

The Distancing Hypothesis: Fact or Fiction? A Response

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Abstract This article is a response to variant views of the hypothesis that American Jews are becoming progressively more distanced from Israel. Analysts agree that Jews under 35 are less attached to Israel than older cohorts. One view is that this is a life cycle effect within the same parameters of differentials found in studies from earlier decades; the other is that there has been a move toward alienation that will persist throughout the life-cycle of those studied today. For this group the change is attributed to rising numbers of cultural Jews and of Jews married to non-Jews. The differences in interpretation arise from analyzing different segments of the Jewish community. There are four areas of concurrence among social scientists; and this concurrence provides an important starting point for further discussion and policy development.

Keywords American Jewry · Israel · Religion

After stating that the current narrative in the Jewish community tells a story of decline in the relationship between American Jews and Israel, Theodore Sasson, Charles Kadushin and Leonard Saxe argue that, in fact, such “distancing” is not borne out by their assessment of available evidence. A pervasive perception of declining attachment is in the air, but it may be mistaken.

While reviewing the literature and rhetoric that surrounds this debate they are careful to cite articles from over a decade ago by Steven M. Cohen in which he suggested that at least from 1986–1993 there was no significant change in American Jews’ attachment to Israel. Further, they argue that the supposed drivers of distancing—generation, intermarriage and political alienation—are not operating

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powerfully in the studies which they have either conducted or re-analyzed. They state: "Age related differences are comparable to those reported in the past; the increasing rate of intermarriage has had a negligible impact on overall levels of attachment; and general political orientation and views regarding West Bank settlements and a Palestinian state are largely (although not completely) independent of Israel attachment." They also discuss travel to Israel as a countervailing force, highlighting their recent studies of *Taglit*-Birthright Israel Trips. Finally, they argue that a case can be made that lower attachment of younger Jews to Israel is part of a recurring life-cycle effect rather than a genuine generational change.

For their part, Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman say that they have "discerned a deep-seated, and broad-based gap in Israel attachment between old and young." Younger Jews were found to be less attached to Israel, to care less for Israel and to be less engaged and supportive of Israel than their elders. The analysts feel that this detachment or indifference has even turned to alienation among some Jews under the age of 35. They argue strongly that this phenomenon "has the markings of a birth cohort effect rather than a family life cycle effect... The trend lines are fairly consistent with age: each drop in age is associated with a drop in Israel attachment." Moreover, they claim to see a half-century pattern of shifting attachment, "from those who are now 65 and older down to those in their 20s."

Cohen and Kelman note that there are actually four areas of concurrence between them and Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe. However, their analysis and interpretations of data differ because they are looking at different segments of the American Jewish population. Although they worked with the same Synovate sample, Cohen and Kelman chose to exclude the Orthodox from their analysis but include Jews who do not relate to Judaism as a religion, while Sasson et al. deal only with those who claim Judaism as their religion, including the Orthodox in their analysis. Cohen and Kelman argue quite convincingly that if Sasson et al. looked at a wider swath of the community and/or excluded the Orthodox they would perforce come to agree with the distancing hypothesis.

As a sociologist of religion who has engaged in both survey and qualitative research on the American Jewish Community for more than three decades, I had several strong reactions to these papers. Each team of authors convinced me that there was some truth in their view of the distancing hypothesis. In some ways their debate reminded me of the decade or more during which time the transformationists and assimilationists did battle in print as well as in other forms of public and private rhetoric. The debaters in that case each saw pieces of the puzzle rather than the whole.

As noted above, Cohen and Kelman point out four areas of consensus which bring some of the pieces of the distancing puzzle together. All six scholars agree that younger Jews are more distant from Israel than older Jews; that political variations do not provide an explanation for the age variations; that intermarried Jews score lower on Israel attachment than all others; and finally, that travel to Israel is strongly associated with higher levels of attachment. These four provide an important base from which to broaden the discussion.

Cohen and Kelman posit that to ignore the growing segment of the American Jewish population that is peripheral to synagogue life and Jewish religious life in

general is a mistake. To assume that a ten day trip to Israel, or even powerful life cycle effects such as the marriage and birth of children, will miraculously turn their attachments into those of their parents or grandparents, is to be somewhat naive. Perhaps a third to half of them will intermarry and become even more attenuated from Jewish communal life than they are now. And, if the work of Bruce Philips and others is correct, then fewer than a quarter of those who intermarry will raise their children as Jews.

While I agree with Cohen and Kelman's critique of Sasson et al.'s use of the term "Jews by ancestry," I take serious issue with one aspect of the language of the Cohen and Kelman paper which I hope they will amend in their future work. Women do not want to be called non-men; Sephardim do not like to be referred to as non-Ashkenazim; and Conservative, Progressive, Reform and Liberal Jews should not consistently be referred to or lumped together as non-Orthodox. Not only is the terminology insulting, but it leads to misunderstanding. If the National Jewish Population Study is at all correct, the Orthodox comprise about 10% of the American Jewish population. When considering only Jews by religion, perhaps they are 15–20%, but the impression is given that all other Jews should be defined in comparison to them. Moreover, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, *Havurah*, New Age and other religious Jews differ from each other and in their attitudes toward Israel, yet they were consistently lumped together in the analysis. In fact, they were sometimes grouped with secular/cultural Jews.

In spite of the language caveat and although I tend to be optimistic about the present and future of the American Jewish Community and the persistence of Jewish identity, I was more persuaded by the Cohen and Kelman approach. There is a distancing trend in certain growing segments of the population that should not be ignored. On the other hand, Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe have demonstrated through their analysis of *Taglit*-Birthright that it is possible to lessen the distancing process for some younger Jews. Policy and programmatic implementation can make a difference when the resources of the community are marshaled. They have also shown that as the group that Daniel Elazar would have called peripheral or marginal grows larger and more attenuated from Jewish life, what he called the core (in his paradigm of concentric circles of attachment) is also growing and may be even more attached to Israel than in past generations. It is not fashionable or "politically correct" to use this terminology today but it is none-the-less apt. So, let us continue the discussion and, as Cohen and Kelman would say, take our roles as "social thinkers and public intellectuals" seriously as we use our "sociological imagination" to better understand and to help shape the big picture of the American Jewish community.

Author Biography

Rela Mintz Geffen is a Professor Emerita of Sociology, was the sixth president of Baltimore Hebrew University after serving as Professor of Sociology and Dean for Academic Affairs at Gratz College. She was a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard, a Skirball Fellow at The Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Jewish Studies, and was the editor of *Contemporary Jewry* for 5 years. She has written more than 45 scholarly articles, co-edited three books and co-authored (with the late Daniel J. Elazar) *The Conservative Movement in Judaism*, published by SUNY Press.