75 Israelis From History

Though they may have played important roles in helping Israel achieve statehood, these 75 people deserve recognition for what they did after Israel's Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948. Everyone on this list either is dead or has largely retired from the public arena. Those still playing an active role in shaping Israel appear on our separate list of current essential Israelis. Those whose greatest influence came before statehood appear on our list of Zionist founders. Also see our list of non-Israelis who helped make Israel what it is today.

S.Y. Agnon, 1888-1970
Known by the acronym Shai, Agnon became Israel's first Nobel laureate when he received the literature prize in 1966. No other Hebrew writer has won the Nobel in literature. Born in Galicia, now part of Ukraine, Agnon immigrated to Israel in 1907. His prolific writing depicts the decline of Galician Jewry and the pioneers of Israel and is full of biblical allusions and religious references.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Reuven Alcalay, 1907-1976
A Jerusalem native, Alcalay was a lexicographer best known for his "The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary," which was popular for its colloquial style. He also wrote "The Hebrew Lexicon of Foreign Words and Phrases." He was a literary critic and the longtime editor of the Israeli government's annual yearbook of facts and figures.
Photo: Public domain

Yigal Allon, 1918-1980
Allon led the Palmach and was an IDF major general who oversaw the Southern Command. He served in the Knesset from 1955 until his death. After the 1967 war, he proposed returning the West Bank to Jordan with an Israeli buffer in the Jordan Valley, then later suggested Arab home rule. His government posts included labor and foreign minister, and he was acting prime minister after Levi Eshkol died.
Photo: Moshe Pridan, Israeli Government Press Office

Shulamit Aloni, 1928-2014
Founder of the Meretz party, Aloni was known for advocating for peace and for human and civil rights, especially as a voice for women and against Orthodox control of society. She fought in the Palmach for Jerusalem and was captured during the War of Independence. In the 1990s she served as education, culture and communications minister. Her principles led her to clash with leaders from Golda Meir to Ovadia Yosef.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Natan Alterman, 1910-1970
A Warsaw native who moved to Tel Aviv as a teen, Alterman was a playwright, poet, journalist and translator who influenced Labor Zionism and socialist Jewish policies despite never holding political office. He opposed martial law for Israeli Arabs, but after the June 1967 war he helped found the Movement for Greater Israel, which advocated keeping and settling the newly captured territories.
Photo: Moshe Milner, Israeli Government Press Office

Yehuda Amichai, 1924-2000
Born in Germany, Amichai immigrated to Palestine in 1935 and became one of Israel's best-known poets and the poet laureate of Jerusalem. He fought for the British in World War II, then with the Palmach. His poetry features themes of war, peace and loss and has been translated into more than 40 languages. One of the first Israeli poets to write in colloquial Hebrew, he won many international prizes.
Photo: Fritz Cohen, Israeli Government Press Office

Aharon Appelfeld, 1932-2018
Born in a part of Romania now in Ukraine, Appelfeld was a writer who survived the Holocaust after escaping a concentration camp. He reached the Land of Israel in 1946. Drawing on his childhood, his works often depict European Jews in the World War II era. Titles such as "For Every Sin," "Tzili," "Iron Tracks" and "The Healer" gained him notoriety. He received the Bialik and Israel prizes.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

Gabriel Baer, 1919-1982
Baer, who escaped Germany in 1933, was a scholar of the social history of the modern Middle East, particularly Egypt, as well as the late Ottoman Empire. As a Hebrew University professor in African and Asian studies starting in 1954, he trained a generation of Israeli scholars. He founded and edited the Journal of Asian and African Studies and edited an Israel Oriental Society journal, The New East.
Photo: Moshe Milner, Israeli Government Press Office

Aharon Barak, 1936-
Lithuania-born Barak was a 28-year Supreme Court justice who served as the court's president from 1995 to 2006. He lifted restrictions on individual petitions to the court and strengthened the judiciary's authority to protect civil liberties. He also served as attorney general and was a key participant in the peace negotiations with Egypt. He served as the law dean of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
Photo: Avi Ohayon, Israeli Government Press Office

