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ESSAY · CULTURE

The Only Country Having Children

The developed world is in a demographic ice age. Israel is the only exception.

By **Brett Henry** · June 20, 2026

Every developed nation on earth is shrinking. Experts and activists, such as Elon Musk and the demographer Paul Morland, have been raising the alarm for years on this “population crisis.” South Korea’s fertility rate hit 0.72 children per woman in 2023, the lowest number ever recorded in any country in human history. Japan dropped to 1.15 in 2024, a record low for the tenth consecutive year. Italy fell to 1.18. France hit 1.62, the lowest since the end of World War I. Canada crossed into what demographers call “ultra-low fertility” territory at 1.25. The United States sits at 1.63. China’s births collapsed 17% in a single year, falling to fewer than eight million for the first time since wartime.

The replacement rate, the number required for a population to sustain itself without immigration, is 2.1 children per woman. Yet today, not one OECD nation reaches it...

Except Israel.

Israel's total fertility rate in 2024 was 2.9 children per woman. Nearly double the OECD average of 1.5. Elementary-level math will show you that Israel's fertility rate is four times South Korea's. The OECD's own 2024 report states it factually: Israel is "the only OECD country with a TFR above the replacement fertility rate."

So is Israel a marginal outlier or a civilization-scale divergence? If you've read the Anti-Replacement League article on the Hebrew language, you probably already know the answer.

The Number That Should Not Exist

The surface-level explanation for Israel's birth rate points to its ultra-Orthodox population. The Haredi community has a fertility rate of roughly 6.5 children per woman. National-religious families average around four children. Here in Tennessee, we call that obeying God's command to be fruitful and multiply. And while those numbers are significant, they are not what makes Israel exceptional. As you have probably already considered, large religious minorities exist in many countries, but they do not produce a national fertility rate of 2.9 in their respective countries.

What makes Israel genuinely anomalous is the number underneath the surface.

Secular Jewish Israelis, the largest single demographic group in the country, maintain a fertility rate of approximately 2.0 children per woman. The Taub Center for Social Policy Studies found that when secular and traditional (but not religious) Jewish women are counted together, their combined fertility rate has never dropped below 2.2. That is higher than the overall fertility rate of every other OECD country.

Let's take a moment to consider the gravity of this reality. Israelis live in a modern, expensive, technologically advanced democracy. Tel Aviv consistently ranks among the most expensive cities in the world to live in. Israeli women are highly educated. Female labor force participation is high. By every indicator, these dynamics predict low fertility in the rest of the developed world. Israelis should be having 1.3 children... maybe 1.5 if we're being generous.

Instead, they are having almost three!

The secular Jewish fertility rate in Israel is roughly twice that of secular American Jews, who average about one child per woman. It is higher than the national average of Germany, Japan, South Korea, Italy, Spain, and Canada. A population that watches the same Netflix shows, uses the same iPhones, holds the same graduate degrees, and faces the same cost-of-living pressures as any Western European cohort is reproducing at a rate the entire developed world has abandoned.

Barbara Okun of Hebrew University published a landmark study investigating precisely this anomaly. Her finding: Israeli childbearing overwhelmingly occurs within marriage (less than 10% of births happen outside marriage, compared to roughly 40% across the OECD). Strong pronatalist social norms maintain high fertility even among the non-religious.

The Taub Center put the structural finding even more sharply. The main difference between Israel and other developed countries is not about religion, it is about educated families. Educated Israeli families bring far more children into the world than their counterparts in Europe. In every other developed nation, higher education correlates with fewer children. In Israel, it is the opposite.

The Rise

There is a second story inside the numbers that almost no one outside of demography has noticed.

In nearly every developed country, fertility has fallen steadily for fifty years. Jewish fertility in Israel went the other way, climbing from 2.6 in 2000 to 3.13 by 2015 and standing at 3.06 in 2024. A modern, wealthy democracy raised its birth rate during the very decades when every comparable nation watched its own fall.

