سجود عوايص | نشر في 8 April, 2026

Transformations of Israeli Judaism: Between the Victim Complex and the Colonizer's Doctrine

In late 2022, the Jewish Agency released statistics indicating an increase in the global Jewish population and its distribution across various countries. Notably, there was a 2% rise in the number of Jews residing in "Israel" compared to the previous year, bringing their proportion to 46.2% of the world's Jewish population.

According to the 2024 census conducted by demographer Professor Sergio Della Pergola of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the global Jewish population reached 15.8 million, with approximately 8.5 million living outside "Israel," including 6.3 million in the United States alone.

These demographic figures not only illustrate population distribution but also, for sociologists, signify the fragmentation of Israeli Jewish identity and its anchorage to a fixed geographical origin. The Jewish Agency has endeavored for over a century to embed "Israel" as the national homeland for these millions in the collective Jewish consciousness.

The complexity deepens when considering the geographical origins of Jews, which continue to influence their sub-identities and cultures. Of the 15 million Jews worldwide, 74% are Western Jews ("Ashkenazim"), while 26% are Eastern and African Jews ("Sephardim and Mizrahim"). Additionally, there are four main

denominations, each with its traditions: Orthodox, Conservative, Reformism, and Reformers, along with smaller groups like the Samaritans and Shomrim.

Researcher Abdel Wahab El-Messiri notes the difficulty in speaking of a singular Jewish identity, stating that Jewish communities have lived in various eras, places, and circumstances, resulting in multiple "Jewish identities." For instance, there's the Yemeni Jewish identity in the late 19th century, the Khazar Jewish identity in the 9th century, and the Ashkenazi identity in Israel, among others.

This significant diversification made the initial pursuit of establishing a "national homeland" a formidable task and now poses a threat to the cohesion and integration of its branches, potentially undermining the existence of the "national homeland." Nevertheless, over the past decades, leaders have succeeded in their mission by balancing the victim complex with the colonizer's doctrine.

The following lines delve into the Israeli Jewish identity's ability to navigate between this complex and doctrine—from the beginnings, where the founders of the "homeland" had to dissolve many elements of Jewish identity in favor of Zionism as a nationality and the state as a dream; through the complex itself and Western ostracism that produced a significant aspect of the Jewish personality; to the role of Palestinian existence, in its "flare-ups and lulls," in amplifying or exacerbating the Jewish identity and renewing its conflicts.

Historical inquiry: Jews or Judaism First?

The "biblical covenants" are prominent when researching Jewish identity on official Israeli sites. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs refers to Jewish identity as the religious heritage of the patriarchs, dating back 4,000 years, from Abraham and his son Isaac, then his grandson Jacob, in Mesopotamia, extending from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan, settling in Egypt before returning with the prophet Moses to Palestine, where their kingdoms divided, experiencing Babylonian exile and displacement twice.

At this point, the historical and religious Jewish heritage ceases in both the official site and the Zionist narrative, which views this heritage and those covenants as evidence of their right to the land, sufficient to affirm their identity. However, this discontinuity reflects a gap between the historical Jewish identity and the current Jews themselves, impacting their interpretation of existence, relationships, and future.

سجود عوايص | نشر في 8 April, 2026

A conceptual portrait of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the renowned Jewish philosopher and leading voice of the Haskalah movement.

Researcher Yaacov Yadgar expresses the troubled relationship between Jewish identity and Jews themselves, stating that Judaism is no longer the primary reference for Jews, even though it predates them. He refers to researcher Leon Roth's assertion that "Judaism should not be viewed from the perspective of Jews, but Jews should be viewed from the perspective of Judaism."

Before the 19th century, Jewish identity bore no markers except for Jewish religious traditions and rituals. Even during the rise of nationalisms and the end of religious wars, followed by the Treaty of Westphalia that established the emergence of nations and states, Judaism remained an identity tied to political changes in the countries where it existed.

However, the rise of nationalisms led to the exclusion and isolation of Jews, turning them into minorities, especially since elements of nationality were absent among them; they were ethnically heterogeneous groups, geographically and economically dispersed, and linguistically, socially, and religiously different from their surroundings.

This encouraged the emergence of what became known as the "Jewish Enlightenment" (Haskalah), which saw the importance of integrating Jews into European societies, adopting national languages, modernizing Jewish education, and engaging in economic and political life.

A prominent figure in this movement was Russian-Jewish writer Moshe Leib Lilienblum, who lived and worked in what is now Lithuania in the latter half of the

19th century. He promoted what he believed to be "proper education" that would rid both Jews and Christians of their religious prejudices and lead them to coexist.

