

The Distancing Debate

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Abstract This review supports the idea that there is a modest distancing from Israel going on among non-Orthodox American Jews. But it raises the question of whether this distancing will continue, and whether this will prove harmful to both Israel and to American Jewish life in the long term.

Keywords American · Canadian · Hybridity · Identity

The paper by Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe argues that there has been no significant distancing of American Jews from Israel, if one looks at attitudes measured in poll data over 20 years or more. Cohen and Kelman suggest that the dips from 2005 to 2007 are not a normal oscillation. They claim they are part of a new and more profound distancing, that is linked with other major trends such as the steady increase in mixed marriage and other evidence of assimilation that is not strictly quantitative, or derived from attitude surveys.

I have been pondering this question ever since I began teaching my McGill University course, *The Sociology of North American Jewry*, in 1977. My current research involves a comparison of Canadian and British Jewry in terms of negotiating competing and at times conflicting loyalties, notably regarding support for Israel and the government or other institutional actors of the two host countries. I will focus my remarks on the U.S., but I daresay that in all three countries Jewish life is assuming a bi-modal character, one part strengthening and one part weakening—at least in the conventional metrics—in terms of Jewish commitments.

I agree to a limited extent with the Cohen–Kelman position. While in iconic-Jewish-joke terms, “they are both right,” in fact I suspect that the Cohen–Kelman position is likely more accurately capturing the *zeitgeist* of the moment. There is a

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bi-modal community emerging at present, and the non-Orthodox segment is likely the one with a modest but steady distancing going on, which depends on Israeli policies, etc., but even more on a general assimilationist drift.

This time a cohort effect may well be different from earlier times, when drops in identity among Jewish youth may well have been simple life-cycle effects. The current generation of American Jewish youth is one which has come of age, say in the last 10–15 years, when very high rates of mixed marriage have become ubiquitous, averaging well over 40% for the country, and well over 50 or 60% in some communities. This is new. It creates a context where all manner of intensive Jewish identifications can be eroded, or certainly modified. On the other hand, other factors reinforce ties to Israel. Not least would be the impact of hundreds of thousands of Israeli immigrants to the U.S., integrating into the body of American Jewry.

I might also note that we do not have comparable data sets of longitudinal poll data in Canada to address this question. But the data we have show at the same time increases over the past years and decades in things like day-school attendance and Birthright trips, along with increases in rates of mixed marriage: Stasis of a sort. But given that traditional indicators of Jewishness still remain higher in Canada than in the U.S., it is likely that any general distancing would be less. In fact there may not even be significant Canadian distancing. A datum: The 2009 Canadian delegation to the Maccabiah games numbered 410 athletes and 80 coaches, trainers, etc. That is up 100 from the last delegation 4 years ago. (The American delegation is 900, much lower on a per-capita basis than the Canadian.)

But in true Jewish fashion, let me pose a question to the questioners: How crucial is the possibility of this distancing to the Jewish future, in Israel and in the United States? Perhaps less than many might think.

The two major reasons offered for worrying about such distancing are the negative impact this would have on Jewish identity in the diaspora, and the negative impact on the security of Israel, based on political lobbying, charitable contributions, aliyah, tourism, economic investments, etc.

On the first issue: The simple fact is that Jewish life persisted, and in some cases flourished in the Diaspora for 1,800 years before the development of the Zionism movement, the Yishuv, and later Israel. While some might argue that the image of Zion was a central force within the Judaic cultural and religious repertoire, it is not at all clear how socially significant this was. Of course the weekly Torah portion was a product of the experience of *Eretz Yisrael* (far more than the Talmud) and we chanted *le shana haba'a be'Yerushalyim* each seder. But what did this mean to Diaspora Jewish communities, to individual Jews and their families? How important was this mythic Zion to their Jewish identities? Did they really desperately nurture a deep longing to return to Zion (and if so, why did so few actually move there pre and post-Herzl)?

The fact is that Jewish Diasporas created a varied but meaningful life for Jews without a very tight link with the Holy Land, and could likely do so again. This applies mainly to the non-Orthodox world, which has already seen some forms of transformation of its Jewish commitments, to a more fluid and post-modern form, replete with a multi-dimensional hybridity. It is even possible that for this group an

attachment to Israel will persist, but less intensely and in a different form than previous more visceral attachments. So in the distant future, for the non-Orthodox, think Italian-Americans and Italy....

On the second issue: It is not clear if a modest decline in American Jewish support for Israel will fatally undermine Israel's security. In fact, for much of Israel's first two decades, American support for Israel, pre-1967, was less intense or reliable, and the dangers at least as serious as they are today. Israel, for better or worse, has become a player in global geo-politics. For some time Israel has been developing linkages with India and China for obvious geo-strategic reasons. Neither country has a large Jewish community. Israel has also been developing various ties within the Islamic world, in part relying on Sunni—Shia tensions, and in part relying on the desire of various regimes to reduce the threat of terrorism from Islamist oppositions. These linkages are notably with the “stans” newly freed from the Soviet Union. Moreover, Israel has developed a variety of security related ties (which can blow hot or cold) with regional states, such as Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the P.A.

Of course the United States remains Israel's main ally, despite the uncertainty in some quarters about President Obama's commitments. In any event there will remain an energized Jewish lobby actively supporting Israel in the U.S., for the foreseeable future. And the Orthodox (growing) segment of the American Jewish population will remain entrenched in the pro-Israel camp.

One final point: If there is one lesson we have learned from Jewish history throughout the twentieth century, it is that the Jewish future is profoundly unpredictable. Knowledgeable and committed Jews in the very early 1900s, surveying the Jewish world, would never have been able to predict things like the successful rise of Zionism, the destruction of European Jewry, the decline of Yiddish, the flowering of North American Jewish life, the renewal of Jewish identity in the former Soviet Union, etc. And social scientific mavens looking at American Jewish life in the post-war period would never have predicted the persistence and resurgence of Orthodoxy, the dramatic growth of mixed marriage, the decline of overt anti-Semitism, the explosion of Jewish Studies programs on the top American campuses, etc.

So no one can predict if any modest distancing will continue, and even if it does, what impact, if any, it might have on Israel and the American Jewish future. And if there is a modest distancing now, and in the near future—and one repeats, if—both American Jewry and Israel will survive, and thrive.

Author Biography

Morton Weinfeld is Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology at McGill University, where he also holds the Chair in Canadian Ethnic Studies. Among his publications are the book *Like everyone else but different: The paradoxical success of Canadian Jews* (2001) and *Still moving: Recent Jewish migration in comparative perspective*, with Daniel Elazar.