

What is Really Being Debated in the Debate on the Distancing Hypothesis?

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Abstract “Trends in American Jewish Attachment to Israel” and “Thinking about Distancing from Israel” purportedly represent the two sides of a debate about whether American Jews are becoming more distant from Israel. But the authors are not really debating whether the distance is increasing; they are debating how to investigate that distance. And there are three sides to the debate, not two: the side that limits its conclusions to what carefully collected and analyzed data show, the side that says “it’s not about the data,” and the side that believes we could better understand American Jews if we put our studies in the context of broader theoretical work and investigations of other groups. This article describes how the articles’ approach to data affect their conclusions, and suggests what should be done next in pursuing the question of Jews’ attachment to Israel.

Keywords American Jews · Israel · Attitude change

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Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and Cohen–Kelman disagree about trends in American Jewish attachment to Israel over the past several decades. Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe claim that for the Jewish community as a whole, there has essentially been no trend; Cohen–Kelman claim that there has been a substantial decrease in attachment among the non-Orthodox. But they reach their conclusions in different ways. Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe provide a great deal of data (relative to what’s available) showing that the percentage of American Jews caring about Israel and feeling close to Israel has varied over the years, but not by very much; the percentages in the most recently collected data are virtually the same as they were 20 years ago (Figs. 1, 2; Table 1). Cohen–Kelman, in contrast, contend that “hard evidence and reasoned analysis” point to the conclusion that attachment has declined, but in fact they provide no data at all. This is ironic, because Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe base their conclusion in part on data from two of Cohen’s own studies (one published in 1986, the other published with Kelman in 2007, presented in Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe’s Table 1).

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and Cohen–Kelman also differ in their predictions about future trends. Cohen–Kelman “think that non-Orthodox Jews in America, as a group, are growing more distant from Israel and *will continue to do so*” (emphasis added). Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe admit that the distancing hypothesis has some plausibility, but conclude that there is “a strong possibility that American Jewish ties to Israel may be stronger in the future.”

Here, again, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and Cohen–Kelman reach their different conclusions in very different ways. Cohen–Kelman find, in their 2007 study, that younger Jews are less attached to Israel than older Jews. Projecting into the future, they believe that as the older Jews with strong attachments die off and are replaced by younger cohorts, each less attached to Israel than its elders, the non-Orthodox community as a whole will necessarily become less and less attached to Israel. Similarly, they find that in-married Jews are more strongly attached to Israel than intermarried and unmarried Jews; as the latter groups become a larger part of the non-Orthodox population, Cohen–Kelman claim, the overall level of attachment to Israel will decline.

Cohen–Kelman’s prediction depends entirely on the assumption that Jews decide at a young age how attached to Israel they will be and never change their minds. If only a small fraction of Jews in their 20s are strongly attached to Israel today, then, in 40 years, only the same small fraction of Jews in their 60s will be similarly attached. This could happen, but Cohen–Kelman are wrong to assume that attitudes are fixed at a young age and do not change; many studies show that attitudes do change over the life course (e.g., Ciabattari 2001; Firebaugh and Davis 1988).

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe, in contrast, suggest that young Jews might change their minds as they age, gradually becoming more attached to Israel. To examine this possibility in a truly satisfactory way, it would be necessary to follow the same people for decades and see whether their level of attachment increases. No such panel studies have been conducted in the past, nor are any likely to be conducted in the future because the cost is too great. So Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe do the next best thing, which is to use available data and see if they are consistent with changing opinions or stable ones.

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe argue that if Jews’ attachment to Israel does not change as they age (as Cohen–Kelman assume), then we could see if the process Cohen–Kelman predict for the future is consistent with what we know about the past. If we go back some distance in history and then move forward, we could see older, more-attached Jews die off, and, as they are replaced by less-attached Jews, watch the overall level of attachment to Israel decline. Data on cohorts based on standardized questions don’t go back very far, but are available for the period 1994–2005. For that entire time period, younger Jews have been less attached to Israel than older Jews (though sometimes not by very much). Older, less comparable data going back to the 1970s produce similar results. By Cohen–Kelman’s logic, this implies that the Jewish community’s overall level of attachment to Israel must have been declining. But it has not. That does not prove that attachment to Israel grows with age, but is consistent with such a view.

Because Cohen–Kelman believe that individuals’ attachment to Israel remains stable over time, they have no reason to consider what might influence attachment. But Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe do. They suggest that attachment to Israel might be affected by travel to Israel, particularly under the auspices of well-designed programs such as Taglit-Birthright Israel; synagogue membership, potentially increased by outreach programs, including programs targeted at the intermarried; and attitudes toward Israel in the broader American population. (Cohen–Kelman mention travel to Israel but are dismissive of its possible aggregate-level impact.)

