



# The Jewish People in 2126: Demography, identity and the future of a global minority

Professor Sergio DellaPergola

Introduction by Dr Jonathan Boyd

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## / Introduction

When Jews argue about the future, they tend to argue about identity, politics or values. Professor Sergio DellaPergola starts somewhere else: with people. How many there are, where they live, how they move, who they partner, what they pass on to their children. It is a deceptively simple move. But as this paper demonstrates, and as he has taught me over many years, it is also one of the most powerful ways of understanding how Jewish life actually works – and how it may change over time. At the same time, as DellaPergola himself is quick to acknowledge from the outset, even the most grounded analysis can only take us so far: the further we look ahead, the more we necessarily enter the realm of uncertainty.

Few scholars are better placed to undertake this type of exercise. Over several decades, DellaPergola has established himself as the pre-eminent authority on Jewish demography worldwide, combining rigorous empirical analysis with a rare capacity to situate population trends within their broader historical, social and political contexts. His work has shaped academic debate and informed communal and policy thinking across the Jewish world. In the pages that follow, he brings that depth of expertise to bear on one of the most fundamental questions facing the Jewish collective: not simply how many Jews there will be in the future, but what kind of people we may become.

That approach resonates strongly with the work of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research. A demographic perspective – grounded in careful data analysis, attentive to long-term structural processes, and alert to the ways in which individual behaviours aggregate into collective outcomes – runs through much of what we do. It reflects a simple but important premise: that any serious attempt to understand Jewish life, or to plan for its future, must begin with the dynamics of population and identity over time. In that sense, this paper sits at the heart of the kind of inquiry JPR seeks to advance.

At the same time, the analysis presented here reflects Professor DellaPergola's own reading of the evidence, his interpretation of long-term trends, and his considered judgement about how these may unfold. It should therefore be understood as an expert perspective rather than an institutional position. JPR's role is to support robust, evidence-informed discussion, including by publishing work that provokes reflection and debate. This paper is offered in that spirit: as a significant contribution to an ongoing conversation, not a definitive statement of view.

It is also worth emphasising another aspect of the spirit in which the exercise is undertaken. DellaPergola opens by citing the Talmudic warning about prophecy – a reminder that attempts to foresee the future, however well grounded in evidence, carry an inherent risk of overreach. Even with the best demographic tools at our disposal, projecting a century ahead remains, unavoidably, speculative. The value of such work lies not in precise prediction, but in clarifying the forces at play, outlining plausible trajectories, and sharpening the questions we ask about what lies ahead.

Yet its publication is timely. Across the Jewish world today, there is a palpable sense of uncertainty – about security, about identity, about relations between Israel and the Diaspora, and about the place of Jews within wider societies. These concerns are often experienced through the immediacy of current events, which can dominate attention and limit horizons. One of the particular strengths of this paper is that it encourages a different way of thinking. By stepping back from the specifics of the present moment and focusing instead on the deeper structural forces that have shaped Jewish life over time – births and deaths, migration, assimilation and renewal, relationships with surrounding societies – it provides a wider lens through which to view both present challenges and future possibilities.

Looking ahead to 2126 is not then an exercise in prediction so much as an exercise in perspective. It invites us to consider how enduring processes may interact with contingent events, and how choices made today may resonate across generations. For policymakers, communal leaders and engaged readers, this kind of perspective is invaluable. It shifts the focus from reacting to immediate pressures towards thinking more strategically about long-term trajectories.

We hope that this paper will stimulate discussion across the Jewish world and beyond. It raises complex questions and does not always offer comfortable answers. But by engaging seriously with those questions – grounded in evidence, informed by history, and attentive to the future – we may be better equipped to navigate the uncertainties of the present and to shape, in however limited a way, the contours of what lies ahead.

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## 1 / Terms of reference

Rabbi Yochanan said: *“From the day the Sanctuary was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and was given to fools and infants”* (Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra, 12b). If we start from this famous Talmudic quote, the attempt to sketch a profile of what the Jewish People might be like in the Gregorian year 2126 (equivalent to the Hebrew year 5886) appears truly mad. There are too many variables in frantic flux – and too many that are still unknown or even nonexistent at the time of writing this text – for one to propose scenarios that fall within a reasonable margin of error and do not risk ridicule upon verification. And this is true even if we limit ourselves to a concrete cultural, social and demographic perspective, without wandering excessively into the realms of religion, philosophy or politics.

A practical example of the risks of forecasting, not only long-term but also short-term, is offered by comparing some key dates in the history of the Jewish people in the modern era. Who in 1897, the year of the first Zionist Congress in Basel, could have predicted 1939, the outbreak of World War II? Who in 1945, at the final count of the Holocaust, could have predicted 1948, the declaration of an independent State of Israel? Who in 1967, the Six-Day War, could have predicted 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union? And who in Israel, on November 1, 2022 – the date of the election of a government mandated to lower prices and improve internal security in the country – could have predicted October 7, 2023: the massacre of 1,200 and the deportation of 250 hostages from Israel into Gaza? Trying to predict 2126 involves countless scenarios and just as many risks.

Today, disturbing and contradictory developments and seemingly unpredictable changes in the global political environment pose perhaps not unprecedented, but certainly unusual existential challenges for the Jewish people. Colossal existential risks are accompanied by great opportunities for growth and success. In this sense, in order to speak about the future of the Jewish People, it is necessary to identify the major underlying issues, immutable in their long-term nature, but harbingers of many alternative developments. We believe three of these can be identified:

1. What are the normative and cultural contents of a coherent and shared *raison d'être* of the Jewish People, which also entails a definition of the boundaries of collective identity, the rules of individual inclusion, and the mechanisms of transmission from one generation to the next?
2. What is the nature of the encounter or conflict, and of the mutual local and global influence, between Jews – who in any scenario are a minority – and non-Jews – who in any scenario are the majority?
3. How are the common interests of the global Jewish collective identified and defended, wherever they may be, through appropriate theoretical and practical tools that foster the development of winning strategies?