Salo Wittmayer Baron, 1895-1989
Born in Poland, Baron emerged as one of the greatest Jewish historians of the 20th century. He opposed the "lachrymose conception of Jewish history," which focused on Jewish suffering. Baron's "Social and Religious History of the Jews," published in 1937, challenged the idea of Jews as the most persecuted group in history. He put the Holocaust in historical context at the Eichmann trial.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Shulamit Bat-Dori, 1904-1985
Born in Warsaw and known as Mita, Bat-Dori immigrated to the Land of Israel in 1923 and brought theater to kibbutzim as an actress, playwright and theater director. Her plays targeted political issues, such as "The Trial," which addressed the 1936-1939 Arab uprising. She founded the Kibbutz ha-Arzi Company in the 1930s and taught theater at Tel Aviv University from 1965 to 1974.
Photo: Public domain

Menachem Begin, 1913-1992
Born in Belarus, Begin joined the Revisionist Betar movement and escaped Nazis and Soviets to reach Palestine. He led the Irgun, then spent three decades in the political opposition, including arguing against German reparations. In 1977 he was elected prime minister at the head of Likud. He negotiated the 1978 Camp David Accords and signed the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt. He invaded Lebanon in 1982 and insisted on Israeli control of the West Bank.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

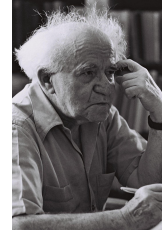**Dorit Beinisch, 1942-**
Beinisch became the first female president of the Supreme Court in 2006 after serving over 10 years as a justice. She also was the first woman to serve as state attorney, the highest nonpolitical role in the Justice Ministry. On the Supreme Court, she emphasized government oversight, child protection, and civil and women's rights. One notable ruling found prison privatization unconstitutional.
Photo: Moshe Milner, Israeli Government Press Office

David Ben-Gurion, 1886-1973
Ben-Gurion was Israel's first prime minister and its leading political force for two decades. Born in Poland, he arrived in Palestine in 1907. He formed socialist-leaning Mapai, the dominant political party, in 1930 and became chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive in 1935. He declared the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. He unified the military, emphasized immigration, promoted the Negev, saw Israel through a decade of economic austerity and established Jerusalem as the capital.
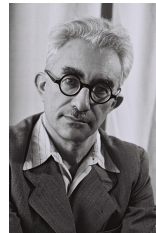Photo: Fritz Cohen, Israeli Government Press Office

Miriam Ben-Porat, 1918-2012
A native of Belarus who made aliyah in 1936, Ben-Porat in 1977 became the first woman to serve on the Israeli Supreme Court and the first on the highest judicial body of any country using common law. After retiring from the Supreme Court in 1988, she was Israel's first female state comptroller. She investigated government lapses in immigrant absorption, water management and gas mask distribution.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1884-1963
Before becoming Israel's second and longest-serving president in 1952, Ukraine-born Ben-Zvi co-founded Yishuv self-defense groups Bar Giora and Hashomer. He became a Poalei Zion leader after immigrating to Palestine in 1907. He was prominent in the development of the Histadrut, attended Zionist Congresses, served as the Va'ad Leumi chairman and president, and signed the Declaration of Independence.
Photo: Fritz Cohen, Israeli Government Press Office

Mordechai Bentov, 1900-1985
Born in Poland, Bentov was a writer and Knesset member who immigrated to Palestine in 1920. He founded the Mapam newspaper Al Hamishmar. He attended Zionist Congresses and was part of the Jewish Agency's U.N. delegation in 1947. He signed the Declaration of Independence and held various Cabinet posts. He was the last surviving member of Israel's 1948 provisional government.
Photo: Teddy Brauner, Israeli Government Press Office

Martin Buber, 1878-1965
Born in Austria, philosopher Buber spoke at the Third Zionist Congress on behalf of education over propaganda to win Zionist support. He edited the Zionist weekly Die Welt for a year but left because he preferred cultural Zionism to Theodor Herzl's political Zionism. From the 1920s on, he advocated a binational state. He immigrated to Palestine in 1938 and joined the Hebrew University faculty.
Photo: Moshe Pridan, Israeli Government Press Office

Eli Cohen, 1924-1965
Israel's most famous spy, Cohen infiltrated the Syrian government in the 1960s. Born in Egypt to Syrian Jewish parents, he applied his language skills to pretend to be businessman Kamel Amin Thaabet. He befriended top politicians and military leaders in Damascus. He was caught and hanged, but only after gaining intelligence on Golan Heights defenses that proved crucial in the June 1967 war.
Photo: Public domain

