

The Birth of the Modern State of Israel

Turning Our Dream into Reality

investigate

- What challenges did the Jews of Palestine face?
- How did the spirit of Jewish unity help them overcome the challenges?
- Why might Diaspora Jews feel greater pride in their Jewish identities because of the achievements of Israeli Jews?

Key Words and Places

Displaced Persons (DPs)	Operation Magic Carpet
DP Camps	Operation Ezra and Nehemiah
<i>Exodus 1947</i>	<i>Ma'abarot</i>
Eidot Hamizrah (Mizrahi Jews)	



The BIG Picture

People liked to say that he was the first Jewish general since Judah Maccabee. New Yorker David “Mickey” Marcus had shown little interest in Zionism until he came face-to-face with the Nazi atrocities upon visiting the Dachau concentration camp shortly after it was liberated. Marcus’s interactions with the survivors convinced him that the Jews needed a homeland of their own. Three years later he was in Palestine helping to turn the underground Haganah into a disciplined, modern army, and playing a critical role in the War of Independence.

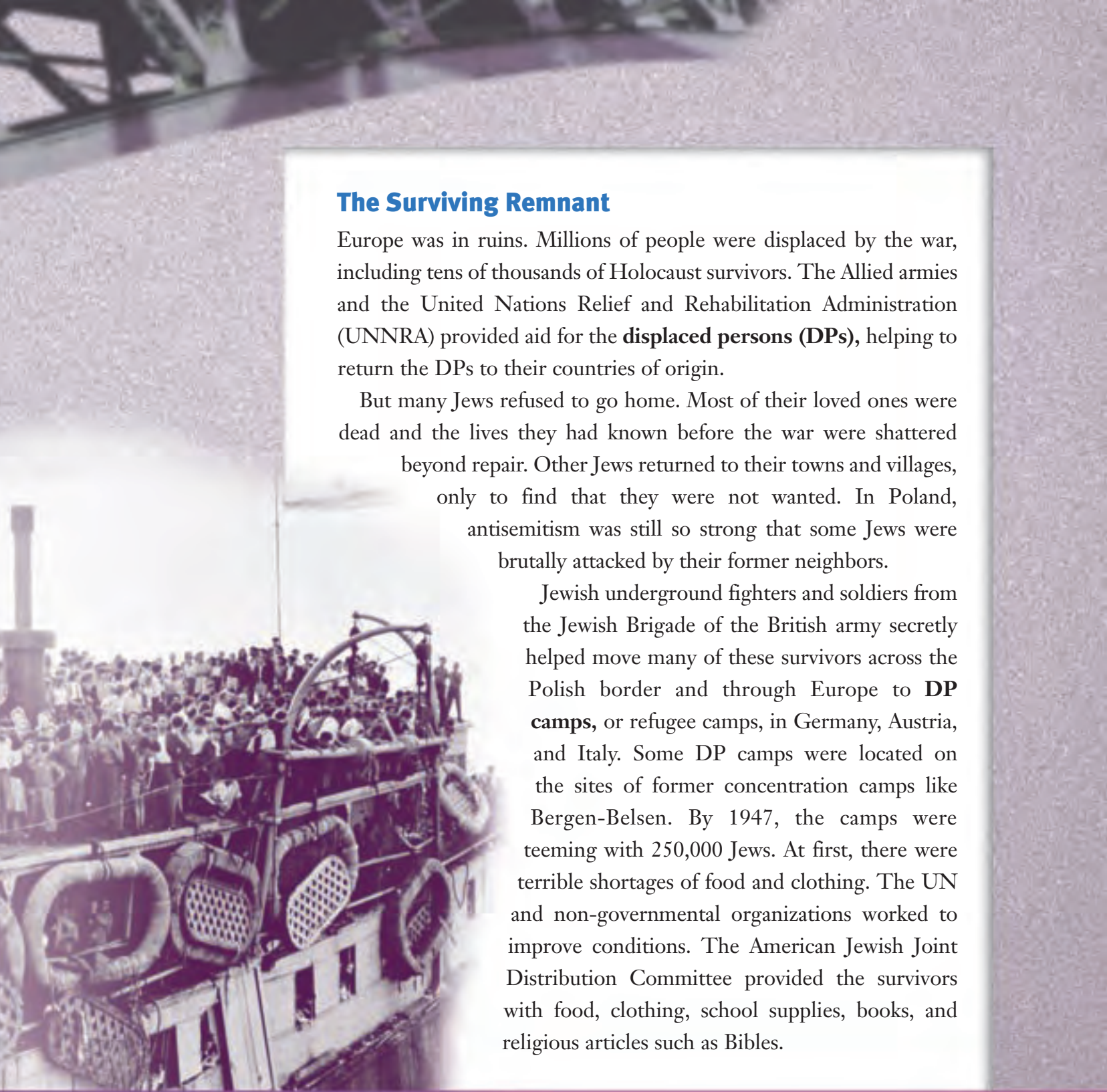
Mickey Marcus was motivated by a strong sense of Jewish unity. This same spirit gave the Jews of Palestine the power to stand up to the British and to defeat the Arabs. It motivated their concern for and responses to Jews in distress, like the lifesaving airlifts of Jews from Iraq and Yemen that the new State of Israel organized.