Unfortunately, there are no good data available on the aggregate-level impact of travel to Israel, synagogue membership, the broader American context, or other forces on American Jews’ attachment to Israel. Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe are providing a research agenda, not sets of findings. But in light of what their data analysis does show, it is a research agenda worth pursuing.

Though Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and Cohen–Kelman disagree about past and future trends in American Jews’ attachment to Israel, the real debate between them is not about the trends. It’s about data and what to do with it. Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe want to base their conclusions on a careful and rigorous analysis of the available data. Cohen–Kelman do not.

For example, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe say that to learn about past trends, it is important to use over-time data that would show directly what the trends, if any, have been. Cohen–Kelman believe that to be unnecessary. They are sure that there has been “a pattern of shifting (declining) attachment to Israel stretching over 50 years” even though they have no data on strength of attachment 50 years ago, and, indeed, in their paper use no data collected earlier than 2007.

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe believe that Jews’ attachment to Israel may change as they age, and do the best they can with limited data to see if that’s true. Cohen–Kelman simply assume, without evidence, that attachment does not change. The Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe conclusions are necessarily very tentative, given the limitations of available data, but their findings cannot be easily dismissed. It would be very important to do more research to see who is right.

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe are concerned, as the title of their paper indicates, about trends in attachment to Israel across the entire American Jewish community, and analyze the best available data on that community. Cohen–Kelman respond by

claiming that the “central issue” between them and Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe is trends among the non-Orthodox, and analyze data for only the non-Orthodox. Since this is so clearly not the central issue, why make such a claim? The Orthodox are more strongly attached to Israel than Jews of other denominations; it is easier to show weak or declining attachment if the group with the strongest and most stable attachment is removed from the analysis.

The conflict between Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and Cohen–Kelman with regard to data has deep roots and reflects debates in the social sciences going back over 60 years. Often the conflict is described as being between quantitative and qualitative approaches. But that is not quite right. The conflict is really a kind of morality play. Those who downplay quantitative data—Cohen–Kelman write that such data merely “shapes our interpretation” and attack others who “refrain from speculating” when they have no data - do not say they proceed as they do because it’s their personal preference; nor do they show that their findings are more credible in some specific way to the findings of research that takes quantitative data more seriously. Instead, they claim, they are creative and imaginative, able to see the big picture, while their opponents, incapable of nuance, mechanically grind out statistics. Or, as Cohen–Kelman put it, their own work is “theoretically rich, contextually situated, and sociologically imaginative”; their argument “based on interpretation rather than mere extrapolation.”

It is ironic that Cohen–Kelman claim their work is based on interpretation rather than mere extrapolation, because in fact it is based on extrapolation of the most mechanical kind. Their conclusions rest entirely on the assumption that people’s attitudes, acquired while young, never change; their predictions depend entirely on extrapolating today’s attitudes into the future, without any consideration of context at all.

Cohen–Kelman express their stance very bluntly: “For Jewish social thinkers and public intellectuals, the roles that both we and our colleagues occupy in Jewish life, ultimately, it’s not about the data. It’s about the ideas and the people whose lives are impacted by them.” Their role, in other words, is to tell us what they imagine Jewish life in America to be; how closely their imagined Jewish community resembles the community described by carefully collected and rigorously analyzed data is not a major concern.

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe are, in contrast, dedicated to making the best use of their quantitative data. Contrary to Cohen–Kelman’s implicit claim, however, they care very much about theory, context, and interpretation. They are the ones who believe that Jews’ attachment to Israel may be affected by Jewish organizations and the broader social context; they are the ones who provide thoughtful guidance as to how organizations and context may be taken into account in future work. It is Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe who are advancing our understanding of American Jews’ attachment to Israel.

And yet, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe’s work exhibits a weakness that characterizes most work on Jews in the U.S.: it proceeds in a bubble, cut off from other work in the social sciences. Almost all of their citations are to works on Jews, written by Jews, primarily for Jews. They are concerned about how attitudes change over time, both at the individual level and in the aggregate, but do not make use of the

substantial bodies of work by demographers, sociologists, and others on attitude change. They write about American Jews' attachment to a country to which they have a historical connection, but do not make use of work on the attachment to Israel of Jews in other countries, or work on attachment to other countries on the part of other ethnic and religious groups in the U.S. This limits their ability to learn from others studying similar issues and processes.

Jews in the U.S. are deeply enmeshed in the larger society; it is impossible to understand them without understanding their social context. Research on Jews in the U.S., in contrast, is not enmeshed in the research efforts of the larger social science community; yet it is impossible to understand American Jews without making more use of what can be learned from others.

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