

Go Out and See What the People Are Doing

Jack Wertheimer

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Abstract Based on a range of sources, there is ample evidence of a general decline in American Jewish identification with Israel, a pattern especially evident today among younger Jews in their twenties and thirties and among Jews who identify with the political left. Survey findings alone are of only limited utility in capturing the underlying social reality and the erosion of connections to Israel stemming from peer pressure.

Keywords American Jewish History · Attachment to Israel · Adult children of intermarried parents

Are the ties that have bound American Jews to Israel fraying, particularly among younger sectors of the population? This is the central question in the lively exchange over the so-called “distancing narrative,” a debate laden with implications particularly for two larger issues: First, a strong sense of connection on the part of Jews in the United States will determine whether Israel can count on American Jews for political support, not a minor matter considering that as citizens of the United States their lobbying can have an impact on the world’s most powerful state and one of the few to offer *reliable* friendship to an often isolated Israel.

Second, solidarity with Israel has served in the past as a measure of how committed individual American Jews are to the Jewish people and its religion. Jewish sacred texts, liturgy and theology have emphasized these connections over the long history of Jewish dispersal. And then as the Zionist movement emerged, the

Babylonian Talmud: Eruvin 14b.

J. Wertheimer (✉)
The Jewish Theological Seminary, 3080 Broadway, New York, NY, USA
e-mail: jawertheimer@jtsa.edu

connection of Diaspora Jews to Israel—the land, the enterprise of Zionism, and eventually the State—took on concrete meaning. As noted a century ago by Solomon Schechter and others who had been influenced by Ahad Ha'am, Zionism came to be seen as a source of Jewish revitalization here in the United States (Schechter 1906). Sociological literature of the past few decades has demonstrated the strong association between support for Israel and a range of other Jewish engagements: American Jews who have participated most actively in religious and communal life over the past few decades have tended to be the most connected to Israel; those living the most attenuated Jewish lives tend to be distant from Israel (Cohen 1987, 2002, 2006, 11ff; Waxman 1992, 1996). If the “distancing narrative” is correct, there is cause to worry about the health of American Jewry.

As an historian who writes on the development of American Jewish communal and religious life since World War II, I take a long view extending back to Israel's founding, if not earlier. Based on a range of sources, there is ample evidence of a general decline in American Jewish identification with Israel, a pattern especially evident today among younger Jews in their twenties and thirties. During the first two decades of Israel's history, only the extreme Left and Right—the American Council for Judaism and Neturei Karta—departed from the consensus of strong identification with Israel. Rumbles of criticism about Israeli policies in the conquered territories began to mount in the 1970s and 1980s. But the issue then was the legitimacy of criticism, not alienation.

Over the past two decades, larger populations of American Jews have turned their backs on Israel than ever before in its history. It is not only the organized groups of Jews who favor the dismantling of the Jewish State in favor of a bi-national one or who one-sidedly object to every action taken by Israel to defend itself or who support Israel-bashing organizations such as Human Rights Watch, or who can be counted on to *lead* demonstrations to silence Israeli or pro-Israel speakers on campus—all symptoms of a hostility toward Israel that were not present a few decades ago, aside from the ranting of a few isolated individuals (Alexander and Bogdanor 2006; International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network 2010; Jewish Professors 2002; Jewish Voice for Peace 2010). But it is also the growing indifference to Israel as measured by declines in the membership of Zionist organizations and the lukewarm feelings expressed toward Israel in private conversations that offer evidence of a gap opening between a portion of American Jews and Israel. Admittedly, Israel is no longer a nascent State upon which American Jews can project idealized images; it is a real country beset by a range of challenges and problems. But criticisms of particular Israeli policies are different from complete estrangement or unqualified hostility to the very concept of a Jewish State. In recent years growing numbers of Jews in the United States and abroad who harbor such animosities have been speaking out with ever greater stridency and recruiting their fellow travelers into Jewish anti-Zionist organizations.

But don't the survey data say differently? As someone trained to marshal a variety of sources, I am cognizant of the limitations inherent in using a single type of source to draw large conclusions—all the more so when it comes to using quantitative data *alone*, given the constraints of survey instruments when it comes to probing deeper issues. Both papers rely heavily upon a small number of questions

that merely skim the surface of what we need to know if we are truly to learn about feelings of attachment and how those feelings shape behavior, particularly if respondents are ambivalent.

