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Relationships of American Jews with Israel - What We Know and What We Need to Know

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What We Know

Distancing from Israel: The Evidence

In May 1967, millions of American Jews were transfixed by events unfolding in the Middle East. Israel stood on the brink of war, threatened by Arab armies on all its borders. The drama was also being played out in the United Nations, punctuated by the memorable eloquence of Israel's ambassador, Abba Eban, as well as in the corridors of power in Washington, where Israel's representatives sought American diplomatic and material support. To many American Jews, the threat to Israel's very existence, the possibility that millions of Jews might perish, and the seeming indifference (or overt hostility) of the world's major powers aroused painful memories. It had been only twenty-two years earlier that the few survivors of the Holocaust were liberated from the concentration camps and the full horror and tragedy of the Nazi atrocities were revealed.

What would soon be seen as the “miraculous” victory of the Israeli army in the Six-Day War set in motion a rather remarkable period in the history of American Jewry. Israel moved to the fore as the most compelling cause in American Jewish life and became the centerpiece of fund-raising and of political activism. The cause of Israel pushed aside the civil rights agenda, liberalism, and even the fight against American antisemitism as the major public issues of American Jewry's vaunted organizational infrastructure. Philanthropic campaigns reached new heights, exceeded in turn by the campaigns during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, another time of palpable threat to Jewish survival. These developments also helped to recruit thousands of lay and professional activists -- many of them affluent, well educated, and thoroughly Americanized -- to the Jewish organizational world.

Two additional issues soon came to capture the attention of those activists. The first, beginning in the 1970s, was the plight of Soviet Jews oppressed in their own country and denied the right of free emigration to Israel or the West. The other issue, which came to the fore at about the same time, was the Holocaust. Remembering and memorializing the Shoah through museums, school curricula, books, university courses and chairs, conferences, the arts and manifold acts of public recognition, became a major cultural and institutional focus of American Jewish life. The Holocaust and Israel became, in the opinion of many observers, the “twin pillars” supporting American Jewish identity. They certainly dominated Jewish public activity, epitomizing the struggle for survival against great odds that served as the major leitmotif of “civil Judaism” (Woocher 1986).

Indeed, the three thematically complementary causes could be seen (and were seen) as alternate applications of the same fundamental principles. Jews constituted one people with an obligation to come to one another's aid in time of danger. The United Jewish Appeal's slogans of the time, such as “Keep The Promise” and “We Are One,” blatantly appealed to this keenly felt sense of shared obligation. So did the rallying cry, “Never Again.” American Jews' failure or inability to come to the aid of the victims of the Nazis served to heighten the resolve of the generation of the 1960s and 1970s to “never again” allow Jews, wherever they might be, to fall

victim to persecution. Israel's defiance of the perceived odds in 1967 and 1973 was taken as paradigmatic of what Jews could and had to do, time and again. American Jews, by fighting for the survival of their fellow Jews elsewhere, would in turn justify and work toward their own survival, against the odds of assimilation.

It was in this period, too, that politically active Jews dramatically altered their method of approach to elected office holders. In the post-war period (1945-1967) Jewish lobbyists and the groups behind them had pressed their objectives through moral suasion and coalition building, often with other liberal advocacy groups, especially civil rights organizations. Jews took great pains to frame their particular interests in terms of broader public interest. The fight against American antisemitism, for example, was never presented as a matter of special pleading, but was depicted in conjunction with other causes that sought to rid American society of prejudice, discrimination, and intolerance of all kinds (Hertzberg 1963). After 1967, by contrast, Jewish activists changed both their tactics and their principled stance. They moved more assuredly and independently to present their concern for Israel and Soviet Jewry as matters of importance to Jews as Jews. They also came to pressure office-holders more vigorously. Jewish activists rewarded their elected friends with significant campaign contributions and punished their political adversaries by supporting potential opponents, often with considerable success.

In retrospect, we can see that The Six Day War inaugurated a very unusual, and eventually limited period in the relationship of American Jews with Israel. The period before 1967 (aside from the years surrounding the wars in 1948 and 1956) was one that saw only limited involvement of American Jews with Israel (see, for example, Sklare and Greenblum 1967). Similarly, perhaps by way of returning to their pre-Six Day War stance, since the early 1980's, American Jews have become decreasingly attached to Israel. This decline in attachment has taken a number of forms. Thus, American Jews have grown less enamored of Israelis, less interested in Israel, and less active in supporting Israel by way of political activism, and, possibly, philanthropic contributions (e.g. Bubis 1992; Cohen and Bubis 1998).

