

# ADJUSTMENT DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY AMERICAN STUDENTS IN ISRAEL

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The Council of Jewish Federation's 1990 National Jewish Population Survey provided a glimpse into the identities, attitudes, and behaviors of the American Jewish community. Much of the data from this survey has been used to substantiate the alarm sounded by many communal professionals; namely, that the prospects for maintaining a vibrant Jewish community in America are declining. For example, citing the finding that 52% of the born Jews who married chose a spouse who was born Gentile and decided to remain so as disturbing evidence that Jewish survival in America is threatened, community leaders have placed the issue of Jewish continuity at center stage on the communal agenda.

Transmitting a strong sense of Jewish identity lies at the heart of the continuity question. Therefore, the search for ways to encourage Jewish continuity has focused on defining identity and determining what types of experiences directly affect Jewish identity building.

Researchers tell us that our identity is formed in stages throughout our lifetime. Erik Erikson, who is widely considered to be the founding father of the concept of "identity," argued that the establishment of a personal identity begins in childhood and continues as a dynamic process even into late adolescence.

In their article, "Jewish Identity and Jewish Schooling," London and Frank (1987) observe that identity formation cannot be separated from social theory. Citing the work of Henri Tajfel, they write that identity "originates in and reflects a primitive human need for affiliation and for exclusion." A positive self-image, they explain, is intimately related to the feeling that we "belong to a group that has admirable characteristics." By inference, Lon-

don and Frank define Jewish identity as "the sense of affiliation with the Jewish people."

Determining which programs best convey this feeling of belonging and therefore deserve community funding is the challenge facing the American Jewish community. One such program is a study experience in Israel.

In many ways, the important role that Israel can play in enhancing Jewish self-esteem and identity throughout the Diaspora was envisioned by Ahad Ha-Am, more than 100 years ago. He argued for a far-flung Jewish community with Israel as the "national spiritual center." His vision is equally valuable to us today.

The fact that Israel has emerged as a popular location for the international student should not be overlooked by communal planners. Under 2% of the 1,083,026 international students who studied in 119 countries in 1984 were in Israel (Institute of International Education, 1988). In 1985 15,000 foreigners studied in Israeli colleges, universities, yeshivot, and other educational programs (Hochstein, 1986).

Israel is a popular destination for American students as well. Only six other countries hosted more American students than Israel in the 1985/86 school year. In that same year, 4% of all Americans studying abroad and returning to receive academic credit from a U.S. institution studied in Israel (Zikopoulos, 1988).

To accommodate the large numbers of foreign students who want to study in Israel, Israeli universities offer a variety of academic programs. One-semester programs are offered by Bar-Ilan University in Ramat-Gan, the Technion in Haifa, and Tel Aviv University in Tel Aviv. Furthermore, Bar-Ilan University, The Hebrew University in

Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv University offer a full-year program. A wide range of academic programs are also available at the Ben Gurion University in Beersheva. In addition to secular studies, religious training is available to the foreign student at many yeshivot. There are also work-study programs sponsored by youth movements, such as Young Judea and B'nai Akiva, which provide an altogether different experience for the foreign student.

As Jewish continuity assumes a central place on the communal agenda and Israel experiences are increasingly advocated as an effective means of strengthening Jewish identity, it is imperative to learn more about the characteristics of those experiences that contribute to their effectiveness. This study on the adjustment difficulties of American students in Israel is a first effort in that direction.

### STUDYING ABROAD

The benefits of studying abroad have long been recognized by professionals in the field of higher education. In fact, during the early 1980s there was widespread agreement that more American students should spend some part of their college careers in a foreign country (Council on International Educational Exchange, 1981). Such a consensus led to a sustained effort by counselors and advisors to encourage college students to study abroad. Increasingly, this enterprise has borne fruit. For example, during the 1985/86 academic year alone, approximately 47,000 Americans traveled overseas to study. In many ways, these sojourners were like their counterparts from other countries. One fundamental difference, however, set them apart. Students from non-European countries usually studied abroad in order to bring new technology back to their countries; in contrast, Americans went abroad for enrichment and to find a sense of purpose (Jenkins et al, 1983; Thavikalivati & Gonotena, 1977).