1946

- Irgun bombs King David Hotel in Jerusalem

1947

- **World History:** Jackie Robinson plays for Brooklyn Dodgers, ending segregation in Major League Baseball
- *Exodus 1947* sets sail for Palestine carrying 4,500 Jewish refugees
- UN General Assembly votes to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states



The Surviving Remnant

Europe was in ruins. Millions of people were displaced by the war, including tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors. The Allied armies and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNNRA) provided aid for the **displaced persons (DPs)**, helping to return the DPs to their countries of origin.

But many Jews refused to go home. Most of their loved ones were dead and the lives they had known before the war were shattered beyond repair. Other Jews returned to their towns and villages, only to find that they were not wanted. In Poland, antisemitism was still so strong that some Jews were brutally attacked by their former neighbors.

Jewish underground fighters and soldiers from the Jewish Brigade of the British army secretly helped move many of these survivors across the Polish border and through Europe to **DP camps**, or refugee camps, in Germany, Austria, and Italy. Some DP camps were located on the sites of former concentration camps like Bergen-Belsen. By 1947, the camps were teeming with 250,000 Jews. At first, there were terrible shortages of food and clothing. The UN and non-governmental organizations worked to improve conditions. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee provided the survivors with food, clothing, school supplies, books, and religious articles such as Bibles.

1948

- Establishment of independent modern State of Israel

1949

- Israel holds first election
- Operation Magic Carpet begins, bringing about 47,000 Jews from Yemen to Israel

Britain and the Jewish Refugee Problem

Even after the war, the British refused to abolish the White Paper and allow DPs to go to Palestine. Dependent on Middle Eastern oil, they did not want to anger the Arabs, who opposed Jewish immigration. In order to increase pressure on the British, the Haganah brought thousands of DPs to southern Europe, where they set sail for Palestine. But in 90 percent of the cases the British stopped the ships before they reached Palestine, sending the Jews to detention camps instead.

In January 1947, hurting from severe economic problems at home and unable to effectively address the competing demands of Arabs and Jews, Britain handed the problem in Palestine over to the United Nations. A UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP)



Holocaust survivors in a DP camp study Hebrew in preparation for resettling in Palestine

Underground Resistance

The Jewish underground militias in Palestine also used force to pressure Britain into changing its policies. For eighteen months the Haganah, Irgun, and the more radical Loḥamei Ḥerut Israel (Leḥi) sabotaged railway tracks and attacked police posts, airfields, and radar installations. The British sent eighty thousand troops to Palestine to put down the violence and round up the attackers.

Cooperation among the Jewish militias fell apart after the bombing of the British military and civilian headquarters in Jerusalem's King David Hotel. The explosion occurred on July 22, 1946, and killed about ninety people—British, Arabs, and Jews. Its mastermind, Irgun leader Menaḥem Begin, claimed that warnings of the attack had been given.

