

Measuring “Attachment” and “Distance”: American Jews and Israel

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Abstract While it is difficult for the non-expert to judge between competing analysis of demographic data, anecdotal evidence suggests that the “distancing” seen by some may turn out to be illusory. Past experience in times of challenge to Israel suggests hidden and unmeasured sources of interest and support for the continued viability of Israel. The measurement itself is compounded by large scale changes in Jewish identification and community.

Keywords Distancing · Jews · Israel · Attachment · Extrapolation fallacy · Religious self-identification · Social conversion

The presentations regarding the “distancing” of American Jews from concern for Israel appear to make use of much of the same source data but reach divergent results and conclusions. While there are two papers, there are actually three perceptions involved. First, is the “conventional wisdom,” perhaps initiated by earlier studies by Cohen himself, that younger Jews are over time becoming more “distant” from Israel, its people, its culture, and its political fortune.

The paper by Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe makes use of the limited and apparently discontinuous demographic and survey data which exists. That data, they report, have been used most frequently as the basis for a concern and conclusion that younger American Jews (and the term itself is not even clear, about which more below) feel less “attached” to Israel than their older forbears. Sasson and his colleagues use much of the same data as Cohen–Kelman to reach the opposite conclusions and thus claim that the “distancing” does not in fact yet exist.

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Par contraire, Cohen and Kelman review much of the same source data and come to the conclusion (p. 8) that non-Orthodox Jews are experiencing a marked and continuing decline in their “attachment” to Israel and its concerns. Whether this means that they would agree with the study-conclusions described by Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe as the “conventional wisdom” or some other conclusion is not completely clear. Perhaps they believe that the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe description itself was a “straw man.”

As neither a sociologist, demographer, or statistician, I must rely on Alexander Pope that “fools rush in where angels fear to tread” (Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*), adding my own observation of some small segments of the community of which both papers speak. My observations are confined to New York City—possibly a disabling factor in speaking of the Jews of the United States—and draw from two sets of communities. In the first place, I am most familiar with the young, middle aged, and older contemporaries who are part of what is considered the “modern Orthodox” segment of the New York Jewish community, living on the Upper West Side and members of its various synagogues. At the same time, over many years, I have been in contact with professionals of all ages in my own law firms and others and in allied professions of real estate, accounting, and financial services. Many of the people I meet or work with identify as Jews, but barely so, and others by their marital and child-rearing choices apparently reject such identification. In any event, while my “sample” is hardly a randomly selected or representative one on which to base any conclusions, it serves for me as the springboard for some questions to both sets of writers.

The importance of the debate (although Cohen–Kelman do not want to call it a “debate,” preferring to call it a “discourse”) is in what it projects for the future. The assumption of both teams is that “distancing” will lead to a reduced political will and effort, or to a perception of such reduction by politicians in office, with a resulting loss of political interest. Such a loss would then presumably lead to distancing by political leaders, reduced support of Israeli positions in the international arena, and reduced material assistance and military aid. While neither group thinks this will happen tomorrow (even if current developments are thought by some to suggest that very possibility), the long-term future of Israel and the political and strategic positions it takes are at stake.

From the point of view of history and not necessarily sociology, even with the best demographic data, extrapolation of this sort is a risky business. In fact, historians often caution us against the “fallacy of extrapolation” and the assumption that a given trend will continue in the same manner and in the same direction over many years. Human life and history are much more complicated than that. For example: by design, the data discussed in these papers is relatively recent, but it merits attention to think back to the period before 1967 and the Six Day War. While we now recall that War as a great military triumph for Israel, the period leading up to June 6 was one fraught with real terror and the fear that the Arab promise of another holocaust would be realized. It was in that pre-war period that observers of the American Jewish scene were astounded by the breadth and depth of the support and concern of entire segments of the community. That support went far beyond what had been expected based on the survey data and information of the time. Its

effects on Jewish identification and willingness to participate in the community in some way continued for some years, again to the amazement of many observers.

