

Brandeis v. Cohen et al.: The Distancing from Israel Debate

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Abstract This paper comments upon the two lead articles in the *Contemporary Jewry* analysis of the Israel distancing hypothesis—the contrasting interpretations of Steven Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman who argue that Jewish Americans, especially younger Jewish adults and the intermarried, are becoming increasingly distant from Israel, and the rejoinder by Theodore Sasson, Charles Kadushin and Leonard Saxe from Brandeis University, who argue that “... neither the scholarly literature nor survey evidence consistently supports the view that attachment to Israel is declining among American Jews.” After discussing some methodological shortcomings in the data used in both the Cohen–Kelman and the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe papers, as well as the reality that the emergence of J-Street as an alternative and younger-Jewish-adult-oriented supporter (and critic) of Israel may reflect a qualitative change in younger Jewish adult perspectives on Israel, this commentary focuses upon the puzzling reality that the authors of the two articles present essentially the same data, yet come to radically different conclusions. Both groups of researchers demonstrate that younger Jews are less likely to be strongly attached to Israel; both note that the intermarried are less connected to Israel; both note that the majority of American Jews still feel connected to and support Israel. The Cohen–Kelman articles interpret these data as reflecting generational changes; Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe interpret the data in a life-cycle change model. The authors of this commentary offer another interpretation, one which focuses upon the methodological problems inherent in using the American Jewish Committee’s annual surveys of American Jewish opinion.

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The Debate

Supreme Court Justice Louis Dembitz Brandeis would most likely have been proud of the comprehensive and painstakingly detailed analysis of the “distancing hypothesis” completed by Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe, distinguished researchers at the Steinhardt Social Research Institute at Brandeis University, published in this journal as “Trends in American Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the ‘Distancing’ Hypothesis.” Originally published as a monograph in February 2008,¹ the article summarized trend data from telephone-based surveys completed for the American Jewish Committee (AJC) by Synovate, Inc. (previously Market Facts, Inc.) on American Jewish public opinion re: Israel.² The genesis of the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe 2008 and 2010 reports appears to have been the publication in 2007 by Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, equally distinguished researchers, of *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*, which summarized the results of a National Survey of American Jews. The survey by Cohen and Kelman (2007) utilized data collected via Internet and mail by Synovate, Inc. from December 2006 through January 2007 from over 1,800 Jewish respondents. In it, Cohen and Kelman (2007:20) noted that while older American Jews express considerable attachment to Israel:

... non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders... We find instances of genuine alienation as many more Jews, especially young people, profess a near-total absence of any positive feelings toward Israel.... This age-related decline characterizes almost all available measures of genuine Israel attachment and thus cannot be attributed to measurement idiosyncrasy.

Cohen and Kelman’s article in the current issue of *Contemporary Jewry* summarizes their perspective: “In sharp contrast to their parents and grandparents, non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders.”

In 2008, and in their lead article in this issue, the Brandeis researchers (Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe) challenged the conclusions of Cohen and Kelman that the evidence clearly indicated that American Jewish disengagement from Israel has occurred. In sharp contrast, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe concluded:

¹ The February 2008 monograph was titled: *American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the “Distancing” Hypothesis*. The current version has a revised introduction and additional analysis, but the data reported in the February 2008 version are essentially the same as published in this journal.

² The American Jewish Committee’s Annual Survey of Jewish Public Opinion (AJC polls as they are often called) are available at the North American Jewish Data Bank (www.jewishdatabank.org) for several of the years analyzed by the Brandeis scholars. Data files have been made available to the Data Bank and its partner, the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, by the research firm conducting the studies (Synovate, Inc., formerly Market Facts, Inc.). The 2002 data file is not available.

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 remainder of the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe article summarized the debate historically and then presented data from the AJC polls that the authors believe support their conclusions and refute the Cohen–Kelman distancing hypothesis conclusions. Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe cleverly noted that summarizing data from 1983 to 1993, Cohen (1996) had similarly concluded that the overall level of support by American Jews for Israel had remained at a relatively constant level, despite all the claims that a distancing-from-Israel pattern had emerged (in the earlier time period).

Commentary

The Israel distancing hypothesis can be addressed on multiple levels. In this commentary, we will focus only on three: (1) methodological issues, (2) the relationship of the quantitative data to more qualitative insights into Jewish life, and (3) the puzzling reality that all five researchers essentially agree on the data— younger Jews are less likely than older Jews to report very strong attachments to Israel; intermarried Jews are less likely than the in-married to report strong attachments to Israel; and the majority of American Jews support Israel.