The attacks and British retaliations continued. But the hotel bombing soured much of the *Yishuv* on the use of terror. *Yishuv* leaders did not want an all-out war with the British. They even urged parents to turn in their own children if the children joined Irgun or Leḥi.

was created. Made up of representatives from eleven neutral countries, its job was to investigate the situation and report back to the UN General Assembly.

Exodus 1947

Meanwhile, the Haganah continued its efforts to bring refugees to Palestine. *Exodus 1947*, a former American passenger ship that the Haganah had acquired and renamed, set sail for Palestine from France in July 1947 with close to 4,500 Jewish refugees aboard, including 655 children. As the ship neared Palestine, British destroyers rammed and boarded it. The passengers tried to defend themselves and a short battle followed—two refugees and one crewman died, and thirty people were injured.

The British towed the ship to Haifa's harbor, forced the refugees onto British navy transports, and sent them back to Europe. When the transports arrived in France, the passengers refused to get off and declared a hunger strike. But the British sent them back to the DP camps in Germany.



Passengers on *Exodus 1947*. A year after being turned back to the DP camps in Germany, more than half of the *Exodus 1947* passengers attempted *aliyah* again and were successful. The remaining passengers settled in Israel after the establishment of the country in 1948.

UNSCOP members, who were in Haifa during a fact-finding mission, witnessed the events with horror. Newspapers gave the story front-page coverage, calling the *Exodus 1947* a “floating Auschwitz.” The incident helped sway world opinion in favor of the Zionists.

The UN Partition Plan

The UNSCOP committee presented its report in August 1947. It recommended that the British mandate end. A majority of the committee members supported the partitioning of Palestine—its division into two separate states, one Jewish, the other Arab—with Jerusalem under international authority.

The Arabs were outraged and threatened war. They outnumbered Jews two to one in Palestine, yet received only about 45 percent of the territory. Why, they complained, should Arabs pay the price for Europe's persecution of the Jews? The Jews, who felt that they had been promised a much larger territory under the Balfour Declaration, nevertheless accepted the partition plan, which promised Jews self-rule and unlimited immigration.

On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted on the partition plan. The final vote was 33 in favor, 13 against, with 10 abstentions. The British announced that they would leave Palestine in May 1948.

As crowds of Jews celebrated the news in Jerusalem's streets, they were addressed by an overjoyed leader of the *Yishuv*, Golda Myerson. “For two thousand years we have waited for our deliverance,” she declared. “Now that it is here it is so great and so wonderful that it surpasses

Fighting for Control of Palestine

Between December 1947 and May 1948, as the British looked on, hostilities raged between the Zionists and the Arabs for control of Palestine. In the early months of the fighting the Jews were on the defensive. The road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem was cut off and the Jewish community within Jerusalem was under fire. In April, an arms shipment from Czechoslovakia helped the Haganah gain the offensive. By early May, it captured Haifa, Jaffa, and most of the Galilee.

Meanwhile, Arab militias and the Irgun and Lehi engaged in a tit-for-tat terror campaign. Houses, buses, office buildings, oil refineries, and hotels were bombed and ambushed. Hundreds of Jewish and Arab civilians were killed.

In mid-April, Irgun and Lehi fighters attacked the Arab village of Deir Yassin, along the Tel Aviv–Jerusalem road, killing scores of civilians. Hearing of the violence, many Arabs in surrounding areas fled. Days after the Deir Yassin attack, Arab militiamen ambushed a ten-vehicle convoy of Jewish doctors and nurses headed for Hadassah hospital, murdering more than seventy Jews.

human words. Jews, *mazal tov!*” David Ben-Gurion was less joyous. He later recalled, “I looked at them so happy dancing, but I could only think that they were all going to war.”

Israel’s War of Independence

Finally, on the morning of May 14, 1948, the British lowered their flag from the Government House in Jerusalem. At 4:00 p.m., Jewish leaders gathered in the Tel Aviv Museum under a portrait of Theodor Herzl. Ben-Gurion banged his gavel to bring the gathering to order and the crowd spontaneously began singing Hatikvah. Then Ben-Gurion read the Scroll of Independence, proclaiming, “We, members of the People’s Council, representatives of the Jewish community of *Eretz Yisrael* and of the Zionist movement...hereby proclaim the establishment of a Jewish State in *Eretz Yisrael*, to be called the State of Israel.”

