

Trends in American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the “Distancing” Hypothesis

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Abstract In recent years, social scientists have claimed that American Jews, in particular in the younger generation, have grown more distant from Israel. This paper draws on evidence from national surveys conducted over two decades to assess the “distancing hypothesis.” The survey data suggest that emotional attachment to Israel has varied within a narrow band, with no consistent pattern of increase or decrease. Predictions of distancing appear to be incorrect and several factors which were presumed to underlie distancing are examined: generational turnover, intermarriage and political alienation. These factors appear to have only small impact on the overall level of American Jewish attachment to Israel. An alternative narrative is suggested and the implications for the future relationship of American Jews to Israel are discussed.

Keywords Diaspora-Israel · American Jewish opinion · Intermarriage

Introduction

The political scientist Daniel Elazar coined the term “Israelolotry” to capture the intensity of American Jewish feelings for Israel in the decade following the 1967 Six-Day War, a period in which Israel appeared as the “be-all and end-all of Jewish existence and identity” (Elazar 1995, p. 107). More recently, and in particular in the 20 years since the 1988 Palestinian Intifada, many observers of American Jewish life have reported a cooling in the relationship to Israel. Indeed, the perception of declining American Jewish attachment to Israel, especially among young adults, has

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become a taken-for-granted element in the intellectual discourse of both Israeli and American commentators. The question of American Jewish attachment to Israel has profound implications for the future of the Diaspora-homeland relationship and, also, for the political debate concerning the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians (Shain 2007; Sheffer 2003).

Discussion of the relationship between American Jews and Israel is a prominent feature of discourse in the Jewish world and the narrative of decline is clearly dominant. Thus, frequent columns in the Jewish and Israeli press by social scientists and public intellectuals seek to explain the “distancing” of American Jewry from Israel (see, for example, Chazan 2007; Rosner 2007; Waxman and DellaPergola 2007). A new anthology on Diaspora-Israel connections includes several essays that assume the declining centrality of Israel among American Jews (Ben Moshe and Segev 2007; see, in particular, contributions by Wexler, Seliktar, Bayme, and Sheffer). How to galvanize the interest of younger American Jews has become a focus of broad discussion (see, for example, lectures at the 2008 Herzliya conference by Yehezkel Dror and Leonard Saxe).¹ The distancing narrative has reached the mainstream press, including a cover story in *The Economist* (“Second Thoughts about the Promised Land,” 2007). It has also been cited to bolster a critique of the “Israel Lobby” as unrepresentative of the views of ordinary American Jews (Walt and Mearsheimer 2006, p. 14).

Notwithstanding widespread discussion and apparent broad consensus, neither the scholarly literature nor survey evidence consistently supports the view that attachment to Israel is declining among American Jews. The present paper reviews this literature and analyzes available survey data to examine the current state of American Jewish attachment to Israel.

Distancing Hypothesis

The present paper is not the first to critically assess the narrative of American Jewish disengagement from Israel. “Since the early 1980s,” notes Steven M. Cohen in an article published in 1996, “[j]ournalists, social scientists, Jewish communal leaders, and Israeli officials, among others, have surmised that American Jews have grown less enamored of Israelis, less interested in Israel, and less active in supporting Israel” (1996). However, Cohen argued, this supposition is not borne out in the survey evidence: “From 1986 to 1993, identically worded measures of Israel attachment fluctuated in a narrow range in apparently near-random fashion...” indicating no significant change in American Jews’ attachment to Israel (1996, p. 366).

Cohen (1996) attributes widespread but misplaced anxiety over “distancing” during this period to a variety of factors, including the critical reactions of American Jewish leaders to Israeli policies, as well as to reports, dating back to the mid-1980s and authored by Cohen himself, showing evidence of lower levels of attachment to

¹ To access the speeches, see: www.herzliyaconference.org/Eng/_Articles/Article.asp?CategoryID=248&ArticleID=1931 <http://cmjs.org/files/Herzilya.022108.pdf>.

Israel among younger age groups (see Cohen 1986, 1989). But the article concludes on a cautionary note: “The patterns in Israel attachment associated with age certainly point to the possibility of broad-scale erosion among the American Jewish population over the medium term” (p. 371).

In a series of publications after the 1996 article, Cohen and colleagues discern evidence that erosion in support for Israel is underway. Cohen and Eisen’s *The Jew Within* (2000) compares a 1997 survey with an earlier one to demonstrate the distancing phenomenon: “When asked about their emotional attachment to Israel, just 9% answered ‘extremely attached’ (as opposed to 13% in a similar survey in 1988), and only another 18% said ‘very attached’ (versus 24% in 1988)” (Cohen and Eisen 2000, p. 143). A subsequent paper, comparing trends in Jewish ethnicity and religiosity, repeats the comparisons referenced in *The Jew Within* (see Cohen 2001, p. 117). Later, writing in the journal *Commentary*, Cohen and Wertheimer (2006) substantiate their claim of declining American Jewish attachment to Israel with similar comparisons, but this time of surveys conducted in 1989 and 2005.

Published reports on trends in Israel attachment are, however, far from uniform in their conclusions. Thus, for example, in their study of American Jewish Committee annual surveys conducted between 1986 and 2002, Phillips et al. (2002) report a stable and apparently high level of attachment to Israel throughout the entire period. Similarly, they report that for roughly three quarters of survey respondents, caring about Israel is important to their Jewish identities, and that this proportion remained stable between 1983 and 2001. Echoing Cohen (1996), however, the researchers warn that there “may be a long-term decline in support for Israel as younger Jewish-Americans are slightly less likely to report feeling very or fairly close to Israel than older cohorts” (p. 13).

In 2003, a pollster and political commentator, Frank Luntz, examined the feelings of Jewish young adults about Israel in a series of six focus group discussions. Recruitment for the focus groups focused on Jewish young adults who had not visited Israel and were not active in any Jewish organizations. The report, “Israel in the Age of Eminem,” concluded that young adults’ “association with Israel is frighteningly weak and ill-defined” (p. 7). Moreover, there exists a “distance and detachment between young American Jews and their Israeli cousins that...has not existed in the American Jewish community until now” (p. 14). However dramatic, given the characteristics of those recruited to Luntz’s focus groups, it is unlikely that the findings are a reliable indicator of the age cohort as a whole.

Contributing to the development of the distancing narrative are several books, including one by Rosenthal (2001) and another by Seliktar (2002). Both authors examine conflicts between American Jewish elites and their Israeli counterparts during the 1980s and 1990s. American Jewish leaders clashed with one another and Israeli government officials over a number of issues, including the definition of a Jew for the purpose of immigration to Israel; recognition of non-Orthodox conversion and marriage rites; the Jonathan Pollard spy case; Jewish settlements in the territories conquered by Israel in 1967; and Israeli responses to the Palestinian Intifada. Both Rosenthal (2001) and Seliktar (2002) contend that during the 1980s and 1990s liberal American Jews became increasingly disaffected from Israel due to their opposition to Israel’s policies regarding religion and state and the Palestinians.

