



ISRAEL JEWISH FIGURES / 1

The Jewish connection to this land is so deep that “it ain’t easy” to highlight just a few of Israel’s “most famous Jews.” But to start the ball rolling, here are profiles of eight remarkable people. From an ancient king to a modern Wonder Woman, they span thousands of years of Jewish life in Israel. We’ll meet two legendary founders of the State of Israel plus the prime minister assassinated in the pursuit of peace and the controversial rabbi that shook up the country’s politics. We’ll also highlight the diversity and vibrancy of modern Israeli culture and science, with profiles of a masterful author, a Hollywood star, and a woman who overcame her impoverished background to win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

KING HEROD (c. 73 BCE-4 BCE)

Although King Herod ruled more than two thousand years ago, you can still see in Israel today evidence of his extraordinary architectural achievements. Alongside his building program, Herod is famous for his brutality and for the fact that his reign spelled the end (at least until 1948) of independent Jewish rule over the Land of Israel. The story begins with the Roman invasion of Palestine in 63 BCE. Rome allowed the existing Hasmonean dynasty (descendants of the Maccabees from the Hanukkah holiday) to remain nominally in charge but also installed its own officials, including Herod’s well-connected and powerful father, Antipater. Antipater was from southern Palestine and an Edomite, a people who had converted to Judaism a generation earlier. Herod’s mother came from the nobility of Petra, the capital of the Nabataean kingdom.

As a young man, Herod earned Rome’s trust as a general and tax collector. He convinced the Roman Senate to provide him with a large army and to back him in a revolt against the Hasmoneans. By 37 BCE, Herod had captured Jerusalem. Antigonus, the last Hasmonean king, and many of his family and backers were killed. To further his hold on power, Herod married Mariamne I, the niece of Antigonus. Herod was now Rome’s client king of Palestine.

In the early years of his reign, Herod was a creative if ostentatious ruler. His close relations with Rome allowed him to control not only Palestine but also parts of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. He averted famine in 24 BCE by importing Egyptian grain. Growing trade revenue – plus heavy taxation – financed his massive building program which created some of modern Israel’s most visited sites including the Roman-style city of Caesarea with its great port and theater, and the splendid palaces and forts atop Masada and at Herodium. He completely rebuilt the Temple, the center of Judaism, and surrounded it with magnificent building and courts. The rabbis of the time were so impressed that they claimed that anyone who had not seen Herod’s Temple had never seen a beautiful building. Today, the Western Wall constructed by Herod is considered modern Judaism’s holiest site, while many also visit what was the Temple Mount plaza and which is sacred to Muslims as the site of the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque.



jewish figures



ISRAEL JEWISH FIGURES / 2

Although he considered himself a Jew and was admired for rebuilding the Temple, many Jewish groups remained suspicious of Herod given his loyalty to Rome, his fondness for Hellenistic culture, and what they considered to be his suspect Jewish lineage. The later years of his reign were marked by tyranny and violence. Suspecting plots, the mentally and physically ill Herod had his favorite wife Mariamne and several of his children, including his first-born son Antipater, killed. The Talmud claims he murdered many rabbis, while the New Testament suggests he massacred Bethlehem's infants when he was unable to kill the baby Jesus. Even with his remarkable building achievements, Herod's rule is considered to be part of the decline of Jewish control over Israel. He reigned only through Rome's approval. Moreover, within a few generations of his death, Rome directly ruled the land of Israel, Herod's lavishly rebuilt Temple was in ruins, and most of the Jewish population had been killed or exiled.

DAVID BEN-GURION (1886-1973)

The founding father of the State of Israel and its first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion was born David Gruen (Green) in the Polish town of Plonsk. His father was an advocate in local law courts; his mother died when he was 11. Ben-Gurion's early years did not mark him out for greatness, and he was an indifferent student. Nonetheless, even as a child Ben-Gurion had found his lifelong calling in Zionism. His father was one of the few Zionists among the mainly Hasidic Jews of Plonsk, and Ben-Gurion formed a Zionist youth group in the town and preferred speaking Hebrew rather than the dominant Yiddish, Russian, or Polish languages.

