

## Attachment to Israel and Jewish Identity: An Assessment of an Assessment

Ephraim Tabory

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**Abstract** The assessment of the essays by Cohen-Kelman and Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe includes five main parts: (1) An explanation of why it is impossible to determine who won the debate; (2) A discussion of why the topic is important; (3) A discussion concerning the problematic conceptualization of attachment; and (4) A discussion questioning for whom the analysis is relevant. The fifth section presents an analytical framework to analyze the issues by focusing on the relationship between the subject populations studied and Israel. This perspective looks at the contribution of Israel to the human and social capital of Jewish identity, and the consequence of such identity for caring about Israel.

**Keywords** Israel · Distancing hypothesis · Jewish identity · Jews by religion · Jews by choice · Human capital · Social capital · Ethnic capital · Religious capital · Jews

The essays by Steven Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman and by Theodore Sasson, Charles Kadushin and Leonard Saxe on the degree of American Jews' attachment to Israel lead me to ask three questions: Why is this topic important? What does attachment really mean? And, what are the population groups that are relevant when discussing attachment to Israel? Before discussing these issues, I will first address the question that the Journal editor posed to the discussants, namely, who won the debate.

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E. Tabory (✉)  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bar Ilan University,  
52900 Ramat Gan, Israel  
e-mail: tabore@mail.biu.ac.il

E. Tabory  
Program in Conflict Management and Negotiation, Bar Ilan University,  
52900 Ramat Gan, Israel

## The Debate

Cohen-Kelman maintain that American Jews, and especially young adults, are characterized by diminished attachment to Israel. Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe examined the survey studies and concluded that emotional attachment to Israel has shown no consistent statistical pattern of increase or decrease over the years. (A survey by The American Jewish Committee [2009], released after the initial essays were written, also shows no substantial change, although AJC Executive Director, Harris (2009), notes the “saddest finding” for him—that 30% of American Jews said they felt “fairly” or “very” distant from Israel.) One might expect that the two groups of researchers based their alternate conclusions on different sets of surveys, but that is not the case. Not only did they basically utilize the same studies, but the differences between them even in the interpretation of the same sets of statistics are not substantial. Essentially, the main difference between them goes beyond the data sets. Cohen-Kelman claim that their professional roles involve more than the “strict constructionist” approach followed by Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe. Cohen-Kelman maintain that “available hard data is not all we have. They stand alongside ‘soft’ evidence, as well as side-knowledge, theory, and ultimately what the great sociologist C. Wright Mills called, ‘The Sociological Imagination’.” In fact, Cohen-Kelman do not debate Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe’s conclusion so much as put forth their discourse that is not only “data-informed,” but also “theoretically rich, contextually situated, and sociologically imaginative.” All that they know, they say, leads them to conclude that non-Orthodox Jews are growing more distant from Israel, and that this pattern will continue in the future.

It is appropriate to use the Talmudic expression, *teyku* (“let it stand”), to bring temporary closure to this discussion and thus indicate that this is indeed not a debate over scientific interpretation but rather a more macro level analysis of American Jewry. While the analysis of the statistical data utilized by Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe is on the mark, the validity of survey research can be undermined by a wide variety of random and systematic errors, and, especially by the willingness of the target population to participate in the surveys. There seems to be little doubt that non-affiliated Jews are more reluctant to participate in surveys of Jewish identity. Generalizations from surveys based on selective participation can lead to an impression of stability in Jewish attachment that misrepresents an increasing rate of non-affiliating (and non-survey-participating) Jews. Furthermore, the wide range of measures that have been used to indicate distancing (a topic that I will address below) enables one to reach disparate conclusions based on the specific selection of variables for analysis, even when looking at the same research studies. As astute observers of the American Jewish scene, Cohen-Kelman might indeed be correct in their assessment that what they say goes beyond the available statistical data. They tell us that they are presenting us with a macro level picture of American Jewry that goes beyond any specific question used in any specific survey. Such a view seems to question the utility of rigorous survey research, but I will not address this specific issue. Regardless of who is correct, the lack of agreement between the groups of researchers about whether or not there is increased distancing makes it all the more

necessary to specify why the question of distancing is important and thus contribute to the clarification of what should be studied.