In the context of an historical narrative of these disputes, Rosenthal (2001, p. 171) cites American Jewish Committee surveys to substantiate the claim that American Jews as a whole have grown more distant from Israel.² Seliktar (2002) also references recent surveys conducted by the American Jewish Committee to advance a similar argument. Notwithstanding Seliktar's claim that "Israel's centrality in American Jewish life reached an all time low" in 2000 (p. 200), no longitudinal analysis is provided.

More recently, Cohen and Kelman (2007) draw together several themes from this literature. Citing mostly Cohen's earlier work, they describe a "mounting body of evidence" pointing to "a growing distancing from Israel of American Jews...most pronounced among younger Jews" (p. 2). In their analysis of a 2007 survey conducted by the market research firm Synovate, Cohen and Kelman note declining attachment to Israel across age cohorts from oldest to youngest which they attribute to the higher rates of intermarriage in the younger cohorts. As a consequence of generational differences in Israel attachment related to intermarriage, they conclude that "we are in the midst of a massive shift in attitudes toward Israel, propelled forward by the process of cohort replacement, where the maturing younger cohorts that are the least Israel-engaged are replacing the oldest cohorts that are the most Israel-engaged." Consequently, they predict a "long-term and ongoing decline in Israel attachment" in the years to come (p. 11). The report does not examine historical trends directly, or attempt to ascertain whether observed age-related differences are greater than those noted in earlier studies. Notably, however, Cohen and Kelman's analysis of the 2007 survey does not support the contention that liberal opposition to Israeli policies has caused general disaffection from Israel (pp. 12–13).

Taken as a whole, the evidence marshaled to demonstrate American Jewish distancing from Israel seems no more compelling today than when Cohen (1996) first identified and dismissed the distancing hypothesis. The comparisons across pairs of surveys, cited as evidence in more recent studies by Cohen and Eisen (2000), Cohen (2001) and Cohen and Wertheimer (2006), must be regarded with skepticism in light of the trend data reported by Phillips et al. (2002). The age-cohort differences described by Cohen and Kelman (2007; see also Wexler 2007) may reflect genuine generational differences; for example, a result of the declining proximity of successive generations to the Holocaust and the founding of the state, or of their increasing propensity for intermarriage. Alternatively, age-related differences might just as well indicate a tendency for Jews to grow closer to Israel as they grow older. Finally, the claim that American Jews have grown more distant from Israel due to opposition to Israeli policies does not receive consistent support in this literature (cf. Cohen and Kelman 2007).

To assess claims regarding declining American Jewish attachment to Israel, the balance of this paper examines national surveys conducted over the past two decades. We continue in the next section with a discussion of the surveys and our research methodology.

² "Two decades of opinion polls conducted by sociologist Steven Cohen for the AJC highlight the diminishing role of Israel in the American Jewish consciousness" (Rosenthal 2001, p. 171).

Methodology

The study of historical trends in Jewish attitudes regarding Israel poses a number of distinct challenges. Large-scale surveys of American public opinion, such as those administered by the Gallup organization, ask relatively few questions regarding Israel and do not report findings for the subpopulation of Jews. Such surveys can provide important context for interpreting Jewish opinion (see below), but cannot address trends among Jews. Alternatively, the large, random sample surveys of American Jewry, such as the National Jewish Population Surveys of 1990 and 2000 (United Jewish Communities 2003) asked differently formulated questions regarding attachment to Israel. Thus, comparisons across surveys are impossible (cf. Kadushin et al. 2005).

The most consistent longitudinal data on American Jewish opinion regarding Israel derive from the surveys of the American Jewish Committee (American Jewish Committee 1994–2008). For present purposes, they provide useful comparative data. The AJC surveys have been conducted annually by the marketing firm Synovate (previously, Market Facts) since the early 1980s. Survey respondents are recruited from Synovate's consumer panel, and each annual survey includes about 1,000 respondents. The surveys repeat verbatim a number of questions regarding Israel each year—as well as additional demographic and attitudinal questions—and utilize standard response options. The surveys track the opinions of self-identified “Jews-by-religion” only (see Perlmann 2007a). Individuals of Jewish ancestry who do not define themselves as Jewish are not included in the samples.³ Thus, the analyses reported here only pertain to trends among individuals who identify themselves as Jewish.

More important is whether the AJC samples adequately represent individuals who identify as Jewish, and whether samples drawn from year to year are relatively consistent in terms of their internal composition. Synovate does not publish detailed information about how panels are assembled and sampled.⁴ Insofar as Synovate panels are established primarily for market research, survey respondents may be somewhat more conventional and interested in consumption than the broader Jewish population. It seems unlikely that such sample characteristics would influence feelings of connection to Israel. A systematic comparison of the AJC samples to the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) (United Jewish Communities 2003) and the American Jewish Identity Survey (AJIS) (Mayer et al. 2001), conducted by Perlmann (2007a), concludes that in most respects the AJC samples are comparable

³ Perlmann (2007a) estimates that a broader definition of Jewish that includes both Jews-by-religion and “Jews for any reason” would include a population larger by one-fifth. For a similar discussion, see Saxe et al. (2006). A sample drawn from such an expanded universe would include relatively more respondents with weak attachment to Israel. Insofar as our emphasis is on trends rather than the absolute level of attachment, the exclusion of “Jews by ancestry” should not influence our findings.

⁴ Synovate does not publish survey response rates but claims that respondents are “representative of the United States adult Jewish population on a variety of measures” (AJC 2000, p. i). Synovate claims a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points, but see note 7, below.

to the other two.⁵ The exceptions concern marriage (the AJC samples have higher marriage rates) and income (the AJC samples include more lower-income respondents). The significance of these relatively small differences for the study of opinion about Israel would be negligible; nevertheless, in the analyses reported below, both income and marital status will be controlled whenever possible.

More significant for the analysis of trends in Israel attachment is the sampling of in-married and intermarried respondents over time. The proportion of married respondents who report that their spouse is not Jewish varies apparently randomly in the AJC samples between 15 and 24%. However, as a consequence of the rising rate of intermarriage during the 1980s and 1990s, the proportion of intermarried Jews has increased. To test for the possible impact of increasing intermarriage on Israel attachment, weighted samples reflecting best estimates of the actual intermarried population will be included in the analysis.

Although the AJC surveys have been administered annually since the early 1980s, standard question and response categories regarding Israel were first introduced in 1989. For comparability, the focus here will be on the period 1989–2008.⁶ For the years 2000–2001 and 2003–2005 full data sets were analyzed. For earlier and more recent years for which full data were unavailable, paper reports were consulted for summary statistics. Finally, to corroborate our findings, additional surveys, including NJPS 1990, were also analyzed.