Throughout their long history, Jews have relentlessly sought faith and spirituality, but also refuge, security, protection, equality, integration, autonomy, dignity and happiness. This has almost always proved to be a utopia, through diverse realities, dominated by a relationship of

almost constant weakness and subordination of Jews to the hegemony of others. Since 1948, however, the options have effectively changed. The Israel-Diaspora dualism has resurfaced, a dualism that had not existed for the previous nearly 2,000 years. Today, therefore, the Jewish People faces three distinct existential circumstances:

1. Israel as a sovereign state in which Jews constitute a solid majority in a society characterised by extraordinary growth and mobility, yet still embroiled in unresolved and perhaps irresolvable military, political and ethno-religious conflicts;
2. The Jewish Diaspora as a proliferation of communities in which Jews constitute small minorities in their respective societies, yet are considerably more visible and at times more influential in the socioeconomic, cultural and political spheres than their mere numerical size;
3. The third condition, more elusive but crucial, is the delicate bilateral relationship between these two partners – the Diaspora and Israel – based on which it is possible to determine whether there truly is one Jewish People, or several, or even none at all.

There are those who maintain (and for our purposes: will maintain in the future) that the vocation of the Jews is to constitute – unlike all other peoples – exclusively a landless diaspora, or even that the Jews are not even a people. And there are those who believe, instead, that the true vocation of the Jews is above all to be and have – like all other peoples – a sovereign state in its own land. There are those who speak of two Jewish Peoples clearly separated by this typological fault line, and those who instead maintain that the common substratum between the different constituent parts is nevertheless dominant. While apologising for a certain crudeness, it is not implausible to reduce the contemporary Jewish people to two modalities: Jews with an army and Jews without an army. But the problems are enormously more complex.

The political, economic and cultural consequences of globalisation and transnationalism, and the inherent tension between being Jewish and belonging to a larger society, today generate, in any scenario, an inevitable interdependence among the different components of the Jewish People, and at the same time, between Jews and non-Jews around the world. Therefore, with a view to the next century, the inevitable question must be asked: Is the existence of a Jewish People possible without a Diaspora? Is the existence of a Jewish People possible without the State of Israel? Is the existence of two or more Jewish peoples possible – that there is a people with a center and a periphery; or that there are two centres in a position of mutual conflict, such as Israel and the United States; or that there is no centre at all, but only several nuclei semi-unrelated to one another?

From the historical perspective of the *longue durée*, the answer is that, yes, all this is possible because it has already effectively happened, but at what price! The price of suffering, persecution, marginalisation and ghettoisation, forced conversions, expulsions and massacres has been very high, even though two facts remain clear: the Jewish People, from its origins to the present, has maintained its resilience over the millennia, thanks to its faith; and, along the way, the Jewish People has produced a cultural heritage of exceptional quality that far transcends, in a universal sense, the narrow dimensions of the Jewish collective itself.

The question we ask ourselves as we look to the next hundred years, then, becomes, in a certain sense, this: Is it possible to survive as a Jewish People while preserving its identity, independence and dignity, without paying absurd and unsustainable prices as in the past?

## 2 / The sociodemographic front

Today, as always in the past, Jews – in internal perception – are a religion, an ethnic group, a culture, a community, among many other things, and – in external perception – they are these same things, but above all, often a foreign group, a foreign community. No serious analysis can ignore the multipolarity of the concept of Judaism, and therefore the multifaceted meanings of individual adherence to the collective paradigm, and the multiple paths through which the collective can be born, live, and die. It is not trivial, in this sense, to recall that the appellation Hebrew (in Hebrew: *'ivri*) means trans – one who passed (*'avar*) from the other bank (of the Euphrates River). It is with this word that the first Jewish man, Abraham the son of Terah, is designated the first time he is attributed by others (in Sodom) a collective, or if you will, symbolic, identity. Pristine Jewish identity is in reality an otherness.

But Jews are also a population. A population is a collection of units that can vary over time and are united by a common definition. It is clear from the outset that the definition is integral to the very existence of the collective in question. Different definitions, by definition, define different collectives. Those who study populations address the world with a very limited but essential set of questions. A population, defined in any way, changes as a function of three fundamental processes:

1. The balance of biological phenomena – births and deaths;
2. The balance of geographical mobility (if referring to a specific place) – incoming and outgoing migrations;
3. The balance of identity mobility (if referring to a particular group) – those who, voluntarily or under duress, join the group in question and those who separate from it.

Each of these processes contributes at any given moment to shaping the numerical size of the collective in question and, selectively, the internal profile of its characteristics.

At least on the sociodemographic front, we can therefore attempt to decipher a certain number of fundamental mechanisms that have determined the Jewish experience over the centuries, which are still active today and will inevitably continue to be relevant in the future.

The essential thing is to try to understand the structure and profound logic of the system – the global one first and foremost, but also, on a smaller scale, the Jewish one – and to ask what has influenced its major facets in the past and what may influence them in the future.

From these premises, it will then be possible to project different outcomes depending on the hypotheses chosen regarding the most likely outcome, or at least it will be possible to formulate different possible developments following alternative hypotheses.