### **The Significance of American Distancing**

Both groups of researchers give only a very brief indication of why they feel distancing is important. Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe state that the nature of Jewish attachment to Israel has “profound implications for the future of Diaspora-homeland relationships, and...for the political debate concerning the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.” Similarly, Cohen-Kelman write that a change in attitudes will have “profound effects upon American Jews’ relationships with Israel, with direct bearing upon Israel’s security.” These considerations refer to distancing as affecting support for Israel. Conspicuously absent is a discussion of how distancing from Israel affects Jewish identity. Such an impact, though, is alluded to by Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe when they focus on the effect of short term visits to Israel on Birthright programs. They note, for example, the greater propensity of Birthright participants, relative to a control group of non-participants, to marry other Jews (Saxe et al. 2009). The implication is that greater attachment to Israel leads to a stronger ethnic Jewish identity.

Interestingly, Israel’s role in fostering Jewish identity is downplayed by some academics in Israel. For example, Ruth Gavison, a Law professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a past Senior Fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, stated at the 2009 Israeli Presidential Conference that attachment to Israel might contribute to one’s Jewish identity outside of Israel, but nevertheless, it is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for Jewish commitment. At the same conference, former head of Israeli Intelligence Efraim Halevy addressed Israel-Diaspora relations in terms of the role that Israel should play in saving Jews world wide—not the role that world Jews play in supporting Israel. Indeed, both speakers were sensitive to the charge of dual loyalty that could be leveled at supporters of Israel who are nationals of another country, and both presenters indicated that Israel’s policies and actions might actually render Jews outside of Israel more vulnerable to hostile acts by persons objecting to Israeli politics. Implicit in their presentations was the assessment that Israel can manage politically by itself. The point is that weaker American Jewish attachment to Israel may now have less of a negative impact on political support for Israel—at least as viewed from Israel—than the impact suggested by Cohen-Kelman and Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe.

I sense that both sets of authors do refer to attachment as an indicator of Jewish identity, but it is not quite clear what it really reflects. To further clarify the degree of obfuscation, I now turn to a more focused discussion of what is meant by distancing as a concept.

## The Conceptualization of Distancing

In this section, I list some of the terms that have been used to conceptualize distancing in the studies cited by Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe, Cohen-Kelman, and Cohen and Kelman (2007). This is not a review article, and I forego referencing the specific studies that they cite. The point is simply to show the lack of clarity in defining this concept. (The response categories to the following questions are usually self-evident—either agreeing or disagreeing with the statement, or indicating some degree of frequency—“often,” “sometimes,” etc.)

“Distancing,” then, has been studied through the use of indicators examining: emotional attachment to Israel; being proud of Israel; being excited about Israel; feeling ambivalent about Israel; and feeling ashamed about Israel.

Measures of distancing have sometimes been phrased in terms of “caring,” and have used the following indicators: assessment of the feeling that caring about Israel is an important part of being a Jew; worry that the United States will not be an ally of Israel; and feeling that Israel’s destruction would be a personal tragedy. Likewise, the degree of engagement with or disengagement from Israel has been used as a measure of distancing (as if distancing is a one-dimensional, bipolar variable, rather than being composed of different attitudes toward different issues). Measures to study this have related to: talking about Israel with Jewish friends; talking about Israel with non-Jewish friends; and being drawn to stories about Israel.

Questions used to examine the degree of support for Israel include: self-identity as being pro-Israel; self-identity as a Zionist; feeling comfortable as a supporter of Israel; feeling uncomfortable self-identifying as a supporter of Israel; agreement with the statement that Israel occupies land belonging to someone else; feeling comfortable with the idea of a Jewish State.

This range of measures is not intended as a comprehensive categorization of all the indicators employed in all of the studies that Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe and Cohen-Kelman cite. What I wish to demonstrate is that a wide variety of questions have been used to examine distancing, and I suggest that researchers and policy makers need to define distancing more clearly by specifying what it is supposed to indicate. For example, is talking about Israel with friends a *positive* indication of engagement with Israel even when the talk entails criticism of Israel? In this context, should support for J Street—a pro-Israel, pro-peace political action committee ([jstreet.org](http://jstreet.org), accessed March 10, 2010) that is viewed by some persons as averse to the traditionally pro-Israel AIPAC—indicate distancing from Israel, or, on the other hand, from its policies? I would argue that these are not (or at least are no longer) the same thing. Likewise, one can ask whether disagreement with the statement that caring about Israel is an important part of being a Jew indicates distancing from Israel. Cohen-Kelman point out that the specific way in which distancing is measured does not matter so much—it is relative change across all measures that indicates trends. It is almost self-evident, however, that the variables tap different underlying dimensions that might vary in importance in different social contexts and with different populations. This leads us to our final issue—the identities of the populations studied.