(1) Methodological Issues

Please note our comments apply to the Cohen–Kelman article as well as the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe article. First, both Cohen–Kelman and Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe relied upon data from the same research firm, Synovate, Inc., which succeeded Market Facts, Inc. This company has over the years compiled a “panel” of American Jews, proclaimed as representative of all American Jews. Demographic characteristics of the AJC polls and the Synovate 2007 survey for Cohen and Kelman match data from national surveys of American Jews, primarily NJPS 2000-01 (see, for example, the direct comparison in Cohen–Kelman’s 2007 Appendix). The panel can be contacted to complete surveys of American Jews. The AJC polls in recent years have been telephone-based calls from a random selection of the Synovate panel (earlier years used mail questionnaires at times). The Cohen–Kelman 2006–2007 survey used a combination of Internet and mail responses, most likely from a similar Synovate pool as the most recent AJC polls.

Even more interesting, the Synovate AJC polls and lack of methodological details have been criticized by several researchers, especially Brandeis-based researchers, including Saxe. Phillips, Lengyel and Saxe (2002:8) commented:

The AJC survey samples were not entirely random.... The 1986-2001 studies were based on identified Jews from the consumer mail panel of... Market Facts, Inc. Although this panel has been used by prominent scholars (Steven Cohen, in particular), it does not provide a random sample of the Jewish

population... so secular Jews, who tend to be less attached to Israel, were not included. We also do not know in what ways Jews who agree to be regularly subjected to time-consuming surveys might differ from others.

Again, “AJC surveys published after 1991 do not report a response rate and it is therefore difficult to know what to make of the data.” In their lead article in this issue of *Contemporary Jewry*, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe added (see footnote 7):

Synovate’s reported margin of error is 3% [and] is misleading. It is based on the assumption that the survey of Jews is a random sample of the Jews on Synovate’s list... But the data are not available from Synovate to adjust for these procedures... Synovate’s list... is not random and has a low initial cooperation rate. The true margin of error must be higher than 3% but cannot be calculated.

The concerns of the Brandeis researchers are quite valid. They apply to the 2007 Cohen–Kelman Synovate poll, and to the AJC polls as well. The AJC polls are useful, but not random. Moreover, details on the Synovate panel, and the Synovate methodology, are surprisingly not available—especially when compared to the extensive methodological summaries included in the Brandeis report’s appendices.

A second major methodological issue is the problem of the Synovate panel’s initial qualifying question, having been based on the respondent being Jewish-by-religion. Cohen–Kelman argue that the exclusion of possibly 20% of American Jews who may be “secular” is a serious problem, since they are more likely to be “distanced” from Israel—and they also see a likely rise in the proportion of secular Jews as a contributing factor to Israel distancing. The secular Jews would not say their religion is Judaism (or Jewish as often phrased in general surveys), but they would identify as Jewish if a different question had been used.³

While the 2002 Brandeis comments noted a similar concern about the sample frame’s bias against secular Jews, the 2010 article’s footnote 3 is puzzling:

Pearlmann... 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.... 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.

But, if the percentage of American secular Jews has been increasing slightly, but steadily—paralleling the national increase in identification as “noness” identified by

³ Please note that the Ukeles Associates, Inc. surveys of American Jewish communities since 1996, cited by Cohen–Kelman were conducted by Jacob B. Ukeles and Ron Miller. These studies typically first ask: “Do you consider yourself Jewish?” Then they ask about the religion of the respondent afterward. Ukeles and Miller contend that once religion is introduced as the first question, as in NJPS and some other Jewish community studies, the follow-up questions asking respondents who do not view Judaism as their religion whether they consider themselves to be Jewish may have been compromised. To be specific, they argue that the question on religion (“What is your religion, if any?” for example) may have created a mindset for “secular” Jews that when the interviewer later asks “Do you consider yourself to be Jewish,” the interviewer is really asking “Do you consider yourself a religious Jew?”

Kosmin and Keysar (2009a)⁴—then the trends revealed from a non-random sample biased against secular Jews would become increasingly misleading. If a higher percentage of Jews have become secular, and if a significant proportion of secular Jews were not included in the trend data from the AJC polls, then the trend data may have become increasingly distorted. If the AJC polls did not reflect the increasing secularization of American Jews, then the steady pattern of reported attachment levels to Israel might have partially been an artifact of the exclusion of increasing proportions of Jews-not-by-religion.

(2) Quantitative Data and Qualitative Insights

Cohen–Kelman argue in the current issue of *Contemporary Jewry* that the debate/discourse needed to go beyond the quantitative data; the distancing-from-Israel hypothesis must increasingly be understood in a broader, qualitative context.

