

“Distancing” from Israel in Jewish American Life

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Abstract This article is a commentary on the current discussion about the “distancing” thesis in American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. After reviewing the data and theory put forth in support and opposition to this thesis, the conclusion of my remarks is that the research and hypothesis on this subject remain too abstract to serve as a demonstration of either firm position. Instead, it is proposed that a macroscopic view of this subject take into consideration new conditions in Middle Eastern and European affairs, as well as changing political leadership in American politics and Israeli politics alike. To retain a microscopic approach, however sensitive the data, can only result in premature and arguably erroneous consequences. In short, this is a time for neither undue optimism or pessimism, but a heightened sense of carefully monitored globally inspired realism.

Keywords American Jewish community · Israeli politics attitudes of youth · Survey research of identification with Israel

In a serious and much-discussed essay, Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew Union College and Ari Y. Kelman of the University of California at Davis provided a richly supported statement on “distancing” from Israel. This is a summary of a larger work on *Beyond Distancing* by the same authors. The thesis is clear: “In sharp contrast to their parents and grandparents, non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders.”

The bar graphs indicate that on measures of caring for, engagement with and supporting Israel, this third generation is clearly dramatically different. Further, on measures of Jews who intermarry, non-observant Jews are less attached to Israeli

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issues than Orthodox Jews. The authors are appreciative of the fact that such data has many hurdles and obstacles to being declared “hard,” but they insist that “all things considered, non-Orthodox Jews in America, as a group, are growing more distant from Israel and will continue to do so.”

The response to this position by equally well known social science researchers is less a denial than a recognition that the same survey data indicates that “emotional attachment to Israel has varied within a narrow band, with no consistent pattern of increase or decrease.” These critics, in this case Charles Kadushin, Theodore Sasson, and Leonard Saxe, further claim that the variables examined to demonstrate “distancing” are in fact tangential and “have only a small impact on the overall level of American Jewish attachment to Israel.” An alternative narrative is put forth claiming that issues of distancing will be resolved less by demographics than organizational factors, that is, the extent to which Jewish organizations engage young adults in the intermarried population. They also note that trend-lines for 2 years may point downward but that there are no discernable trend-lines for longer time frames, such as two decades. In this view, the distancing hypothesis has gained currency not for its statistical reliability but because “it makes good headlines and justifies resources.”

I have tried to be fair to both the pessimistic and optimistic reading of the attitudes of Jewish-American youth to Israeli concerns. But without wishing to belittle or minimize the sobriety of these alternating positions, it must be said that the analysis tends to leave out of consideration a wide array of historical features in American Jewish life, and even more, the changing character of Israeli-Jewish life. With that in mind, I take this opportunity not so much to enter the fray, but to suggest that the actual struggles are taking place less in terms of affection and alienation, and more as a reflection of a stronger sense of American concerns as a fulcrum through which American Jews—of all ages and stages—look at Israeli affairs.

Questioning identification with or distancing from Israel within American Jewish life is well intentioned, but unlikely to soothe ruffled feathers. Framed in such broad theoretical terms, firm answers to the issues raised are virtually impossible, and may serve only to fuel academic frustration and public anxiety. When confronted with varied data and diametrically different conclusions framed by first-rate researchers and concerned scholars, it might well be that the best methodological device is to seek answers to somewhat less value-laden questions, and treat such large-scale issues in historical as well as longitudinal and middle-range terms. Given the strains in Middle East conflicts as a whole, it might be best to consider large theories for another, quieter time in American Jewish and Israeli-Jewish relations.

A somewhat different referential point allows us to avoid describing American Jews as part of a “Diaspora” or Israeli Jews presumptively integrated or at home in Israel society. Indeed, if the actual migration of Jews is any indication, researchers on either side would be hard pressed to claim greater pressure on young Jews to leave America or their counterparts to leave Israel. This is not to disparage the special nature of Israel as the Jewish national homeland; it is to avoid rhetoric about third generation American Jews as if they are stalled in a state of unfulfilled dreams or goals.

