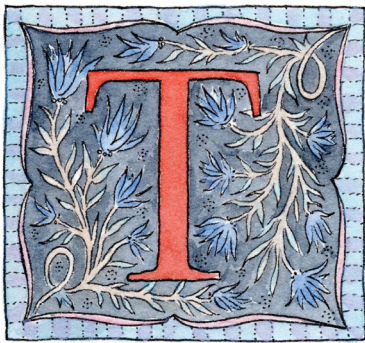


BARBARA S. OKUN

# Faith & Fertility in Israel

*Israel's birthrate is uncommonly high among Western countries, but the implications of this are not entirely positive*



**T**HAT WOMEN are having fewer children all over the world, from Europe (about 1.5 children per woman in the EU) to East Asia (less than one child per woman in Korea) to the United States (slightly below two), has been a matter of concern for some time now. Even the religious Middle East and North Africa have experienced a decades-long decline in fertility. At the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iranian women had 6.5 children on average. Today, the fertility rate is on par with that of the United States. In Tunisia, fertility is nearly as low today as in France, and in Yemen—one of the highest-fertility Muslim countries in the world—childbearing has fallen by more than half in 30 years.

In this global story, Israel is an outlier. For decades, its fertility rate has held at around three children per woman on average, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. But this rough stability obscures wide variation and dramatic change within population groups. For example, fertility has fallen dramatically in recent decades among Muslim women, so that in recent years, Muslim women in Israel have almost the same number of children, on average, as Jewish women in Israel do. In contrast, fertility remains very high among the Haredi Jewish population, who are at the same 6.5 rate of pre-Revolution Iran. Even Jewish Israelis outside the Haredi community have higher fertility than their counterparts in other countries.

What, then, are we to make of Israel's outlier status when it comes to fertility among wealthy nations? What role does faith play in that status? What explains the positive relationship between religiosity and fertility among Jews in Israel? And why do secular and other non-Haredi Jews in Israel have relatively high fertility compared with their Diaspora counterparts?



Beyond the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply, it is the embrace of religion as a political and social institution that is key to high Haredi fertility. Haredi groups in Israel are politically organized and have leverage in coalition politics. This has empowered their religious leaders and enabled their communities to receive much government financial assistance. As is well known, the Haredi community has leveraged its political power to ensure subsidies for yeshiva study and exemption from military conscription (until the recent Supreme Court of Israel ruling against the legality of current exemption practices). They've even pushed lawmakers to scrap legislation to tax single-use plastics that are widely used in their community.

Socially, the institutionalization of patriarchal, religious family law serves as a code for dictating the proper life for women and men, emphasizing familism, marriage, marital stability, and high fertility. Religious values—for example, about family life and gender relations—matter because religious institutions communicate those values to their community members, promote compliance with those values, and have the means to punish those who do not conform.

The impact of religion and faith on fertility in Israel is not monolithic, even when it comes to the delicate matter of religious attitudes toward birth control or abortion. For instance, even though Haredi fertility is high, it is far below maximal levels observed in other populations (10 children per woman on average), and it is consciously limited and controlled by married couples, implying that family planning and family limitation in this population is widespread. Fertility in this community does not have to and will not necessarily remain as high as it has been for the past several decades. In fact, in order to maintain overall fertility rates at their current levels, there have to be very substantial reductions in the rates among the Haredi population.



Beyond the wide disparities in fertility among various Jewish subpopulations, Israel is also unique in the value placed on having children among self-described *secular* Jews, who most commonly have three children by the time they complete their families, a markedly higher rate than their Diaspora counterparts. Why?

Among Jews in Israel who are not Haredi, religion has a similar if more subtle role in fertility via its interconnectedness with Israeli nationalism and familism. These are the factors that set Jewish fertility in Israel apart from that in the Diaspora, and they by turns inform and are informed by a fertility-friendly social ethos.