Intermarriage, the waning influence and power of institutions, the decline in denominational affiliation among younger people, the dramatic growth of Jewish organizations outside of the federation-family system, and an increasing emphasis on meaning-seeking... rather than ethnic bonds and loyalty points to significant changes in American Jewish life.

Rather than speculate excessively at this point on qualitative issues, however, we should note one critical empirical indicator which reflects the reality that the American Jewish landscape concerning Israel has changed radically in the past few years. The name J-Street might have meant little in 2005 when the AJC poll most heavily analyzed in the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe research analysis was completed by Synovate; but in 2010, it means an enormous amount for the distancing hypothesis discourse. While in 2005, the Israel discussions in the American media were dominated by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) perspectives, by 2008–2010, the themes that Cohen and Kelman argue were occurring nationally may have also set the stage for the emergence of a new Jewish organization—J-Street—competing with AIPAC for public relations and policy interpretations, even as AIPAC has sought to reassert its primacy in the early 2010 “Netanyahu-Biden-Settlement Expansion” discussions. J-Street has deliberately structured its appeal to the younger (more likely to be secular) American Jews, especially those who have been influenced by the media’s coverage of the Palestinian–Israeli conflicts and the international community’s criticism of Israeli policies (warranted or not).

Regardless of one’s personal ideology, it is clear that the rise of J-Street represents a change in the American Jewish political landscape, supporting positions that have not been as actively voiced in America as in Israel. Both organizations are pro-Israel. For more than half a century, with apologies to other Israel-oriented Jewish organizations, AIPAC has expressed one voice for Israel, has been a major pro-Israel lobbying force in the United States, and has rarely (if ever) been critical of Israeli policies. J-Street also defines itself as pro-Israel, but with an added

⁴ In general, the “nones” tend to be considerably younger, and 32% of “nones” are first-generation; they were not “nones” at age 12.

concern: “J-Street defines itself as the political arm of the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement.” While publicly supporting Israel and its desire for security, J-Street leaders are also publicly supporting the right of the Palestinians to a sovereign State of their own, and the right/obligation of American Jews to be fair in their treatment of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. What is critical to the “distancing” hypothesis, and supports the Cohen–Kelman thesis, is that J-Street appears to have emerged because an increasing number of younger American Jews, less connected to Israel, were more critical of Israel’s policies on settlements, etc., and formed a nascent base of support for the new organization. J-Street both reflected and legitimized public criticism of Israeli policies in the United States, paralleling similar movements within Israel itself, while still stressing its support for peace and for Israel’s future.

(3) The Puzzling Reality

Both groups of researchers—despite their differences—present similar data. First, both agree that younger Jews are less likely to report being strongly connected or attached to Israel. It is a central theme in the Cohen–Kelman reports, reflected in almost every chart they present. In the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe materials based on the AJC polls, Figs. 6 and 7 indicate that younger Jews were less likely to feel close to Israel and care about Israel, summarizing data from 1994 through 2005; Figure 8 summarizes NJPS 1990 data and clearly shows that within all denominations, the youngest respondents were the least likely to be “extremely/very attached” to Israel—the differences by age were strongest and linear among Jewish respondents who were Reform Jews or “just Jewish.” Age differences were also evident when Conservative Jews under age 40 were compared to older Conservative Jews. Finally, even among the Orthodox, the cohorts under age 60 were somewhat less extremely attached to Israel (67%) than those over 60 (89%).

Second, both sets of researchers agree that intermarried Jews are less connected to Israel than in-married Jews. Cohen and Kelman had two graphs of interest in their analysis of non-Orthodox Jews, which they showed after the initial age graphs. The first showed that on a scale of Israel attachment, “mixed” marriage Jews, from their 2007 survey, scored lower than in-married Jews and non-married Jews. The second, and more interesting, graph introduced age to the in-marriage/intermarriage analysis; the age and intermarriage graph showed a fascinating pattern, reporting on a scale of alienation from Israel. Among the in-married and non-married, alienation was lowest among the senior (65+) Jews, and highest among the age 35–49 Jewish cohort; the under 35 cohort was less alienated than the cohorts age 35–49 and 50–64. This is hardly strong support for a distancing hypothesis. On the other hand, among the intermarried, alienation is strongly linear—the youngest intermarried Jews were the most alienated, and alienation decreased as age increases. The Cohen–Kelman data on intermarrieds strongly support their contention, and fear of (if we may editorialize) distancing from Israel.