## 2.1 / Dying

It may seem counterintuitive that this examination begins with the terminal act and not the initial act of life. The logic behind this choice is based on the observation of the great demographic transition that saw the Jewish People grow from approximately one million people in 1700 – after a very long period of stagnation, characterised by frequent ups and downs – to the historic peak of 16.5 million living worldwide on the eve of the Second World War. The size and fundamental structure of the contemporary Jewish population – the 11 million who survived in 1945 and the 15.8 million estimated in 2025 – still largely depend on this growth and geographic redistribution associated with the era of modernisation and Jewish emancipation.

The primary cause of this transformation was above all the lower mortality rate of Jews, not their supposedly high birth rate. This is generally true across many periods of history, although, from time to time, major epidemics caused widespread deaths among the entire population, including the Jewish minority, while periodic waves of persecution particularly affected Jews.

The intensity of mortality, it is essential to remember, derives from the combination of two types of factors: exposure to risk, and protection from the risk of a person suffering temporary or permanent harm. These two categories operate to varying degrees for different population groups and subgroups, creating interesting differences between Jews and others, and within the Jewish collective itself.

Regarding exposure to morbidity and mortality risks, Jews in the past, first and foremost, suffered a high probability of the massacre of entire communities, of which the Holocaust was the most emblematic and quantitatively the largest, but certainly not the only one. If need be, the events of October 7, 2023, have taught us that the risk of genocide is never absent, and is not resolved, wherever fundamentalist and delusional ideologies and doctrines are present in society and its institutions. In the past, these were mostly of Nazi-Fascist origin; today and for the foreseeable future, they are of Islamist origin; in a more distant future, they may come from currently unknown origin. Close attention must always be paid to the possibility of attempted genocide and the mechanisms that can instigate and prevent it.

Regarding major epidemics, such as the plague, historical experience is not uniform. In the more distant past, the number of Jewish victims was sometimes lower and sometimes higher than the average for the total population. This uncertain pattern was repeated during the most recent COVID-19 epidemic, with contrasting results depending on the country, the city, and even the different Jewish sub-communities distinguished by religiosity and residential density.

A greater propensity for prevention, through the use of vaccines and masks, likely had a positive effect in reducing Jewish morbidity, but greater social and family ties perhaps had the opposite effect. We know nothing about possible future epidemics, nor about the scientific community's ability to devise efficient solutions like those implemented with COVID-19, but we can intuit that we cannot rule out future events that could decimate humankind

and its subpopulations. Growing concerns about changes in the Earth's climate also suggest future cataclysms with high human casualties.

Regarding the more conventional forms of mortality, we must distinguish between external physical-chemical causes, those resulting from contagion, those derived from genetic inheritance, and those reflecting the wear and tear of ageing. The advantage in health capital accumulated by Jews compared to other populations, even those of compatible socioeconomic status, reflected in the past a mix of cultural and socioeconomic factors.

The Jewish normative environment entailed greater attention to personal hygiene and food selection, along with greater family and community cohesion, which also led to greater assistance to the needy as an alternative to absolute poverty. As a result, the incidence of diseases resulting from disordered behaviour (such as alcoholism or venereal diseases) or from contagions and poisonings from the immediate environment (such as typhus or cholera) was lower.

However, the risk of genetically transmitted diseases and malformations was greater due to the sometimes very restricted marital circle and frequent consanguinity (such as Tay-Sachs, Gaucher, Mediterranean anemia, Favism, or certain types of cancer).

During the modernisation process, the socioeconomic stratification of Jews became crucial, particularly their higher level of education and greater urbanisation, which ultimately allowed many Jews more informed and easier access to healthcare facilities. The high Jewish concentration in Israel, with its scientific research institutions and state-of-the-art hospitals, also contributed to creating an environment with among the highest longevity rates in the world.

Medical and health research prospects suggest a further reduction in the incidence of known diseases, but also the possible emergence of new syndromes currently obscured by existing ones. Few died from the effects of Alzheimer's disease when many died of malaria. Regarding predictions for future longevity, experts are divided between those who believe a reasonable life expectancy of around 90-95 years, and those who would extend this limit by at least thirty years or more.

Today, as we will see, the demographic structure of the Jewish People in the Diaspora is considerably older, while in Israel it is much younger, even though the average age is increasing. What seems certain is that in a future society, with a proportion of elderly or very old Jews far higher than today, the need for related care will greatly increase.

## 2.2 / Being born

The first imperative of Jewish existence is *prù urvù* – bear fruit and multiply. Throughout history, this normative reference primarily resulted in nearly universal, young, and endogamous marriages, which in turn favoured sufficiently high levels of fertility, always within the limits of biological variability. Interestingly, of the four matriarchs of Israel, three – Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel – are remembered for their low fertility. From the Jewish casuistry

developed over the centuries, it also appears clear that Judaism concedes a certain limited measure of birth control (allowed only to women, particularly to protect their life and health), thus preventing the maximum levels of reproduction observed among other populations.

Over time, social stratification became more important, so the middle and upper classes, into which Jews were already flocking at the end of the 19th century, but especially in the second half of the 20th century, tended to be associated with smaller families. At the same time, the phenomenon of growing exogamy caused a significant erosion in the proportion of children born to one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent who were effectively integrated into the Jewish population and community.

These different processes of erosion of the birth rate generated a prolonged ageing syndrome in the structure of the Jewish population according to age groups. In its more advanced stages, the consequences for many Diaspora communities manifest themselves in an excess of deaths compared to births and a gradual decline in the Jewish population.

