



# Baby Boom

## Why is Israel's fertility rate at an all-time high?

**AN UNUSUAL** Israeli reality TV series began its fifth season on Channel 10 on May 28. “Baby Boom,” according to Jerusalem Post reporter Amy Spiro, is about “one of the most intimate moments of [young couples’] lives. There is crying, screaming and yelling, as well as sweat, tears and emotion... on every face in the room. It’s a hospital delivery room....” I doubt there is anything like it on foreign television. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis watch the program.

The first episode of the season followed Chanel and Philip Freiberg, two Americans from Los Angeles who met in Tel Aviv and are building their life and family together in Israel.

We first meet them when Chanel is heavily pregnant and the couple visits the maternity ward at the Rabin Medical Center-Beilinson Campus in Petah Tikva.

I missed the first episode. My wife and I were busy with our own baby boom – the recent blessed birth of our 15th grandchild, Carmel Sapir, a boy.

There are a great many blessings that building a life and a family in Israel confers. Babies are a major one. Over the past 12 months, 177,000 babies were born in Israel. Each one is a tiny blessing. I know that first hand.

I have traveled the world teaching management students. In Europe, Asia and even to some extent the United States, I was always struck by the paucity of babies and pregnant women. All of East Asia, Europe and North America are experiencing birth-rates that are below replacement level, i.e. 2.1 births per woman. Even Iran and Brazil are on this list. Fertility rates are falling in India. Only Africa is poised for major population growth.

China, the world’s most populous nation, is now struggling with the fallout from its now-abandoned one-child policy that has left the current working-age cohort unable to meet labor needs and support the older

generation. China’s fertility rate is only 1.57 children per woman.

On the one hand, this baby bust translates into a declining population. But beyond that, it may imply that baby-bust societies have given up on their futures. If you don’t believe in the future strongly enough to want to bring new lives into the world and build a new generation, then prospects for the future are not at all what they once were.

And never mind the cold numbers. I’ve been in countries with abysmally low birth rates – they feel like homes for the aged. There is no energy, no vigor, no boundless hope.

**BABY BUST?** Not in Israel. Israelis are having babies left and right – and I don’t mean only among the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox. Overall, Israeli women are giving birth at higher rates than they were 20 years ago! This makes Israel one of the few wealthy nations in the world that can truly claim to be having a baby boom like the one experienced in the West after World War II, when returning soldiers caught up on expanding their families, delayed during wartime.

Israel’s total fertility rate among all women is now 3.1 children per woman, up from a low of 2.6 in the late 1990s. This, according to ‘Haaretz’ reporter David Rosenberg, is twice the fertility rate of women in the European Union.

Of course, the ultra-Orthodox women boost the numbers. Haredi women have a fertility rate of 6.7 children per woman, down from 7.5 in 2000. Orthodox women’s fertility rose to 4.2 children per woman over the past 15 years. Meanwhile, Israeli Arab women have seen their fertility rate plunge from 4.36 children per woman in 1996 to only 3.11 in 2016.

So where is the Israeli baby boom coming from? Mainly, from non-religious Jewish women. Surprise.

According to Rosenberg, fertility rates among Israeli women who are secular or masorti (traditional) rose by 15% in the past 15 years. “Israeli women today seem more inclined to have babies than they did 20 years ago, on average,” he observes. In Europe and North America, women (and men) marry much later, and have fewer children. Marrying later reduces population growth because it increases the time span during which a given number of cohort children are born.

Europe’s baby bust is responsible for much of Europe’s current political troubles. If you don’t have babies, and if your labor force is not growing, you need immigrants to do the work. This, not liberal values, was at the heart of Germany’s wholesale welcome of immigrants, first from Turkey and later from Africa and Asia. Now, European voters are having major second thoughts, and right-wing anti-immigrant parties are on the rise, causing social upheaval. Britain’s exit from the European Union may in large part be due to the flood of unwanted migrants pouring in to that country.

Why is Israel experiencing a baby boom? Why does Israel seem out of step with some 40 other developed and developing countries, where fertility has plummeted?

Rosenberg quotes Israeli historian Ofir Haivry, vice president of Jerusalem’s Herzl Institute. Writing in the journal ‘Mosaic,’ he claims that “the educational and moral welfare of children [and] the continuity of the family remains at the center of parents’ (and grandparents’) lives, not only emotionally but as a matter of almost day-to-day practice.”

I have my own theory. For young Israelis, babies are cool. Elsewhere, mostly, they are not.

And observing our own son, a new father, I note that baby rearing duties in Israel among young couples are far more equally



The writer, **Shlomo Maital**, with his new grandson Carmel Sapir Maital

divided between mothers and fathers than they once were, in previous generations. Many new dads do half the work. New mothers know it.

Former Palestine Authority and Fatah leader Yassir Arafat liked to speak about the Arab woman's womb as his primary weapon. He claimed that Arab fertility would eventually overwhelm the Jews of Israel. Every so often, this issue pops up again.

"We estimate the (Palestinian) population in Judea and Samaria at between 2.5 million and 2.7 million," Col. Uri Mendes, deputy director of COGAT (Coordinator of

Government Activities in the Territories), told a Knesset committee recently.

Avi Dichter, former head of the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency), said that when Gaza's two million Palestinians are added to that figure, a total of nearly five million Palestinians live in Gaza and the West Bank. Add to this 1.84 million Arabs living inside Israel and the total number of Arabs in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip rises to 6.5 million. This is almost equivalent to the number of Jews living between the Jordan Valley and Mediterranean.

For some, these demographics sound alarm bells. But in modern times, social,

economic and military strength have never been a matter of sheer numbers. There is, of course, that "minor" issue of democracy. One person, one vote for the whole region would give Arabs a majority. But we are far far away from even tackling that issue – a great many pain points must be resolved before the voting procedure is addressed.

**WHAT DOES** the future hold? Israel's Jewish population has risen by 10 times since 1948, from only 600,000 to today's 6.6 million. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, by 2048, Israel's population will nearly double, to 15 million. By then, population growth will fall somewhat, to 1.7 percent annually – still faster than Western and Asian nations. Babies, it appears, will remain an Israeli blessing for many years to come.

And what about Chanel and Philip Freiberg? According to Spiro, later in the episode, "Chanel's mom has arrived and the baby is ready to make its own arrival into the world. The couple get comfortable in the hospital room and settle in for a long day ahead.... Before long, it's time to bring baby boy Jordan into the world, and he arrives along with the tears of his mother, father and both his grandmothers. (Where are the grandpas?)"

"I wasn't ready for how special this feeling would be, for how it would take over my whole body," Philip says. "I can't stop smiling. This is the best time in my life." A year later, Spiro reports, "Jordan is happy and healthy – and about to become a big brother."

The Freiberg family is ready for round two. And Israel's baby boom is alive and well! ■

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