At age 20, Ben-Gurion arrived in Ottoman-ruled Palestine. An advocate of "Hebrew labor," he was personally ill-suited for agricultural work and in 1911 went to Turkey to study law. He spent most of World War I in the United States where he married Paula Munweis, an anarchist rather than a Zionist. In 1918, they moved to then British-ruled Palestine where Ben-Gurion developed into a skillful, driven leader of Labor Zionism. In 1920, he helped establish the Histadrut federation of trade unions, a key Zionist institution. From 1930, he led Mapai, the center-left political party that would, in various iterations, dominate Israeli politics until 1977. By 1935, if not earlier, Ben-Gurion was the dominant figure in Zionism. His obsession with creating "facts on the ground" – building up the Jewish community and infrastructure in Palestine including through immigration – triumphed over the approach of his rival, Chaim Weizmann, which emphasized negotiations and close ties with the British. Ben-Gurion also shaped Zionism's generally pragmatic stance on territorial issues. In 1937, he reacted favorably to an (unsuccessful) British plan to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, overcoming the opposition of Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin of the right-wing Revisionist Zionists.

In 1947, the UN voted in favor of partition and a Jewish State. Ben-Gurion seized this opportunity for statehood despite fearing that it would lead to a potentially disastrous war with the Arab nations. In 1948, he declared the establishment of the State of Israel, and by the following year had led it to victory in the War of Independence. He played a towering role in Israel's first decades. Apart from one brief period, he reigned as Prime Minister from 1948 to 1963. His decision in 1952 to accept Holocaust reparations from West Germany helped solidify the economy of the young State but stoked fierce debate in Israel. In his later years, he moved to the Sde Boker Kibbutz but continued to play an influential role as "the Old Man" of Israeli politics.



jewish figures



ISRAEL JEWISH FIGURES / 3

Debate still rages over many elements of Ben-Gurion's tumultuous reign, including his attitude toward Holocaust survivors, Palestinian Arabs, and the Mizrahi Jews who came to Israel from the Arab nations. Biographers portray him as a complex, even contradictory, man. He was known as iron-willed, decisive, and dedicated to reason and integrity. But privately, he was prone to anxiety and depression, loathe to take responsibility for political mistakes, was occasionally impulsive, and expressed some unconventional beliefs (including in UFOs). But few doubt that the diminutive Ben-Gurion was a political giant and that he, perhaps more than any other individual, built and shaped the State of Israel.

SHMUEL YOSEF AGNON (1888-1970)

The writer known as Shai or S.Y. Agnon is the only Israeli to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. He was born Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes in the small town of Buczacz in what is today Ukraine but was then part of Polish Galicia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He wrote over 140 short stories about Buczacz, evoking with "both reverence and irony" the life of its Jews before the community was destroyed during the Holocaust.

As a child, Agnon learned at a cheder, or religious school, and then with private tutors. His father, a merchant who trained as a rabbi, taught him traditional religious and Hasidic texts, while he received his grounding in German literature from his mother. Drawn by Zionism, he moved to Palestine in 1908 where he lived in Jaffa and abandoned his Orthodox religious practices (to which he would later return). He created his new Hebrew surname of Agnon from the title of his most important early story *Agnot* (*Chained Women*). Life in pre-State Israel posed many difficulties, and in 1913 he moved to Germany, where he immersed himself in modern literature and German-Jewish culture. The novel and many stories he wrote during this period were lost when his beloved library was destroyed by fire in 1924, a traumatic event which he would later compare to the burning of the Jewish Temple. Accompanied by his wife and two children, he returned to Palestine, settling in Jerusalem's Talpiot neighborhood.

Agnon was a subtle and, despite his constant tinkering and revisions, prolific writer. His published work included over 500 short stories, several anthologies of religious texts that he compiled, and five novels. Three of these novels were set among the Polish Jews of the past including *Hakhnasat Kallah* (*The Bridal Canopy*), the book which swept Agnon into the top ranks of Hebrew literature. Its main character, a poor, pious Jew named Reb Udel Hasid, wanders the ghettos and shtetls of Eastern Europe searching for husbands for his three daughters. Agnon's other key subject was Israel. Many consider *Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) his masterpiece and the greatest of all Israeli novels. Rich in symbolism, atmosphere, and ambivalence, it examines the experiences of an idealistic, torn Jew who (like the author) arrives in Palestine in the early 20th century where he shuffles between secular, sexually free, Zionist Jaffa and ultra-Orthodox, anti-Zionist Jerusalem.