Used in isolation, quantitative data may lead to tunnel vision. To illustrate the point, I begin with a matter of *agreement* between the two papers. Both assert that political leanings along the liberal/conservative spectrum have no implications for the ties between American Jews and Israel. Cohen and Kelman in fact argue in their original paper that “political identity for the general population [of Jews] has little bearing upon feelings of warmth toward or alienation from Israel” (Cohen and Kelman 2008, p. 13). If anything, they claim, younger Jews on the conservative end of the political spectrum are slightly more inclined to distance themselves from Israel than their counterparts on the Left. This assertion is hard to take seriously because the relative proportions of people affected by the anti-Israel animus on the Left and Right are scarcely the same. With 80–90% of American Jews arrayed on the Center/Left end of the political spectrum, does it not stand to reason that the hostility to Israel evident in precincts of the Left have far weightier significance than the anti-Israel forces on the Right?

To its credit, the Sasson, Kadushin, Saxe paper widens the focus of the political discussion when it alerts readers to what the authors deem “the increasingly pro-Israel orientation of the American public” as a factor influencing the positive attachment of American Jews. The climate of public opinion, they argue, will make it easier for Jews to identify with Israel as levels of sympathy for the Jewish State rise in the general U.S. population. True as far as it goes, but this insight has additional ramifications. When 26% of liberal democrats according to a Pew survey conducted in January 2009 claim to sympathize more with the Palestinians than with Israel (Pew 2009), we ought to be alert to potential consequences of this tilt for the large numbers of American Jews who identify with the Left wing of the Democratic Party. Thus, when Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe write that “American Jews participate in [and are influenced by] the broader political culture,” they fail to acknowledge that the specific political culture with which a large number of American Jews identify is increasingly hostile to Israel.

The impact of political bedfellows was dramatically evident and openly conceded in a much discussed op-ed penned by Jay Michaelson (2009) in the English language *Forward*. He writes:

In my social circles, supporting Israel is like supporting segregation, apartheid or worse. ...I don't think advocates of Israel understand exactly how bad the situation is on college campuses, in Europe, and in liberal or leftist social-political circles. Supporting Israel in these contexts is like supporting repression, or the war in Iraq, or George W. Bush. It's gotten so bad, I don't mention Israel in certain conversations anymore, and no longer defend it when it's lumped in with South Africa and China by my friends. This is wrong of me, I know, but I've been defending Israel for years, and it's gotten harder and harder to do so.

Note that support for Israel, not for specific policies in Gaza or in peace negotiations, is under assault. (It is also noteworthy that contrary to both papers,

specific military and political events, according to Michaelson, have shaped attitudes toward Israel.) It matters a great deal that the political allies and confreres of a large sector of the American Jewish community are turning on Israel. And it simply is not credible to argue that as these dominoes continue to fall they have no impact on the attachment of left-of-center Jews to Israel.

The surveys under discussion did not ask respondents about how people in their social circles relate to Israel or how political alignments are affecting their outlook. To be clear, I am not questioning the allegiances of American Jews who criticize particular Israeli policies; we know from extensive research that American Jews, like their Israeli counterparts, are divided over the proper course for making peace. The deeper issue to probe is how the overall relationship of American Jews with Israel is eroding under pressures from their friends, social interactions with business associates, the media, and a host of other possible influences. When an interviewer under my direction spoke with young people in their twenties, he heard some describe how “inconvenient” Israel has become. Hanging out with their non-Jewish business or social associates, they feel worn down by the increasingly strident anti-Israel positions of their peers. We simply do not know how Jews, particularly younger Jews who are exposed to this kind of talk on university campuses and beyond, navigate the social and political realities—and how the hostile discourse shapes their levels of attachment to the State of Israel.

Jay Michaelson’s article is particularly important as a possible bellwether of how younger Jewish adults in their twenties and thirties are responding to the political pressure. Michaelson, after all, is a prolific writer and a shaper of Jewish culture for his age peers. And he is hardly unique in his growing discomfort with Israel, as any scan of blogs will reveal. The further along writers are on the left end of the spectrum, the less they resist the anti-Israel political culture festering in their social circles. One need only follow the activities of Jewish “progressives” who actively participate in demonstrations delegitimizing Israel to note the way a portion of young Jews is relating to Israel not only with distance but with hostility. Though dissatisfaction with Israeli policies is hardly new, the virulence and brazenness of Jews aligned with the more extreme Left offers evidence of eroding connections to Israel.

