



# Israel – Land of Cultural Fusion

By Michal WEILER-TAL



Photo: Michal Tal

Photo: MFA

## Modern History of Israel

Upon termination of the British Mandate, the Jewish people proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. Less than 24 hours later, the armies of five neighboring Arab countries invaded the new state, launching what became Israel's War of Independence, fought intermittently for more than a year. By July 1949, separate armistice agreements, based on cease-fire lines, had been signed with all the adjacent Arab states.

In the Declaration of the Establishment of the State, Israel extends its "hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness."

In 1979, a peace treaty was signed between Israel and Egypt. Further rapprochement in the region was achieved when Israel and Jordan ended the 46-year-long state of war between them by a peace treaty which was signed in October 1994. The momentum in the peace process opened the way for expanding contacts and setting up relations with other Arab countries as well.

Unfortunately, the next step, the Camp David Summit of July 2000, failed due to the Palestinians' refusal to accept Israel's unprecedented proposals for solving the conflict. Until today, there are constant direct and indirect negotiations being held between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority aiming to bring long and lasting peace to the region.

Peace remains Israel's primary goal. Its hopes for a negotiated peace settlement can be realized through reasonable historical compromises with its neighbors, in which the right of Israel to exist in security, as the homeland of the Jewish people, is recognized and respected.

## Jewish State with a Diversity of People

Founded as a Jewish state, Israel's society, numbering more than 7 million people, forms a mosaic of different religions, cultures and social traditions. Citizenship is determined by birth, residence or naturalization; citizens wishing to hold dual nationality may do so.

Religious affiliation and practice are a matter of personal choice, with religious freedom guaranteed by the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel.

Today, the country's population is comprised of 75.5% Jews, 20.2% Arabs (mostly Muslim) and the remaining 4.3% Druze, Circassians, and others not classified by religion. Within this pluralistic framework, the various communities maintain their own religious, educational, cultural and charitable institutions.

Israel's official day of rest is Saturday, the Shabbat. Muslims observe their day of rest on Friday, while Christians observe theirs on Sunday.

Since the establishment of the state (1948), the Jewish population has grown from 650,000 to over 7 million, doubling in the first four years alone with the mass immigration of European Holocaust survivors and refugees from Arab countries. From that time, Jews have continued to come, in varying numbers, both from countries of oppression and from the free world. In two major efforts (1984 and 1991) virtually the entire Jewish community of Ethiopia, believed to have been there since the time of King Solomon, was gathered to Israel. Another large wave of immigration, which began in 1989, is comprised of more than one million Jews from the former Soviet Union.

In the course of the "ingathering of the exiles," Jews brought with them the traditions of their own communities as well as aspects of the culture indigenous to the countries where they had lived for generations. Thus Israel's Jewish population, while united by a common faith and history, is characterized by a diversity of outlooks and lifestyles, resulting in a society which is partly Western, partly Eastern European and partly Middle Eastern, but mainly Israeli.

## Science and Technology (R&D)

Israel is known as a nation of science and technology. Academic research is almost considered a part of our culture. We are proud of the academic competence of our universities and research institutes.

R&D in Israel is carried out primarily at seven universities, dozens of government and public research institutes and hundreds of civilian and military enterprises. Significant research is also performed at medical centers and by a number of public service firms in fields such as telecommunications, power production and water resources management.

Government and public bodies are primary sources of R&D funding, providing financial support for well over half of Israel's R&D activities. The major share of these funds for civilian R&D purposes is allocated for economic development, mainly in the industrial and agricultural sectors, which, in comparison with other countries, constitutes a very large part of the total (more than 40%).

The large number of patents taken out by Israel's universities is one measure of the effectiveness of the relationship between the universities and industry.

The agricultural sector is based almost entirely on R&D, implemented by cooperation between farmers and researchers. Research results are quickly transmitted through an extension service to the field for trial, and problems are brought directly to the scientists for solutions. Agricultural R&D is carried out primarily by the Ministry of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Organization. Most agricultural research institutes in Israel

PHOTO 1

Michal Tal

*Great agriculture produce of Israel*

maintain close relations with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, ensuring a continuous exchange of information with other countries.