But there was little time for celebration. Before dawn the next day, four Egyptian fighter planes attacked Tel Aviv. Arab armies from neighboring countries launched an invasion on three fronts, but by early June the Israelis gained strength, stopping the Egyptian advance in the south and repelling attacks from the Syrians and Iraqis in the northeast.

Israel made important gains in the later stages of the war, capturing the Negev in the south and widening the narrow corridor of land between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. By the time the fighting ended, Israel controlled 80 percent of Palestine. Jordan controlled the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including the Old City, and Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip.

Golda (Myerson) Meir

Golda Mabovitch was born in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1898, immigrated to the United States with her family, and became a schoolteacher and passionate Zionist. In 1921, she and her husband, Morris Myerson, settled on Kibbutz Merhavayah in Palestine.

Golda Myerson quickly became active in Zionist politics. Among her many contributions, she conducted secret negotiations with Jordan's King Abdullah that helped limit Jordan's involvement in Israel's War of Independence. In 1956, at Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's request, she changed her name from Myerson to Meir, a Hebrew name. She was foreign minister of Israel from 1956 to 1965, and she became Israel's fourth prime minister in 1969. She died in 1978.

Meir was one of only two women to sign Israel's Declaration of Independence. She later recalled: "After I signed, I cried. When I studied American history as a schoolgirl and I read about those who signed the Declaration of Independence, I couldn't imagine these were real people doing something real. And there I was...signing a declaration of independence."

If you could participate in one important event in Jewish history, what would you want it to be? Why?



Golda Meir

Casualties were heavy on both sides, although there was no doubt that Israel had won the war and gained its independence. There were early signs that the Arab states might be ready to negotiate permanent peace treaties with Israel. But the Israelis considered Arab demands for territory to be too high. “The neighboring states do not deserve an inch of Israel’s land,” insisted Ben-Gurion. “We are ready for peace in exchange for peace.” In the end, no peace treaties were signed.

On January 25, 1949, Israel held its first election. Ben-Gurion’s Labor Party won the most seats and formed the first government with Ben-Gurion as prime minister.

The Palestinian Refugees

What Israel calls the War of Independence is known in Palestinian history as the *Naqba*, or “Catastrophe.” Over 700,000 Arabs fled or were forced from their homes in the territory that became the State of Israel. When the war was over, the Israeli government did not allow them to return. The Israelis feared that the Arabs would not support the Jewish State and might eventually become the majority, which would pose a threat to the Jewish character of Israel. Many Palestinian refugees never gave up the hope of returning to their former homes.

The 150,000 Arabs who remained in Israel, meanwhile, were officially granted equal rights under Israel’s Declaration of Independence. But in practice, the government was suspicious of their loyalties. Military rule was declared over many Arab towns and villages near Israel’s borders and



As a result of Israel's War of Independence, its borders were actually expanded.

was only lifted in 1966. Studies indicate that discrimination against Arab communities and individuals continues to this day.

A Flood of Newcomers

With the hostilities over, chief among Israel's challenges was absorbing the waves of immigrants pouring into the country from Europe and the Middle East. They came by boat, by airplane, and even on foot. Between 1948 and 1951, almost 700,000 Jews arrived in Israel, more than doubling the size of its Jewish population.

Half of the newcomers were European Holocaust survivors, including 136,000 DPs. (Another 115,000 survivors immigrated to

Western countries including the United States, Canada, and South Africa.) The other half moving to Israel arrived from Middle Eastern and North African countries—some of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. These Jews are referred to as **Eidot Hamizrah**, or **Mizrahi** Jews.