Moshe Dayan, 1915-1981
Known for the patch he wore after losing his left eye in World War II, Dayan was a military leader and politician. As a field commander, IDF chief of staff and defense minister, he helped lead Israel's military for more than 30 years. As defense minister, he was acclaimed for decisive action in the 1967 war but criticized for the surprise of the 1973 war. As foreign minister, he negotiated the peace treaty with Egypt.
Photo: Fritz Cohen, Israeli Government Press Office

Edis De Philippe, 1912-1979
A New York-born opera singer, De Philippe founded the Israel National Opera Company in 1947. She settled in Palestine after World War II and performed with the Palestine Folk Opera in 1945 and for the Zionist Congress in 1946. She financed, managed and starred for the national opera company, which performed around Israel and drew international performers.
Photo: Moshe Pridan, Israeli Government Press Office

Abba Eban, 1915-2002
A native of South Africa who was raised in England and made aliyah in 1944, Eban was a diplomat, politician and writer. With the Jewish Agency's U.N. delegation, he was heavily involved in the partition plan. His government posts included foreign minister, and he was ambassador to the United States and United Nations. His "Oxbridge" English gave his oratory great value, particularly after the June 1967 war.
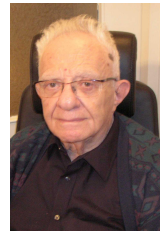Photo: Fritz Cohen, Israeli Government Press Office

Arik Einstein, 1939-2013
Combining folk and rock, Einstein's music has been celebrated since his first album in 1960 and still influences pop. He introduced rock to Israel, produced Israel's first music video and created the state's first album on CD. He released almost 50 albums. His popular songs include "Cry for You," "Me and You" and "Fly, Baby Bird." Also an actor, comedian and writer, he reflected and shaped Israeli society.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

Shmuel Eisenstadt, 1923-2010
Warsaw-born Eisenstadt was an internationally acclaimed sociologist noted for enhancing understanding of cultures and civilizations. Aside from guest professorships, he spent his career at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, including time as department chairman and as humanities dean. His 1985 book "Transformation of Israeli Society" investigates Jewish traditions from biblical times to the secular state.
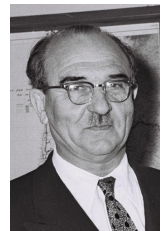Photo: Tzahy Lerner, edit by Gridge, via he.wikipedia.org

Eliyahu Elath, 1903-1990
A Ukraine-born journalist, politician and diplomat, Elath arrived in the Land of Israel in 1924, joined the Jewish Agency in 1934, and became Israel's first ambassador to the United States and, when the diplomatic post was upgraded, its first ambassador to the United Kingdom. His diplomatic skills were prominent during the 1956 war. He served as the president of Hebrew University from 1962 to 1968.
Photo: Central Zionist Archives

Levi Eshkol, 1895-1969
Eshkol, Israel's third prime minister, was a farm worke r after arriving from Ukraine in 1914. He organized labor and became a Mapai and Jewish Agency leader. He founded the National Water Service and developed the National Water Carrier. He procured arms for the Haganah in the 1940s. As finance minister, he guided the economy through the 1950s austerity. As prime minister, he won the June 1967 war.
Photo: Fritz Cohen, Israeli Government Press Office

Amir Gilboa, 1917-1984
Ukraine-born Gilboa was one of Israel's leading poets, winning the Bialik and Israel prizes. His poems incorporated a biblical theme of moral ambiguity and reflected his experience as a soldier in World War II with the Jewish Brigade and in the War of Independence. His collections include "Seven Domains," "Isaac" and "To Write the Lips of Those Asleep." He was an editor with Masada Publishing House.
Photo: Boris Carmi, Meitar Collection, National Library of Israel, Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, CC BY 4.0

Leah Goldberg, 1911-1970
Raised in Lithuania, Goldberg settled in Tel Aviv in 1935 and became a Hebrew poet, literary translator, and author of children's books and plays. She referenced the effects of World War II on Jews in her works. Her poetry collections "Smoke Rings" in 1935 and "Green-Eyed Spike" in 1939 are among the classics of Hebrew literature. She won the Israel Prize in 1970.
Photo: David Eldan, National Photo Collection of Israel