Much of Agnon's writing reflects this sense of being caught between worlds: between Israel and Europe, between the modern and the traditional, the secular and the religious. This tension was evoked by the way he wrote in modern Hebrew and was influenced by modernist writers yet used language thick with allusions to ancient Jewish religious texts.



jewish figures



ISRAEL JEWISH FIGURES / 4

In 1966, while accepting the Nobel Prize, he remarked that "I was born in a city of the Exile but always, I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem." A powerful influence on Israeli authors, including Amos Oz and David Grossman, he was vital to the country's culture. Indeed, when he complained that traffic noise was disrupting his writing, the Jerusalem municipality closed his street with a sign that read "No entry to all vehicles, writer at work."

GOLDA MEIR (1898-1978)

Golda Meir, Israel's first (and, so far, only) female Prime Minister, was born in Kiev in present-day Ukraine. In 1906, she and her family moved to Milwaukee. Her family was poor and Golda at age 14 was expected to leave school and find work and a husband. Instead, she ran away to Denver where, encouraged by her eldest sister, she embraced Labor Zionism. She returned to school and in 1921, soon after getting married, moved to Palestine.

Shrewd, charismatic, and fiercely committed, Meir was an important figure in the founding of the State of Israel and its first decades. She was a leader in the Histadrut trade union before being sent to the US where she raised vital funds to arm Jewish forces during the 1948 War of Independence. She was among the 22 men and two women who signed Israel's Declaration of Independence and received a rapturous welcome by Soviet Jews when she shortly afterward became the country's first ambassador to the USSR.

From 1949, she was a Member of the Knesset. As Minister of Labor she oversaw the creation of Israel's social welfare system and the integration of massive numbers of new immigrants. In 1955, she lost the battle to be mayor of Tel Aviv because religious parties refused to support a woman, the most overt but certainly not the only challenge that Meir faced as a rare female politician of that time. From 1956 to 1966, she was the world's first female foreign minister. Plain-spoken, even blunt, Meir was an unlikely but effective diplomat, deepening Israel's alliance with the US and helping create new ties with African nations.

Despite these achievements, it was her stint as Prime Minister that Golda (as she was widely known) is most remembered for. Few expected that she would become just the fourth woman in the world to become Prime Minister of a country. By 1969, the chain-smoking Meir had retired, was in poor health, and seventy years old. However, party leaders surprisingly called on her to replace Levi Eshkol, who had died in office. It initially appeared to be an inspired choice. While some intellectuals mocked her lack of education and poor (and American-accented) Hebrew, the public saw her as tough, warm, and experienced. In 1969, she took her center-left Labor Alignment to what is still the best electoral showing in Israel's history. However, in 1973 came the Yom Kippur War. She led steadfastly during the conflict itself but was heavily criticized for her handling of the lead-up to the war and for the heavy casualties suffered by Israel. Some claimed that she squandered chances of a peace accord with Egypt before war broke out, that the army was ill-prepared and over-confident, and, most damagingly, that she ignored clear signs that Egypt and Syria were about to attack.

Fair or not, the allegations led to Meir's resignation in 1974 and contributed to the center-left losing power in Israel for the first time in 1977. Meir has also been criticized for her brusque handling of protests by Israel's Mizrahi Jews, for claiming that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people, and for her hostility to feminism. Nonetheless, Golda Meir remains a hero to many, a crucial figure in the history of Israel, and a woman who broke into the male-only club of world leaders.



jewish figures



ISRAEL JEWISH FIGURES / 5

RABBI OVADIA YOSEF (1920-2013)

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was a central – and controversial – figure in the Sephardi renaissance in Israel. Under his leadership, Jews from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds (the Sephardim or Mizrachim) grew in influence and assertiveness. By the time he died in 2013, the dominance of the “Ashkenazi elite” – Jews originally from Europe – over Israel’s religious, cultural, and political life had been challenged, weakened and, arguably, broken.

Rav Ovadia (as he became widely known) was born in Baghdad, Iraq and came to Jerusalem in 1924 at age four. His family was poor and had little educational background, but the young Ovadia “displayed a stupendous photographic memory, a prodigious capacity for study, religious fervor, and scholarly ambition, all fused in fierce traditionalism and equally fierce independence.” By his late teens, he was already a rising ultra-Orthodox rabbi.

Ovadia’s lifelong aim was to strengthen Sephardi religious life and the role of Sephardi halakha (religious law), a renaissance he called “restoring the crown to its former glory.” Through countless sermons and classes, he inspired Sephardi Jews, many of them poor and marginalized, to embrace a stricter Orthodoxy. In his writings and religious judgements, he boldly attempted to unify diverse Sephardi religious traditions. He championed what he saw as a particularly Sephardi tradition of seeking lenient, humane solutions when issuing religious judgements, and he frequently condemned the stringencies of his Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox colleagues-rivals. As Chief Sephardi Rabbi of Israel from 1973 until 1983, he made far-reaching decisions, including accepting the Beta Israel community of Ethiopia as Jews and encouraging their immigration to Israel.