Conditions for Jews in many Arab countries deteriorated after the creation of the State of Israel. Many Mizrahi Jews left their homes eager to start new lives in Israel and Western countries like France, the United States, and Canada. But others, especially in North Africa, were attached to their homes and cultures and less willing to leave. Continued Arab-Israeli tension, particularly in the 1960's, eventually forced most of them to evacuate. By 1974, about 600,000 Mizrahi refugees had settled in Israel.

In a secret airlift called **Operation Magic Carpet**, about 47,000 Jews from Yemen were brought to Israel. Many walked hundreds of miles across rugged terrain to the British colony of Aden, where the Joint Distribution Committee cared for them until American planes could fly them to safety. Between 1950 and 1952, 110,000 Jews were evacuated to Israel from Iraq in **Operation Ezra and Nehemiah**. Tens of thousands also arrived from Morocco and Libya.

Helping these immigrants learn Hebrew, find homes, and earn a living was a huge task. Half were between the ages of fifteen and forty-five, and able to enter the army or the workforce. Only 50 percent of those were skilled in a trade or profession and only 16 percent had a high school or higher education.

Housing, in particular, was a major problem. Immigrants were arriving faster than homes could be built. Many of the earliest immigrants, mostly survivors from Europe, moved into

Palestinians as Pawns

Using the Palestinian Arab refugees as pawns in a political game served the purposes of both the Arab and Israeli governments. Arab governments, with the exception of Jordan, refused to accept the refugees as citizens of their own countries. They wanted the refugee problem to be a thorn in the side of Israel. So they kept the Palestinians in refugee camps along their border with Israel, where the Palestinians' anger and frustration toward Israel would grow and their plight would be on display for the whole world to see.

Israel, for its part, wanted to pressure the Arabs to negotiate a peace treaty. So it refused to compensate the Palestinians until a more comprehensive agreement could be worked out.



Most passengers on Operation Magic Carpet had never even seen a plane before, let alone flown in one.



A tent camp in 1953

houses vacated by the fleeing Arabs. When this supply was exhausted, many were forced to live temporarily in tent camps and *ma'abarot*, makeshift shantytowns.

Looking to the Future

By the early 1950's, major problems that continue to confront Israel today were already clear—in particular, social inequality, the status

The Challenges of Diversity

Many long-established Israelis looked down on Mizrahi Jews, showing little respect for their traditions. Government policies encouraged Mizrahi Jews to assimilate into Israeli society and shed their cultural distinctiveness. This created much anger and resentment among the immigrants.


One government official warned in 1949 that the Mizrahi immigrants were becoming “a kind of second nation.” As time went on, the second-class status of the Mizrahi Jews became set. In general, they were more poorly educated, held lower-paying jobs, and were overrepresented in prisons and underrepresented in government.

In Israel, as in the United States and other democracies, it is a continuing challenge to offer equal opportunity and to balance national unity with respect for diversity.

of Israeli Arabs, the conflict with Arab neighbors, and the problem of Palestinian refugees. But the founders of the modern State of Israel also had many achievements. After two thousand years, they reestablished an independent Jewish state. Moreover, in just three and a half years Israel doubled its population and turned peoples from many nations with diverse cultures, languages, and views into one people working toward a common future.



then & NOW



Israel's concern for abandoned people extends beyond the needs of Jews. When the boat people of Southeast Asia were drowning at sea in the 1970's, Israel opened its borders to them. Following the catastrophic nuclear accident at Chernobyl in 1986, Israeli experts flew to the Soviet Union to help save hundreds of lives. And, in 1999, when Turkey suffered an earthquake that killed and injured thousands of people, Israel sent a two-hundred-member team and a field hospital to help in the rescue effort.

Of course, like other countries, Israel has not always lived up to its ideals. In the past, many Arab communities in Israel lacked bomb shelters and early warning systems to help them survive rocket attacks. In addition, there have been numerous instances when foreign workers were unjustly deprived of their rights.

1. Do Israel's acts of compassion affect how you feel about being a Jew and how you feel about Israel? Why or why not?

2. The prophet Isaiah taught that Israel must be a light unto the nations by modeling just and compassionate behavior for others. Do you think that it is realistic or fair to hold Israel or other democratic countries to this standard? Why or why not?