Gila Goldstein, 1947-2017
A singer, actress, and advocate for trans and gay rights, Goldstein in 1960 was the first trans Israeli woman to have sanctioned sex reassignment surgery. She co-founded the nonprofit organization Aguda in 1975 to help LGBTQ youth, and she received Israel's LGBT community prize for her activism in 2003. The 2010 documentary "That's Gila, That's Me," directed by Alon Weinstock, tells her story.
Photo: Courtesy A Wider Bridge

Leah Gottlieb, 1918-2012
Gottlieb, who escaped the Holocaust in Hungary, was world-renowned and known as the "queen of Israeli fashion" for her swimsuit designs for Gottex, the textile company she created with her husband, Armin. The couple tried to re-create the raincoat business they had in Europe, but Israel's dry climate inspired Gottlieb to pivot to swimsuits. Her business was a pioneer as an Israeli merchandise exporter.
Photo: Leah Gottlieb with model Tami Ben Ami (Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office)

Abraham Granot, 1890-1962
Moldova-born Granot (originally Granovsky) led the Jewish National Fund in expanding land purchases during the British Mandate. As JNF director-general starting in 1940, he led settlement and forestry initiatives. A signatory of the Declaration of Independence, Granot was elected to the first Knesset with the Progressive Party. He wrote books on land policy and taught agrarian economy at the Hebrew University.
Photo: Alfred Bernheim, JNF Archive

Gideon Hausner, 1915-1990
As Israel's attorney general, Poland-born Hausner successfully prosecuted Adolf Eichmann in 1961 for his crimes against humanity and the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Hausner persuaded the court to sentence Eichmann to death, the only capital sentence in Israel's history, because the Nazi "had no mercy in his heart." Hausner also served four terms in the Knesset.
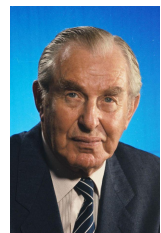Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Ofra Haza, 1957-2000
Born into a Yemeni family in Tel Aviv, singer Haza helped popularize Mizrahi culture. Her song "Ga'agu'im" ("Yearning") launched her career in 1973. She was Israel's Singer of the Year from 1980 to 1983 and finished second in the 1983 Eurovision. She recorded "Deliver Us" for the film "Prince of Egypt" in 29 languages and voiced Moses' mother, Yocheved. Her death from AIDS complications helped open public discourse about the disease.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

Chaim Herzog, 1918-1997
A politician, lawyer, diplomat and writer who immigrated to Israel in 1935, Herzog was Israel's sixth president. He led IDF military intelligence after the War of Independence. When the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution declaring Zionism a form of racism in 1975, he was the ambassador to the United Nations and shredded the text. He was the father of Israel's 11th president, Isaac Herzog.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

Eliezer Hoofien, 1881-1957
Born in Holland, Hoofien was the president of Bank Leumi L'Yisrael when it issued Israel's first non-British currency. He arrived in Ottoman Palestine in 1912 to help run the Anglo-Palestine Bank, which financed land purchases and Yishuv economic activity. He helped stabilize the Yishuv economy and develop Tel Aviv's port in the 1930s. He led Bank Leumi's shift to a private commercial bank in 1954.
Photo: Central Zionist Archives

David Horowitz, 1899-1979
Horowitz, who was born in Galicia and immigrated to Palestine in 1920, helped organize the state economy as the first director-general of Israel's Finance Ministry. He founded the Bank of Israel in 1954 and was its president until 1971, backing policies to reduce public spending, increase savings and boost productivity. Pre-state, he led the Histadrut and the Jewish Agency's economic department.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Eli Hurvitz, 1932-2011
Hurvitz in 1976 merged three companies, including one where he started working in college, into Teva Pharmaceuticals, the world's largest manufacturer of generic pharmaceuticals, which he led as CEO for 25 years and as chairman until his death. He led Shimon Peres' anti-inflation program in the mid-1980s and later served as the chairman of the board of the Israel Democracy Institute and Bank Leumi.
Photo: Moshe Milner, Israeli Government Press Office