Trends in Israel Attachment

Trends in Israel attachment from raw survey data are first described. Then, analyses based on application of multivariate techniques and weights (to correct for possible sampling error) are presented. In the following section, the significance of each of the putative drivers of distancing—generation, intermarriage and political alienation—is examined.

The AJC Annual Survey repeats two questions related to attachment to Israel almost every year. One question asks respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: “Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew.” As shown in Fig. 1, the proportion of respondents who agreed that Israel is a “very important” aspect of their Jewish identity remains mostly stable throughout the time period. Between 2005 and 2007 the trend is downward, from 79 to 69% agreeing with the statement. However, the decline in recent years follows an increase in the period 2000–2005, from 72 to 79% agreeing with the statement.

⁵ Perlmann’s (2007a) analysis finds that the AJC samples are comparable to those of the NJPS and AJIS for the variables age, gender, region, education, denomination, and feeling close to Israel. Note that NJPS 2000 likely under-represents non-Orthodox Jews (see Saxe et al. 2006). To the extent the AJC samples resemble the NJPS samples they likely feature the same distortion. We present our findings with statistical controls for denomination, or separately for each denominational grouping, so such distortions do not influence our findings.

⁶ Surveys in 1989, 1991 and 1993 were conducted by mail; in the years since, surveys were conducted by telephone.

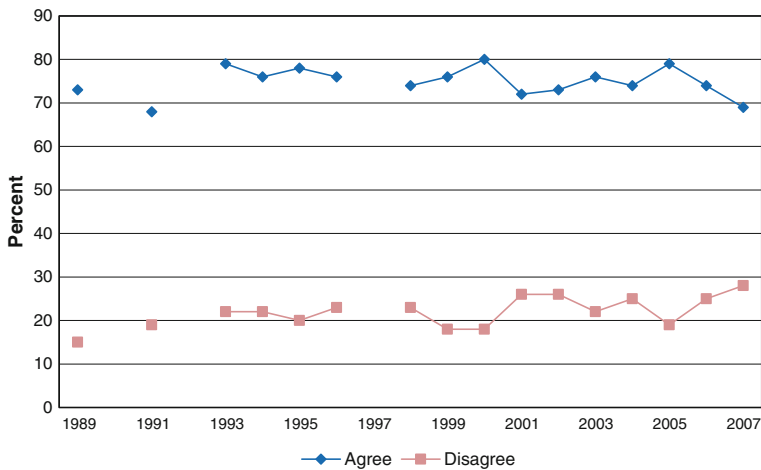


Fig. 1 Caring about Israel

Throughout the period as a whole, a sizeable majority of survey respondents view Israel as very important to their Jewish identity.

The second question, included every year, asks “How close do you feel to Israel?” The possible response categories include “very close,” “fairly close,” “fairly distant,” and “very distant.” Figure 2 shows the trend lines of those who felt close to Israel (very close or fairly close) and those who felt distant. Between 2005 and 2008 the proportion who felt close decreased from 77 to 67%. However, this decline occurred after an 11% increase (between 1994 and 2005) and the proportion who felt close to Israel in 2008 was actually higher than in 1994 or 1989. For the period as a whole, the proportion that felt close varied within 15 percentage points. Given the reported margin of error in these surveys, this is nearly a flat response—at best a modest increase followed by a return to the earlier level.⁷

Similar trends with respect to “caring” and “closeness” are evident among respondents who identify with different denominations. As shown in Fig. 3, the proportion of Reform Jews who felt close to Israel increased from 59% in 1994 to 69% in 2005 (the earliest and most recent years for which disaggregated data were available). During the same years, the proportion of Conservative Jews who felt close to Israel increased from 83 to 88%, and the proportion of “Just Jews” from 50 to 64%.

⁷ Synovate’s reported margin of error of 3% is misleading. It is based on the assumption that the survey of Jews is a random sample of the Jews on Synovate’s list. In the first place, in some years the sample was stratified and in some years weighted. Both these procedures that are standard to survey research call for special software for analysis and that software generally increases the margin of error. But the data are not available from Synovate to adjust for these procedures so the reported margin of error must stand, and our own analyses also assume a random survey. But the randomness refers to Synovate’s list, which itself is not random and has a low initial cooperation rate. The true margin of error must be higher than 3% but cannot be calculated.

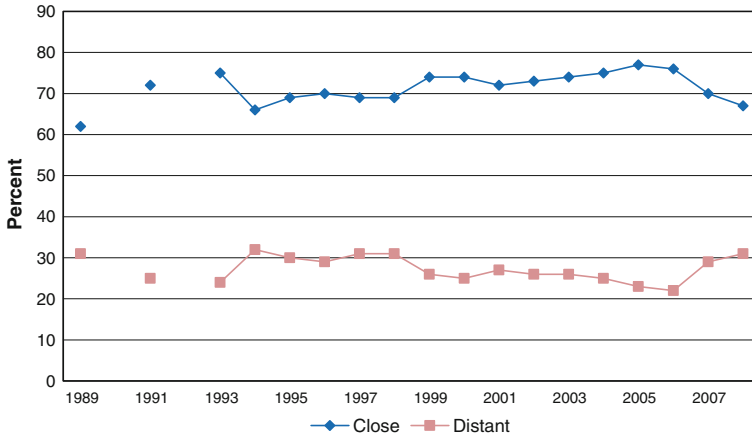


Fig. 2 Close to Israel

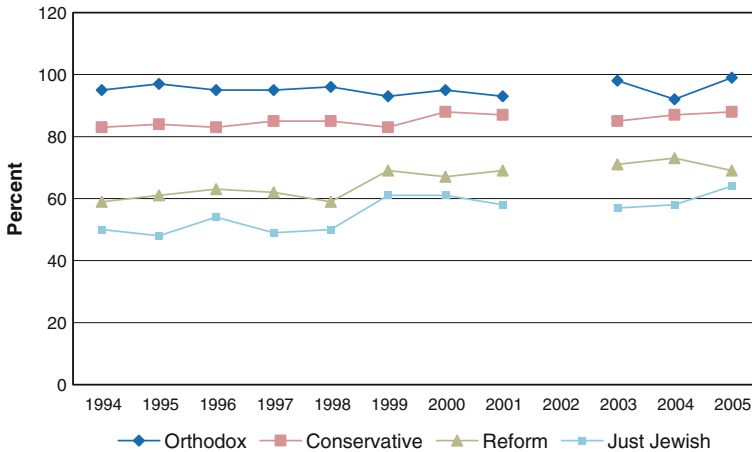


Fig. 3 Close to Israel, by denomination

Multivariate Analyses

Complete data sets for 2000–2001 and 2002–2005 surveys were available for more in-depth analysis. Multivariate analyses provide several advantages over the raw trend data described above. First, the analyses identify those factors that predict attachment to Israel, and thereby improve our general understanding of the phenomenon. Second, by holding constant those factors, the analysis controls for sampling variation across the annual surveys and therefore permits a more rigorous test of the distancing hypothesis.⁸

⁸ See Perlmann (2007b) for a parallel analysis of the factors associated with attachment to Israel in the AJC data sets.