The most recent evolutionary phase is characterised by a reversal of the relationship between socioeconomic status and birth rate. The wealthier classes and those with greater economic resources have (and may have in the future) greater opportunities to achieve family expansion, if desired. This latter variable depends equally on a more or less optimistic attitude toward life and the future. Trends in recent years indicate a clear divergence between Diaspora Jews, well below generational replacement rates – like all Western societies – and the Jewish population in Israel, which still enjoys higher fertility rates than any other developed country. Even in the secular and nonconformist city of Tel Aviv, an average of two children are born per family, more than in any European country.

Part – but note, only part – of this highly resilient familial tendency is explained by the gap between religious Jews, particularly Haredim (strictly Orthodox Jews), and secular Jews. Currently, the gap is an average of 6-7 children compared to just over 2, respectively. If we project these differences over several decades, the emerging effect is a profound transformation in the Jewish population structure, primarily in Israel but also in the United States and other countries.

Yet beyond demographics, long-term forecasts also leave room for fanciful scenarios, such as the gradual replacement of human reproduction with assisted reproduction through mechanical substitutes – as in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Today, assisted reproduction is quite widespread in Israel, but always with the involvement of human beings in various roles. But here we are hypothesising absolutely futuristic technologies without the direct involvement of humans in the gestation phase. The interesting aspect in this case would not only be the type of emerging humanity, but also the halakhic question: if a Jew is someone born of a Jewish woman, can an individual conceived within a machine, perhaps with two male gametes, be considered Jewish?

## 2.3 / Departing

Let us now turn to the great international migrations of Jews in ancient, modern and contemporary times. Humanity has been in perpetual motion since the expulsion of the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, from the Garden of Eden. Even the first Jewish man, Abraham, as mentioned, found his identity in the imperative to leave his homeland and go to the destined land that would be indicated to him. Despite this precise indication, and the binding and definitive message of mission inherent in it, over the millennia the Jews have been maliciously accused of being a wandering people without land and without roots.

In the 145 years from 1880 to 2025, over 9 million Jews left their homelands to move to other lands, mostly on another continent. They did so not because, contrary to the ancient stereotype, the Jew is inherently an unstable and wandering element in society. The reasons for the great intercontinental transfer were, on the one hand, the unbearable poverty and the persecution and discrimination they suffered in the old-established countries of Eastern Europe and the Muslim world; and on the other, the new opportunities for freedom and work in previously inaccessible lands, mostly in the West and overseas, and finally in Israel.

The historical profile of global Jewish emigration, characterised by repeated large waves, reflects the Jews' reaction to major crises, the resulting destabilisation, and the push factors that emerged in different eras and parts of the world. It also reflects the changing opportunities, often limited by strict quotas, for finding suitable resettlement locations.

The main peaks have occurred primarily in conjunction with major global geopolitical shifts, such as the dissolution of great empires and the emergence of a new world order. In particular, we note the wave of migration, primarily to the United States, which preceded and followed the demise of the Russian, Habsburg, and Prussian Empires at the end of World War I; the demise of the British Empire as a necessary prerequisite for Israel's independence in 1948 and the subsequent great wave of *aliyah*; the demise of the French Empire and decolonisation in North Africa in the 1950s and 1960s; and the demise of the Soviet Union – itself a form of empire – following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent exodus, mostly to Israel, of nearly 90% of the Jews living there. A miniature case is that of Venezuela, where a well-organised and prosperous Jewish community was virtually dissolved by the advent of Hugo Rafael Chávez's regime. The most recent data powerfully reflect Russia's war in Ukraine, as well as the increased emigration from Israel after October 7.

The important lesson to be learned is that fundamental developments in Jewish society reflect and depend to a large extent on the major changes in the surrounding environment. Jews, beyond their proven stability and loyalty to their homeland, have had to adapt, often against their will, to the constraints and opportunities offered.

Long-term forecasting inevitably leads us to the following question: to what extent will the current global geopolitical order hold up, and therefore be capable of maintaining Jewish populations in their current places of residence? Will the European Union, or the United States, or indeed the State of Israel exist in 2126? Who, after all, predicted the dissolution of a power like the Soviet Union? In some cases, like that of the United States, it would seem that the answer depends on a global revolution. But in other cases, like that of the EU, uncertainty

seems more real and suggests a more careful reflection on the geopolitical lessons of history and their consequences for the global system of Jewish migration.

## 2.4 / Arriving

The mirror image of emigration is evidently immigration. If the former primarily reflects the negative pressures perceived in the countries of origin, the latter primarily reflects the attractiveness of the countries of destination. Since independence in 1948, Israel has been the main magnet for international Jewish migration. Over the past hundred years, the country has recorded a positive migration balance, with only four brief exceptions: in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s, and in 2024-25, driven by the October 7 events but also by discontent among citizens with Israeli government policies, such as the proposed constitutional reform or the exemption of young Haredim from military service.

The conventional expectation is that *aliyah* (the ascension to Israel) is essentially governed by ideological motivations, such as the desire to rebuild the Jewish State and live there far from antisemitism and the frustrations of minority life. However, the correlation between immigrant numbers and other variables demonstrates that the dominant explanatory factor is the conditions of freedom (such as the prevailing lack of personal security in a society) and the economy (such as unemployment rates) in the countries of origin – much more than the symmetric variables in Israel.

International migration has long led to the concentration of Jews in the most developed, democratic, and pluralistic societies. Immigration has been one of the major drivers of Israel's demographic and cultural growth. The absorption of immigrants from dozens of countries has given rise to a complex process of integration, which over the decades has greatly attenuated the socioeconomic differences that arose from the very different levels of development in the countries of origin. It has also contributed to the creation of a new type of Jewish culture, embodying values and concepts that have developed over the centuries, in both the East and the West.

