

Responding to the Debate Between Sasson, et al., and Cohen and Kelman

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Abstract Both sets of authors work within a set of boundaries I find too constraining. As careful and revealing as their work is, they do not examine their assumptions about the desirability of attachment, about the usefulness of Taglit-Birthright, and about what it means to ask respondents their views on “the West Bank settlements.” Perhaps because of these limits, they neither seek nor find a healthy form of distancing from Israel that might be useful for its holders, for the US Jewish community, and even for Israel itself. I offer a critical response to both articles and to the frameworks and methodology they present.

Keywords Distancing · Attachment · Settlements · Occupation

The argument is over whether or not American Jews are increasingly distancing themselves from Israel. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe observe that much social science research suggests that U.S. Jews “feel increasingly less connected to Israel.” They claim that the distancing hypothesis “makes for good headlines and justifies the mobilization of philanthropic resources for various causes.” They see an increasing number of young Jews participating in Taglit-Birthright as evidence against the distancing hypothesis. They also claim that increasing rates of intermarriage and attitudes toward West Bank settlements and a Palestinian state have little effect on feelings of attachment to or detachment from Israel. They argue that age-related claims have to do with life stages rather than generational differences. Sasson, et al. draw their evidence mainly from surveys of people who say they are Jewish by religion and admit that including Jews who do not identify with Judaism might show lowered rates of attachment.

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The latter issue is a big one for Cohen and Kelman, who observe that the two sets of authors are really investigating two different sets of Jews. This makes it harder to argue, it seems to me. The findings of Sasson, et al. appear true for the people they consider significant to examine. The findings of Cohen and Kelman appear true for the people they consider significant to examine, but Cohen and Kelman are correct in their assertion that Sasson, et al. are inappropriately generalizing from a population of Jewish-religion identified Jews to Jews beyond that population. In addition, Cohen and Kelman say that younger Jews are less attached to Israel but still tend to view it positively. They see evidence that intermarried Jews and their children feel less attached to Israel than do in-married Jews. They observe that attachment to Israel cannot be a life-stage matter, as Sasson, et al. claim, in that from their data, Jews of all ages have lessened their feelings of attachment to Israel. They also observe, most crucially, that their discussion includes Jews who identify only slightly or not at all with being Jewish, whereas, again, their colleagues Sasson, et al. concentrate more on Jews who identify with the Jewish religion.

Although a sociologist, and although I have spent about four and a half years in Israel during the last thirty-five, and although for about 20 years I have taught a course at Brandeis University called *The Sociology of the Israeli-Palestinian Confrontation*, and although I have written numerous columns and op-ed pieces about U.S. Jews and Israel, and although I was for 5 years co-chair of the National Middle East Task Force for the long-defunct *New Jewish Agenda*, I do not study the Jewish community professionally. The issue discussed by the two sets of authors concerns me, though, and I bring a sociologist's sensibilities and tool-kit to the discussion.

What I find especially fascinating about the dispute is the unexamined assumption that there is something good about American Jews feeling connected with Israel. I see nothing the matter with that being a fundamental assumption of both papers, but why not acknowledge it as such and examine it in some complex way? Although I feel deeply connected to Israel myself, I want to know why that connection is important to the people to whom it is important. Is it that U.S. Jewish identity cannot stand on its own and that Jews are better off (and/or Israel is better off?) if they identify with Israel and feel attached to it?

Are these papers part of that implicit movement that assumes that U.S. Jews cannot sustain a vibrant Jewish culture that may be non-Orthodox or fully secular without reference to Israel? Does being Jewish for the authors imply loyalty to Israel? If so, why and how? Is there a covert issue in the whole controversy of Israel needing U.S. Jews' support so that the U.S. government will continue its favoring of Israel? If this is a relevant issue (how could it not be?), why does that not enter the discussion? Does not some of that attachment they seem to think is important suggest a sad neglect of the project of a vital Jewish life in the Diaspora, where most U.S. Jews, however they identify themselves, will continue to live?

Many U.S. Jews who do feel attached to Israel support the most reactionary elements in Israeli society. Does this bother the authors? The reader has no way of knowing. Neither paper raises any questions about what some people see as alarming about uncritical attachments to Israel. I have been saying for 20 years that *Arabs can never destroy Israel; only Jews can*. Does not the implicit assumption of both papers that any attachment to Israel is good feed into the probably widespread

lack of critical and concerned response in the Diaspora to the myriad of problems within Israeli society?

Sasson, et al. refer in their survey materials to attitudes toward “West Bank settlements” but not to what is called by much of the world “the occupation.” The narrative of the other side does not come into either body of work. The occupation is the elephant in the middle of the room in the debate between the two sets of authors and, as is usual with such elephants, it is not addressed directly in the fullness and complexity I am convinced it deserves. I can imagine a respondent looking favorably upon settlements without knowing much about what they are, how they got there, how they are maintained, what price Palestinians pay for them, what price all of Israel pays for them, and how most Israeli Jews scorn the settlers. It appears that respondents’ level of information and sophistication about Israel is not on the agenda of either set of authors.

According to many surveys, most U.S. Jews, like most Israeli Jews, favor a two-state solution. Could not some disaffection from Israel reflect anger, impatience, and disillusionment with the apparent Israeli government determination to make settlement/occupation more important than a realistic resolution of the conflict? Sasson, et al. dismiss this possibility, but they do not make it clear how the surveys they used worded and dealt with this crucial issue. Did either set of authors ask Jews what they think and feel about the politically charged issues of settlers killing Palestinians, destroying their olive groves, growing in their racist attitudes toward Palestinians, harassing Palestinians in large and small ways? Apparently not. Did the researchers measure how much respondents know about Palestinian violence toward Israelis as well as vice versa? I gather they did not. The hotly contested occupation is not just a matter of Jewish identity but of universal standards of legality and decency and of great tendencies of countless Jews both in official positions and among the Jewish masses, to deny the realities of occupation. I refer the reader to Stanley Cohen’s *States of Denial* for what I see as an exceptionally powerful analysis of the nature and dynamics of denial among peoples who violate the rights of other peoples.