The following observations are also highlighted in the literature of sojourners in

host countries:

- When the home and host culture are similar, the sojourner will be able to transfer his or her previously learned behavior and therefore be able to adapt more quickly to the new environment (Bochner, 1972).
- Learning about the host culture is a trial-and-error process that may have negative effects on future interaction (Bochner, 1972; Hull, 1971).
- Social isolation of the sojourner makes learning the culture more difficult (Bochner, 1972).
- Personal rigidity of the sojourner may cause additional problems (Watson & Lippitt, 1955).
- Certain background variables, such as language proficiency and age, influence the amount of social interaction that sojourners have with host nationals. Younger sojourners and undergraduate students have more social contacts than older people with the native population, both as friends and in their living arrangements (Deutsch, 1970; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1966; Hull, 1978; Ibrahim, 1970; Johnson, 1970; Sevell & Davidsen, 1961; U.S. Advisory Commission, 1966). Yet, older sojourners, particularly graduate students, report greater academic and general satisfaction with the results of their sojourns than do younger ones (Gezi, 1959; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1966; Hull, 1978; Melby & Wolf, 1961).

Only a few studies of sojourners in host countries have examined the effect that gender has on the adjustment process. Fong and Peskin (1969), Hill (1966), and Porter (1963) reported that females experienced more adjustment problems than males. In their research, Fong and Peskin (1969) attributed some of the disparity to the fact that special problems may exist for those women who come from more traditional cultures where social roles are more restrictive than they are in the United States.

Menninger and English (1965) and Thomson and English (1964) studied female volunteers who returned home prematurely from the Peace Corps. They concluded that women were more likely to suffer from culture shock. Lee, Abd-Ella, and Burks (1981) reached similar conclusions, finding female students to be among those most likely to experience sociocultural and psychological problems.

Cunningham and Kang (1990) found that female students from Korea in four Texas universities perceived adjustment problems caused by poor verbal skills to be more difficult than their male counterparts thought them to be.

In summary, sojourners' feelings and attitudes toward the host country undergo a variety of changes as they adjust to their new environment. Such factors as similarity of home and host cultures, language proficiency, age, and gender affect the adjustment of the sojourners.

An important difference between American students in Israel and American students in other countries is that the former bring a prior emotional attachment to the host country not usually found among other students sojourning in foreign lands. Herman (1970) and the directors of various programs for foreign students in Israel in personal interviews with the author confirmed the special relationship that Jewish students have to Israel. Therefore, one may assume that American students in Israeli postsecondary institutions would experience less adjustment difficulty than American students in other countries. In addition, extensive experiences in integrating immigrant populations has helped make Israel sensitive to the adjustment problems that American students may experience.

Research on successful study programs in Israel highlights the importance of peer groups in mitigating loneliness and shaping American student opinion about Israel (Herman & Shild, 1961). Several studies have shown that American students have

more positive attitudes toward Israel and increased identification with Jewish values after their course of study there (Friedlander et al., 1991; Herman, 1970, 1972; Herman & Shild, 1961; Ronen-Rolnik, 1966).

### STUDY METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study described in this article was to determine the extent to which American students in Israeli colleges, universities, and yeshivot experience adjustment difficulties in certain problem areas, as defined through the Study Abroad Adjustment Inventory; to ascertain differences, if any, in the difficulties reported by male versus female students; and to interpret the findings to directors of foreign student programs in Israeli colleges and universities and to advisors in the United States of American students planning to study abroad.

The following five research questions were addressed in the study:

1. To what extent do American students studying at Israeli colleges/universities and yeshivot experience adjustment difficulties related to the Hebrew language, such as understanding teachers, taking exams in Hebrew, and communicating with Israelis?
2. To what extent do American students studying at Israeli colleges/universities and yeshivot experience adjustment difficulties related to academic matters, such as understanding school procedures, grading systems, and obtaining personal advice?
3. To what extent do American students studying at Israeli colleges/universities and yeshivot experience adjustment difficulties related to personal situations, such as finances, relationships, and depression?
4. To what extent do American students studying at Israeli colleges/universities and yeshivot experience adjustment difficulties related to living arrangements,

such as privacy in living quarters, banking facilities, and adjustment to food, climate, and social customs?

5. Are there differences in the extent of difficulties experienced as reported by males versus females in each of the problem areas considered on the Study Abroad Adjustment Inventory?

In November and December of 1989, 671 American undergraduates in Israeli institutions were surveyed to determine how difficult it was for them to make 53 specific school-related adjustments. Each participant completed the Study Abroad Adjustment Inventory (SAAI), which was created by the author specifically for this research (see Table 2). The SAAI categorized the adjustment difficulties into four general areas: Hebrew language, academic matters, personal situations, and living arrangements. It used four extent-of-difficulty response alternatives—1.00 = none, 2.00 = not serious, 3.00 = serious, and 4.00 = very serious—to assess student difficulty with each adjustment. The *t* test statistic was used to assess the significance of the findings.