American Jewish distancing took place long before the establishment of the State of Israel. It was a distancing from religious orthodoxy at one end and no less an

incorporation of social-reform movements in the New World. Irving Howe's *World of our Fathers* emphasizes the East European migration to North America more as liberation than as alienation from what was to become modern Israel. And this was long before concerns about inter-religious marriages became fashionable. The unease set in motion by mass Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to Eastern America had as much to do with the well demonstrated socialist inclinations—right, center and left—of the first generation of Jewish immigrants as with any feeling of alienation from the land of Israel. The pre-World War Two identification of American Jewish youth with the Jewish communities during the Mandate period, or the pre-State of Israel formation, must be viewed primarily in the New World political context of totalitarian Europe, rather than the present day Middle East context.

The first and in part second generation of Jewish migrants to the New World divided into a variety of beliefs in socialist universality, settling on the utopian fantasies of Birobirdjan in the Stalinist Empire. They included building a green belt of trees under the sponsorship of the United Jewish Fund in Palestine, and seeking out mechanisms for the escape of Jews or at least their very physical protection, from the Nazi totalitarian leaders of Germany and later much of Europe. As the much cited Daniel Elazar observed, the organizational life of Jews went far beyond their religious training grounds, into a variety of broad based institutional formations appropriate to and made possible by American tradition and history—traditions to which Elazar's pioneering work on federalism made him acutely sensitive. The identification of Jews with organizational affairs was rooted in the struggle for survival. The shift from temple to secular organizations did not lessen or weaken that struggle. Indeed, Jewish support for the emergence of the State of Israel after the World War period was similarly orchestrated at many levels of institutional linkages and ideological persuasions. The political “world of our fathers” was also a world of family-oriented mothers and grandparents—all deeply concerned with issues of life and death. This common thread of concern for the Jewish tragedy of World War Two (Nazism and to a lesser extent post-World War Two Communism) underwrote identification and lasting bonding between American Jews and those new pioneers with the ancient homeland of Israel into a State of Israel. They had in common Jewish tradition and a democratic culture.

Secular Jewish children attended largely Yiddish speaking day schools under the supervision of The Workman's Circle or International Workers Order, and those who attended religious schools with strong commitments to the Hebrew language and traditional Orthodox theology shared a special moment in time that made support for Israeli statehood a relatively simple common denominator in Jewish life. Differential responses among American Jews to the pre-Statehood period collapsed in the face of the Holocaust and helped create a powerful consensus of support for the coming into existence of Israel after World War Two. So the thread of tradition through generations of Jewish migrants and settlers was subject to distinguishing as well as integrating features within American society as well as Israeli life.

A long honeymoon period between American Jewry and the State of Israel was forged by the Holocaust. Further Jewish support was strengthened by the wars fought by Israel, from the struggle for independence in 1945–1948, as well as the

wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973. Each military engagement revealed an Israel at high risk, and hence an American Jewish community united in its determination to make the phrase “never again” a reality. Indeed, Jewish support reflected American sentiments and values as a whole—Christian no less than Jewish. Even those Jews with socialist and communist leanings and commitments felt a positive sense of pride at the rise of Israel. The support reflected a broad consensus—of the Soviet Union (albeit somewhat reticently) as well as the United States and the rest of the civilized world, or at least the world of the United Nations at the time.

When geopolitical issues appeared less transparent, and the wars as such seemed predicated more on Israeli security than State survival, such as the conflicts with Lebanon, a certain distancing emerged. This too reflected American sentiments and values that were shared by many Jews deeply embedded in American culture and politics. I apologize for this brief, well known, digression into past histories of American Jewish-Israeli relations, but to fail to keep in mind the strains and tensions of three generations of Jewish life in America is to flatten the cultural turf upon which real decisions and interests are made in the present environment.