Sasson, et al. seem reluctant to consider distancing among fully secular Jews (interestingly, neither paper uses that phrase) who identify with Jewish ethics, culture, and history but not with any branch of Judaism or with the current incarnation of Israel. This reality is especially poignant in the papers’ assuming positive effects of Taglit-Birthright Israel with no reference to its contents. That the program (according to many of my students who have been in it) makes light of or ignores the Palestinian issue (within Israel as well as in the occupation), the growing power of ultra-Orthodox Jews in the politics of Israel, the escalating hatred between ultra-Orthodox Jews and most of the rest of both religious and secular Israel, the growing social class divisions and income discrepancies in Israel, and an almost dysfunctional pluralist political system are not, I think, on the Taglit-Birthright agenda. Taglit-Birthright may move visitors to Israel toward positive identification with it, but it seems to do so by offering an incredibly selective set of experiences and speakers.

Do the authors of either paper favor unthinking attachment to Israel? Do they not see an informed, critical relationship to Israel as perhaps a more likely way to engage Jews in relating to it? Nothing in this direction appears in either paper.

I read both papers as, in quite different ways, engaged in research and writing that will find what the authors want to find. We all know that data can be used for many purposes and can be interpreted in many different ways. Throughout the paper by Sasson, et al. I sense a wish to be assured that U.S. Jews' attachment to Israel is not waning. Throughout the paper by Cohen and Kelman, I sense the ringing of an alarm bell: uh oh, attachment to Israel by U.S. Jews is on the decline.

The claim of objectivity in social science research is obviated by the temptation to make the data fit the argument. The main limit I see in both presentations is what appears to me to be the lack of depth of the surveys and the decision to use quantitative data without supplementing it with qualitative data. (I think this would have made for richer papers in both cases.) The reader does not find out what those surveyed know, if anything, about Israel, about its history, about its struggles, about its vibrancy and its contradictions, and about what many of us see as its tragic trajectory with currently a fully right-wing government that could well be leading Israel to disaster.

Imagine a methodology that includes a section of at least a dozen interviews with U.S. Jews from a variety of backgrounds. They could explore feelings about Israel, feelings about being Jewish, attitudes toward The Conflict, information about Israel, information about the structure and operations of leaders and organizations in the American Jewish community, the interviewees' familiarity with Israeli politics and society, etc., etc., etc. Such interviews would put some meat on the bones of the survey data presented.

Does either set of authors prefer uninformed attachment to Israel to informed attachment or informed distancing? This question does not come up in either paper. The papers seem concerned that U.S. Jews view Israel "positively." Why? Why not view Israel as complex and tortured as it is? Would they prefer a U.S. population that views the U.S. positively to one that is cognizant of its limits, cruelties, and hypocrisies; feels deeply attached to it and involved in it all the same; and is moved to act to improve what it sees as a beloved but highly flawed society?

I have sensed for decades that "establishment" Jews in the U.S. fear that if U.S. Jews know more about the complexity and contradictions in Israel, they will lose interest in it or even become hostile to it. There seems to be an unspoken preference among some of them for what they appear to view as benign ignorance rather than enlightened engagement. This is a profoundly anti-intellectual approach. A well informed U.S. Jewry might turn Jews away from Israel, but it also might not. It may be that the strong tendency to intimidate and marginalize U.S. Jews who criticize Israeli policies (this is especially pronounced in the academy) is well enough known to put off at least some well educated, potentially engaged critics.

Israel, which claims to represent all Jews throughout the world, could open itself to participation in its debates by Jews in the Diaspora. I have always felt a bit odd that someone who claims to represent me has no interest in my reactions, views, analyses, etc. but only in my money and my blind political support.

In sum, I see the question in both papers of whether Jews in the U.S. feel attached to Israel as too reduced, too vague, too unclear to be of much value. What, after all, do the authors mean by "attached"? They seem to mean a positive uncritical valence. But why is that valuable? And is that the only viable sense of the word

“attached”? Whose interests do their views serve? And where does a vibrant, critical attachment (such as mine, for example) fit?

About 40 years ago, I had a conversation with a Jewish colleague about how Jewish identity might persist or might diminish in the freedom Jews experience in the United States. She startled me by asking why it was important that Jewish identity persist at all. All peoples eventually disappear, she observed. So will Jews, she said, and what is the matter with that? I found the question and discussion disquieting. I could not disagree with her logically, but I could not agree with her emotionally.

I know two of the authors of the Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe paper and respect and admire them enormously. I think it would be valuable for both sets of authors to separate cognitive from emotional variables and see where that takes them in the ways they identify the issue of attachment/detachment and the ways they investigate it. I hope my few words on this entire subject might lead to a rethinking of the research under examination and a refocusing onto real and challenging survival issues more fully than on uncomplicated loyalty/attachment ones.

Author Biography

Gordon Fellman is Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Peace, Conflict, and Coexistence Studies program at Brandeis University. His most recent book is on the possibility of a major paradigm shift in society today, from adversary relations to those of mutuality. It is entitled *Rambo and the Dalai Lama: The Compulsion to Win and Its Threat to Human Survival* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1998). He is currently working on a book tentatively entitled *Cease Fire: The Case for Ending War*.