Analyses of the two questions on Israel attachment reveal a high degree of correlation, ($r = 0.53$) making it possible to create a single, dichotomous index of Israel attachment.⁹ The analysis focuses on the factors related to the index in the combined 2000 and 2005 surveys—the years in which questions related to all of the key predictor variables were asked. The four columns in Table 2 (see Appendix) show a series of nested logistic regressions.¹⁰ In each column, the variables marked by one or two asterisks are statistically significantly related to attachment to Israel in an equation that holds all other items constant.

In the complete model displayed in Column 4, the factors associated with attachment to Israel include age, intermarriage, marital status, religious denomination, subjective importance of being Jewish,¹¹ Jewish organizational activity, and agreement with a statement, “The goal of the Arabs is... the destruction of Israel.” With each of these factors held constant (see Column 4), the survey year (2000 versus 2005) retains its statistical significance. Thus, controlling for these variables among the self-identified Jews who responded to the AJC surveys, one finds that there is still a modest but statistically significant increase in the index of Israel attachment between the years 2000 and 2005. That said, the raw survey data for 2006–2008 suggest a subsequent dip, reversing the gains of recent years.¹²

Samples Weighted for Intermarriage

One possible problem with comparisons over time from the AJC cross-sectional surveys is that the samples are not adjusted for the increasing proportion of married adults who are intermarried. It is potentially important to account for intermarriage, given that intermarried respondents report levels of Israel attachment that are 20–25% lower than respondents who are in-married. The best recent estimate of the intermarried population, 31% of married Jewish adults, is from the Pew Forum’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (Pew Forum 2008). To assess the impact of increasing intermarriage, the 2000 and 2005 AJC surveys were compared with the 2005 survey weighted to reflect the 31% estimate of the intermarried population (Fig. 4). Weighting the 2005 sample so that it appears to have 31% intermarried, however, yielded only a negligible change in the overall level of Israel attachment, reducing the proportion that feels close to Israel by just one percentage point (Fig. 5). The impact on “caring about Israel” is an identical 1% (not shown). Given the limited number of cases that switch from in-married to intermarried when the

⁹ Dichotomization is necessary because one of the questions is dichotomous and the other has four categories. “How close do you feel to Israel” is dichotomized as close or distant. The correlation between the two variables in the index is 0.53, with “How close...” dichotomized or with its original four categories. Combining the two variables into an index gives the dependent variable greater stability and the dichotomy also makes it easier to interpret.

¹⁰ Given the dichotomous dependent variable, this is the only choice.

¹¹ Because we have included “How important is being Jewish in your life?”—which is highly related to denomination—not all the denominations are significantly different from “Just Jewish” as might have otherwise been the case. The model was chosen to control for possible sample differences between the 2 years on matters that were related to support for Israel.

¹² Complete data sets for 2006–2008 were unavailable for secondary analysis. The raw data were reported in the AJC Annual Survey reports.

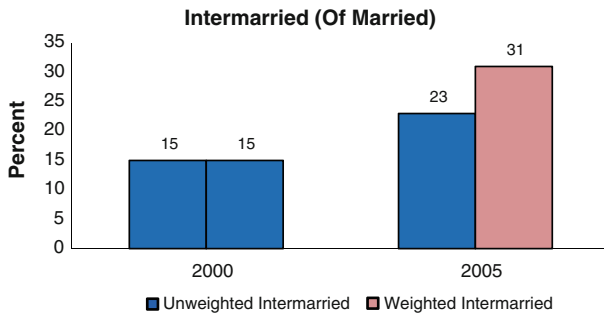


Fig. 4 2005 AJC sample weighted to higher intermarriage estimate

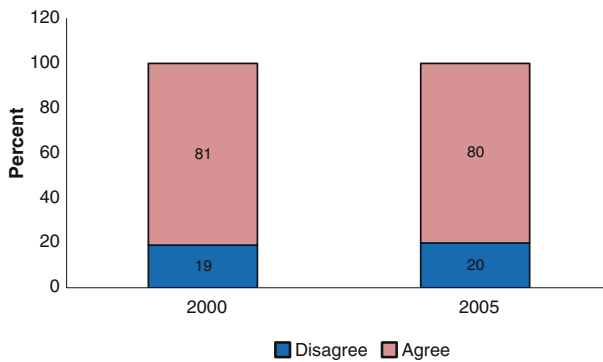


Fig. 5 2000/2005 Weighted for intermarriage: "Caring Israel is Important"

latter category is increased to 31% of the married population, weighting simply does not make a difference.

Parallel Surveys

The overall picture emerging from the above analyses is of largely stable Israel attachment between 1989 and 2008, fluctuating within a band of 10–15 percent, with no consistent trend upward or downward. This picture can be corroborated by examining a parallel set of surveys conducted by Synovate (and its predecessor, Market Facts) on behalf of Cohen (1986) and Cohen and Kelman (2007).¹³ The surveys employed sampling procedures similar to those employed in the AJC surveys (which are also conducted by Synovate) but were conducted by mail (1986)

¹³ Longitudinal comparisons across all other sets of surveys known to the authors are impossible due to differences in question wording and response categories. For example, NJPS 1990 asks, "How emotionally attached are you to Israel?" whereas NJPS 2000 asks, "How close are you to Israel." Several surveys administered by Steven M. Cohen since the 1980s employ identical questions but disparate response categories.

Table 1 Parallel surveys

| | Cohen (1986) (%) | Cohen and Kelman (2007) (%) |
|--|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| “Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew.” (% agree) | 63 | 70 |
| “If Israel were destroyed, I would feel as if I had suffered one of the greatest personal tragedies of my life.” (% agree) | 61 | 64 |
| “Do you consider yourself to be a Zionist?” (% yes) | 27 | 29 |

or mail plus Internet (2007). The earlier survey included larger proportions of Orthodox respondents (10 versus 7%) and synagogue members (51 versus 40%)—sampling characteristics that would tend to bolster Israel attachment in the earlier survey. Table 1 compares responses on the small number of Israel-related items that were formulated in an identical fashion. These additional comparisons fit the general overall picture suggesting largely stable Israel attachment.

Analysis of “Distancing Drivers”

The present analyses of available survey evidence find no consistent support for the distancing hypothesis. If the declines of 2006–2008 were to continue, however, then a statistically significant downward trend would become evident. Understanding the influence of the factors identified in the literature as sources of distancing may help improve the accuracy of our predictions for the future. In this section, we examine the significance for Israel attachment of generational turnover, intermarriage and political alienation.