Salim Joubran, 1947-
Joubran, a Maronite Christian born in Haifa, was the first Arab with a permanent seat on the Israeli Supreme Court, serving from 2004 to 2017 after a temporary appointment in 2003. He was often on the losing side of decisions while trying to protect minority rights. He previously served as a magistrate and district judge. He also was the first Arab to chair the Central Elections Committee.
Photo: Moshe Milner, Israeli Government Press Office

Eliezer Kaplan, 1891-1952
Belarus-born Kaplan was an active Socialist Zionist before immigrating to Palestine in 1919. He served as the treasurer of the Jewish Agency and a member of the Zionist Executive and was part of the Histadrut and the Tel Aviv Municipal Council. He was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He was the finance minister in Israel's first government.
Photo: National Photo Collection of Israel

Jacob Katz, 1904-1998
Awarded the Israel Prize in 1980, modern Israeli historian Katz was a leading figure in Jewish social studies as a Hebrew University professor. He used rabbinical sources for books such as 1970's "Freemasons and Jews" and 1973's "Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770-1870." His work provides much of the basis for scholarly analysis of antisemitism.
Photo: Cover of "Jacob Katz on the Origins of Orthodoxy," Shikey Press

Ephraim Kishon, 1924-2005
A Holocaust survivor from Hungary, Kishon was a columnist, playwright and film director. His satirical work portrayed social and political issues. As an immigrant, he wrote about the government's failings in immigrant absorption during the state's early years. His film "Sallah Shabati" was Israel's first Oscar nominee in 1964, and his "The Policeman" won the 1972 Golden Globe for best foreign film.
Photo: Zvi Tiberiu Keller, CC BY-SA 3.0, via PikiWiki

Israel Kolatt, 1927-2007

Kolatt was a professor of the New Yishuv at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Israel Goldstein professor emeritus of the history of Zionism. His books and articles address such topics as the organization of the Jewish population of Ottoman Palestine, Israeli nationalism, political and labor Zionism, political messianism in Zionism, and the leadership of Chaim Weizmann.

Photo: From "Studies on Palestine During the Ottoman Period," edited by Moshe Ma'oz

Teddy Kollek, 1911-2007

Kollek was Jerusalem's mayor from 1965 to 1993 and, after the city's 1967 reunification, helped develop it into a modern metropolis with a vision for coexistence and religious protection. Born in Hungary, he was named for Theodor Herzl. His family made aliyah in 1934. He helped 3,000 Jews leave German concentration camps on British visas in 1939, then smuggled Holocaust survivors into Palestine in the 1940s.

Photo: Central Zionist Archives

Rabbi Moshe Levinger, 1935-2015

Levinger was a leader in the settler movement. He brought 30 families to a Hebron hotel in 1968 to demand and win the right to establish the first permanent Jewish presence in the city since 1929. He founded Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) in 1974 to expand settlements. In 1988, after his car was attacked in Hebron, he shot at nearby Palestinians and killed one. He served three months in prison.

Photo: Public domain

Sarah Levy-Tanai, 1910-2005

One of Israel's foremost choreographers and a 1973 Israel Prize winner, Levy-Tanai also produced plays and drew inspiration from her Mizrahi roots in her art. A Jerusalem native who was largely raised in orphanages, she was a leader in the Israeli folk dance movement and in 1949 founded the Inbal Dance Theater, which she directed into the 1990s.

Photo: Israel Press and Photo Agency, Dan Hadani Collection, National Library of Israel, CC BY 4.0

Ehud Manor, 1941-2005

Manor was a singer, songwriter, and TV and radio host. He wrote more than 1,200 songs, including the 1978 Eurovision winner, "A-Ba-Ni-Bi." Many songs reacted to events such as the June 1967 war and the War of Attrition. His most popular songs include "Bashana Haba'ah" ("In the Coming Year") and "My Younger Brother Yehuda." He also translated songs and plays into Hebrew and wrote children's books.

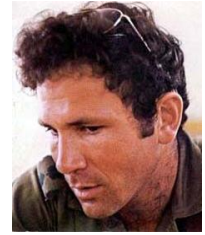Photo: Ehud Manor with Ofra Fuchs (Nachoom Assis, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Golda Meir, 1898-1978

Born in Ukraine and raised in Wisconsin, Meir rose in Labor Zionism with the Histadrut and engaged in diplomacy for the Jewish Agency and Israel, including trying to keep Transjordan out of the 1948 war and serving as ambassador to the Soviet Union. She was the first woman to lead the Labor Party and the first female prime minister from 1969 to 1974. She resigned that post after the Agranat Commission reported on the government's failures in the 1973 war.