Yoram Ettinger, writing in The Ettinger Report in March 2026, called it a repudiation of conventional wisdom. David Heller, in a Times of Israel essay titled “Israel Chooses Life,” framed the data in the language of Deuteronomy: “Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”

What both writers are pointing at is a reversal of expectation. For most of the modern era the assumption was that a Western, educated, secularizing society would eventually stop renewing itself, and that Israel would bend toward the same curve as everyone else. Ettinger’s argument is that the curve never bent, and that Israel’s demographic vitality is structural rather than a passing spike. Heller reads it as something more deliberate still. His title borrows from the close of Deuteronomy, where Moses sets the covenant before Israel as a choice between life and death and charges them to choose life “so that you and your children may live.” The promise is explicitly generational, reaching past the people standing in front of him to the question of whether there will be anyone standing there at all in the centuries to come. Israel, alone among developed nations, keeps answering that question with a resounding “Am Yisrael Chai,” Israel lives or, my preferred Tennessee translation, We’re still here.

Why Israel and Nowhere Else

Demographers have a theory called the Second Demographic Transition. It holds that modernization inevitably leads to sub-replacement fertility. Urbanization, education, women in the workforce, access to contraception, secularization. The theory has held in every industrialized nation for half a century.

But the Taub Center confirmed what the theory cannot explain: Israel is the only OECD country in which the second fertility transition did not occur, not merely where it has not yet occurred. Israel's TFR has not dropped below 2.8 since the 1980s and actually increased between 1995 and 2015, while every other country with a TFR above 2.0 in 1995 saw decline.

The standard policy responses attempting to solve the population crisis have not worked anywhere else though.

Hungary spent 5% of GDP on pronatalist programs. Mortgage write-offs, tax exemptions, lifetime income-tax exemptions for mothers of four or more. The rate briefly rose from 1.23 to 1.61, then it fell back to 1.38. South Korea has spent more than \$360 billion on demographic interventions since 2006. The result: a 2024 fertility rate of 0.75. The Nordics built the most generous parental leave and childcare systems on earth. Sweden sits at 1.43. Norway at 1.44.

Israel's state spending on family policy is moderate, not exceptional, but noteworthy. It offers universal IVF coverage until a woman has two children, up to age 45. Israel leads the world in IVF cycles per capita. Monthly child allowances run about NIS 173-219 per child, which equals roughly \$47 to \$59 USD at current exchange rates. Maternity leave provides up to 15 weeks paid at full salary, which is pretty strong. These policies matter, but they do not explain a fertility rate nearly double Hungary's, which spends far more aggressively.

So, the difference is not policy as we have established. Then what is it?

A Society That Believes in Tomorrow

Daniel Kane, writing in Public Discourse, identified the structural factor that policy cannot manufacture: “The enduring source of the Children of Israel’s exceptional, future-oriented natalism is their intense, equally exceptional rootedness in their shared past.”

That sentence is doing a lot of work, so read it again and notice my favorite phrase, “shared past.”

Israel is a country that was founded by people who survived the murder of a third of their global population. The post-Holocaust imperative to rebuild was not a simple abstraction. Ben-Gurion’s government explicitly framed childbearing as a national duty and a demographic emergency. The Biblical command to be fruitful and multiply, *pru urvu*, was already the first mitzvah in the Torah. After the Shoah, it carried the full weight of survival and continuity for an entire ethnicity.

Eighty years later, that impulse has not faded. It has embedded itself in culture so deeply that it operates even among Israelis who do not pray, do not keep Shabbat, and do not describe themselves as religious. The Overpopulation Project analyzed this phenomenon and concluded that Israel is “socio-economically typical of a low-fertility country” but maintains high fertility because pronatalist norms cut across all social classes.

More than 91% of Israelis say they are satisfied with their lives. Life expectancy is 83.8 years, fourth-highest in the OECD. The country spends only 7.6% of GDP on healthcare versus the OECD average of 9.3%. And Israel gets better outcomes for less money. It has a younger population funding its pension system, and its workforce is growing.