He believed that "the root cause of anti-Semitism is ignorance, and once Jews free themselves from superstitions, they will live harmoniously in modern liberal Europe."

While the Haskalah succeeded in parts of Europe, especially France, it failed elsewhere, particularly in the face of the traditionalist and stringent Halakha movement. Nevertheless, it contributed to the emergence of the first Jewish political movement aimed at Jewish liberation, focusing on the "Jewish question" between the choices of integration and isolation. Among its advocates were Moses Mendelssohn, Israel Jacobson, and Leopold Zunz.

This movement brought about numerous changes affecting European Jews in Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Germany, France, and Lithuania. It launched a wave rejecting the Yiddish language in favor of reviving Hebrew, established a secular Jewish culture focusing on history, sciences, and political and economic engagement, and supported reconciliation between Christianity and Judaism within a reformist framework, dropping aspects of Jewish law in favor of liberation issues.

Amid this momentum for integration — driven by fear of decline — Jewish identity began to take on new, active components: from the revival of the Hebrew language, to academic and intellectual Jewish excellence, to an open, modern Jewish culture compatible with Christian Europe.

Yet this wasn't enough to unite the scattered Jewish communities across the world. The movement encountered fierce resistance from those who rejected integration and reform, clinging instead to insularity. Political shifts also left deep scars on Jewish minorities, with pogroms affecting both traditionalists and reformists alike.

Even attempts at assimilation largely failed, as suspicion toward the "loyalty" and belonging of Jews persisted.

Nonetheless, the Haskalah birthed another, more rebellious offshoot: Zionism. First referenced by Austrian journalist Nathan Birnbaum in 1890, it was presented as the nationalist framework Jews could rally under — another form of self-determination and the right to govern themselves.

سجود عوايص | نشر في 8 April ,2026

Theodor Herzl, founder of modern political Zionism.

Theodor Herzl revived and redefined Zionism by proposing a Jewish identity bound to a single homeland, one that transcended internal differences through the unifying goal of statehood. His 1896 book Der Judenstaat (The Jewish State) infused his vision with religious, historical, and economic dimensions aimed at rallying the widest possible Jewish support worldwide — in effect, a search for Jewish nationhood in the age of rising nationalisms.

In his book, Herzl intentionally favored the term "nation" over "identity", asserting: "The Jewish nation cannot be destroyed, and must not be. Many branches of Judaism may wither and fall, but the trunk remains firmly rooted."

He outlined three pillars of Jewish nationhood:

The Religious Dimension – evoking biblical imagery like "the Promised Land," "a land flowing with milk and honey," and "God's chosen people." As historian William Eckler wrote: "The belief in a divine covenant between the Jews and the Land of Israel is the cornerstone of Jewish identity."

The Social Dimension – highlighting the marginalized status of European Jews and their need for a new space where they could construct their own social hierarchy. Herzl also tied this to economic justifications.

The Ethnic Dimension – arguing that Judaism is more than a religion; it is a

peoplehood. Even if geographically dispersed, Jews still constitute one nation. He further declared:

"The Jewish question is not just a social issue, nor merely a religious one. It can assume various forms, but at its core, it is a national problem. It can only be solved politically on the global stage, where the civilized nations deliberate. We are a people — one people."

Between the first Zionist Congress in 1897 and the sixth in 1903, Herzl — backed by wealthy financiers, economists, scholars, and political figures — helped mold an Israeli Jewish identity grounded in land, language, culture, and history.

Supporting institutions developed to solidify each of these pillars: colonizing land, Hebraizing geography, building cultural and scientific foundations, backed by economic support, weaponry, and international diplomacy.

These efforts culminated in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, a landmark in the campaign to forge a lasting Israeli Jewish identity for future generations.

Ultimately, this historical excavation affirms the view of scholar Yadgar Katzenelson in his 1935 book "Tradition and Revolution", who wrote:

"By the late 19th and early 20th century, Zionism, as a Jewish intellectual and political force, had surpassed Judaism as a religion. The notion that Jews and Judaism are inherently intertwined no longer produced new intellectual movements — and those that remained held little value compared to Zionism itself."

Identity Excavation: The Victim Complex or the Colonizer's Creed?

Even as Zionism grew to represent world Jewry and gained traction in Western political institutions, it faced strong opposition from within European Jewish communities — especially in Western Europe. The cultural assimilationist camp, led by Mendelssohn, called for integration rather than pursuing a separate Jewish identity.