To determine differences between the adjustment difficulties experienced by male and female students, rating scores for all males participants and for all female participants were averaged separately for the extent of seriousness of each adjustment difficulty. The average scores within each area were added, and an average for each area was obtained for males and females separately.

## STUDY FINDINGS

### Characteristics of the Study Sample

Of the 671 study participants, 306 were males and 365 were females; 292 attended five universities, 16 went to one college, and 363 (of whom 189 were male and 174 were female) attended 14 yeshivot. Most

schools in the study were located in urban and suburban areas; 429 students studied in Jerusalem and 242 in other areas throughout Israel.

A majority of both male (61.8%) and female students (52.9%) were graduates of a Jewish day school or yeshiva. Over 80% of the students were between the ages of 17 and 20, and more than nine of every ten were single. Less than half of the men (42.2%) and women (35.1%) studied abroad after completing high school but before starting college. The others completed at least part of their undergraduate education in the United States before going abroad. More than 60% of the students spent less than 3 months or no time at all in Israel immediately before starting their studies in Israel. The great majority of the male (92.1%) and female (86.9%) respondents were Jewish, and very few of these (3.9% of the males and 3.6% of the females) were of Sephardic descent.

Study subjects were limited to those American students who had completed one or more semesters at an Israeli college, university, or yeshiva. A majority of the male (58.2%) and female (57.8%) subjects were surveyed at the end of their first semester.

Students' reasons for studying in Israel varied. About one-fifth of the males and 37.3% of the females reported "broadening my experience," whereas 35.6% of the males and 15.1% of the females reported "studying Judaica" as the primary reason. Students used various financial resources, but about two-thirds of all students reported parents' financing as their primary source of funds.

The respondents' knowledge of the Hebrew language before starting the program ranged widely, from no Hebrew language mastery (12.1% of males and 10.4% of females) to fluency (4.9% of males and 6.6% of females). Many attended programs that used English partially or completely in class instruction.

### Results

Table 1 reports the mean rating and the rank order of mean ratings for each of the four problem areas on the SAAI. Living arrangements was the one area in which the most serious and most frequent adjustment difficulties were reported. The mean rating of the adjustment difficulties for this problem area was close to "serious." In contrast, the mean rating of the seriousness of the difficulties in the other three problem areas was between "not a problem" and "not serious." Therefore, in Hebrew language, academic matters, and personal situations, the adjustment difficulties reported by American students in Israel could be considered minor.

The mean rating and rank order of each of the 53 individual areas of adjustment difficulties listed on the SAAI are shown in Table 2.

In the living arrangements problem area, phone facilities was the most serious adjustment difficulty reported by the American students. The other adjustment difficulties (in descending order of seriousness), all of which ranked above not serious but below serious, were adequate facilities to prepare food, getting around on Shabbat (for those who travel on Shabbat), laundry facilities, bank facilities, enough space for study in living quarters, and privacy in living quarters. The least serious adjustment difficulty

within the living arrangements problem area was living too far from school.

In the Hebrew language problem area, writing term papers and communicating with Israelis posed the two most serious adjustment difficulties. Each was rated between not serious and serious. The least serious adjustment difficulty within the Hebrew language problem area was taking class notes.

Within the academic matters problem area, the most serious areas of adjustment difficulties reported by the students were obtaining secretarial services and finding academic resources. Each, however, was cited as not serious to serious in terms of difficulty. Understanding school registration procedures posed the least serious adjustment difficulty in this problem area.

Within the personal situations problem area, relating to Israeli students was the most formidable adjustment difficulty. The extent of difficulty assigned to this item was between not serious and serious. This finding, when combined with that for communicating with Israelis in the Hebrew language problem area, suggests that cultural factors as well as language competency come into play in American-Israeli communication. The highest percentage (22.6%) of serious and very serious responses in the personal situation problem area was for having adequate financial resources. This adjustment difficulty is also listed by Church (1982) as

*Table 1—Mean Rating and Rank Order of SAAI Problem Area Scores For 671 American Students in Israeli Colleges, Universities, and Yeshivot*

Problem Area	Mean Rating <sup>a</sup>	Rank Order <sup>b</sup>
Living Arrangements	2.872	1
Hebrew Language	1.781	2
Academic Matters	1.691	3
Personal Situations	1.647	4

<sup>a</sup>Mean rating is based on a response continuum of 1.00—none, 2.00—not serious, 3.00—serious, 4.00—very serious.

<sup>b</sup>Rank order of one represents greatest average reported difficulty.