Over the years, the State of Israel has managed to establish itself among the elite group of the 20-25 most developed countries in the world, thus also capable of retaining the vast majority of its inhabitants. But recent events seem to be weakening this dominant position within the Jewish world.

Many Israeli citizens are currently considering moving abroad, even temporarily, while the clouds of antisemitism gathering over major Western countries, including the United States, are pushing many local Jews to seriously consider leaving for Israel. Under the current circumstances, Israel's diminishing appeal has caused many contemporary Jews to perceive a 'cage effect': a strong desire to leave, but without being able to truly decide where. Such a situation, vaguely reminiscent of the pessimistic perceptions of many European Jews in the 1930s, is unsustainable in the long run.

A long-term forecast of international Jewish migration, and especially of migrants' landing points, is therefore almost impossible because it implies predicting the economic and political

developments of the entire global system of political and military dominance, economies, and cultures. It is clear, however, that uncertainty can only be overcome if the geopolitical crisis affecting the State of Israel is resolved.

## 2.5 / Seceding

Since the emancipation of European Jews, especially since the early 19th century, and obviously in earlier historical periods, there was always a flow of many people away from Judaism. This phenomenon of partial or total secession is generally defined as assimilation. These people can be classified into two types: those who make a conscious and declared choice to renounce all Jewish identity, in many cases even adopting an alternative religious identity, and sometimes promoting a fierce anti-Judaic polemic; and those who do not renounce their Jewish identity but are completely immersed in a non-Jewish environment, including primary family relationships, and therefore virtually disappear from the organised life of the Jewish community.

The primary indicator, albeit very simplistic, of this phenomenon is the frequency of 'mixed' marriages, that is, between a Jewish and a non-Jewish partner. Such rates have risen, for example in the United States, from minimal percentages in 1900 to over 60% in 2020. In Europe, the upward trend of exogamy began many decades earlier and reached even greater heights at the end of the 20th century.

It is possible, however, that the pendulum of assimilation reached its maximum extent at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, and that a certain reversal of the trend is underway. Perhaps we are once again observing a split similar to that of the emancipatory period between those who wish to remain within a certain Jewish context and those who choose to explicitly dissociate themselves from it. But, also due to the hostility perceived outside the Jewish community, many Jews – even among the most distant and marginal – feel the need to find a meeting point, a helping hand, a home where they can come together and feel more at ease.

The fundamental fact, historically as today, remains the ability to transmit the contents of Jewish knowledge and identity from one generation to the next. This transmission appears to be strongly influenced by the family environment into which one is born, even more so than by the socialisation tools available to a Jewish community, such as schools, youth movements, and cultural centres. Thus, there is a chain reaction in the transmission of identity, which in past generations has generally been declining.

The Jewish minority operates in a position of inferiority compared to the majority, which is nevertheless capable of dictating its hegemonic rules. The question of whether this process of erosion is entirely reversible remains open. The answer will likely come from the continuous evolution of the external context within which the Jewish collective operates, and from the internal capacity to find adequate responses to it.

## 2.6 / Joining

One of the most interesting and perhaps surprising phenomena of recent decades is a resurgence of interest in Judaism, explained at least in part by the hostility of the surrounding environment. The return manifests itself in a greater interest in religious rites among younger people, and in a perception of greater centrality of relevance – not necessarily empathy – towards what we have called the Jewish ‘peoplehood,’ with Israel at its centre.

But there are also new phenomena, such as the growing interest in Judaism among communities that are not currently formally part of it, such as numerous groups of believers, especially in Latin America, but also in Africa and Asia, who claim ancient Jewish ancestral origins. Part of this phenomenon is linked to the hypothesis that they are descendants of Jews forcibly converted to Christianity during the Inquisition. Others of these new communities have different origins and memories, such as the Lemba, from the southern part of the African continent, who are shown to be genetically descended from the primary group of the Cohanim – the ancient Jewish Priests.

A very rough estimate of the size of these real or self-imagined crypto-Jewish populations, or dispersed tribes, would put the possible number at around 60-80 million people globally. What to do? Admit them all *en masse*, or implement a policy of selective co-optation?

This leads us more generally to reflect on the rules of accession to Judaism, and in particular on the question of conversion, both as a legal-normative principle and as an administrative-executive apparatus managed by the rabbinates of various countries, and in particular by the central rabbinate of Israel in Jerusalem. We immediately note that in biblical Judaism, the transmission of Jewish identity was originally patrilineal, at least in the sense of the public image of a person's identity, but became more explicitly matrilineal at the time of the Mishnah.

In contemporary Jewish society, it is customary to distinguish between Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jewish communities, each of which, in its own way, interpret the rules, suppress old ones, or establish new ones. The Orthodox follow the criterion of matrilinearity; some more progressive communities also admit patrilinearity. These are rules, after all. But the most interesting, and perhaps most dramatic, debate is taking place in contemporary times within Orthodox Judaism itself, where, on the basis of identical biblical and Talmudic sources, some authorities pass judgments that others oppose.

One of the discriminating factors emerges precisely in the matter of conversions, where a view currently dominant within the Israeli establishment is very reluctant to grant admission, and is also highly influential among Orthodox rabbis in the Diaspora. Indeed, there is a retreat, whereas, for example, until recently, many Orthodox rabbinical authorities granted *giyùr qatàn* – that is, the conversion of a child born of a mixed marriage – even without requiring the conversion of the non-Jewish mother.