Photo: Moshe Pridan, Israeli Government Press Office

Yoni Netanyahu, 1946-1976

The older brother of Benjamin, Netanyahu was a military legend and the assault commander of the elite Sayeret Matkal commandos. A New York native who fought in the June 1967 war, he joined Sayeret Matkal in the early 1970s and was a hero of the 1973 war. He was killed while commanding the successful raid on Entebbe, Uganda, to free hijacked airline passengers in 1976.
Photo: Public domain

Ehud Olmert, 1945-

Olmert, a 10-year Jerusalem mayor, served as Israel's 12th prime minister from 2006 to 2009, taking office for Kadima after Ariel Sharon's stroke and resigning amid charges of bribery and obstruction of justice, for which he was convicted and served prison time. He oversaw wars against Hezbollah and Hamas and made an extensive two-state peace offer to the Palestinian Authority.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Shaike Ophir, 1928-1987

A Palmach veteran of the War of Independence, Ophir was a comedian, actor and singer for whom the Israeli Film Academy Award was named. He starred in almost 30 films, including the Hebrew version of "My Fair Lady." Along with skits and films, Ophir appeared in several television shows in the 1950s and 1960s, performed in Hollywood and New York, and directed TV shows in the 1980s.
Photo: Boris Carmi, Meitar Collection, National Library of Israel, Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, CC BY 4.0

Amos Oz, 1939-2018
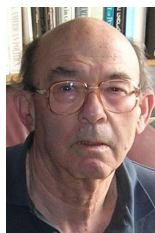
Oz was a journalist, a novelist and one of the first Israeli intellectuals to endorse a two-state solution through his 1967 article "Land of Our Forefathers." He was a frequent critic of Israel's military policies and politics and co-founded Peace Now in 1978. He wrote over 30 books, from short story collections to the autobiographical novel "A Tale of Love and Darkness." He taught literature at Ben-Gurion University.
Photo: Shannon, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Shimon Peres, 1923-2016

Peres is the only Israeli to serve as prime minister and president. Born in Belarus, he arrived in Palestine in 1934. He helped establish and arm the initial IDF and launched a nuclear program. In 1977 he was the first Labor Party leader to lose to a right-of-center candidate for prime minister. He pushed high-tech innovation and stabilized the economy in the 1980s. He shared the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat for the Oslo Accords.
Photo: Mark Neyman, Israeli Government Press Office

Yehoshua Porath, 1938-2019
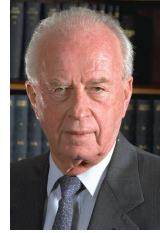
Porath specialized in the history of Palestinian nationalism as a professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His books include "Palestine Jewry and the Arab Question, 1917-1925" and "In Search of Arab Unity, 1930-1945." He ran for the Knesset with left-wing party Meretz in 1992 but opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords and supported Likud in 1996.
Photo: Tzachi Lerner via Wikimedia Commons

Yitzhak Rabin, 1922-1995
Rabin was a two-time prime minister whose assassination shattered hopes for peace under the Oslo Accords, for which he shared the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize. He also signed a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994. As a Palmach officer, he was involved in efforts to break the blockade of Jerusalem in 1948 and rose to be the IDF's chief of staff during the 1967 war. He served as ambassador to the United States before entering the Knesset with the Labor Party.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

Gideon Rafael, 1913-1999
Berlin-born Rafael made a career in diplomacy after time as a soldier with the Haganah and the British. He was part of the Jewish Agency's U.N. delegation in 1947, was a founder of the Foreign Ministry in 1948, and served as the ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg and to Britain. As ambassador to the United Nations, he defended Israel during the 1967 war and worked on Security Council Resolution 242.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Ilan Ramon, 1954-2003
Israel's first astronaut, Ramon was an air force colonel and pilot who flew in Operation Opera, which destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981. He was one of the seven crew members aboard the space shuttle Columbia when it broke apart upon re-entry in 2003, killing all seven. He was vocal about his role in representing Israel and the Jewish people on the mission.
Photo: NASA