The initial impetus for the distancing argument derived from the criticism of Israeli government policies by American Jewish leaders that emerged in the 1980's. (To be clear, criticism in and of itself signifies attachment –the most Israel-involved American Jews have been more prone to criticize Israeli politics over the years.) The 1970's witnessed only isolated instances of public criticism by what were, in effect, fringe intellectuals in the Jewish community. But, by the 1980's, increasingly mainstream American Jewish leaders publicly voiced demurral from Israeli government policies. Four major flash points are particularly noteworthy. The first is the Sabra and Shatilla massacres in September 1982. Next came the arrest of Jonathan Pollard in 1986. Shortly thereafter came the intifada in late 1987 and early 1988. Next, American Jews closely watched the post-election bargaining in the winter of 1988-89 that raised what become known as the "Who-is-a-Jew?" question. In the 1990s, in part, because events narrowed the range of options in Israel's relations with the Arab world, American Jews seemed less likely to hotly contest Israeli war-and-peace policies from the right or the left. However, repeated clashes within Israel related to the rights of Conservative and Reform Judaism captured the attention of American Jewish leaders and the rank-and-file (Cohen 1988).

American Jews' adverse reactions to these events signified a growing disenchantment not just with certain Israeli leaders and policies. In time, the broadening disenchantment has come to pertain to Israel as the Jewish state and to Israel as a Judaic symbol in the consciousness of American Jews (Cohen 1989b, 1990b, 1992). The critical statements of American Jewish leaders

and activists of hard-line Israeli policies had the effect of expressing, signifying and promoting less regard and admiration for Israelis' sagacity, morality, commitment to democracy, and sincerity in the pursuit of peace. Moreover, Israel's unfavorable images among Americans generally (i.e., non-Jews) may well have contributed to Israel's diminished standing among American Jews. In the 1980s Eytan Gilboa (1987) wrote presciently, "Substantial anti-Israel shifts in the attitudes of the general public toward Israel, which so far have not occurred, could cause erosion in the ethnic attitude structure [i.e., attachment to Israel] of American Jews." (See also Gilboa 1990.)

The declining levels of American Jews' philanthropic contributions to the local Jewish federation drives, the centralized philanthropic campaigns, may constitute another expression of the distancing phenomenon. For years, the United Jewish Appeal (whose successor is the United Jewish Communities) has functioned as a barometer of American Jewish commitment to Israel. The cause of supporting Israel was understood, at least until recently, as the principal single motivation for Jewish philanthropic giving to the local federation campaigns that feed into the national UJA drive.

The declines in giving to Israel through centralized charities have taken place on three levels. First, total giving in real, inflation-adjusted terms has declined fairly steadily since the mid-1970's. Second, the proportion of all funds allocated to Israel and other overseas beneficiaries has also declined. Last, philanthropic support for Israel is declining in terms of its meaning for Israel. As a fraction of the budget for social welfare needs of the Israeli citizenry, or as a fraction of the total economy, the dollars derived from American Jewish donors comprise a far smaller share than in the past.

Recently conducted survey research (Cohen and Bubis 1998) uncovers some of the thinking and feeling behind declining interest on the part of Jewish lay and professional leaders to support Israeli causes. Very simply, they feel that Israel is relatively less important than are Jewish education or Jewish social services. Moreover, they feel that any funds cut from supporting "Israel" (i.e., the sorts of programs supported or run by the Jewish Agency for Israel) could be more easily replaced by outside sources (perhaps the Israeli government) than could funds cut from Jewish education or Jewish social services in the United States.

At the same time, we cannot ignore some evidence to the contrary. Observers report marked increases to "friends of " and other specialized campaigns. These trends may point to not so much a decline in interest in Israel-oriented philanthropy, but to a shift in interest from giving to a multi-purpose campaign, collectively oriented destination toward more specific and more narrowly focused causes.

The fluctuations in American Jewish travel to Israel constitute yet another source for concern over American Jewish support for Israel. Israelis interpreted the severe falloffs in tourism during the first year of the intifada in 1988 and during the Gulf War in 1991 as signs of the hollowness of American Jewish proclamations of existential solidarity with Israel. In a related area, the difficulties encountered in substantially raising the number of young people participating in the Israel experience also underscore the limited American Jewish engagement in Israel. Years of marketing, advertising, personnel training, program development, and communal subsidies by organized Jewry, sparked in large part by Birthright Israel and its predecessor organizations, had yet to produce major increases in travel by younger Jews to Israel until 1999 (Cohen 1986, 1994-5; Chazan and Cohen 1999). By the end of that year, though,

Birthright Israel scored its first sign of initial “victory” among American college students, in bringing thousands of them to Israel.