This is the result of a society that actually believes in its own future.

What the Rest of the World Looks Like

The contrast is severe.

By 2050, the OECD projects that the working-age population across its member countries will have declined by 8%. In more than a quarter of OECD countries, the decline will exceed 30%, according to the OECD Employment Outlook 2025. Japan is projected to lose 18.7 million people by 2050. Italy will shrink by 12.5%. China could lose more than half its population by 2100, falling from 1.4 billion to 633 million.

Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said Italy is "destined to disappear" without reversing its birth rate. Japan's PM Sanae Takaichi called population decline the country's "biggest problem." The New Yorker published a feature in March 2025 titled "The End of Children."

The old-age dependency ratio across the OECD was 33 people aged 65 or older for every 100 working-age adults in 2024. By 2050, it will be 52 per 100. Pension systems designed for young, growing populations are colliding with the arithmetic of societies that stopped having children. In America there is optimism that the Trump Accounts will result in a second Trump baby boom, but we will have to wait to find out its effectiveness. The first one is already on the books: after the 2016 election, economists documented a sharp and persistent rise in births in Republican-leaning counties, a shift worth 1.2 to 2.2 percent of the national fertility rate.

And every major economy is running the same or a similar playbook: spend more on family subsidies, extend parental leave, build more childcare centers. But none of it is working. The playbook assumes that children are an economic calculation. That if you lower the cost to have children or give families financial incentives, people will buy into it.

Israel's data suggests the opposite is true. Israelis face some of the highest costs of living in the developed world and they have children anyway. Not because the government pays them to, but because their culture treats children as the whole point.

The instinct is of antiquity and can be seen clearly in the 2,000-year-old writings of my favorite historian, Josephus. When Josephus defended the honor of his people to their Greek and Roman critics in the first century, in the work known as *Against Apion*, he located the center of Jewish life in the same place (Book 1.60):

"Our principal care of all is this, to educate our children well."

The same conviction carries into the New Testament, where the instruction comes from Paul, himself a Jew and a Pharisee and son of Pharisees (Acts 23:6), writing to fathers in the early church (Ephesians 6:4):

"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

What This Has to Do with Replacement Theology

This website exists because of a conviction that God's covenants with Israel have not been annulled or transferred to the Church. That Israel remains central to God's purpose. That the theological tradition claiming otherwise, replacement theology, misreads Scripture and produces real-world consequences.

The demographic data we have covered in this article carries a resonance which is hard to ignore from within the Anti-Replacement League framework, which we simply define as Biblical.

The nations that have most fully secularized, that have most thoroughly separated their public life from any sense of divine purpose or covenantal obligation, are the nations that have stopped reproducing, and not just gradually but catastrophically. South Korea is on pace to halve its population within a generation. Japan is depopulating faster than any major economy in peacetime history. Europe is aging into a continent of retirees being flooded by other ethnicities at a startling rate.

Israel, the nation whose founding story begins with a promise of descendants as numerous as the stars, is the sole developed country that continues to grow through natural increase.

There is obviously something here that transcends demography.

The Claremont Institute published [an analysis](#) arguing that Israel's fertility exception comes down to faith. The more religious the community, the higher the birth rate. But the deeper finding is that even the secular population carries enough cultural memory of covenantal identity to sustain reproduction above the levels of every other modern democracy.

A nation that remembers why it exists believes it should and must continue existing.

The Implication

Nations that have children are nations that believe in their own future. Nations that do not are nations that have, whether they admit it or not, begun the process of leaving faith and existence.

Israel is having children. Its Jewish population stood at roughly 7.7 million at the end of 2024, up from about 650,000 at statehood, nearly twelvefold growth in under eighty years.

The developed world is in a demographic ice age. Israel is the only exception.

No one in their right mind can call this an accident or a coincidence. And we've shown that it is not merely a policy outcome. It is the behavior of a people who believe, down to the level of family formation, that the story is not over.

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