

American ideals draw U.S. citizens to settle in Israel's West Bank

by [Michele Chabin](#)

September 8, 2015

c. 2015 *USA Today*

EFRAT, West Bank — When Mordechai Reich moved to this Jewish settlement seven miles south of Jerusalem in 1994, he wanted to study in a yeshiva, or seminary. He stayed in Efrat, once part of the biblical land of Israel, because he felt he could make a difference.

“For me, Israel is a young country where individual contributions add up to create significant change,” said Reich, a psychologist who immigrated here from New York. “In that sense it is a land of opportunity, just as America is. We integrate Israeli culture and American culture and the result is a strong culture.”

Today, Efrat is a suburban community with 10,000 residents, many of them Americans who have lived here for decades. U.S. citizens make up roughly 15 percent of the Jewish population in the West Bank, but only 2-3 percent of Israel’s overall citizenry, making them “strikingly over-represented” within the settler population, according to data released last week in Jerusalem by Oxford University historian Sara Yael Hirschhorn.

Hirschhorn’s research profiling American settlers here shows 60,000 of Israel’s 200,000 to 300,000 U.S. citizens live in the West Bank. The territory remains at the heart of a four-decade dispute over competing claims to the land between Palestinians and Israelis. Many Israeli settlers have moved into certain areas, despite the government’s opposition.

Many American immigrants who moved to the West Bank settlements say it was their upbringing in the United States that drew them here.

While “many people consider settlements a violation of Palestinian rights of sovereignty,” Hirschhorn said, American settlers “believe Jews should have the right to live wherever they want in the Holy Land and certainly anywhere under Israel

sovereignty. To them, this is a deeply American vision.”

The Americans who immigrated to Israel, including those who moved to the West Bank after the 1967 Six-Day War, “were mostly young, single, highly educated, upwardly mobile, traditional but not necessarily Orthodox in religious practice,” the historian said. “They were people involved and sympathetic to leftist social movements, such as the U.S. civil rights struggle.”

Today’s American immigrants tend to be older, married, and more religious, she said.

Hirschhorn noted that some American settlers have carried out “egregious acts of terror,” such as Brooklyn-born Baruch Goldstein, who shot to death 29 Muslim worshipers in a Hebron mosque in 1994. But others are spearheading Israeli-Palestinian dialogue groups.

“It cuts both ways,” Hirschhorn said. “If my research has shown me anything it is that stereotypes are an unhelpful way of understanding the settler project, regardless of whether you are sympathetic or opposed to it.”

Shlomo Fischer, an expert on Jewish extremism at the Jewish People Policy Institute, dispelled the view that American settlers are the ringleaders behind many Jewish attacks against Palestinians and non-Jewish institutions in recent years.

“My impression is that Americans are not disproportionately represented within the extremist population,” Fischer said. “In the past there have been some in the leadership with an American background but, in fact, most Americans who live on the West Bank, especially in places like Efrat, aren’t extremists. They live their lives according to American values.”

Oded Revivi, the mayor of Efrat, where English is preferred in many homes and synagogues, said his city’s many American immigrants often volunteer to act as spokespersons and goodwill ambassadors. “They host foreign groups and explain the reality we’re living in,” Revivi said.

They have also helped imbue Efrat, which was co-founded by American-born Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, with an American ethos.

“Ours is definitely a community where democratic processes and transparency are a priority and where there is a strong sense of civic responsibility and activism,” the

mayor said. "Within our group of volunteers there are large numbers of Americans who lead and initiate projects."

Bobby Brown, 63, a New Yorker who moved to the nearby settlement of Tekoa in 1978, said there is no question that the American ideals he grew up with influenced his decision to move here.

"That feeling of pioneering, of encouraging people to reach their full potential in a new and exciting self-created community reflects everything we were taught about America's beginnings and America's greatness," said Brown, a former adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The grandfather of ten called it "an amazing thing" to be part of the first generation of modern Jews "who didn't have to wish for a Jewish state because we had one. The only question was how we could contribute to the state with our presence."