Today, this practice has virtually ceased, and the simultaneous conversion of the mother is also required. In Israel today, out of a potential population of approximately half a million non-Jewish citizens – members of families who immigrated under the Law of Return who are fully

involved and identified in all spheres of the Jewish State's existence – the Rabbinate converts just over 2,000 to Judaism each year. The frustration generated by the difficulties of the accession process acts as a strong deterrent.

There is also significant disagreement regarding the meaning of accession to Judaism: an exclusively ritualistic and religious behavioural significance, or a communion of destinies in the sense of national belonging – as Ruth the Moabite, the paradigmatic *gijòret* (convert), grandmother of King David, actually affirmed – which ultimately even entails sacrificing one's life for the defense and protection of the common good. The prevalence of one or the other will determine many of the possibilities for maintaining the relevance of Jewish identity among those who belong to it today, and also for expanding the Jewish collective in the future.

### 3 / Imagining a future Jewish People

The preceding considerations can be summarised by focusing on some concrete aspects of contemporary Jewish social reality that are attracting the greatest attention today and that seem unescapable even in the future. We believe we can identify four crucial and concrete balances that will determine the existence, or otherwise, and the nature of a Jewish people in 2126.

#### 3.1 / The balance between Jews and Arabs in the Land of Israel

Demographic projections from a few years ago indicated a progressive erosion in the quantitative ratio between Jews and Arabs in Israel, and, at worst, a return of Jews to the minority status they featured on the eve of the 1948 Declaration of Independence. A more updated version of the same projections provides a different answer, and instead indicates a longer-term maintenance of the current balances – always assuming the absence of macroscopic events that could completely alter the ongoing demographic dynamics.

These balances can be briefly summarised as follows: Jews currently constitute approximately 80% of the total population of the State of Israel within its internationally recognised borders, including the neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. This quantitative ratio is projected to remain fairly stable over the coming decades. If we add to these the Arab inhabitants of the West Bank, the percentage of Jews in the total drops to about 60%, still with a prospect of relative stability. Finally, if we add to them the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, the percentage of Jews in the entire territory from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea drops steadily to about 50%.

It is now clear that a Jewish State cannot be viable without an absolute majority of the Jewish nation on its sovereign territory. Extending the current official terms of Israel's territorial sovereignty to additional areas densely populated by Palestinian Arabs would make such a project impossible to realise. Likewise, the project would be thwarted by attempts at 'staticide', such as that perpetrated on October 7, 2023, and in the subsequent Iranian-led military campaign involving Palestinian, Lebanese, Yemeni, Syrian, and Iraqi armed forces.

Staticide involves three essential elements: a grand theoretical plan for the total destruction of the opposing side, such as the one formulated in Hamas's 1988 founding charter; an operational, meticulously detailed executive plan, such as the one developed by Hamas in the years leading up to October 7; and a broad participation of civilian volunteers, with the support of significant capital from other countries, and with the support of a massive political and media campaign in several countries not directly involved in the conflict, as well as from many international organisations.

The balance between Jews and Arabs in the Land of Israel from the River to the Sea cannot be abandoned indefinitely to the whim of demographic trends. In the interest of the Jewish side, the division of territory and sovereignty should necessarily be resolved through a definition of the borders and responsibilities between the two rival national, ethnic, religious, linguistic and political entities – Israel and Palestine.

### 3.2 / The balance between Jews and non-Jews in different geographical areas of the world

In 2025, Jews constituted less than 2 per 1,000 of the world's population, but excluding the large concentration in Israel, they represented only 1 per 1,000 of the world's inhabitants outside Israel, and excluding the United States, 0.63 per 1,000 inhabitants. This tiny entity, however, is the object of an exorbitant amount of attention and sometimes hostility, stemming from diverse and ever-changing ideological and cultural references.

The phenomenon of anti-Jewish hostility is generally defined by the term 'antisemitism,' which is, however, a sort of abstraction devoid of any analytical meaning. Given the long history of antisemitism, there is no reason to assume it will cease to exist in the future. To better understand the terms of the problem, it is necessary to briefly reconstruct its essentials.

In practice, antisemitism (which would be more accurately defined by the neologism anti-Jewishism) is perceived by Jews as a worldview, a set of actions, and, ultimately, a coherent project aimed at achieving one or more of three main objectives:

1. Physical violence and annihilation of Jews;
2. Exclusion and marginalisation of Jews from civil, social, economic and cultural life;
3. Deteriorating the quality of Jewish private life by inciting fear, frustration and anxiety.

Of these three goals, the first two have been actively pursued throughout history, with varying degrees of success, and often with widespread popular support. Today, these goals are mostly illegitimate in law and less achievable, with the notable exception of threats of annihilation directed against the State of Israel and its Jewish population, and even against global Jewry at large, by the Iranian government and its supporters in the Middle East and elsewhere. Therefore, it is actually the third goal that is the most widespread and relevant in the perception of contemporary antisemitism.

To truly understand antisemitism, it is essential to explore all possible perceptual modalities: cognitive, experiential, and affective. Its most relevant manifestations are the following:

1. Derogatory representation of Jews in the *cognitive/intellectual* sphere;
2. Coercing Jews and isolating them from other individuals or groups to cause harm or inferiority in the *behavioural/experiential* sphere;
3. Causing Jews mental distress and emotional pain in the *affective* sphere.

The lack of distinction between cognitive and experiential modes of perception is particularly unfortunate in the discourse on contemporary antisemitism. As for the affective mode, it is virtually ignored in recent research. The latest research essentially highlights three fundamental axes of denial or denialism, in which the Jew is dispossessed:

1. As an individual – of the right to enjoy civil, social, cultural, and political equality like any other individual in the society in which we live;
2. As a potential victim and survivor of a planned extermination – of the right to preserve and transmit his or her authentic memory of the destruction of his or her people through the Shoah;
3. As a member of a national community – of the right to exercise national sovereignty through an independent state, Israel.