Significance of Generation

The overall level of attachment to Israel has not declined over the past two decades, but what of younger Jews? Is it true that younger American Jews are more distant from Israel than their counterparts a generation ago? In the 2005 AJC survey, the most recent one that has the full data set available (see Table 3), only the oldest age group, those 60 and older, is significantly more connected to Israel than the youngest group (those under 30). In the combined 2000 and 2005 data (see Table 2), however, respondents 40 and above are more highly attached than those under 30, and those over 70 are markedly more highly attached. Thus, in a snapshot image of American Jewry, younger respondents appear less attached to Israel than older respondents.

The key question regarding such age-related differences is whether they are due to ongoing processes related to aging (a “life-cycle effect”), or whether successive generations of American Jews have developed progressively weaker ties to the Jewish State (a “birth-cohort effect”). In reporting the results of a recent survey, Cohen and Kelman (2007) reject the life-cycle interpretation, arguing instead that

their cross-sectional evidence indicates declining attachment across birth-cohorts among non-Orthodox Jews:

That each age group is less Israel-attached than its elders suggests that we are in the midst of a long-term and ongoing decline in Israel attachment. The age-related differences cannot be attributed primarily to family life-cycle effects, if only because the age-related declines characterize the entire age spectrum from the very old to the very young. Rather, we are in the midst of a massive shift in attitudes toward Israel, propelled forward by the process of cohort replacement, where the maturing younger cohorts that are the least Israel-engaged are replacing the oldest cohorts that are the most Israel-engaged (p. 11).

Insofar as Cohen and Kelman interpret their data as indicative of birth-cohort effects rather than life-cycle effects, they conclude that “the gaps today will influence the stance of American Jewry toward Israel for years to come” (p. 5).

The present multivariate analysis of the AJC surveys appears to also support the birth-cohort hypothesis. Age differences in attachment to Israel remain statistically significant after the introduction of controls for factors known to be related to aging, including travel to Israel, Jewish organizational involvement, income and attachment to Jewish identity and/or denomination (as indicated in Tables 2 and 3; income is not shown in these tables). Since controlling for factors relating to aging does not reduce age-related differences, one possible implication would be that birth-cohort, not life-cycle, is the key determining factor.

Employed in this fashion, however, multivariate analysis of cross-sectional data is best understood as a means to estimate historical and future trends on the basis of limited information. A more direct test of the life-cycle versus birth-cohort hypotheses is to examine the longitudinal data. If it can be shown that successive birth-cohorts of Jews actually maintained their characteristic levels of Israel attachment over time, then the birth-cohort hypothesis would receive further support. What then do the historical data show regarding age-related differences?

Figures 6 and 7 show age-related differences in attachment to Israel in the AJC surveys for the years 1994–2005. If attachment to Israel were declining across generations, then one would expect to see evidence of such decline in the longitudinal data. Specifically, the percentage of respondents in the older two age categories indicating attachment would decline over time as younger respondents replaced older respondents within each category. The evidence, however, does not point in this direction. Rather, the percentage of respondents in the older two age categories expressing attachment increases slightly or holds steady. For example, the percentage of respondents aged 40–59 who feel close to Israel (Fig. 6) increased from 61% in 1994 to 73% in 2005; the percentage of respondents aged 60 and older who feel close to Israel increased from 86% in 1994 to 88% in 2005. A similar pattern is evident in relation to the question on “caring about Israel” (see Fig. 7).

The 11 years for which longitudinal data are available may be insufficient to capture the trend. Published reports of surveys conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, however, indicate that age-related differences were evident more than a generation ago. For example, respondents in a 1975 survey of Boston Jews were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “The existence of Israel is essential for the

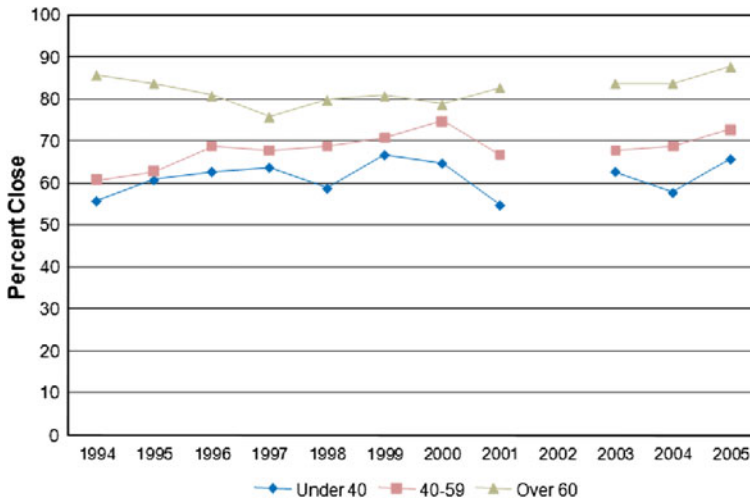


Fig. 6 Close to Israel, by age cohort

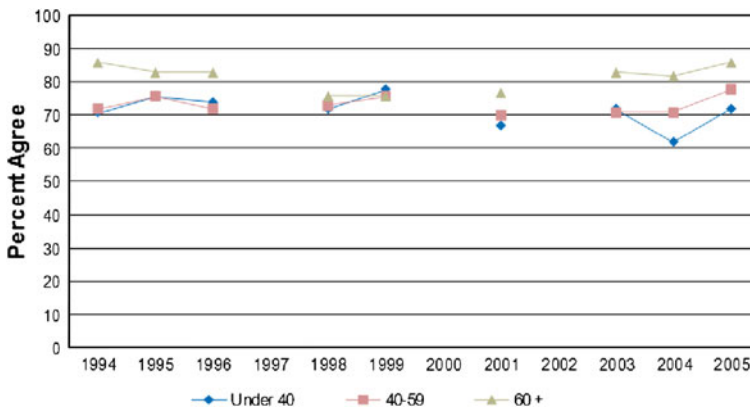


Fig. 7 Caring about Israel, by age cohort

continuation of American Jewish life.” Noting that although a majority of respondents agreed with the statement, the authors of the report write, “It is apparent that there is a general trend for older Jews and Jews of earlier generations to be more in agreement...It appears that agreement... declines as one gets further from the foreign-born, first generation” (Fowler 1976). Similarly, in the report on the 1986 national survey (discussed above), Cohen observed that “attachment to Israel is relatively less frequent among Jews under 40, than in the older groups...[T]he middle aged, and above all the elderly, care more deeply about Israel than those born after World War II” (1986, p. 17). Unfortunately, the original data for these surveys are no longer available and it is not possible to ascertain whether the magnitude of age-related differences has increased over time.