The Brandeis article also strongly showed that the intermarried are less connected to Israel. Figure 9, an index of Israel attachment, clearly showed that in

the AJC polls, from 2000 to 2005, the intermarried were much less attached to Israel than the not-intermarried. The two studies essentially agreed: The intermarried are less connected to Israel than other Jews. The Brandeis report also noted that a key variable for intermarrieds will probably be their level of Jewish organizational connection. “If intermarrieds 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... may be... attenuated.” While the Brandeis paper does not include any data, strong quantitative support for this perspective was reported in the 2007 Denver/Boulder Jewish community study (Ukeles and Miller 2008, see Exhibit 65). “Very attached” to Israel responses were reported by 44% of the intermarried-affiliated-with-synagogue respondents, compared to 23% of the intermarried-not-affiliated.

Third, both the Cohen–Kelman reports and the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe reports noted that the majority of American Jews care about Israel. The Brandeis researchers show a remarkable pattern of consistency of caring about Israel and feeling close to Israel from 1989 to 2007 in the AJC polls (Figs. 1, 2). The percentage caring about Israel, or feeling close to Israel, was basically between 70 and 80% in almost every AJC poll reported during this time frame—reflecting the authors’ overall conclusion that support for Israel has not declined. They do note that the 2006 and 2007 AJC summary reports show a decline in overall support for Israel, adding that while the available survey evidence indicates 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.” Note that this is the conclusion of Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe, not that of Cohen and Kelman. Similar data were presented by Cohen and Kelman, that while there was increased alienation among younger Jews, the majority of American Jews support Israel as noted in the 2007 monograph: “... the results also point to a majority of young adults with warm and positive feelings toward Israel. Their large numbers suggest a sizeable... [pool] of potential candidates for travel programs and other forms of Israel education.” Likewise, in the current *Contemporary Jewry* article, they state:

At the same time, the bottom has not fallen out entirely: about 60% of younger adult Jews who are not Orthodox profess some attachment to Israel. While less attached than their elders, most younger adult Jews still view Israel positively.

Summary

In summary, the puzzling reality is that the two research teams differ in their interpretations of similar data—younger Jews are less connected, intermarried Jews are less connected, and the majority of Jews (even younger Jews) support Israel.

- Cohen and Kelman interpret their data as indicating that a “cohort” of younger and increasingly intermarried Jews is emerging that will weaken overall American attachment to Israel. When the current young and often intermarried generation is followed by similarly minded younger American Jews, support for

Israel will weaken. They state in this issue of the journal: “All things considered, we think that non-Orthodox Jews in America, as a group, are growing more distant from Israel and will continue to so.”

- Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe summarize similar patterns among younger Jews and the intermarried, and while they are a bit cautious about future projections given the decline of support for Israel in the more recent AJC polls, they see the consistency of support for Israel during the time frame they studied (during which intermarriage increased) as the key “bottom line.” Indeed, they conclude in this issue of the journal that given the positive impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel, and the increased number of young Jewish adults in Israel-experience programs, there is a “...strong possibility that American Jewish ties to Israel may be stronger in the future.” (See our discussion in Appendix A.)
- Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe directly dispute the Cohen–Kelman thesis that the decline in Israel support will be a generational, cohort issue. Instead, they see the issue as a “life-cycle” pattern: As Jews get older, they become more attached to Israel. That would explain why in 2007 the young and the intermarried seem less connected, but the overall rate of attachment to Israel will ultimately remain the same.

While the data presented by Cohen–Kelman and Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe are similar, their explanations are different (generational versus life-cycle). Cohen and Kelman may be right that the pattern is generational, and that generational changes will continue. On the other hand, it just might be a “life-cycle” issue, reflecting other social maturational processes, e.g., the very strong impact of having children and having to decide whether and how to raise them Jewishly.

Of course, there is another explanation that we can offer that makes sense of the young-intermarried individuals and their reduced support for Israel as a long-term generational process versus the reality that overall levels of support in the AJC polls have not dropped as sharply (if at all) as projected by the distancing hypothesis. There is (to us) a reasonable possibility that the long-term research panels from which the AJC polls are completed have biased “panel mortality”—that is, the alienated-from-Israel and the less-connected Jewishly may have been and continue to be more likely than the connected-to-Israel to disengage from the Synovate panel over time. Stated differently, the pro-Israel younger respondents may be more likely to remain in the sample and to answer the surveys when contacted, while the not-so-pro-Israel younger and intermarried respondents disappear from the potential survey pool over a decade or two at higher rates than the pro-Israel same-aged cohort. The lack of details from Synovate, Inc. on the sampling frame construction, their methodology, response rates (especially by age of the respondent and their intermarried/in-married status), and defection rates compounds the “fuzziness” of the data interpretations. Rather than favoring one interpretation over the others, we need to stress once again that while the researchers report exceptionally similar data, they come to remarkably different conclusions. Hence, our recommendation for further research at both the quantitative and qualitative levels should come as no surprise!