There is no question that the Arab and Moslem barrage against Israel, spearheaded by Iran and the Palestinians, has driven a wedge between American Jews, especially younger Jews. The centrality of Israel to their decision-making and political opinion is no longer certain. Then again, it is hard to demonstrate the extent to which this reflects general deterioration of support for Israel, or simply a maturation of primary commitments in both nations. More pointedly, support for military options by America by the young as such has weakened under the impact of wars that have been fought but not won: in Korea, then in Vietnam, and currently with limited, ambiguous success in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indirectly, such shifts have served to exacerbate critical views of Israel—not only among its opponents, but even among its proponents. Jewish support for the Democratic Party, certainly from the presidencies of Carter to Clinton, has translated into a greater sense of caution, if not neutrality, with respect to the American commitment to Israel. The liberal canons, coupled with fiercely anti-war sentiments of the young in general and of university and college students in particular (a turf which youth of the Jewish faith inhabit in large numbers), indicate that a certain alienation from Israeli positions can be expected as the presidency of Barack Obama progresses.

There has also been a reversal of David and Goliath. Israel is now seen as a colossus in the Middle East, despite its diminutive size, and the Arab Muslim world the weaker segment, especially the Palestinian enclaves. Consequentially, reasons for uncertainty about the strength and weakness of Jewish American support for Israel becomes transparent. This is not to make light of the issues involved. They go to the heart of supposed dual loyalties and multiple ethnic, racial or religious commitments. Not too long ago, the absence of a Jewish State signaled the unique character and capacity of the Jewish people to survive as a nation of tradition and belief. Having such highly risky theological antecedents, unusual and ambivalent new elements may raise questions about American Jewish support for Israel. These issues can also be turned around. They are less about Israel as a nation-state than questions about the survival capacity of the Jewish people as a world religion and culture.

Such larger apocalyptic considerations must be placed in the context of empirical shifts in American Jewish affairs of a more optimistic sort. These merit further consideration and articulation.

The first new element is the emergence of organizational activities dedicated to fostering American-Jewish cooperation, even migration of Jews to Israel. The very nature of Israeli democracy, its movement away from socialist dreams based upon agrarian values, reinforces positive sentiments toward Israel. The nation takes on the qualities of a secular society closer to the American system of economy and governance—an easily overlooked factor. But democracy also invites unabashed political criticism. So a decline in passionate or uncritical support for Israel at this time is to be expected. Of course, were the rhetoric of Iranian threats to liquidate Israel turn to reality in any military form, such criticisms would quickly be muted in favor of a well trodden survivalist support.

A second element is the large number of Jews, even if it remains a minority, that have visited Israel on tours, in academies, and on Kibbutzim, which have generated strong personal, human bonds between young Jews from both nations. At the same time, barnstorming also serves to distinguish the culture of America from that of Israel. The two countries, big and powerful, small and fragile, share a democratic credo. Awareness of a Judeo-Christian mosaic has grown in intensity as the Islamic extremists and terrorist activists have increased in ferocity and exposed themselves in ignominious purposes, such as when the Iranian regime called for the denial of the Holocaust on one hand and the annihilation of the Jewish people on the other.

Third, the emergence of pure anti-Semitism in the Moslem rhetoric concerning Israel's legitimacy stimulates well-grounded fears for the existence and safety of the State of Israel. This serves to rekindle concerns of older generations of Jews for the fate of their nation and its people. But such views are mitigated by a strong tendency in American Jewish history toward the pacific resolution of problems, and the presumption that rational behavior is the hallmark of all peoples, nations and religions—including Islam. Israeli centers of policy and international affairs have increasingly called attention to the folly of isolationism and political compromises. Clearly, one object of this attention is to mobilize Jewish support at institutional and individual levels alike.

In a new twenty-first century environment, simplified models of partisanship and cooperation are being displaced by a more nuanced appreciation of issues of patriotism, loyalty and ideology/theology. These involve a reappraisal not only of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel, but Israeli Jewish attitudes toward America. In the absence of the outright military threat to the existence of the Jewish State, this is likely to continue being the pattern for some time to come. We now have a blunt resurrection of the David Ben-Gurion theme that being Jewish in a time of Israel requires a return to Zion itself. So in its own way, distancing is a two way street, and is not easy to navigate intellectually or emotionally.