But it was politics that brought Ovadia Yosef his greatest influence. From 1984 until his death in 2013, he was the unquestioned spiritual leader of Shas (“the Sephardi Guardians”). This new political party took Sephardi concerns and identity issues into the heart of the national debate. Shas shook up Israel in other ways. They were an ultra-Orthodox party but had many supporters who were Zionists and not ultra-Orthodox. Their followers were overwhelmingly right wing yet, under Rav Ovadia, Shas initially took a dovish position regarding a possible “land for peace” agreement with the Palestinians and joined coalition governments led by Yitzhak Rabin and the center-left Labor. By 1999, Shas held 17 Knesset seats, making Rav Ovadia the unpredictable but crucial kingmaker of Israeli politics and the most politically powerful rabbi since Talmudic times.

However, over time, Shas dipped in support and became emmeshed in corruption scandals. Rav Ovadia moved emphatically to the right regarding peace and security issues and made a series of incendiary statements regarding women, Arabs, and non-Orthodox Jews. As one writer put it, Ovadia Yosef’s image as a “humane traditionalist” had been replaced by a sense that he was an intolerant, populist demagogue. Nonetheless, many revered him as a symbol of Sephardi pride, scholarship, and piety. His funeral was the largest in Israeli history, with hundreds of thousands of mourners.

YITZHAK RABIN (1922-1995)

Yitzhak Rabin was a military hero, an army man turned Prime Minister, and a peacemaker. His assassination was one of the great traumas of modern Israeli history and is seen by many to have been a grievous setback for the nation’s democracy and the struggle for peace.



jewish figures



ISRAEL JEWISH FIGURES / 6

Born in Jerusalem, Rabin showed an early and lasting commitment to Israel's security. At age 14, he joined the pre-State Haganah military organization before enlisting in its elite fighting force, the Palmach. At age 26, he played a key role in the battle for Jerusalem during Israel's 1948 War of Independence, proving himself to be a superb military tactician and – despite being shy and socially awkward – a powerful leader. By 1967, he was the Israel Defense Force's chief of staff. During the tense times leading up to the Six Day War, he worked himself to a state of exhaustion and was briefly incapacitated but recovered to command Israel's stunning victory.

In 1974, after a period as Israel's ambassador to the US, Rabin became the leader of Israel's ruling Labor Party. Politically inexperienced, this first stint as prime minister was marked by public anger about the high casualty rate of the Yom Kippur War (which Rabin had not been involved in) and by Rabin's bitter relationship with his intra-party rival Shimon Peres. Rabin's popularity grew after he ordered the daring rescue of Jewish hostages at Entebbe, but he resigned from office in 1977 due to a financial scandal. Shortly afterward, the center-left lost political power in Israel for the first time. In the following years, Rabin served as a hardline Minister of Defense under various national unity governments, taking an "iron fist" approach to Palestinian protesters during the first Intifada (uprising) that began in 1987.

Rabin's second period as prime minister from 1992 to 1995 was dominated by the pursuit of peace. Always a pragmatic and flexible thinker, the security "hawk" now believed that a political settlement with the Palestinians and Israel's near neighbors was possible and vital to Israel's future. He entered into successful negotiations with Jordan and unsuccessful ones with Syria. In 1993 came the stunning, unexpected Oslo Accords. The two enemies, Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, recognized each other and began a process that would, it was planned, lead within five years to a comprehensive peace settlement. The accords appeared to signal that a Palestinian state would be established on land that Israel had conquered in 1967. At a signing ceremony at the White House, Rabin, albeit reluctantly, shook hands with PLO leader Yasser Arafat and stated "Enough of blood and tears. Enough... We are today giving peace a chance."

Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Rabin was nonetheless subject to fierce criticism among parts of Israel's population, particularly after an upsurge in Palestinian terrorism. At a peace rally in Tel Aviv in 1995, he was shot dead by a right-wing Jewish extremist. His murder caused an outpouring of grief as thousands flocked to where he was killed, in what is today known as Rabin Square. Israel's first native-born Prime Minister, the cautious man who had daringly striven for peace, was gone. Following his death, the Oslo Accords eventually collapsed and Israel's unity and hopes for peace seemed more fragile than ever before.