Antisemitism, or rather ‘anti-Jewishism,’ is the denial of one or more of these three essential axes of reference, which are also three inalienable existential rights. This definition of antisemitism represents a Copernican revolution compared to those commonly used, in that it reverses the perspective of observation.

At the centre of the decision-making process regarding the definition and extent of defamation must be the offended party – that is, the Jews – and not others. Today, however, this role is played, usually in good faith, by external judges who, from their ivory tower, render judgements based on their knowledge or social connections, or even, in bad faith, by the perpetrators themselves.

The possible reaction to offence tends to be an unequal struggle of the minority against the majority. In a growing number of cases, especially but not only in smaller Jewish communities, a phenomenon of ‘neo-Marranism’ is also observed, that is, the concealment by Jews of their external Jewish appearance, their willingness to speak in public, and ultimately, their Jewish identity *tout court*.

The changing social context of American Jewry, whose weight on global Jewry is decisive, deserves further reflection. We have long been accustomed to the paradigm of an American Jewry different from that of the rest of the Diaspora, in a predominantly white, non-Hispanic – or even WASP – America, home to a wide range of minorities who gradually made their way and assimilated into a central strand of the dominant society. This process of integration has been gradual and not without conflict and difficulty.

Jews in the United States have experienced one of the greatest success stories, starting from very low positions on the social ladder of ethnic, religious, and social groups, then rising to the top – although ultimately overtaken by other minorities, especially Asians, in the race towards the highest levels of education or income. The successful socioeconomic and cultural integration of Jews into the broader social context has been counterbalanced by their increasing and ultimately very high rates of cultural assimilation.

The dynamics of large-scale immigration absorption, accompanied by differential fertility levels, have gradually altered the profile of the overall US population. This trend intensified significantly after the immigration reforms of the 1960s, which allowed the entry of larger shares of Africans, Asians, Latino-Americans, and other non-white immigrant groups, and thus a decline in the Jewish share, not only overall but also in elite professions. U.S. demographic projections predict that between 2050 and 2060, non-Hispanic whites will become a minority of the total U.S. population.

This is a novel scenario with potentially crucial consequences. The United States is poised to become a predominantly Hispanic/non-white society, with a decreasing percentage of Jews and, simultaneously, in the long term, with a Jewish community dominated by a more visible and dominant Orthodox component.

This completely changes the terms of the current discourse. Unlike the past model, in which modernising Jews, mostly of European origin, could easily integrate and sometimes disappear into the white American mainstream, the future level of intimacy, communication, mutual empathy, and cultural exchange between Jews and American society could become significantly less relevant.

The gap between the historical memory and political sensibilities of Jews and the non-Jewish majority in America could widen to the point of becoming unbridgeable. Jews could become increasingly less part of mainstream American culture, which in turn could lead American Jews to increasingly resemble Jews from other, more vulnerable diasporas. And, as for the latter, their reduced numbers and the even more evident transnationalisation of their respective social and political contexts would suggest an increasingly probable and sustained marginalisation.

### 3.3 / The balance between Jews Living in Israel and the Diaspora

In 2026, Jews in Israel represented approximately 46% of the world's Jewish population. At current rates of differential demographic growth, the emblematic 50% could be surpassed as early as 2035. Furthermore, if a majority of the world's Jews lived in Israel, tradition dictates that the laws of *shemita*, the seven-year rest of the land, would no longer apply in their current form. In any case, this would represent an epochal structural and conceptual transformation of the very essence of being a Jewish People.

In these processes of transformation, whether they occur in the short term or the longer term, the ability to communicate between Israel and the rest of the Jewish world will remain a crucial challenge for global Jewry: to understand the integrated complex of Jews in Israel and

throughout the Diaspora, and how to generate stronger and more meaningful interaction between the different parts, in which a core sovereign state constitutes a source of meaning and pride for Jewish communities beyond it, and Jewish communities worldwide constitute a source of strength and a reservoir of wisdom for the core state.

This requires the development of shared and functioning mechanisms for evaluating existing trends and political decision-making processes capable of addressing common challenges and interests. Currently, these mechanisms for debate and decision-making do not exist, and it would be crucial if they did.

### 3.4 / The balance between Jews with different shades of Jewish religious identity

We have already noted the differential fertility rates among different segments of the Israeli population according to their levels of religiosity. At current birth rates, the current proportion of Haredim, around or slightly above 15% of Israel's total Jewish population, could grow to 30% around 2050, and to an even more dominant proportion in subsequent decades.

In school-age groups, the relative presence of the Haredi sector already predicts the national totals of subsequent generations. The projected increase in Israel's school population over the next quarter century entails approximately two-thirds of Haredim children and one-third of non-Haredim Jewish children. By the time they reach military conscription age, the majority of the projected increase in the number of young men eligible for military service compared to today would be recorded in the Haredi sector. The consequences for the Israel Defense Forces are easy to imagine.

Such differentials cannot reasonably be sustained for many consecutive decades without leading to a complete transformation of the character of Israeli society. And this is not only due to the quantitative relationships between the various subgroups, but above all due to socioeconomic issues. Indeed, the Haredi sector maintains labour force participation rates far below average (for men, not women). With fewer workers, the national product would tend to decline, resulting in a general impoverishment of the country, and above all, the ratio between economically productive sectors and sectors subsidised through social security could become unsustainable. This would suggest the need for some adjustment by the Haredi sector, in the direction of gradually declining fertility, inclusion in the national defence system, and greater socioeconomic integration.