This leads to a final set of observations that can hardly be ignored. There have been vast changes in Israel of which Jews and non-Jews alike seem only dimly aware. It has been transformed from an agrarian society rooted in the Zionist cause, to a Jewish State rooted in national survival, and when possible economic growth. The Israeli challenge is to meld and weld its multiple identities as a varied religious

community within a secular nation. This master theme of Israeli life has had a profound impact on American Jewish responses, and in my view, will continue to do so.

The State of Israel is rife with discordant images of a muscular secular state and a tradition rooted in ancient Hebraic values and teachings. To expect American Jewish communities to simply remain dedicated to Israel without qualification or concern is to expect loyalties predicated on dogma. It is hard for Americans to accept the credo of “my country right or wrong.” Imagine how much more difficult and troubling it is for Jewish youth raised in a critical culture to adopt such an absolute standard when it comes to Israel. Indeed, the same critical skepticism is part of the Israeli scene. The Jewish communities of the United States and other democratic nations cannot be expected to respond to events with the singular, unitary fanaticism of Moslem communities in the West when confronted with events in the Middle East. Those who express horror or regret as to the “alienation” of American Jewish communities to events in Israel would do well to remember the power and self-assurance of Israel, as well as its past struggles.

The American Jewish world is one in which liberal-left politics remain dominant, and have been so from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Barack Obama. It is a politics rooted in an ethos of regard for the underprivileged, animosity for exploitation of all kinds, and a cultural ancestry that often embraces European socialist traditions as well as Jewish religious beliefs. The strong commitment of Israel to airlifting and preserving Jewish communities of Ethiopia, not exactly a high-agenda item in the religious Hebrew school of the past, has elicited strong and positive responses within American life—and it has played a huge part in mitigating potential lines of criticism from the African American community impacted by Muslim teachings of various sorts. Israel’s capacities to appreciate American sensibilities are hugely important in underwriting the support of American Jewish young generations. The shifting sands of ideology are such that firming up alliances is a complex undertaking. For example, Israel has strong regional interests in maintaining cordial relations with Turkey, while at the same time, it is asked to show support for recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Such conflicting Statist interests in Israel, however authentic and difficult to resolve, also serve to create unease and perhaps criticism within the Jewish American communities.

A portion of the younger generation of Jews reveals a greater interest in and capacity for religious and ethical teachings than their parents. This is true in Israel and the United States alike. There are now special learning centers for Jewish values and projects in the Israeli Defense Forces to reclaim such values from the strictly Ultra Orthodox portions of Israeli society. In this sense, the “Protestantization” of American Jewish religious life, with Orthodox Conservative, Liberal, Reconstructionist, and now naturalistic strains vying for support among the Jewish communities, resonates very well with these emerging pluralistic tendencies in Israeli life.

If candle-lighting ceremonies at Friday evening services can co-exist with non-kosher eating habits in Tel Aviv homes, perhaps what seemed beyond the pale of tradition to an older generation of Jews will appear commonplace to a younger generation of Jews worldwide—yet compatible with the deepest values of Jewish culture and religion. In short, in a world filled with troubles, re-examining the nature

of Jewish life as it takes place in an Israeli State will appear not all that different from similar examinations of Jewish life as it takes place in the American State—troublesome, complex, and vastly intriguing.

It is thus my contention that the issue of Jewish “distancing” from Israel can only make sense and be resolved in an appropriate context of larger global considerations and at the same time with a realistic sense of the new contours of twenty-first century Israel as a highly urbanized and technologically mature Jewish State. The parochial, however compelling, is not yet the universal. And it is precisely at such interplay of macroscopic and microscopic levels that the content as well as the context of American Jewish support for and appreciation of Israel will be brought to a meaningful and positive further evolution.

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Irving Louis Horowitz is Hannah Arendt Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Political Science at Rutgers University. He has written widely on Jewish and Israeli themes, including *Israeli Ecstasies and Jewish Agonies*, *Taking Lives: Genocide and State Power* (now in its fifth edition); and *Daydreams and Nightmares: Reflections of a Harlem Childhood*, recipient of the National Jewish Book Award in Biography & Autobiography for 1991.