The secularism of Zionist leaders also unsettled religious Jews, sparking waves of skepticism — even among American Jews. One of the most vocal critics was Berl Katznelson, a staunch Zionist and labor movement pioneer in Palestine, who nonetheless fiercely rejected attempts to adapt Jewish tradition to the building of a new generation of "creative" Jews within the Yishuv community.

Zionism remained ideologically fragmented and institutionally fragile until World War I, when growing European suspicion of Jewish minorities triggered more persecution and exclusion. This undermined the feasibility of assimilation — socially, economically, and religiously.

During that time, Zionist activists became convinced that Judaism, in its traditional form, no longer served the colonial project in Palestine. As a result, they favored defining Jewishness "biologically" rather than religiously — a move that widened the rift between Zionism and Judaism.

Occupation soldiers emerge from Gaza displaying a plastic skeleton they claim was taken from a school December 27, 2023.

As writer Michael Wyschogrod noted: "Zionist activists constructed a new identity divorced from its past, while paradoxically relying on Orthodox rabbis to preserve ethnic continuity."

In the 1930s, history handed Zionism its biggest opportunity: the Nazi Holocaust. Lasting into the mid-1940s, it added a profound moral layer to the emerging Zionist identity, casting it as a national liberation movement. Zionist thinkers dusted off older ideas of emancipation, echoing Russian-Jewish philosopher Leon Pinsker, who called for "auto-emancipation":

"We do not merely feel like Jews — we feel like men. And as men, we too wish to live and to become a nation like others."

The Holocaust thus became another cornerstone of Jewish identity and breathed new life into Zionism. Western societies and governments, burdened by guilt, embraced the fulfillment of the Jewish dream. Antisemitism became almost

exclusively tied to Jewish suffering, detached from broader Semitic contexts.

Though Zionism predated the Holocaust, Western sociologists and scholars often frame it as a reaction to it. Historians Shlomo Avineri and Derek Penslar, for instance, argue that everything in Zionist identity before the Holocaust was just one part — and everything after was its dramatic counterbalance.

Before the first Zionist Congress and the designation of Palestine as the "Jewish homeland," Zionism had merely been a national movement to liberate an oppressed people. It promoted itself as seeking "a land without a people to build a new Jewish society free of material and spiritual ghettos."

But once Palestine — then part of Ottoman Greater Syria — became its target, settler-colonialism took precedence over nationalism.

While some see the decision to colonize Palestine as a shift from victimhood to colonizer, it's important to note that Jewish immigration began decades before the Holocaust. The first waves of settlers arrived in the mid-19th century, and the earliest Jewish colonies predated the Holocaust by more than 70 years.

This transformation marked a reengineering of Jewish identity through a Zionist-imperial lens — one that sought to modernize Judaism by framing it in secular terms, adopting European economic and scientific norms, and reinforcing the divide between a "barbaric East" and a "developed West."

Land became a central axis of this identity. Jewish history was reconstructed to begin in Palestine, not from historical evidence but political necessity, interweaving selectively borrowed socialist values into the blueprint of the emerging collective identity.

سجود عوايص | نشر في 8 April 2026,

Settlers establish outposts within the buffer zone maintained by the Israeli army around the Gaza Strip, near the Erez Crossing

Eventually, the Holocaust, counterbalanced by antisemitism, granted Jewish identity the enduring mantle of the "eternal victim," framing any challenge to its policies as a looming "existential threat."

Over the decades, Zionism succeeded in forging a new Jewish persona — one that could transcend internal divisions for the sake of a national homeland. This persona was embodied in the figure of the "Sabra": unlike diaspora Jews, he knew no other homeland but Palestine. His spiritual and historical ties were severed from the outside world, making him the living realization of the Zionist dream of self-liberation and national determination.

Supported by British mandate authorities and later American patronage, the contours of a Jewish state began to materialize — albeit in ambiguous form. Its earliest structures included the Jewish Agency (led by Labor Zionists), the Histadrut (a national trade union), and the Haganah (a militia force).

The colonial dimension became impossible to ignore, especially as Zionist policy relied on the expulsion of Arabs from farmland to build an exclusively Jewish economy — reinforcing its settler nature and advancing a new reality in Palestine.

Modern Jewish Identity: Between the Al-Aqsa Flood and the Justification for

Genocide

Mordechai Bar-On, a former commander in the Israeli army during the 1948 war—the Nakba—once remarked: "Had the Jews not embarked, in the late 19th century, on the project of reassembling the Jewish people in their promised land, all the refugees now in camps would still be living in the villages they fled or were expelled from."