The linkages among religious traditionalism, familism, and nationalism are seen, for example, in extremely generous public subsidies for assisted reproductive technologies (ART). As of 2016, the per capita use of these services was higher than anywhere else in the world, and 4.7 percent of all births were products of in-vitro fertilization (IVF), which is among the highest percentages recorded globally. Perhaps as important as the direct effect of ART programs on raising fertility rates is their symbolic meaning. As the scholar Sigal Gooldin has argued, broad public support for subsidized ART in Israel is based on the widely held belief that the opportunity to experience biological parenthood is a kind of civil right. Infertility, on the other hand, is seen as a source of human suffering (as it was for the biblical matriarchs) that needs to be addressed with public policy.

This pro-natalist policy ethos has remained constant even as other social norms have evolved. In 2022, during the brief non-Netanyahu government, equal rights to the use of surrogacy services in Israel were extended to include same-sex couples, single men, and transgender individuals, not, as was previously the case, only heterosexual couples and single women.



The sociologist Kevin McQuillan once argued that religion is most likely to affect fertility “where religion and nationalism blend together, and where religious identity distinguishes a people from other groups in the territory who are either competitors or aggressors.” For most Jewish Israelis, national identity means feeling connected with the Jewish people and being a member of the Jewish majority of Israel. This idea differs from one that is strictly based in religion. Although some argue that nationalism may be receding from secular Israeli spaces, one thing we learned from the civic response to October 7 is

that commitment to the nation remains a prominent feature of Jewish Israeli society. Moreover, considerations of national security reinforce group cohesion among Jewish Israelis. This goes a long way in explaining why familism has persisted despite Israel's transformation into a start-up nation that rewards individual achievement. As Israeli sociologist Sammy Smooha put it nearly two decades ago, "Individualism as a value and a behavior has to compete hard with collectivistic and communitarian orientations."

Here we see the peculiar durability of Israel's fertility, unique in ethnically diverse societies. The collectivist and communitarian core of Israel's social philosophy places a family-shaped framework around its mores at all levels of society. Individuals rely to a great extent on their families within and across generations, strengthening family bonds and engendering a broad and expanded conception of the family: in size, relational lines, and responsibility. Put another way, cultural codes for family behavior and commitment are rather extensive because familial feeling extends beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family. Taking this into account, we can understand Israel's high fertility in part as springing from the institution that serves as the foundation of family life: marriage.

Back in 2010, demographer Ron Lesthaeghe referred to marriage as a "fertility-enhancing prop." Although delayed marriage, non-marriage, and marital dissolution are on the rise, fertility is still marriage-based in Israel, to a much greater degree than it is in most Western countries. Marriage stability and prevalence contribute to higher desired family sizes and to larger completed families. Another way of putting this is that Israel's high fertility is rooted in the near universality of marriage among most Jewish groups.

As in many Western countries, clear social expectations are that women will work to contribute to household income. According to World Bank data from 2022, the labor-force participation rate for

women ages 15–64 in Israel is around 71 percent, which is comparable to that of France, the U.S., and Germany, much higher than Italy's, lower than Sweden's—but with higher fertility than all of them. Proportions of Jewish women and men in Israel who state a desire for no children or at most one child are very low. There is also research suggesting that the generally negative relationship between women's educational level and their completed family size (i.e., the higher the education level, the smaller the family) is less pronounced among Jewish Israelis than it is, for instance, in Europe.

But here is where we may be witnessing some shifts. While Israel remains a pro-natalist society and one supportive of working mothers, traditional familism is weakest among the most educated and secular groups in Israel, and collectivist values may be waning. Fertility is falling among many Jewish Israelis as marriage and childbearing are delayed and divorce and non-marriage increase along with the increasing cost of living and housing. For many Jewish Israelis, the shift toward cultural values that accompany low fertility in many rich societies, alongside changing economic realities, may eventually lead to smaller families. Reductions in family size among secular Jews in Israel has been slowly progressing over the past 25 years or so, with reductions in proportions of families with three or more children.