PROFESSOR ADA YONATH (born 1939)

Modern Israel has made an enormous contribution to the world of science, including through the discoveries of Ada Yonath, the first Israeli woman to win the Nobel Prize. Her parents came to Jerusalem from Poland in 1933. Although Yonath's father had a rabbinical background, in Palestine the family scratched out a meager living as owners of a grocery shop. Yonath was an intensely curious child, encouraged by a family that, despite their poverty, prized education. At age five, she carried out her first experiment. She tried to measure the distance



jewish figures



ISRAEL JEWISH FIGURES / 7

from the floor to the ceiling. She fell while standing on top of piled-up chairs and tables. Yonath broke her arm but remained determined to understand the world around her.

When she was 11, her father died and the family moved to Tel Aviv where Yonath, despite taking on a string of before and after-school jobs, often went hungry. Nonetheless, she was an outstanding student aided by a remarkable memory and a passion for science inspired, in part, by reading a biography about Marie Curie. She attended the Tichon Hadash high school – where she paid her tuition fees by tutoring other students – graduated from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and completed her Ph.D. at the Weizmann Institute of Science. She did post-doctoral work at Carnegie Mellon University and MIT.

Driven to trying to solve “impossible” problems, Yonath from the 1970s attempted to map, through X-ray crystallography, the structure of the ribosome. These protein-making particles are notoriously complex, and leading scientific teams had already tried and failed in this task. Many considered her efforts foolhardy but in 1980, after a staggering 25,000 attempts, Yonath made a crucial breakthrough. Yonath has said that her first glimpse of a crystalized ribosome was more exciting than winning the Nobel, a moment of “overwhelming internal joy.”

For the next 20 years, Yonath headed teams of researchers in both Israel and Germany which by 2000 had mapped in three dimensions the subunits of the bacterial ribosome. This has proven crucial to understanding more about how antibiotics work, and it led Yonath to study how resistance to antibiotics is developed, one of the most pressing modern medical issues.

Her discoveries also led to a string of awards, and in 2009, she became the first woman in 45 years to win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Known for her straight talking, she complained that the Nobel Committee did not provide enough information on how women should dress when receiving the prize. She ascribes the relative lack of women in chemistry to a lack of encouragement to enter the field and to family pressures rather than to direct gender discrimination. She has continued working into her 80s, describing science as a “beautiful life” in which she receives a salary for delving into the questions that fascinate her and that relate to the very origins of life.

GAL GADOT (born 1985)

Wonder Woman may be an immortal Amazonian warrior from an all-female island named Themyscira, but the actress who brought her to the big screen was born in Petah Tikva. Gal Gadot, sometimes described as the most famous person in Israel who does not run the country, is from a “very Jewish, very Israeli family environment.” Her mother is a teacher, her father an engineer. At age 18, she won the Miss Israel beauty pageant, but she hated the experience so much that she deliberately sabotaged her chances of winning Miss Universe.

Gadot served two years in the IDF as a fitness trainer, studied law for a year at IDC Herzliya, and did modeling work before heading for Hollywood. She made her film debut in 2009 in the *Fast & Furious* “cars, fights, and pretty women” franchise. She subsequently had a series of minor roles with little dialogue (her English was at that point not fluent) playing “a spy, a former spy, the wife of a spy, a henchwoman, a member of a Jewish crime family, and a sexy woman who is Israeli and doesn’t speak much English.”



jewish figures



I S R A E L

ISRAEL JEWISH FIGURES / 8

In 2016, she appeared as Wonder Woman in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. The movie was critically panned, but Gadot's relatively brief performance drew raves. The next year, Gadot starred in the standalone *Wonder Woman*. While countless superhero movies based on comics have appeared in recent years and have dominated the box office, *Wonder Woman* created special interest as being the first with a female lead character. It was also a rare big-budget movie directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins. Before filming, Gadot did six months of fitness work, which she described as more intense than army training. The film proved popular around the world, grossing \$821 million, while Gadot's performance was praised for combining charm and compassion with a fine ability in "kicking the butts of the bad guys." Even her Israeli accent was a hit.

The movie made Gadot an international celebrity and a source of pride in her homeland. An American journalist who walked with her in Tel Aviv found that "just about everyone in Israel wanted to come up and say hi" to Gadot. In 2017, she appeared as Wonder Woman in the unsuccessful ensemble superhero movie *Justice League*. A sequel to her *Wonder Woman* film is due to appear in 2020. In her spare time, Gadot likes to dress up as Wonder Woman and visit children in Israeli hospitals.