*Table 2—Mean Rating and Rank Order of SAAI Adjustment Difficulty Scores for 671 American Students Studying in Israeli Colleges, Universities, and Yeshivot*

Problem Area and Adjustment Difficulty	Mean Rating <sup>a</sup>	Rank Order <sup>b</sup>
<b>Hebrew Language</b>		
writing term papers	2.361	1
communicating with Israelis	2.133	2
feeling embarrassed to speak Hebrew	1.995	3
taking exams in Hebrew	1.968	4
reading text for class	1.919	5
making myself understood in class	1.684	6
understanding the professor in class	1.645	7
taking class notes	1.528	8
<b>Academic Matters</b>		
obtaining secretarial services	2.053	1
finding academic resources	2.043	2
meeting time pressures	1.871	3
obtaining academic advisement	1.729	4
taking exams	1.720	5
having access to faculty for academic discussions	1.630	6
knowing teacher expectations of me	1.584	7
dealing with competitiveness	1.538	8
understanding grading system	1.504	9
understanding school registration procedures	1.451	10
<b>Personal Situations</b>		
relating to Israeli students	2.016	1
being homesick	1.970	2
finding dates	1.934	3
feeling depressed	1.903	4
having adequate financial resources	1.887	5
establishing acquaintances with people other than students	1.851	6
relating to students of non-English speaking countries (other than Israelis)	1.846	7
being lonely	1.735	8
keeping in touch with family/friends in America	1.714	9
relating to faculty members on social level	1.682	10
obtaining personal advisement	1.675	11
having a social life	1.562	12
relating to students from other English-speaking countries	1.317	13
relating to American students	1.286	14
<b>Living Arrangements</b>		
phone facilities	2.960	1
adequate facilities to prepare food	2.458	2
getting around on the Sabbath (if you travel on the Sabbath)	2.231	3

laundry facilities	2.230	4
banking facilities	2.149	5
enough space for study in living quarters	2.133	6
privacy in living quarters	2.108	7
living quarters too small	1.928	8
adjusting to food	1.901	9
adequate facilities to buy meals	1.844	10
mailing facilities	1.821	11
too many people in my apartment	1.775	12
having proper furniture	1.761	13
relating to roommates or apartment mates	1.745	14
having proper transportation	1.700	15
adjusting to local social customs and norms	1.664	16
not being invited to Israeli homes	1.578	17.5
adjusting to climate	1.578	17.5
adequate facilities to buy groceries	1.574	19
having the proper Sabbath atmosphere (if so inclined)	1.430	20
living quarters too far from school	1.346	21

\*Mean rating is based on a response continuum of 1.00—none, 2.00—not serious, 3.00—serious, 4.00—very serious.

<sup>b</sup>Rank order of one represents greatest average reported difficulty.

among the commonly reported problems of foreign students. The difficulty of relating to American students was considered slightly above not a problem; it was the least serious difficulty within the personal situations problem area.

#### **Differences and Similarities in Adjustment Difficulties of Males versus Females**

Significant differences were found between the rankings given by male and female students to the adjustment difficulties in the personal situations and academic matters problem areas. Male students encountered significantly more adjustment difficulties overall in the personal situations problem area, whereas female students encountered significantly more adjustment difficulties overall in the academic matters problem area. No significant differences were found between the rankings for male and female students in the living arrangements and Hebrew language problem areas.

In only 18 of the 53 individual adjustment difficulties in this study were signifi-

cant differences found between male and female students. Within the personal situations problem area, males as compared with females assigned significantly more seriousness to the following adjustment difficulties—having a social life and keeping in touch with family and friends in America—whereas female students encountered significantly more adjustment difficulties in being homesick, feeling depressed, and being lonely. Within the academic matters problem area, females assigned significantly more seriousness to the following adjustment difficulties: finding academic resources and having access to faculty for academic discussion.

Within the Hebrew language problem area, taking class notes and feeling embarrassed to speak Hebrew were assigned a significantly different level of seriousness by male and female students. Males considered taking notes to be a more serious problem, whereas, females felt more embarrassed speaking Hebrew. The gender difference in taking class notes may be attributed

to the fact that high-school female students demonstrate better writing skills than males in America (Applebee et al., 1990; Mullis et al., 1990; Snyder, 1989). The gender difference in feeling embarrassed to speak Hebrew may be due to a cultural difference, in that females are expected to be more reserved and males to be more forthcoming in expressing themselves, even if they speak with mistakes. It is also possible that this difference exists because males are called on more often by teachers and are involved in more interaction than females in American schools (Sadker & Sadker, 1980). Therefore, they would develop a higher degree of courage to speak than females even when they have not acquired fluency in the language.