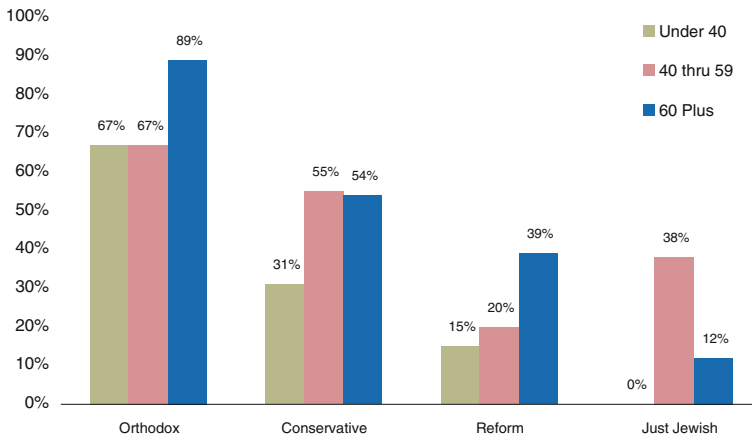


Fig. 8 Percent extremely or very attached to Israel: NJPS 1990

Finally, reanalysis of the 1990 NJPS reveals significant age-related differences among non-Orthodox Jews nearly a generation ago. Figure 8 shows responses by age group and denomination to the question: “How emotionally attached are you to Israel?” Reform Jews over age 60 were 2.5 times as likely to indicate a strong connection to Israel as those under 40. Conservative Jews in the older two age groups were nearly twice as likely to indicate a strong connection. The pattern among “Just Jews” is discrepant, with none under 40, and just 12% of those over 60 indicating strong attachment.

Overall, age-related differences have been a consistent feature of the survey evidence on American Jewish attachment to Israel for over two decades. Such differences cannot be explained by several variables related to aging that we are able to measure—they are not due, for example, to the fact that older respondents tend to be members of more Jewish organizations or are more likely to have traveled to Israel. Such differences, however, are evident in surveys from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s and no evidence shows that attachment has declined across the generations. The conclusion that best fits these observations is that American Jews have tended to become more attached to Israel as they grew older.¹⁴ One possible implication for understanding future trends is that today’s young adults who appear somewhat less attached to Israel will become more so as they age. Nevertheless, without a better understanding of why Israel attachment increased over the life course in recent decades, we cannot know with any certainty whether it will do so in the future as well.

¹⁴ The possibility that attachment to Israel increases with age but independently of religiosity, Israel trips, and organizational engagement, is underscored by an association between aging and a propensity to agree with the statement, “The goal of the Arabs is not the return of occupied territories but rather the destruction of Israel.” In 2005, 85% of respondents over 60 tended to agree with the statement, compared to 64% of respondents under 30 (with other age cohorts arrayed in between, in a stepwise fashion).

Intermarriage

Although intermarriage is associated with lower levels of Israel attachment at the individual level, increases in the rate of intermarriage have not been great enough to change substantially overall levels of Israel attachment. In the future, as the intermarried population continues to rise due to a historically high rate of intermarriage, there will be some downward pressure on the average level of Israel attachment. The intermarriage-related effects will, however, depend not only on the number of intermarried but also on how their feelings of connection to the Jewish State develop over time. Between the years 2000 and 2005 (for which we have disaggregated data) the level of Israel attachment among intermarried respondents was actually more variable than among others, and the trend for the period as a whole was slightly upward (see Fig. 9).

Intermarried Jews, like their in-married counterparts, are more likely to be attached to Israel if they have visited the country or are affiliated with a synagogue. The future impact of intermarriage on Israel attachment will therefore be influenced by how Jewish organizations engage the intermarried population (Chertok et al. 2008). If intermarried Jews are drawn into the orbit of synagogues and included on Israel tours, the impact of their increasing number on the overall level of American Jewish attachment to Israel—slight in any case—may be further attenuated. (Such processes will affect younger generations as well.)

Political Alienation

The AJC surveys asked a number of questions regarding respondents' general political views and their political views regarding Israel. It is therefore possible to examine the hypothesis, much discussed in public and scholarly discourse, that liberal American Jews have grown increasingly detached from Israel due to their

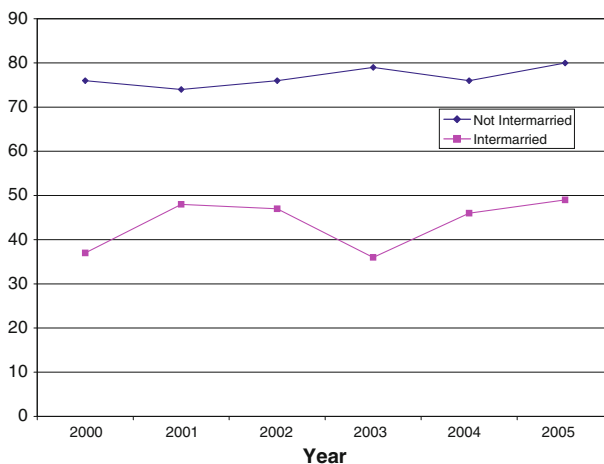


Fig. 9 Israel attachment by marriage type (Index of attachment)

opposition to Israel’s policies regarding the Palestinians. To the extent that this is so, continued stalemate in the peace process could contribute to alienation in the future.

American Jews do, indeed, appear to be somewhat divided in their views on West Bank settlements and the establishment of a Palestinian state. As Fig. 10 indicates, however, most respondents locate themselves in the center with respect to West Bank settlements, stating that Israel should dismantle some settlements and thus by implication keep others. There is no clear trend toward greater polarization regarding the future of West Bank settlements. On the question concerning the possible establishment of a Palestinian state (see Fig. 11), respondents have been fairly evenly divided, though the general trend has been in favor, albeit with a drop in support during 2001–2002, the peak years of the second Palestinian uprising. The most recent findings for 2006 and 2007 also show a modest drop in support for a Palestinian state.

In terms of the relationship between political views and attachment to Israel, as Table 2 shows, respondents’ general political orientation on a continuum from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative” is not related to attachment to Israel. All things being equal, liberals and conservatives do not differ in their level