In the same way, based on my inadequate “sample,” I continue to be amazed at the continued interest in and support for Israel evinced by young people with whom I come into contact in a professional setting who have no apparent zeal for religious identification, and perhaps not even a Jewish spouse. Their interest in my descriptions of a trip to Israel, or the thought that I have some kind of “inside information” about current political developments in Israel, appears to me to transcend boundaries of political identification and religious observance or self-identification. Does this reflect “concern” or “attachment” or “distance”? The data cannot really tell us whether questioners are simply being polite to me (“How was your trip to Israel?”) or have a continuing underlying concern. Since I am sometimes surprised by the source of the question, I wonder.

My own anecdotal experience causes me to wonder, too, about the structure of the surveys which are reported and which form the basis for the different interpretations of data. A survey of “attachment” is vague, almost mystical. Moreover, one which offers options of “very concerned,” “somewhat concerned,” “slightly concerned,” and the like reflects a series of questions leading the interviewee to throw up his or her hands and just check the same boxes for everything on the list. Other than the self-identification as “Orthodox,” “Conservative,” or “Reform,” we are given no insight by any of the data presented concerning actual action in either a religious or a political sense.

In the same way, I have some doubts about two other necessary components of the demographic analysis. Most basically, the very definition of who is a “Jew” (that same question again) presents itself. It is interesting to note how the demographics are used without precision in so many ways by institutions in America. Thus, for example, Orthodox institutions will speak casually of “6 million American Jews” without the slightest sense of irony over the fact that as much as 50% of that number might not be recognized by their Orthodox rabbinic authorities as Jews in any way. Conversely, organizations looking to educational efforts with the intermarried will come at the statistics from an entirely different vantage point. How such a difference is resolved obviously bears upon the survey calculations which are presented.

Similarly, I question the precision of the label “Orthodox” which Cohen and Kelman are so ready to exclude from all their calculations. Is it enough if someone says he or she is Orthodox? Is participation in weekly services for less than an hour enough to confirm that designation? The label is almost as broad as the general spectrum of religious identification and may not be as meaningful as Cohen and Kelman take it to be. Since I assume that most of those who self-identify as Orthodox will feel strongly committed to and interested in Israel, their exclusion from the data skews the results. Perhaps more nuanced analysis is needed to determine just how those termed “Orthodox” relate to Israel. I would expect the response of a Charedi young person to vary considerably from that of someone living in mid-Manhattan or Riverdale.

It may well be that even those considered “distanced,” whether by the experts attacked by Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe, or those found with sociological “imagination”

by Cohen–Kelman, are not truly as removed as the surveys appear to make them. The very success and appeal of the Birthright experience, to which both papers refer, demonstrates that people in the cohort considered the young and upcoming segment are ready to be “taken” by Israel and perhaps become “attached” to it as well. It is still too early to tell whether this is a lasting phenomenon or just the afterglow of a trip, a sort of “summer romance” infatuation.

Interestingly, language as a feature of the relationship of the two communities which had been seen to divide them may no longer be such an obstacle. In the early years of the State, the inability of virtually all American Jews to communicate in Hebrew threatened to divide them completely. The English-language imperialism of the last decades, turbo-charged by the invasiveness of the Internet, has made English the *lingua franca* of the younger generation. Hebrew may continue to serve as the cultural melting pot in Israel itself, particularly in its army, but many of the young people in Israel may readily converse in English—or at least in its popular song lyrics.

One term which is part of the focus of the Cohen–Kelman analysis may portend even greater changes for the community than those measured in the various studies which are cited. The idea of ever increasing circles of “Jews-not-by-religion” (p. 11), or as Cohen–Kelman have termed them elsewhere “socially converted” Jews, challenges all of the models for community organization and understanding which have been in existence for decades, or centuries. Other than an indication that the numbers of such Jews may bear strongly on the percentage calculations and statistical assumptions that we are making, this article does not expand on that concept or category. Yet, an increase in such people may recast much of the relationship between the young American Jews and their young counterparts in Israel. Such a recast relationship would side-step much of the continuing battle over conversion, recognition of conversion, and the dominance of the rabbinic establishment over personal status in Israel. If it did so, one of the points of conflict noted by both papers would simply be papered over and eliminated. Again, the difficulty of extrapolation imposes itself.

Only time will make clear which of these analyses will prove to be correct. As in all things, presumably the community should prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

Author Biography

Lawrence A. Kobrin is a practicing real estate attorney in New York City who has been active in Jewish communal organizations and educational institutions.