappoint. Bethlehem's only all-Chinese restaurant that does a reasonable job of it has been confined into a dark crevice by the Separation Wall, so it will be surprising if it stays open. Israel's urban centres have more ethnically themed restaurants; the more specialised the better.

Visit www.thisweekinpalestine.com for articles on Palestinian food life. Issue 98 (June 2006) got rave reviews for its stories on subjects like the aesthetics of Palestinian cuisine, and the food of Gaza. Search for it by month, year or edition in the archives.

WHERE TO DRINK

In Israel the after-hours drinking scene is much the same as in the UK, Europe, Australia or North America, only Shabbat shapes the week, starting at sundown on Friday. Thursday and to some extent Wednesday are the going-out nights for the urbane set, while Saturday is reputedly the suburbanite soirée. Discotheques, live-music venues, collegiate hangouts, wine bars and cafés are sprinkled throughout commercial districts and virtually garland the streets in certain concentrated areas of West Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

As for the pace of Palestinian life by day – Fridays are quiet, Saturdays throb and Sunday is a workday for many. So social calendars point to Thursday. In Ramallah, the Palestinian capital of nightlife, foreign workers and locals get together in understatedly glamorous settings. 'Party' is code for cutting loose – dancing and drinking, mixed company, internationals and Birzeit University students. Coffeehouses offer low-wattage leisure. International sporting events play on big screens in pleasure gardens and restaurant-cafés. Ramallah's skin-loving nights mean delicious outdoor cocktail lounging in summer. Bethlehem is on the same social schedule, but the drinking destinations are more obviously in the context of an eating atmosphere, with the exception of the disco at Al-Zaytouna, the Olive Tree Tourist Village/Al-Zaytouna (see p297) in Beit Jala.

CONTRADICTION CORNER

The concentrated drinking-and-dancing scene in West Jerusalem winds down toward a Russian church for which the area gets its name: Maskoubiya, within the Russian Compound (p112). Mention that to a Palestinian ex-prisoner and the meaning shifts to the notorious detention centre across the street.

In general, Palestinian nightlife is more low-key than that in Israel. It's not your elbow-in-beer scene, and you won't often find people stumbling out of an establishment with a song in their hearts. Everyone gets a place to sit even when it's busy, because on those nights everyone makes a reservation. The *shabab* (single young men) are discouraged from arriving in groups without women. The hypeless swank of the West Bank's night-

spots combined with an almost Victorian reserve is at once provincial and dignified. You feel sexy on your own terms.

COSTS

This book offers a budget breakdown when many locations are reviewed. Budget refers to basic restaurants, cafés and quick meals up to 30NIS, excluding tips and drinks. Midrange includes meals generally priced 30NIS to 60NIS. Top end is 60NIS and above.

Gratuity is becoming more standardised. Cafés and casual spots are beginning to expect 10% to 12%, while fine restaurants are said to be fetching 15%. But it's worth polling around to learn what people are doing.

An informal 'fish joint' in Israel is a *dagia*, an inexpensive way to enjoy a full meal of mezze, the small starters accompanying Middle Eastern meals, and seafood including fish and shellfish.

EATING WITH KIDS

Middle Easterners like to feed and they know what satisfies. Children are not left out of that embrace. Only in the top-end Israeli restaurants might there be mixed reception, but even there, most visits go without a hitch unless the child is disturbing other diners. There may not be a special menu, however, as there would be at mass-market affairs such as Chocolate Bar (see p174) by the Bald Man, so ask for half portions.

Ramallah is a particularly child-friendly Palestinian town, with playgrounds attached to so many business enterprises that you'll come to expect it. The Plaza Mall in Al-Balu'a has a food court as well as a play yard. Even at high-end Darna and diplomat-dense Gemzo Suites (p300), a swing set or rocking horse is part of the tableau.

Palestinian and Israeli children are accustomed to hummus and pita, but chicken fingers, burgers and fries are easy to find. If a when-in-Rome attitude is in order, turn your child onto *Bamba*. This vitamin-fortified crispy snack is the first word uttered by many native children, surely to their mothers' dismay. But it is nut-based, so if allergies are a possibility, avoid it.

For infants, powdered milk, formula and Gerber baby food are standard fare available at grocery stores and pharmacies. See also p387.

On ketchup: there is no surer way to ruin your chips than by dragging them through bad ketchup. Most in this region is abysmal. Look for Don. Industrial yet gourmet-tasting – better even than any of the internationally popular brands.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

In mostly secular Israel, keeping kosher in restaurants is a matter of choice. Strict *kashrut* laws govern the handling of food in kosher establishments, including dairy restaurants, whether the type that serves fish or not. Since meat and dairy cannot mix in kosher tradition, dairy restaurants operating under the watchful eye of the rabbinic authority guarantee a compliant meal, even if they aren't reputed to be the best eating experiences Israel has to offer. Because most Israelis only dabble in kosher habits, these restaurants draw devout Jews, vegetarians and people who like the milkshakes or pasta Alfredo. In kosher situations where meat is served, milk substitutes become important. As for seafood, bottom feeders are off the menu. That leaves out shellfish, so impostors abound. Fish is acceptable, as long as it's of the variety that has scales.