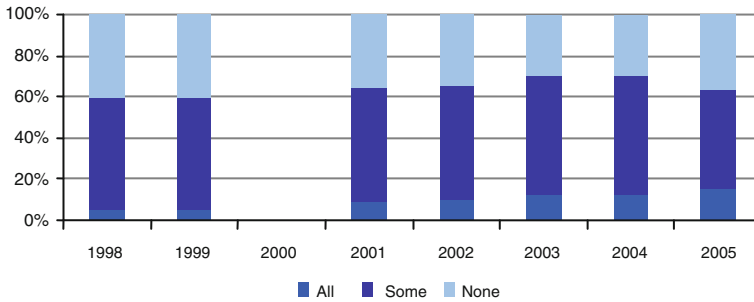


Fig. 10 Dismantle settlements

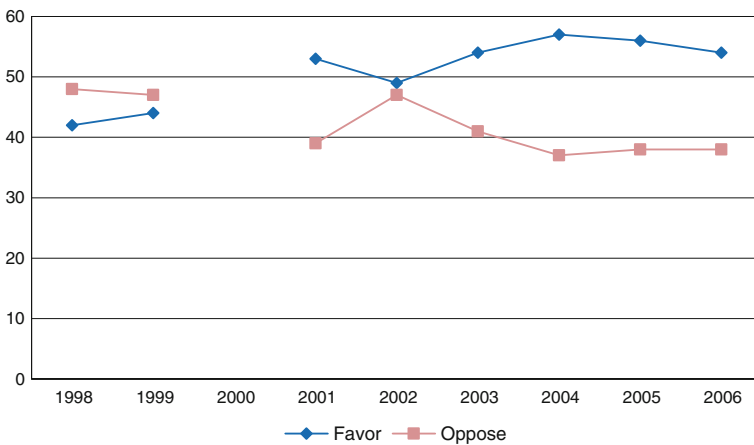


Fig. 11 Favor/oppose Palestinian state

of attachment to Israel. The dynamics regarding political views relative to Israel are more complex. The relevant questions were not asked in the 2000 survey and therefore are not included in Table 2. Table 3 shows the multivariate analysis for the 2005 data alone. The results are mixed. The respondents' views on whether to dismantle West Bank settlements are unrelated to their levels of attachment to Israel (results not shown). Opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian State is, however, moderately related (odds ratio 1.57) to attachment to Israel.

To an extent, the tendency of survey respondents to distinguish between their feelings of closeness and caring and their views on specific policy matters reflects a broader cultural climate that is highly favorable to Israel. American Jews formulate their attitudes in much the same context as other Americans. If *American* opinion of Israel had become more favorable over the past 12 years, then that would tend to support feelings of attachment among *American Jews*. Insofar as the U.S. public is polled regularly by Gallup (as well as other survey companies) regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, this hypothesis can be readily tested. The standard Gallup question asks respondents, "In the Middle East situation, are your sympathies more with the Israelis or more with the Palestinians?" This question is repeated at regular intervals, often several times per year. Below, the trend data for the period 1988–2006 are reproduced (Fig. 12, see Saad 2007).

Between 1996 and 2006, the proportion of Americans indicating support for both the Israelis and the Palestinians increased as the proportion indicating "no preference" declined. The tilt toward Israel is unmistakable though: during the period in question, the proportion indicating pro-Israel sentiment increased by 21 percentage points (from 38 to 59%), whereas the proportion indicating pro-Palestinian sentiment increased by five percentage points (from 15 to 20%) (Saad 2007). To the extent that American Jews participate in the broader political culture, the increasingly pro-Israel orientation of the American public likely provided support for specifically Jewish feelings of attachment.

Discussion

The present analyses of extant survey data about American Jewish attitudes to Israel show that a large majority of survey respondents consistently agrees that Israel is a

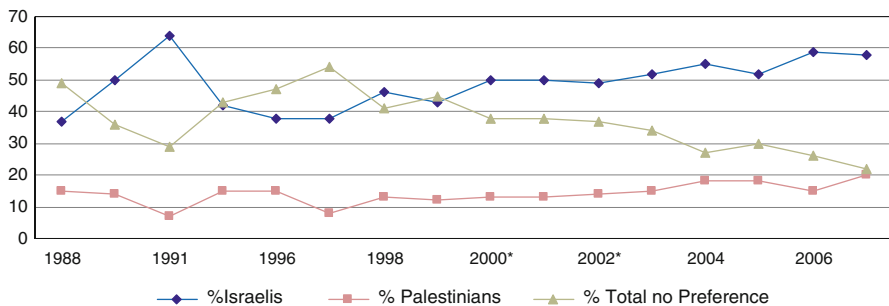


Fig. 12 Long-term trends in Middle East sympathies (Gallup)

“very important” aspect of their Jewish identity. Consistent with previous studies, our analyses show that Israel attachment varies with age, denomination, intermarriage, and visits to Israel. Other variables also appear to be significant in particular years. For those looking for detachment, there is plenty of evidence to be found in these surveys: younger American Jews and those who define themselves as Reform or unaffiliated express comparatively lower levels of attachment to Israel. However, no significant decline is evident in the survey data for the period extending from the late 1980s to the most recent years. Further, today’s 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.

The findings of the present study contradict many recent treatments of the relationship between American Jews and Israel. As discussed earlier, prior studies that reported evidence of distancing are problematic. Several studies (e.g. Cohen and Eisen 2000; Cohen and Wertheimer 2006) cited unsystematic data—i.e. pairs of surveys rather than complete time series. Others (e.g., Cohen and Kelman 2007; Wexler 2007) extrapolated from age-related differences evident in individual surveys to putative long-term trends without directly examining the alternative hypothesis, i.e. that age-related differences evident in individual surveys are related to life-stage rather than generational differences. In contrast, the few prior studies (Cohen 1996; Phillips et al. 2002) that examined surveys conducted at regular intervals over several years did not find evidence of distancing.

The overall image of stability reflected by the analyses reported in the present study should be qualified in a number of ways. First, our analyses examined surveys of individuals who identify as “Jewish” when asked about their religion. Were one to employ a more expansive definition of Jewish to include anyone of Jewish ancestry who does not identify with another religion, then the overall level of Israel attachment would be somewhat lower. Moreover, if the population of “Jews by ancestry” is increasing over time, as some analysts suggest, then including this group would put downward pressure on overall Israel attachment. No data, however, exists to estimate whether and to what extent this population is in fact increasing. Moreover, weighting the AJC samples to reflect a growing *intermarried* population had negligible impact on overall levels of Israel attachment. It is expected that the same would be true for Jews by ancestry were we able to estimate their numbers and weight the samples accordingly.

In addition, although generational turnover, intermarriage and political alienation were found to have had negligible or slight impact on levels of attachment over the past two decades, the past is not necessarily a reliable guide to the future. Each of these factors has the potential to contribute to a weakening of Israel attachment. Whether they do so or not will depend on a variety of developments some of which—for example, the future of the conflict with the Palestinians—are entirely unpredictable. Future trends will also depend on how well Jewish organizations engage young adults and the intermarried population. As we have seen, visits to the Jewish state and membership of Jewish organizations are associated with increased levels of emotional attachment to Israel in each of these populations.

Third, during the three most recent years of the AJC surveys (2006–2008), the trend related to questions measuring emotional attachment to Israel has been downward. Over the span of two decades, this slide does not yet qualify as a departure from the norm. Indeed, more respondents felt close to Israel in 2008 than in either 1994 or 1989. Still, if the downward-slide were to continue in the coming years there would then be evidence of emotional distancing. Given the totality of evidence we have reviewed in this paper, we believe the slide during 2006–2008 is a correction from rising levels of attachment during 2000–2005, the peak years of the Second Intifada. It seems likely that rising attachment during those years reflected the images of Israelis suffering under an unprecedented rash of suicide bombings and other terror attacks. As these attacks diminished in the years since, the survey measures of emotional attachment returned to their pre-Intifada levels. But this is only a hunch.