Hanna Rovina, 1888-1980
Called "the high priestess of the Hebrew theater" by a fellow actor, Belarus-born Rovina got her start onstage in Moscow with what became Israel's national theater, Habimah. She was best known for playing Leah in Habimah's "The Dybbuk," a role she originated in 1922 and returned to in revivals through 1957, but she played a wide range of headlining parts. She won the Israel Prize in 1956.
Photo: Boris Carmi, Meitar Collection, National Library of Israel, Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, CC BY 4.0

Pinhas Sapir, 1906-1975
Labor Party politician Sapir played a vital role in the development of the Israeli economy. Born in Poland, he immigrated to the Land of Israel in 1929. He served in the Cabinet from 1955 to 1972, usually as the finance minister or the trade and industry minister. He opposed territorial expansion beyond the Green Line after the 1967 war because of the economic ramifications.
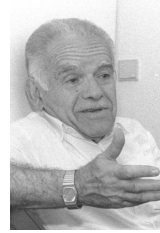Photo: Fritz Cohen, Israeli Government Press Office

Gershom Scholem, 1897-1982
A brilliant scholar of Jewish mysticism and messianism, Berlin-born Scholem arrived in the Land of Israel in 1923 after completing his doctorate and taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he was the first professor devoted to Jewish mysticism. He published more than 40 volumes and some 700 articles. He was the first head librarian of the Judaic collection at the National Library of Israel.
Photo: National Library of Israel

Yitzhak Shamir, 1915-2012
Belarus-born Shamir was the seventh prime minister, serving two terms between 1983 and 1992. He was a Lehi leader during the British Mandate. As a Likud prime minister, he approved Operation Solomon to airlift in Ethiopian Jews, settled the first influx of post-Soviet Jews, agreed not to respond to Iraqi Scud attacks during the Gulf War and participated in the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Moshe Sharett, 1894-1965
The first foreign minister and second prime minister of Israel, Ukraine-born Sharett (originally Shertok) was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and one of the key negotiators of cease-fire agreements that ended the War of Independence. He led the political department of the Jewish Agency beginning in 1933. He founded the Jewish Brigade to fight alongside the British army in World War II.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Ariel Sharon, 1928-2014
Sharon led IDF commandos in the 1950s, was a field commander in 1967 and drove the Sinai counteroffensive in 1973. As defense minister, he launched the First Lebanon War, which resulted in an 18-year occupation, and was blamed for the Sabra and Shatila massacre. As a Likud politician, he championed settlements, but as the 11th prime minister, he withdrew all settlers and troops from Gaza. He never emerged from a coma after a stroke in 2006.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

Naomi Shemer, 1930-2004
Singer-songwriter Shemer wrote "Jerusalem of Gold," which became the anthem for a united Jerusalem after the June 1967 war. She also translated famous songs and poems into Hebrew and performed them, including The Beatles' "Let It Be" (a response to the 1973 war) and works by Walt Whitman. She put to music many poems by Rachel Bluwstein and was buried near her at Kvutzat Kinneret.
Photo: Boris Carmi, Meitar Collection, National Library of Israel, Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, CC BY 4.0

Reuven Shiloah, 1909-1959
Born in Jerusalem, Shiloah was the founding director of the Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency. His support of the British military during World War II included planning Hannah Senesh's mission. Before independence he obtained the Arab League's invasion plans. He cultivated ties with Western spy agencies. He participated in 1949 cease-fire talks. After the Mossad, he served in the embassy in Washington.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

Moshe Sneh, 1909-1972
Sneh was a left-wing Knesset member from 1949 to 1972, mostly with the Communist Maki party. Born in Poland, Sneh was a founder of the General Zionists in 1935 and a doctor with the Polish army at the outset of World War II. He escaped to Palestine and commanded the Haganah from 1941 to 1946. He was active in smuggling Jews into Palestine and fled to France at one point to avoid British arrest.
Photo: Teddy Brauner, National Photo Collection of Israel

Yosef Sprinzak, 1885-1959
Originally from Moscow, Sprinzak was the first speaker of the Knesset, a position he held until his death. He was interim president after Chaim Weizmann died. After immigrating to Palestine during the Second Aliyah, Sprinzak co-founded Hapoel Hatzair, a socialist party that was one of the components of Mapai, and the Histadrut, which he served as general secretary at the state's founding.
Photo: Central Zionist Archives