Appendix A: Taglit-Birthright Israel and Distancing

One final comment: Taglit-Birthright Israel has been a successful program, encouraging younger Jews of all denominations to travel to Israel by providing funds for their visits. The recent Brandeis research report on Taglit-Birthright documents the considerable impact of the program. It is not really relevant to the quality of the research report that the program was “created” by the same Jewish philanthropist who funded the Steinhardt Research Institute at Brandeis. While this would have made it awkward if the follow-up research did not show strong positive results, and usually researchers try to avoid any hint of a conflict of interest, the professionalism of the researchers at Brandeis, under Len Saxe’s leadership, makes the issue moot.

On the other hand, we all need to recognize that Birthright Israel was created because there were fears—the Brandeis researchers might argue (in retrospect) unwarranted—that younger Jews were becoming more distant from Israel, and support for Israel might decrease over time. Implicit in the Brandeis “life-cycle” interpretation is an assumption that many younger Jews who are not connected to Israel will ultimately become strongly pro-Israel as they age. Happily for many thousands of Jewish Americans, the interventionist Birthright solution to the attitudinal distancing hypothesis (and the implicit notion that American financial support for Israel might also decrease over time) was implemented. The model used was a direct response: Reduce the distance attitudinally by reducing the distance physically; send thousands of young Jews to Israel as part of their birthright.

Over time, the Birthright participants have become less Orthodox denominationally; the earliest cohort was disproportionately Orthodox. Hopefully over time, the program will continue to expand its appeal among all America’s young Jews, including the inter-dating and the intermarried. Apparently, one of the most powerful ways to reduce the distancing effect is to eliminate (for a period of time) the physical distance between American Jews and Israel. “If you send them, they will change” was not only implemented, but it appears to have worked. However, even Birthright has limits economically and physically. (All young American Jews cannot be accommodated in Israel, unless our arithmetic is wrong.) All young Jewish Americans will not have a Birthright experience.

The perceived need that created Birthright reflects the same forces that created the preconditions which allowed for and encouraged the emergence of J-Street as a new force in American Jewish politics and as a competitor to AIPAC. The controversy over whether President Obama would attend the J-Street convention clearly signals the discomfort of the AIPAC-generation with the J-Street-generation. The President’s announced intention to attend the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America in November 2009 only further dramatized the contemporary concerns of the lay and professional leadership of American Jewry in regard to Israel. The President’s change of plans—due to his need to attend the memorial for the slain soldiers of Fort Hood—brought his chief-of-staff, Rahm Emanuel, whose father is Israeli, to the podium to proclaim the administration’s support for Israel.

Finally, the increased level of coverage of Israel-Palestine news by America's media (especially live television coverage of military confrontations in Israel and Palestine and the settlements controversy) and the carefully orchestrated international management of reactions to events in Israel by Israel's opponents (individuals, countries, and movements) may have changed forever the landscape of emotional attachment versus alienation from Israel, although not necessarily the outcome. In summary, in 2009 the Israel distancing hypothesis is as valid a hypothesis as it was decades ago. The debate/discourse is not resolved, but rather, has been engaged on a different playing field with a revised set of players.

Author Biographies

Ron Miller is the Associate Director of the Berman Institute—North American Jewish Data Bank at the University of Connecticut. He is also Vice-President for research at Ukeles Associates, Inc. where he has served as Project Director for many local Jewish community studies archived at the Data Bank: next stop: Chicago, 2010. He taught with the late Egon Mayer at Brooklyn College for 25 years before Egon convinced him to help with the Data Bank in 1996–1997. Ron returned to the Data Bank in October 2005, partially in tribute to Egon's memory and partially to help expand with Arnold Dashefsky and Cory Lebson a vibrant, online Data Bank that Egon would have loved to have seen.

Arnold Dashefsky is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Connecticut in Storrs (UConn), having earned B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in sociology, as well as a Bachelor of Hebrew Literature. He currently serves as the founding Director of the Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life, as the Director of the North American Jewish Data Bank, and occupies the Doris and Simon Konover Chair of Judaic Studies at UConn. He was one of the founding members of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry, created in 1971, serving as its first Secretary-Treasurer and later, as Vice-President and President, as well as Editor of its journal, *Contemporary Jewry*.