This image of a Jewish world seemingly divided dichotomously between black and white is, however, erroneous, or at least insufficient. The empirical reality is that of a gradual distribution of identities, not a dichotomy. All possible nuances coexist without an absolute majority of one type or another.

In theory, this should allow for constructive dialogue between the different parties, also considering the shared interests of the various Jewish populations, especially in the face of the challenges we have outlined here. Paraphrasing Shylock's lament, we could say that the colour of the blood of a Haredi Jew and a secular Jew is exactly the same, just as the fate of the Jews has been the same in the worst critical moments of history, or in the best moments of great spiritual and communal elevation. This is the lesson we must learn in view of the uncertainties of the future.

#### 4 / Who will lead the Jewish people in crossing the Red Sea?

Concluding this admittedly tentative overview of future prospects, informed by a better understanding of the logic of the system in the past, it is impossible not to state the obvious: the Jewish People in 2126 will be composed of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of today's Jews (as well as new followers). Those among today's Jews who have not passed down Jewish grandchildren and great-grandchildren will disappear and cease to be part of that history – which will be what it will be.

But beyond the life choices of individuals, a brief reflection is due to the leaders of the collective, that is, those who will be tasked with leading the Jews in their incessant, symbolic crossing of the Red Sea for the next hundred years. If we ignore the figure of Moses (Moshe Rabbenu) – the greatest biblical leader – two figures, above all others, have shaped the destiny of Israel in the modern era: Theodor Herzl, the central figure of the Jewish Revival (also known by the much misunderstood and often misinterpreted term, 'Zionism'), and David Ben-Gurion, the founding Prime Minister of the State. Both occasionally made grave errors of judgement, but both clearly identified major strategic objectives, and were able to marshal broad consensus and create convergence, even among diverse groups, in order to achieve those goals.

From the panorama we have described, it is clear that many of the unknowns regarding the future of the Jewish People actually concern the future of humankind. Jews have always been heavily dependent on developments to which they themselves contributed only to a secondary extent. The resilience of Jews will depend on their ability to resist negative external pressures, their ability to instantly seize the opportunities that periodically arise throughout history, and their ability to maintain an internal structure sufficiently united and coherent to address these developments together.

The ruling class in the State of Israel and the Diaspora must, above all, be aware of the multiplicity and complexity of the issues at hand. An educated and concrete vision of the relationship between their actual capabilities, which are always limited, and the immense magnitude of the challenges they face must motivate those in power, transcending the temptation to be captivated by unrealistic delusions, deliria of grandeur, or personality cults. This does not mean abandoning Utopia, but it does require adapting it to real possibilities. To achieve this goal, unifying leadership will be needed, capable of uniting different sectors of the Jewish community, and not divisive and antagonistic, or even pitting one against the other. Metaphorically speaking, the current state of Israeli politics is unthinkable, or tolerable like the Red Sea crossing being accomplished by taking the tribes of Rachel's children, but leaving behind the tribes of Leah's children – perhaps even branding them traitors. The government must be of and for the entire people, not just half of them.

Just as it is intolerable that Jews be marginalised by others, it is also imperative that Jews – as a minority community in the Diaspora and as a sovereign state in the Middle East – realise that the world is a dense condominium. It will be increasingly impossible to conduct one's own affairs and satisfy one's own needs without being aware of the existence of others, without to some extent negotiating the conditions of coexistence with them, and, if necessary, without strenuously fighting for one's own existence.

The State of Israel cannot be democratic without being Jewish, and it cannot be Jewish without being democratic. The Jewish Diaspora cannot afford to ape the internal debates of Israeli society without possessing the critical mass and the cognitive and operational tools of the latter. And Israeli society cannot afford to mock the Diaspora without recognising the courage and perseverance of Jews living outside the State. The Jewish people cannot afford to be pragmatic and realistic without faith, nor to live by faith alone without being pragmatic and realistic.

If there is still a world in 2126, there will be a Jewish People. It will be a Jewish People very different from the current one, in a world even more unrecognisable than the one we live in today.

## / About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to positively influence Jewish life. Web: [www.jpr.org.uk](http://www.jpr.org.uk).

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**Professor Sergio DellaPergola** is Professor Emeritus and former Chairman of the Hebrew University's Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, and Chairman of JPR's European Jewish Demography Unit. Born in Italy 1942, he has lived in Israel since 1966. He has an MA in Political Sciences from the University of Pavia, and a PhD in Social Sciences and Contemporary Jewry from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A specialist in the demography of world Jewry, he has published or edited sixty books and monographs including *Jewish Demographic Policies: Population Trends and Options* (2011), *Jewish Population and Identity: Concept and Reality* (with Uzi Rebhun, 2018), *Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism among Jews in Europe, 2018: A New Structural Look* (2020), *Diaspora vs. Homeland: Development, Unemployment and Ethnic Migration to Israel, 1991–2019* (2020), and *US Jews: Reflections on Identity and Demography* (2024), besides over 300 papers on historical demography, the family, international migration, Jewish identification, antisemitism, and projections in the Diaspora and in Israel. He has lectured at over 100 universities and research centres all over the world and was senior policy consultant to the President of Israel, the Israeli Government, the Jerusalem Municipality, and major national and international organisations. A winner of the Marshall Sklare Award for distinguished achievement in the Social Scientific Study of Jewry (1999), and the Michael Landau Prize for Demography and Migration (2013), he is a member of Yad Vashem's Committee for the Righteous of the Nations. He is a consultant and frequent contributor to JPR.

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