Chaim Topol, 1935-
Born in Tel Aviv, Topol was an actor, singer and comedian best known for playing Tevye on the stage and screen in "Fiddler on the Roof." He received Oscar and Tony nominations and won two Golden Globes: best actor for 1971's "Fiddler" and most promising newcomer for 1964's "Sallah Shabati." He last performed on screen in 1998. He co-founded the Haifa Theatre, Variety Israel and Jordan River Village.
Photo: Israel Press and Photo Agency, Dan Hadani Collection, National Library of Israel, CC BY 4.0

Ephraim Urbach, 1912-1991
Urbach was a religion scholar and rabbi whose seminal work, "The Sages," focused on the evolution of Jewish religious and social thought. A native of Poland, Urbach studied in Rome and Breslau before immigrating to Palestine in 1937. He was a Talmud professor at the Hebrew University and translated ancient Hebrew into modern Hebrew. He finished second in the 1973 presidential election.
Photo: National Library of Israel

Rabbi Zerach Warhaftig, 1906-2002
Belarus-born Warhaftig persuaded Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara to issue 3,500 visas for Jews fleeing Lithuania at the start of World War II, then escaped to Canada via Japan. He reached the Land of Israel in 1947. He signed the Declaration of Independence and founded the National Religious Party. He was a Knesset member of the Knesset from 1949 to 1981 and served as minister of religious affairs.
Photo: Teddy Brauner, National Photo Collection of Israel

Yosef Weitz, 1890-1972
Born in Ukraine, Weitz moved to Palestine in 1908 and became a leader in efforts to acculturate immigrants through agricultural labor. He helped found the Galilee's Yavniel moshav and Jerusalem's Beit Hakerem neighborhood. Starting in the 1930s, he led the Jewish National Fund's land and afforestation department and established the forestry policies used into the 1960s. He also acquired land for the pre-state Jewish community.
Photo: Central Zionist Archives

Ezer Weizman, 1924-2005
Weizman, the nephew of Chaim Weizmann, was Israel's seventh president from 1993 to 2000. He was a founder of the Israeli Air Force and became its commander in 1958. As defense minister in the first Likud-led government, he helped negotiate the Camp David Accords. He resigned from the Cabinet in 1980 because of Menachem Begin's refusal to hold peace talks with Palestinians and was fired as science minister in 1990 over contacts with the PLO.
Photo: Ya'acov Sa'ar, Israeli Government Press Office

Chaim Weizmann, 1874-1952
Weizmann, a native of Russian-controlled Poland, was the first president of Israel. In England during World War I, he used his chemistry skills to develop a synthetic process for making acetone and thus made relationships that helped achieve the Balfour Declaration in 1917. He was elected the president of the Zionist Organization in 1921 and was tireless in fundraising and diplomacy.
Photo: Hugo Mendelson, National Photo Collection of Israel

Yigael Yadin, 1917-1984
Yadin was a military commander and an archaeologist. He led the Negev campaign against the Egyptians in the War of Independence and became the second IDF chief of staff. He modeled the IDF's reserve force on the Swiss military. As an archaeologist, he carried out important work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, Masada, Tel Hazor, Tel Megiddo and other finds. He was deputy prime minister to Menachem Begin.
Photo: Israeli Government Press Office

A.B. Yehoshua, 1936-2022
A part of the new wave of Israeli authors, Yehoshua wrote short stories, novels and plays, including "The Lover," "The Tunnel" and "A Tale of Two Zionists." He received international literary awards ranging from the National Jewish Book Award in 1990 to the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 2006. His works have been translated into over 30 languages. He was active in peace efforts and helped start Peace Now.
Photo: Arielinson, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, 1920-2013
Born in Baghdad, Yosef in 1984 founded Shas, an Orthodox Sephardi political party. He exerted authority within the party and backed government funding for the poor and Orthodox. He served as the chief rabbi of Cairo and Tel Aviv before becoming the Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel in 1973. He ruled that Ethiopia's Beta Israel were Jewish and said it was acceptable to cede part of the Land of Israel to achieve peace.
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