

World Jewish Communities

Zion Ozeri's photographs reflect Jewish life in more than a dozen different countries on five continents. Here is some background on the Jewish communities in just a few of the places represented in his pictures. For more information about Jewish communities around the world, see the resources listed in the bibliography provided.

The Jews of Argentina

Argentina is home to the largest Jewish community in Latin America. The first Jews in Argentina arrived from Spain following the expulsion of 1492, but this small group of immigrants and their descendants soon assimilated into Argentine culture, and few Jews remained by the 19th century.

In the late 19th century, Jewish immigrants streamed across the Atlantic Ocean from Eastern Europe to escape poverty and anti-Semitism. Many landed in Argentina, which had an open immigration policy at the time. Argentina also became home to a unique experiment in communal Jewish living at the end of the 19th century. In 1891, European Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch created the Jewish Colonization Association, which established agricultural settlements for Eastern European Jews in the New World. Most of the JCA's work was centered in Argentina. In the early 20th century, as many as 200,000 Jews lived and worked on JCA lands. Although most of Argentina's Jews live in the cities today, there are a few who still maintain the agricultural lifestyle.

The Jewish community of Argentina has remained strong throughout the 20th century, and Jews have played an active role in all aspects of the society. There have, however, been numerous episodes of anti-Semitism. Although a law against racism and anti-Semitism was passed in the Argentine parliament in 1988, that didn't prevent two major terrorist attacks in the 1990s—one on the Israeli Embassy and the other on the Jewish community headquarters in Buenos Aires. Today, Argentina's community of almost a quarter-million Jews faces difficult economic conditions, and many have immigrated to Israel.

The Jews of Ethiopia

Jews have lived in Ethiopia since antiquity. They existed, however, in complete isolation from the rest of the world Jewish community. Because of that, their religious traditions developed separately from mainstream Jewish practice, reflecting pre-rabbinic practices. During the Middle Ages, the Ethiopian Jews lived in relative autonomy and may have numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Although the Ethiopian Jews were discovered by the world Jewish community in the 18th century, they continued to live in relative isolation until the 20th century. The Jews' situation took a radical turn for the worse in 1973. With the rise of the dictatorship of Colonel Mengistu, Haile Mariam, Jewish lives and livelihoods came under grave threat. By the early 1980s, Judaism was forbidden, and many members of the community were falsely imprisoned for being "Zionist spies." In addition, they faced the horrors of war, famine, and disease.

Although some Ethiopian Jews began immigrating to Israel in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was Operation Moses in 1984 and Operation Solomon in 1991 that

really saved the Ethiopian community. Between November 1984 and January 1985, Israel brought almost 8,000 Ethiopian Jews to safety in the Holy Land. Then, on May 24, 1991—as Mengistu’s regime fell to rebel forces—Israel staged the greatest human rescue effort ever. In just 36 hours, they airlifted almost 15,000 Jews from Ethiopia to Israel. Today, a small number of Jews still remain in Ethiopia.

The Jews of India

Three distinct communities make up the Jewish population of India. The oldest community is the *B’nei Yisrael*, who believe their ancestors arrived on the sub-continent from the Land of Israel in the 2nd century BCE. Over the years, the *B’nei Yisrael* maintained the essentials of Jewish practice—such as circumcision, dietary laws, and the observance of the Sabbath—while developing a number of distinct local traditions. They have lived mainly in and around the cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, and Ahmedabad.

The second Jewish community has lived for centuries in the southern Indian city of Cochin. The Cochin Jews also trace their history back almost 2,000 years, but the community was enriched in the medieval and early modern periods with newer arrivals from Europe and elsewhere. The most recent Jewish community in India includes Middle Eastern merchants who arrived in the late 18th century. Many of these Bagdadi Jews live in Calcutta and Bombay.

India’s Jews have traditionally gotten along very well with their non-Jewish neighbors. They have generally been free to practice their religion without interference or prejudice. In recent decades, however, the Jewish community of India has declined dramatically, as many have immigrated to the U.S., England, and Israel. There are now just a few thousand Jews left in the entire country.

The Jews of Riga, Latvia

Although Jews had lived in nearby Poland since at least the 13th century, they could not become official residents of Riga (the capital of Latvia) until the 18th century. By the late 19th century, there were 20,000 Jews in Riga, and by the eve of World War I, the number had reached more than 33,000.

When the independent Republic of Latvia was established in 1918, the Jews received full civil rights for the first time. The Jewish community of Latvia continued to grow and prosper in the period between the two world wars, but it was struck hard by the Holocaust. In 1935, Riga was home to more than 43,000 Jews. In 1944, just 150 Jews lived in the city.

After the war, many Jews returned to Latvia. Although it is a shadow of its former self, the Latvian Jewish community today numbers several thousand (mainly in Riga). In the past 15 years, a rebirth of Jewish cultural life has taken hold. Jewish schools and camps have opened, and a Jewish soup kitchen serves hot meals daily for elderly members of the community.

Bukharan Jews, Uzbekistan, Central Asia

It is not clear exactly when the first Jews arrived in Central Asia. Some traditions suggest an arrival more than 2,000 years ago; others give a date of 1,500 or 1,000 years ago. Regardless, the Jews of Uzbekistan have a long history in the area and have weathered numerous storms along the way. Along with their non-Jewish neighbors, they persevered through repeated conquests by armies from both the East and the West. With a few exceptions, these regimes did not make life easy for the Jews.

But after the Russians took over in 1868, the Jewish community of Uzbekistan finally enjoyed some measure of economic and civic freedom. As many as 50,000 Jews lived in the city of Samarkand in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with another 20,000 in Bukhara. With the rise of Communism in 1917, however, the Jewish community once again had to face anti-Semitism. Today, there are 15,000 to 20,000 Jews in Uzbekistan, an area slightly larger than California. Most live in the cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent.

Although the majority of Uzbekistan's population is Muslim, relations are generally good between the country's Jews and non-Jews. However, thousands of Uzbek Jews have left in recent years to escape difficult economic conditions. Large communities of Uzbek Jews have grown up in Jerusalem and in Queens, New York. Central Asian Jews retain many of their unique customs and cultural traditions.

The Jews of Yemen

Jews have been living in Yemen since perhaps the second century CE, if not before. For centuries, the Jews remained devout and committed to their tradition, despite their isolation from other centers of the world Jewish community and the challenges they often had to face as non-Muslims. At the same time, they adapted many elements of the surrounding culture into their own practice.

Life was difficult and even dangerous for the Jews of Yemen. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, however, made possible an unprecedented rescue effort. Between 1949 and 1950, a massive airlift, known as Operation Magic Carpet, brought nearly the entire Yemenite Jewish community—almost 50,000 people—to Israel. Israeli society was enriched by the unique customs and crafts of the Yemenite Jews.

A small number of Jews, however, remained in Yemen after Operation Magic Carpet—particularly the sick and the elderly. The tiny Jewish community that still exists there is scattered in the mountains of the northern part of the country. Although their ongoing commitment to Jewish practice is tolerated by their Muslim neighbors, the Jews are still treated as second-class citizens.