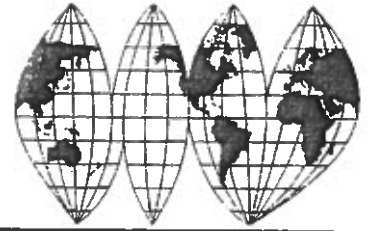


33. Israel



TEACHER BACKGROUND

Israel is a tiny country, and for most of its history, it has been surrounded by enemies. Israel is 260 miles (420 kilometers) long. At its narrowest point, it is 12.5 miles (20 kilometers) wide; at its widest point, it is 72 miles (116 kilometers) wide. Its area is roughly that of New Jersey. From the birth of Israel on May 14, 1948, until 1979, all the neighboring states—Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt—were hostile. In 1979, Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty giving Israel a secure border with Egypt. All the other countries on Israel's border remained hostile. The occupied territories that Israel conquered in 1967 added a bit of buffer space around this tiny country.

In the peace treaty with Egypt, Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, but still retained the Golan Heights, West Bank, and Gaza Strip. The Golan Heights are strategically important because they provide a protected site for enemy observers or artillery. The West Bank is home to many Palestinians but has also attracted Israeli settlers. The Gaza Strip may become the first occupied territory to be governed by Palestinians. In September 1993, Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat signed a Declaration of Principles, which included limited self-government in the Gaza Strip and the west border starting with Jericho. Jordan and Israel ended their state of war in July 1994.

The land that makes up Israel is not a rich prize. Only about a third of Israel's area is suitable for farming. To the south along the Sinai Peninsula is the Negev Desert. The Jordan Rift Valley runs along the eastern border. This is an extension of the Rift Valley in Africa. The Dead Sea in this valley is the lowest point on earth,

with its surface 1299 feet (396 meters) below sea level. The Jordan River runs into the Dead Sea. In a region this dry, water is a precious resource, and disputes about use of Jordan River water have been part of Israel's problems with Jordan and Syria. At the north end of the valley is Lake Tiberius, also known as the Sea of Galilee. The narrow plain along the coast is farmed intensively. It has a Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and cooler winters. This is similar to southern California's climate. Tel Aviv has average daily high temperatures of 85°F (29°C) with average daily lows of 72°F (22°C) in July and August. In January the highs are 63°F (17°C) and lows are 49°F (9°C).

The history of an area often makes the land desirable. Jerusalem is a city straddling the border between Israel and the West Bank. It is a hotly contested prize. The city contains religious sites holy to three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Temple Mount is the site of the temple built by Solomon, which became the center of the ancient Jewish religion. It stood about 400 years, then it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. For the Jews, the site remains the most holy place on earth. The West Wall of the Temple Mount is also known as the Wailing Wall, because it is the place where Jews call out laments about the destruction of the temple.

A second temple was built on this site and became the site of several events in the life of Jesus. As an infant he was presented in the temple. When a 12-year-old, he argued with the scribes there. As an adult, he drove out the

money changers. These and other events make the site holy to Christians.

For Muslims, the site is holy because the Koran says Mohammed miraculously ascended to heaven from the rock on top of the mountain. They have built the Dome of the Rock to commemorate the event. It is the third holiest place on earth for Islam. So all three religions see the Temple Mount as a holy place and are concerned about access to it.

The population of Israel is predominantly Jewish. In 1987, the population of Israel was 4,389,600. Of that, 82 percent were Jews, 13.8 percent Muslims, 2.3 percent Christians, and 1.7 percent others. Jews from all over the world moved to Israel. At first, most were from Europe or America. Later, more immigrants came from Africa and Asia. Since 1965, Soviet and Russian Jews have been arriving. The flow of immigrants has been slowing, however, and since 1975, the number of *sabras*, native-born Israelis, has outnumbered immigrants. Most of the population, almost 90 percent, is concentrated in cities.

Israel is a modern country with a high literacy rate (90 percent) and a healthy population,

with a life expectancy of 73.9 years for Jewish men and 77.3 for women. Non-Jews have a slightly lower expectancy, 72.0 for men and 75.8 for women. Figures from a recent year showed the gross national product at \$33 billion in American dollars and the per capita gross national product at \$7575.

The Israeli government is a parliamentary democracy. Its major ally is the United States, which has been a major arms supplier and a supporter of Israel in the United Nations and other diplomatic arenas. With so many pressures on it, Israel needs such a strong friend and ally.