In truth, he was not wrong. Jewish behavior in the West and elsewhere had long provoked discrimination and hostility, and in its earliest iteration, "Israel" was little more than a sanctuary—a place where Jews could forge their identity, determine their fate, and escape the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust and centuries of European persecution. It also granted them an edge over their surrounding Arab societies.

Thus, the Israeli Jewish identity continued to perform a kind of ideological acrobatics—oscillating between the rhetoric of national liberation from persecution and the reality of settler-colonial domination over a populated land. Within just 72 years since the establishment of "Israel," and 140 years since the first Jewish settlements in Palestine, more than seven million Jews around the world now identify "Israel" as their homeland.

It's this dynamic that led researcher Eviatar Friesel to describe modern Jewish identity as "the cracks in the model of integration."

But in the past decade, these cracks have deepened into full-fledged fissures. Researcher Samia Al-Atoot traces this shift to the wide popularity of a 2014 song that took direct aim at the foundational elements of modern Jewish identity. It said:

"Goodbye, land of honey... I wasn't born to kill... Don't sting me, bee, with your honey."

The message was explicit: Jews were being called to emigrate from Israel, to leave behind a land of endless war.

Alarmed by such signals, the Israeli Ministry of Diaspora Affairs launched, in early 2016, a $250 million shekel initiative to bolster Jewish identity and reinforce Israel's image as the homeland of all Jews. But the project faced sweeping criticism—particularly due to its implementation by far-right organizations such as Chabad, Hillel, and Ayalim. These groups enjoyed little appeal among younger generations, especially outside ultra-Orthodox circles.

The fractures in Jewish identity didn't stop there. They widened with the rise of the far-right, which sought to dominate the state's institutions and "purify" it of secular influences under the pretext of "judicial reforms." This political crisis

triggered the first wave of reverse migration from the "land of milk and honey" at the end of 2022.

Then came the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation in 2023, which shattered "land" as a pillar of Jewish identity. Suddenly, "Israel" was no longer a safe haven—it became a liability. Reverse migration became a trend, not just an anomaly, with 600,000 Israelis leaving the country within a single year. In response, the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics redefined emigration, extending the required absence period from one year to one year and 275 days, to delay the formal recognition of this outflow.

Meanwhile, the pillars of antisemitism and Holocaust memory began to crumble under the weight of Israel's own genocidal practices and settler-violence against Palestinians. Israel's military has mirrored colonial patterns of ethnic cleansing, using the same fear-based justifications that were once employed to legitimize colonizing Palestine.

A new Zionist campaign emerged to redefine who is "truly" Jewish, based on one's stance toward Israeli military policy. Thus, the term "non-Jewish Jew" has resurfaced in a new form—as "the self-hating Jew."

The unraveling didn't stop there. The image of the "enlightened Western Jew," once seen as superior to his regional surroundings, began to deteriorate. Israel's portrayal of itself as a democratic oasis in a backward Middle East increasingly clashed with its internal abuses of power, violations of international law, and consistent evasion of accountability.

These contradictions reached a peak during several flashpoints: the genocidal war on Gaza, annexation efforts in the West Bank, the "pager explosion" in Lebanon, and repeated airstrikes on Syrian government sites following incursions into the country's south.

سجود عوايص | نشر في 8 April ,2026

Palestinians take in the rubble left by an Israeli airstrike on residential buildings and a mosque in Rafah, Gaza Strip.(Fatima Shbair / Associated Press)

Today, the transformations surrounding Israeli Jewish identity are forging a new identity pattern—one in which the image of the eternal victim fades, replaced by that of the brutal oppressor. Religious and cultural values give way to the annihilation of the Other and the quest to expel them. Democracy disappears in the face of occupation, lawlessness, and contempt for international norms.

Some might still view this as a new face of Zionism—but in truth, it is its real face: the one carefully cultivated and cynically masked for decades to gain Western political support, secure foreign aid, and reinforce Jewish supremacy in the Middle East at the expense of the Arab world.

The existential question confronting Jewish identity today is no longer: Does Judaism precede the Jew? Or: Is the identity built on victimhood or colonialism? But rather: Does humanity precede barbarism? And where do democracy, rights, and freedoms stand amid ethnic cleansing and genocide?

Thank you for reading. Subscribe to receive in-depth reports from and about the Middle East.

رابط المقال:https://www.noonpost.com/en/363804/