Israel's dairy cows are, on average, the world champions in milk production, having increased the average yield per cow from 6,300 liters in 1970 to more than 10,000 liters today through scientific breeding and genetic testing carried out by the Volcani Institute. By harvesting sperm and ova from cattle of superior bloodlines, Israel is able to upgrade its own herd as well as share its advances in this field with other countries.

Israeli agriculturists have pioneered trickle-drip irrigation, agricultural biotechnology, soil solarization and the sustained use of industrial waste water for agriculture. These advances have been applied to marketable products, ranging from genetically engineered seeds and biopesticides to light-degradable plastics and computerized irrigation/fertilization systems.

Making optimal use of scarce water, harsh land and a limited labor force has led to revolutions in agricultural methods. The search for water-saving techniques spurred development of computer-controlled irrigation systems, including the drip method that directs water flow straight to the root zone of plants, helping farmers worldwide. Research relating to the electromagnetic treatment of water to improve animal health and crop yields has also produced promising results.

Israeli-designed and manufactured computers are widely used to coordinate daily farming activities, such as guiding fertilizer injection while monitoring relevant environmental factors, supplying feed for livestock mixed according to tested least-cost/best-yield proportions, and providing a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment for poultry. In addition, a variety of innovative equipment for tilling, sowing, planting, harvesting, collecting, sorting and packing has been developed, manufactured and implemented.

Agriculture has also benefited from general scientific research and R&D, including automated plant tissue culture, biological insecticides, disease-resistant seeds and biological fertilization. *(Photo 1)*

### Alternative Energy Solutions: Solar Power

Israel, nearly bereft of fossil fuel deposits and forced to supply its own peak demand, has turned weakness into advantage. As with its renowned water and wastewater technologies, and its advanced aerospace and information technologies, Israel relies on a long tradition of R&D to overcome natural resources scarcity.

Largely arid and blessed with abundant of sunshine, solar

PHOTO 2

Boaz Dovev

*Aora's solar energy site at Kibbutz Samar*

energy was one of the first alternatives Israeli researchers examined. Israel's pioneering use of renewable energy began decades ago with the near-universal adoption of passive solar-energy domestic water heaters that save the country 2%-3% of its fossil energy imports.

Today, in an era of global warming, the ongoing geopolitical oil crisis and environmental awareness, Israel understands the need for transition to renewable energy. Israel today has more than 100 companies with renewable energy solutions, while R&D has been going on a fast track in almost all variations of alternative energy solutions, from biofuel, biomass, wind turbines and wave turbines to hydroelectric gauges. In a sunny country such as Israel, most renewable energy research is naturally focused on solar energy.

The Israeli solar solutions vary from the conventional, photovoltaic (PV) cell collectors (their manufacturers include Interdan) to concentrated radiation dishes (Zenith and Heliofocus), oil tubes which conduct heat (Solel), solar mirrors (Luz II) and the more sophisticated solar towers (AORA).

In 2009, members of Kibbutz Samar, about 50 km north of Eilat in the Negev Desert, were the first to enjoy the fruits of the advanced solar energy technologies Israel has to offer. *(Photo 2)* AORA, an Israeli solar company, developed a hybrid gas turbine which generates electricity by the heat of sunlight. A mass of reflective mirrors concentrate the sun's rays onto a solar tower, causing the turbine to turn just like the one used in jet planes.

During night time, the turbine can be connected to another source of renewable energy (biofuel/biomass). This technology is able to produce over 500 MW/h, providing electricity to more than 50 households in the kibbutz.

### Culture

Israel is an old-new country, small in size, but with a culturally active, heterogeneous population. Four thousand years of Jewish heritage, over a century of Zionism and more than half a century of modern statehood have contributed to a culture which has already created an identity of its own, while preserving the uniqueness of 70 different communities.

A largely immigrant society, Israel's creative expression has absorbed many different cultural and social influences as it blends tradition and innovation and strives to steer a course between Israeli particularism and universalism. The constant search for cultural identity is expressed through creativity in a broad range of art forms, appreciated and enjoyed by a great many people as part of daily life.