## The Relevant Populations

Cohen-Kelman state that distancing characterizes the non-Orthodox Jewish population, and that it is that group which is of major concern to them. However, if the primary interest in distancing relates to political support for Israel, Orthodox Jews should not be counted out. Indeed, Orthodox support might be stronger and more action oriented than more lackadaisical or ambivalent support by non-Orthodox Jews. On the other hand, if identity is the issue, then perhaps Orthodox Jews should not really be counted in, because their Jewish identity may be more strongly affected by factors other than identification with Israel.

Discussion regarding the inclusion or exclusion from analyses of Jews-by-religion, Jews-not-by-religion, or Jews-by-ancestry, or any other term used to describe a specific group of people who are Jewish, or who should be considered Jewish, or who would like to be Jewish further indicates the need for conceptual clarification in the discussion of distancing. What is important about distancing, and for whom? A clarification of the question requires a refinement of the variables and specification of the research populations. The answer, quite likely, is multifaceted, with different dimensions of distancing relevant to different groups of subjects.

## Discussion

One way to consider distancing is by viewing Israel as part of the cultural tool-box of Jewish identity. Jewish identity potentially encompasses both a religious and an ethnic component for American Jews. Each component constitutes a separate dimension of identity, although it may be difficult to conceive of a situation in which they are mutually exclusive with no overlap—religious identity in Judaism cannot really be totally separated from ethnic identity.

The distinction drawn by Philips and Barack Fishman (2006) regarding ethnic human capital and ethnic social capital, in their analysis of intermarriage in the United States, is useful. Philips and Barack Fishman conceive of ethnic human capital as incorporating an individual's knowledge and skills regarding the cultural practices of a given ethnicity. Ethnic social capital is the extent and nature of an individual's ties to other members of the ethnic group. Social capital can relate to both an in-group and an out-group. Out-group ties can offer alternate interpretations of cultural practices that can affect an individual's choice of behavior. Philips and Barack Fishman explain that out-group ties also constitute "bridging" social capital—competing social capital that mitigates the power of the ethnic group to exert social control, and therefore impacts on ethnic human capital.

I suggest that the distancing hypothesis is important because one's relationship to Israel is part of the ethnic human capital of Jewish identity. An "Israel component" incorporates various behaviors and observances that can tie people to their Jewish identity. As a collective focus of identity, Israel also impacts on social capital, leading to a perception of a larger shared ethnic entity. (Perhaps this partially explains the impact of Birthright on reducing intermarriage, found by Saxe et al. [2009]—as the social capital of Jewish ethnic identity is strengthened, especially if

participants retain contact with one another after returning from Israel.) Looked at in this way, the question is not what Jews (whether Jews-by-religion or Jews-not-by-religion) can do for Israel, but what does caring about Israel mean for them and do to them as Jews? This question needs to be considered in light of the specific social capital that different groups bring with them, as well as their competing group identities (or in Phillips' and Barack Fishman's terms—their bridging social capital).

The distinction between religious social capital and ethnic social capital is also useful for understanding the differential relationship of Orthodox Jews and Jews-by-any-other-definition to Israel. The social capital of Orthodox Jews is strong and all-encompassing and includes strong identification with Israel. The Biblical "Land of Israel" (*Eretz Yisrael*) constitutes a very significant element of religious human capital for many Orthodox Jews and it overlaps with political identification with the State of Israel. At the same time, the Land of Israel has a direct impact on Jewish identity for many Jews that accounts, independently, for some of the variance in Jewish identity. Indeed, for some Orthodox Jews, Israel as a political entity might be totally irrelevant to their Jewish identity. This, too, might be the case for other groups of Jews, such as Jews-by-choice. In this framework, distinguishing between religious human capital and ethnic social capital reminds us that different groups may behave similarly toward a focus object but for different reasons. People may support Israel because of their ethnic capital, or their religious capital. These forms of capital may cross cut with human and social capital, or be totally unrelated to such forms of capital. Indeed, it is possible that the difference between Orthodox Jewry and other Jews with regard to attachment to Israel captures the chasm between Orthodox and non-Orthodox groups in general. A nominally similar identity may mask different underlying dimensions of identity that stress diversity more than unity. The distancing of Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews from one another may be more significant for a united Jewish people than the distancing of Diaspora Jews from support for Israel as a political entity.

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## Author Biography

**Ephraim Tabory** teaches in the Department of Sociology and is Director of the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Conflict Management and Negotiation at Bar Ilan University, Israel. He is co-author of *Jewish Choices: American Jewish Denominationalism*. His articles have appeared in *Review of Religious Research*, *Sociology of Religion*, *Journal of Church and State*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, and *Israel Studies*. Special interests include religious denominations, religion-state relations, and intergroup relations.