Jewish organizations are not blind to the shift in mood. A recent blog analyzes the transformational nature of the decision by the United Jewish Communities, once tightly allied to the United Jewish Appeal, to change its name to the Jewish Federations of North America. “To recruit contributions and commitment from Jews under 40, the future givers, the communal funds have to match the approach of the under 40s, who do not place Israel in the center of their identity as Jews” (Bass 2009). Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe may respond that that this is yet another example of a false perception the entire federation system has internalized due to the dissemination of the “distancing narrative.” But how would they advise Jewish organizations to treat Israel in programs designed for younger Jews? Would they urge federations to act as if nothing has changed in recent decades? And how would they respond to leaders in the so-called innovative sector, particularly those working with a “social justice” agenda, who assert, as they have in numerous interviews I have conducted, that they avoid programming related to Israel for Jews in their

twenties and thirties because it is too divisive a topic for their audiences? Are these young Jewish leaders also being duped by the “distancing narrative” or are they responding to the Jews they meet in the street and in their programs?

To be sure, not all sectors of the Jewish community are equally skittish about celebrating their connection with Israel. Public worship in synagogues of all hues contains numerous direct and indirect allusions to the religious significance of modern Israel and even more so to a relationship with the land of Israel. Jewish schools, both day schools and supplementary schools, include Israel education. And settings of informal Jewish education such as summer camps, youth movements and of course trips to Israel strive to strengthen the bonds to Israel through experiential programming. More broadly, American Jewish culture is awash in references to Israel. Even many organizations and initiatives directed at Generations X and Y continue to offer programs related to Israel, often quite defiantly, contending that this is core to their mission and if people don’t like it, they can stay away. Here, then, is evidence of the ubiquity of Israel in programs offered by Jewish organizations—i.e., to a lack of distance.¹

All of these efforts, however, cannot touch the Jews who stay away in droves. Unaffiliated Jews are not exposed to the positive messages about Israel widely delivered in Jewish organizational settings. Because I take these Jews into account, I am in complete sympathy with the contention of Cohen and Kelman when they argue that relying upon data only from those who identify as Jewish by religion misses a vast swathe of the Jewish population. We know from the last two National Jewish Population Studies how differently the Jewish profiles look when we separate the population of “Jews-by-religion” from those who identify as Jews in other ways. It is a sleight of hand to exclude the rest and then argue that the picture remains rosy—unless one is prepared to argue that the entire American Jewish population consists only of some three and a half million Jews who were identified in the 2000–2001 NJPS as Jews by religion.

So too is it a distortion of the realities on the ground not to factor in the vast population of young adults raised in intermarried families. “Weighting the AJC samples to reflect a growing intermarried population had negligible impact on overall levels of Israel attachment,” Sasson et al. claim. But that is a diversion. The real issue is not the parents who are intermarried but rather *the children of intermarriage* and how *they* identify. If this vast population is indifferent to Israel, it means that at least half of young Jews are distant. If Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe wish to omit adult children of intermarriage from the Jewish population, their reasoning works. But if they want to include them in Jewish population estimates, their sample has to reflect the mammoth size of this population. They may be right that Birthright Israel may eventually influence the attachment of the small minority of young adults raised in intermarried families who apply for a free trip to Israel, but the evidence to date does not support optimism about the strong engagement of this population with Israel.

Indeed, the very need for Birthright Israel itself suggests a significant problem in how American Jews relate to Israel. The large majority of Jews between the ages of

¹ I argued this thesis in Wertimer (2008).

18 and 26 travel extensively and probably disproportionately take advantage of study abroad programs in many countries while in college, yet they do not see fit to invest their own or their parents' money to visit the Jewish State. If we subtract those who have traveled for free to Israel, what is the percentage of American Jews who have been to Israel? Moreover, even with the free trips, American Jews lag considerably behind all other Jewish communities in the West in the percentages of visitors to Israel.

The debunking of the “distancing narrative,” then, is hardly an airtight case. It is therefore completely unnecessary for the Sasson, Kadushin, Saxe paper to speculate as to the motives of those who do not share their convictions. In their effort to explain why the “distancing narrative” has gained wide currency, the authors wonder whether this thesis has gained currency because it “makes good headlines and justifies the mobilization of philanthropic resources for various causes, such as Diaspora Jewish education and Israel experience programs.” Rather than look for ulterior motives, the authors would do well to move beyond survey research and speak extensively to Jews in the street, as the rabbis of yore suggested. The important question, after all, is not what the surveys in isolation tell us, but what is actually happening in the American Jewish community.

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Author Biography

Jack Wertheimer is the Joseph and Martha Mendelson Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Among his books are *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* and edited volumes entitled, *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Change*, *Imagining the American Jewish Community*, and *Learning and Community: Jewish Supplementary Schools in the 21st Century*.