Some wine produced in Israel is kosher, even to the extent that the vintner deferentially pours some of the product on the ground or gives a percentage of the profits to charity. But it starts in the vineyards, where only grapes are to be grown, and where wine cannot be made until the fourth year with the fields left fallow during the seventh. Only observant men are permitted to handle the grapes, and some wineries pasteurise the wine.

Because the Palestinian Territories are predominantly Muslim, food is handled according to halal standards universally, though Islamic food laws are somewhat less stringent than those of Jewish orthodoxy. But like compliant Jews, Muslims don't eat pork, and some of the slaughtering

If pink is your colour, go for a tour-and-tasting at a rosé winery. But if you blush at politics, know that Chateau Golan (www.chateaugolan.com) gets its name from a controversial location in Israeli-occupied Syria.

The Jerusalem School of Kosher Culinary Arts, the only Glatt Mehadrin Kosher cooking school in the world, offers mini-courses in the art of cooking according to *kashrut* laws (☎ 02-642 9345; www.jskca.org.il).

techniques are shared. For that reason, Muslims are said to incant: 'Sleep with the Christians, but eat with the Jews', a phrase you'll be hard pressed to find a Muslim actually uttering, so it wouldn't be nice to ascribe it to anyone. According to Islam, Muslims are not to drink alcohol.

As a guest, knowing what to bring can be perplexing. Gauge the situation according to the host. Is it a couple having you over for Shabbat? Is it an apartment-dwelling expatriate? A Palestinian family? Is it Christmas or Ramadan? Bring some kosher chocolates or wine to a religious Jewish family. Flowers are always nice. But family affairs that engulf you don't necessarily require that you come bearing gifts. However, an offering could fill a need, especially for people in compromised economic conditions. So if you would like to bring something, make it modest and practical. Decorative items are not as appreciated as useful ones or basic consumables.

Circumstances and surroundings determine the pace of an eating occasion. Cigarettes can prolong a meal – or shorten it for someone who doesn't like smoke. Since smoking is very much in vogue, restaurants have their sections, but few prohibit the habit.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Here's just enough linguistic information to get you into trouble. In the useful phrases section, the first entry is for Hebrew, the second, for Arabic.

Useful Phrases

Do you have a menu in English?
yesh tafreet beh angleet? *fee menu bil ingleezee*?

I'm a vegetarian.
ani tseemkhonee/tseemkhoneet (m/f) *ana bakulish lahem*

Is there meat in this?
zeh eem basar? *fi lahem*?

I (don't) want...
ani (lo) rotze/rotza...(m/f) a*na (ma) bidee*...

What time do you close?
matai atem sogreem? a*la aeesa'a bitsakker*?

Food Glossary

English	Hebrew	Arabic
breakfast	*arukhat boker*	*iftar*
lunch	*arukhat tsara'im*	*ghada*
dinner	*arukhat erev*	*a'sha*
FOOD		
cheese	*gvina*	*jibneh*
cheese (goat; salty)	*gvina melukha*	*jibneh nabilsiyeh*
chicken	*off*	*jaj*
egg	*beitsa*	*beid*
egg with cheese	*beitsa eem gvina*	*beid ma jibneh*
lamb	*keves*	*lahmet harouf*
oil	*shemen*	*zeit*
olives	*zeitim*	*zeitoun*
omelette	*omelette*	*omelette*
pepper/chilli	*peelpel*	*filfel*
pickled vegetables	*khamutsim*	*mhalal*
potato	*tapukhei adama*	*batata*
salt	*melakh*	*meleh*
sausage/salami	*naknik*	*salsees/nakanik*
soup	*makak*	*maraka*
spicy	*hareef*	*hareef*
turkey	*hodu*	*habash*
yogurt	*leben*	*laban*
yogurt (thick)	*labaneh*	*labaneh*
DRINKS		
...with/without sugar	*...in/bli sukkar*	*...ma sukkar/bidoun sukkar*
beer	*beera*	*beera*
coffee (black/with milk)	*kafeh (shakhor/hafukh)*	*qahwah (samra/ma halib)*
hot chocolate	*shoko*	*shoko*
juice	*meets*	*asseer*
grapefruit juice	*meets eshkoliot*	*aseer grefout*
orange juice	*meets tapuzim*	*aseer burtuqal*
lemonade	*limonada*	*limonada*
tea	*te*	*shai*
tea with milk	*te bekhalav*	*shai ma halib*
tea with spearmint	*te eem na'ana*	*shai ma na'ana*
herbal tea	*te tsmakhim*	*shai a'shab*
Turkish/Arabic coffee	*kafeh turkee*	*qahwah arabiya*
water	*mayim*	*mayeh*
wine	*yayeen*	*nabeethe*