And perhaps not too soon. Although Israel's high fertility has been celebrated by many, notably Dan Senor and Saul Singer in their book *The Genius of Israel*, for its promise of a youthful population and the potential for a more innovative labor force and creative society, it comes with very real challenges. Rapid population growth, increasing population density, environmental threats, limited natural resources, youth dependency, and threats to economic well-being are among the issues that require serious forethought.

While you might think that a difference of one or two children per woman in Israel versus countries in Europe, East Asia, or the United

States doesn't mean much, the demographic, social, and economic implications of these sustained differences are enormous. Israel is already one of the most densely populated countries in the world among those with populations over 2 million. Israel is similar in land area, total population, and population density to the state of New Jersey—the densest of the 50 states. But Israel continues to grow at nearly 2 percent annually, which compounds to a population doubling time of only 35 years. In contrast, New Jersey's population grew only 1 percent from 2010 to 2019.

And Israel's increased population density will occur in an environmentally sensitive geographic area, particularly vulnerable to climate change and extreme climate events, and with access to limited natural resources. The health, welfare, and transportation implications of these changes are potentially grave.

Other concerns are the differential population growth rates of economically active populations. Although the situation is dynamic—for example, labor-force participation among underrepresented groups, such as Haredi men, is increasing, albeit from low levels—Israel will undoubtedly need to successfully invest resources in the human capital of underrepresented populations and to promote their active participation in the labor market. If not, the economy will suffer and poverty rates will increase.

Rapid population growth presents additional challenges on top of other demographic realities that are inevitable regardless of any fertility-rate changes in the coming decades, such as the aging of large cohorts born in the 1970s. This generation—the grandchildren of mass migrants who arrived in the early years of statehood—will begin reaching retirement ages in the mid-2030s. The aging process in Israel is already under way.

Facing fertility rates below that required to replace their populations in the long run (roughly 2.1 children per woman), many coun-

tries have emphasized immigration as a way to maintain their population sizes. Here again, Israel bucks the trend and is experiencing transition in the opposite direction. Historically, immigration was the engine of population change in Israel. Following the last massive wave of migration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, fertility has replaced immigration as the major driver of Israel's rapid population growth. Future trajectories of population growth hinge on fertility. Needless to say, the math simply determines that fertility today will affect population growth decades ahead, as babies born today will become parents in a generation; large cohorts born now come with the promise of further population growth down the line.

Bluntly, population growth, in the short-to-medium run, is nearly unstoppable, owing to numbers of young people already born who will enter the prime childbearing ages. That is why even Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics' moderate population forecasts, based on projections of declining numbers of births per woman among the Haredi community, other Jews, and Arabs, show that Israel's population may exceed 13 million by 2040, compared with 9.8 million at the end of 2023, astounding growth of roughly 33 percent. Although other forecasts are slightly lower, such as that of the Taub Center think tank (on the order of 12.8 million), there is no doubt that Israel's population will continue to grow and that the growth will be exponentially greater if fertility does not fall.



Sadly, there has been little public discourse concerning the implications of high fertility for social, economic, and environmental change in Israel. Some of this is because the trauma of October 7, the persistent demands of war, and internal political strife have combined to cast this incubating set of challenges to the side. But this interpreta-



tion misses the unstated assumption regarding fertility in Israel: that it is an unadulterated good, a symbol of a thriving, vibrant society, and one of the characteristics that is associated with greater levels of life satisfaction and happiness in Israel, compared with other countries. But it is past time to take a critical look at what Israel's fertility patterns will mean for the country's future, and to explore potential avenues for responsible and gradual fertility decline. For example, research indicates that if Israel were to lower its aggregate level of fertility and its consequent burden of youth dependency (usually defined as the proportion of the population age 19 or younger) in the coming decades, the result would be an increase in the proportion of the population at the working ages of 20–64, a factor that positively affects per capita income. In contrast, if aggregate fertility remains unchanged, the dependency burden will grow and the proportion of the population at the working ages will decline.

While no one can foretell the distant future, we need to think about Israel's population goals, how to design population and social policy to address these goals, and what we should do in the meantime to meet the challenges that we know are coming. We need a serious, strategic discussion of these issues, which will help to inform policymakers and planners. \*