Looking to the future, recent investment in young adult travel to Israel may prove a countervailing force to any distancing tendencies. The popularity of Taglit-Birthright Israel (Saxe and Chazan 2008), which by 2010 had sent nearly 200,000 Jewish young adults from the United States to Israel since its inception in 1999, suggests that Israel is not as marginal to the identities of young adult Jews as many observers have suggested. Recent analyses suggest that for some age-cohorts born after 1985, 25% or more will participate by the time they are 27 years old (and no longer eligible; Saxe et al. 2007).

Evaluation studies of Birthright Israel (Saxe et al. 2004, 2006, 2007) indicate that alumni of that program report high levels of attachment to Israel and often discuss their experiences with family and friends. Thus, for example, a survey of nearly 12,000 participants in Taglit-Birthright Israel trips during winter 2007, administered 3–4 months following the trip, finds substantial differences in connection to Israel between trip participants and a control group of applicants to the program who did not go. Specifically, in an analysis that adjusts for pre-trip differences between participants and non-participants, the estimated probability of participants feeling “very much” connected to Israel is nearly triple (62 versus 21%) that of the nonparticipants (Saxe et al. 2007). Such findings are typical of those reported in several years of evaluation research on the program and testify to the impact of Israel travel on feelings of attachment. The program’s impact is not yet evident in the AJC samples; perhaps sample size, with roughly 200 respondents under 39, is too small to capture the impact of Taglit.

Conclusion

Given evidence presented in this report, why has the “distancing narrative” gained such widespread currency? One might argue that bad news regarding Diaspora-Israel relations spreads so easily because it makes good headlines and justifies the mobilization of philanthropic resources for various causes, such as Diaspora Jewish education and Israel experience programs. That may very well be part of the story. But the factors that Cohen (1996) identified as responsible for widespread concern over the connection of American Jewry to Israel are still in evidence: visible

conflicts among American Jewish elites over Israeli policies; a steady flow of bad news regarding the peace process; lower levels of attachment to Israel among young adults; and a historically high rate of intermarriage. These factors certainly lend plausibility to the distancing hypothesis. As we have shown, however, there is no consistent evidence of distancing in the available survey data. Moreover, the increasing percentage of Jewish young adults who participate in Israel experience programs—in particular, Taglit-Birthright Israel—suggests a strong possibility that American Jewish ties to Israel may be stronger in the future.

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Appendix

See Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 Logistic regression on Israel attachment for 2000/2005 of key predictors

| | (1) Close to Israel | (2) Close to Israel | (3) Close to Israel | (4) Close to Israel |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Year (2000/2005) | 1.065** | 1.068** | 1.078** | 1.064* |
| Under 30 Reference | | | | |
| Age 30–39 | 1.140 | 1.155 | 1.397 | 1.360 |
| Age 40–49 | 1.215 | 1.521 | 1.969* | 1.953* |
| Age 50–59 | 1.297 | 1.826* | 2.445** | 2.268* |
| Age 60–69 | 1.404 | 1.693 | 2.329* | 2.095* |
| Age 70+ | 1.908* | 2.111* | 2.936** | 2.747** |
| Reference: Jewish spouse | | | | |
| Spouse not Jewish | 0.233** | 0.372** | 0.558** | 0.542** |
| Not married | 0.515** | 0.625** | 0.799** | 0.797** |
| Reference: never been to Israel | | | | |
| Been to Israel once | | 1.782** | 1.924** | 1.889** |
| Been to Israel more than once | | 2.980** | 2.616** | 2.689** |
| Travel to Israel important to Jewish identity | | 3.218** | 2.242** | 2.251** |
| Reference: just Jewish | | | | |
| Orthodox | | | 1.660 | 1.481 |
| Conservative | | | 1.541* | 1.531* |
| Reconstructionist | | | 0.491 | 0.534 |
| Reform | | | 0.740 | 0.763 |
| Being Jewish important to identity | | | 1.959** | 1.898** |
| Jewish organizational activity important to Jewish Identity | | | 1.476** | 1.478** |
| Arab goal is destruction of Israel | | | | 1.771** |

Table 2 continued

| | (1) Close to Israel | (2) Close to Israel | (3) Close to Israel | (4) Close to Israel |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| General political orientation | | | | 1.05 1 |
| Observations | 1896 | 1893 | 1881 | 1855 |
| Pseudo <i>R</i> -squared | 0.06 | 0.22 | 0.28 | 0.29 |
| Log likelihood | -1086.33 | -901.87 | -823.15 | -797.97 |
| DF | 8.00 | 11.00 | 17.00 | 19.00 |

Absolute value of *z* statistics in parentheses

* Significant at 0.05, ** significant at 0.01

Table 3 Logistic regression on Israel attachment for 2005 of key predictors

| 2005 | (1) Close to Israel | (2) Close to Israel | (3) Close to Israel | (4) Close to Israel |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Under 30 Reference | | | | |
| Age 30–39 | 1.150 | 1.511 | 1.620 | 1.544 |
| Age 40–49 | 1.336 | 1.841 | 2.219 | 1.837 |
| Age 50–59 | 1.269 | 1.976 | 2.450 | 2.200 |
| Age 60–69 | 1.929 | 2.849* | 3.950** | 3.405* |
| Age 70+ | 3.116** | 5.082** | 6.045** | 5.432** |
| Reference: Jewish spouse | | | | |
| Spouse not Jewish | 0.281** | 0.534** | 0.666 | 0.694 |
| Not married | 0.559** | 0.829 | 0.854 | 0.851 |
| Reference: just Jewish | | | | |
| Orthodox | | 1.616 | 1.112 | 1.008 |
| Conservative | | 1.287 | 1.173 | 1.180 |
| Reconstructionist | | 0.906 | 0.685 | 0.588 |
| Reform | | 0.596* | 0.628* | 0.656 |
| Being Jewish important to identity | | 2.479** | 2.002** | 1.927** |
| Jewish organizational activity important to Jewish Identity | | 2.094** | 1.643** | 1.549** |
| Reference: never been to Israel | | | | |
| Been to Israel once | | | 1.641 | 1.575 |
| Been to Israel more than once | | | 2.297* | 2.234* |
| | | | (2.48)* | (2.34)* |
| Travel to Israel important to Jewish identity | | | 2.419** | 2.447** |
| Oppose Palestinian state | | | | 1.566* |
| Arab goal is destruction of Israel | | | | 1.812** |
| General political orientation | | | | 0.985 |
| Observations | 939 | 931 | 928 | 865 |
| Pseudo <i>R</i> -squared | 0.07 | 0.24 | 0.30 | 0.31 |

Table 3 continued

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | Close to Israel | Close to Israel | Close to Israel | Close to Israel |
| Log likelihood | -519.22 | -421.09 | -386.02 | -350.21 |
| DF | 7.00 | 13.00 | 16.00 | 19.00 |

Absolute value of z statistics in parentheses

* Significant at 0.05, ** significant at 0.01

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