PHOTO 3

Casa Brutus+ Figaro/Yael Pincus



Design Museum Holon

### Notable Japan-Israel Culture Exchange

Worldwide culture ties focus on cooperation in a broad range of fields, including language, literature, the arts, media and sports. Based on cultural agreements with more than 70 countries, in addition to links with many others, activities range from student and academic exchange programs and reciprocal tours by dance troupes, theater companies, art exhibits, musicians and orchestras to participation in book fairs, film festivals and sports competitions as well as the teaching of the language and cultural traditions of both countries.

The culture exchange between Israel and Japan has been remarkable for the past 58 years of diplomatic relations. Whether initiated by the governments through the embassies or simply by the natural relations of “people to people,” who are curious to learn about the “other’s” culture, being it similar or extremely different. Exchanges have been active and operating in each and every aspect of culture possible, while new and innovative fields in arts are being examined.

In the past year, the cultural exchange focused on design, dance and music. One example is the Design Museum in Holon, Israel (<http://www.dmh.org.il/default.aspx>) (Photo 3). The establishment of the museum is a climax in the ongoing process of transforming the city of Holon into a hub of arts, culture and education, while putting much attention on the younger and more promising layers of society – children. The primary goals of the Design Museum are to inspire and challenge the design community, the general public’s perception of design and the way it affects their lives. Concluding a decade, the new museum joins the Holon Institute of Technology, Mediatheque and the National Israeli Cartoon Museum, all founded in Holon.

The museum has drawn much attention from the design industry and media in Japan. The architecture of the museum has been recognized as one of the 100 noticeable designs in the leading monthly design magazine Casa Brutus. To top that, the museum is expected to exhibit this year (June 25 – September 4) the design exhibition “Senseware” curated by renowned Japanese designer Kenya Hara.

Another event which is distinct with its Japanese presence in Israel is the International Exposure festival at the Suzanne Dellal Center for Dance in Tel Aviv. This initiative, with the cooperation of Israeli embassies around the world, is a scheme which introduces local work to guests from abroad who are invited by the center to choose works for future festivals and dance events around the world. Taking place yearly from the end of November to the beginning of December, this scheme has already brought many

PHOTO 4

Gaidi Dagon



Bat-Sheva Dance Group

Israeli dance pieces to some of the world’s most famous stages.

This year, a Japanese delegation of seven members, consisting of people from the media, arts and dance scenes, visited the International Exposure festival in Israel. Their visit was very successful and their impressions were great. Each one of the participants in his/her own field was able to produce a form of cultural cooperation, be it a special review for a Japanese monthly magazine on the Israeli dance scene, or actual future consideration with local festivals in Japan. In addition, this delegation was joined by a group of the Japanese GAGA Association, who went for a special workshop.

Recent cooperation between the Saitama Arts Theater and the famous Israeli dance group “Bat-Sheva” (choreographed by Ohad Naharin) has produced a series of three dance performances MAX, which left a memorable experience on its 2,000 viewers (Photo 4). The performances were followed by a series of 10 GAGA workshops in Kyoto, Saitama and Kobe led by Naharin himself.

According to Naharin: “GAGA challenges multilayer tasks. At once we, the users, can be involved in moving slowly through space while a quick action in our body is in progress. Those dynamics of movement are only a portion of what else might go on at the same time. We are letting our mind observe and analyze many things at once, we are aware of the connection between effort and pleasure, we connect to the ‘sense of plenty of time,’ especially when we move fast, we are aware of the distance between our body parts, we are aware of the friction between flesh and bones, we sense the weight of our body parts, we are aware of where we hold unnecessary tension, we let go only to bring life and efficient movement to where we let go... We are listening, seeing, measuring, playing with the texture of our flesh, we might be silly, decorating our inside, we can laugh at ourselves. We learn to love our sweat, we discover our passion to move and connect it to effort, we discover both the animal in us and the power of our imagination...”

In the field of music, the world-renowned Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra has its share of fame in Japan and it will begin in the coming months a series of nine concerts in six cities across Japan. In Tokyo, it will also cooperate with the Tokyo Ballet Company. The orchestra will close its tour in Tokyo at the NHK Hall, which will be taped, for the first time in Japan, by the Japanese public TV network. **J.S**

Note: This article owes most of its content to the Information Department, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel.

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