Within the living arrangements problem area, males had significantly more difficulty than females with the following adjustment items: inadequate facilities to buy meals, living quarters too far from school, adjustment to food, lack of proper furniture, inadequate facilities to buy groceries, adjusting to local social customs and norms, living quarters too small, and having proper transportation. Females had significantly more difficulties than males with phone facilities.

#### **Summary of Results**

In general, the adjustment difficulties faced by American undergraduate students in Israel are not serious and are lower in magnitude than those experienced by international students in America and by foreign students in other countries. The reason for this may be the special affinity these (predominantly Jewish) students feel toward Israel. Many reported an intrinsic motivation for study in Israel; only 6% of the study sample reported that their reason for study in Israel was obtaining credit while having a good time. It is logical to conclude that such intrinsic motivation may reduce the frustrations of adjustment difficulties experienced by the American students.

Although more than a third of the study subjects reported that their Hebrew language mastery before starting to study in Israel was best described as none or poor, the language problem area was rated lower than not serious. This finding suggests that a lack of Hebrew language knowledge does not pose much of a problem for English-speaking students in Israel. This may be due to the widespread familiarity with English in Israel. In particular in the academic community, English is practically a second language and is a primary reading source in many academic disciplines. Many programs in Israel are geared to accommodate English-speaking students with no knowledge of Hebrew. Therefore, competency in Hebrew is not an essential skill for successful adjustment to study in Israeli colleges, universities, and yeshivot.

#### **PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS**

A guidebook developed specifically for high-school and college students who plan to study in Israel would be a valuable resource in minimizing the inevitable adjustment difficulties faced by young people studying abroad. It should address the most common problems faced by students and effective strategies for dealing with them.

The guide should also provide information about the unique features of specific Israeli universities and yeshivot so that an appropriate match can be made between student characteristics and goals and the Israeli institutions in which they study. This material should emphasize items covered by the SAAI, such as exams, teacher expectations, grading systems, necessary financial resources, living quarters, food, local social customs and norms, living conditions, and the standard of living, which is lower than in the United States.

It is also important that advisors in both America and in Israel of the American students studying in Israel be made aware of the differences in types and extent of difficulties encountered by men and women.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In the course of conducting this study, the author saw the need for the following areas of research.

- It would be useful to compare American students attending different types of post-high school programs in Israel, such as yeshivot versus the university. This may provide insights into the relationship, if any, between motivations for studying in Israel and the extent of adjustment difficulty in the four SAAI problem areas. The results of such a study could shed light on the importance of matching students to the appropriate institutions to meet their needs.
- It would be useful to compare different English-speaking groups of students in Israel, such as Canadian, British, and American students. The results would indicate the extent to which cultural factors come into play in the adjustment of such students, for whom language (English) would be a constant.
- Further study is recommended on the relationship of student age to the extent of adjustment difficulty experienced. This research would clarify the role of maturity in student adjustment abroad.
- It would be useful to compare the extent of adjustment difficulties experienced in particular problem areas by American students who are in their first semester abroad with those who are in their second year. The effect of length of stay in a foreign country on a student's adjustment in that country is a matter needing research attention.
- Further study is recommended to ascertain the relationship between the extent of knowledge of the host country's language and the extent of adjustment difficulty in problem areas researched in this study. Although it was found to be a minor problem to American students studying in Israel, lack of language competence could be a very serious problem for

Americans studying in other countries.

## CONCLUSION

An Israel experience, particularly an extended time of study, is a very effective means of strengthening Jewish identity. The American Jewish community needs to capitalize on the drive that currently propels many college students to study in Israel. In turn, it will be revitalized by the technology of Jewish living that college students can bring back to this country from their experiences studying in Israel.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author acknowledges with appreciation the contribution made by his friend and colleague, Rabbi Mark Levine, consultant at the Board of Jewish Education of Greater Washington, in the development of the introductory section of this article.

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## ERRATA

Two important items were inadvertently omitted from articles in the Winter/Spring 1993/94 issue of the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*.

Arlene Kahn, co-author of "Reaching Out to Recovering Jews: A Professional Partnership with the Jewish Community," is a certified alcoholism counselor and has received ACSW certification.

The major contribution of Jonathan Woocher to the framing of the article, "The Case for Jewish Political Studies in the Field of Jewish Communal Service," was not acknowledged by the authors, who requested that the readers of the *Journal* be made aware of that fact.