But perhaps more fundamental than all these issues is the implicit comparison of the recent times (say, the last two decades or so) with the unusual period of American Jewish romance with Israel that followed the Six Day War. The Six Day War helped produce a profound re-orientation in the American Jewish psyche, one that was increasingly political, assertive, and pro-Israel.

In the decade that followed, several highly captivating news reports helpful to Israel's image followed fast upon each other. Jews and other Americans clearly attended to the early acts of urban terrorism in 1968, the War of Attrition in 1969-71, the Munich Massacre in 1972, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the proclamation of Arab unity behind the PLO in 1974, the UN's Zionism-is-racism resolution in 1975, and, finally, the Entebbe Rescue in 1976. These stories served to reinforce the idealized images of Israelis so widespread among American Jews in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The highly critical reactions of American Jewish leaders to the less favorable events of the 1980's took on special meaning precisely because they were in such sharp contrast with the wildly unrealistic favorable images of Israelis commonly held by American Jews (and others) just a decade earlier (Cohen 1985).

Certainly far less favorable stories dominated the news in the 1980's: Sabra and Shatilla in 1982, the election of Meir Kahane in 1984, violent clashes between Haredim and their opponents in the middle 1980's, the Jonathan Pollard Affair in 1986, the outbreak of the intifada in late 1987, the attempt to revise the Who-is-a-Jew law in 1988, seamy in-fighting and wrangling over constructing a coalition in 1990, the clashes between Haredim and Conservative and Reform Jews over prayer at the Western Wall, and the ongoing struggles over non-Orthodox conversion. The string of peace agreements between Israel and Arab parties in the middle 1990's may have added to admiration for Israel. On the other hand, we cannot assume the same for two significant subsequent developments: the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin and the election of Prime Minister Netanyahu over Shimon Peres, a figure well-known to American Jews. Despite some impressions to the contrary, over the years American Jews have preferred Labor Party leaders and policies to those of their Likud counterparts. In fact, except for the Orthodox and some Zionist organization leaders, the vast majority of American Jewish leadership has, over the years, felt more kindly to more conciliatory rather than more hard-line Israeli leaders and positions (Cohen 1989a, 1990a; Cohen and Lipset 1991).

The steadily declining favorability of news (to American Jewish eyes and ears) coming out of Israel comported very neatly with reports of a significant age-related gap in pro-Israel sentiment (see, for example, Cohen 1987, 1989c, 1991b; Waxman 1992). The attitudes of younger adult Jews are of course especially critical, in part because they are destined to inevitably replace their elders in the ranks of American Jewish leaders and public.

Analyses of all the surveys on the matter produce the same essential results: a weak to moderate direct relationship between age and Israel attachment. Older American Jews are somewhat more attached to Israel than their middle-aged counterparts who, in turn, are more attached than younger Jewish adults. The patterns vary somewhat over time and by the particular measure being utilized, but the essential contours of the relationship emerges in all surveys and with almost all measures of Israel attachment.

To illustrate, we may turn to the data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (see Kosmin et al. 1991; Goldstein 1992) that contained three items especially pertinent to the study of Israel attachment. One question explicitly asked respondents how closely attached they felt toward Israel. Two others asked whether the respondent spoke about Israel with friends and family members and, if so, how often. By calibrating the answers to the attachment question and a combination of the two questions on talking about Israel, I devised an index that ranges from 0 to 100, measuring extent of attachment to Israel. High scores represent greater attachment.

Index of Attachment* to Israel by Age

(Entries are mean scores on the Israel Attachment Index)

Source: 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, weighted by household weights and by number Jewish adults in the household.

Age:	18-39	40-59	60+	Total (all respondents, age 18+)
	39	46	56	46
<u>Number of Visits to Israel</u>				
Twice or more	74	75	75	75
Once	57	46	57	53
Never	29	41	47	36
Never visited Israel, controlling for Jewish involvement**	31	38	45	36

*Index consists of three NJPS questionnaire items, ranging in score from 0 to 100.

**Only respondents who have never been to Israel, assuming - by way of Multiple Classification Analysis - of equality among the three age groups in levels of Jewish involvement as measured by a comprehensive scale.

Those age 40-59 scored an average of 46 on this index, as contrasted with a mean of 39 among those under 40, and 56 for those age 60 and over (see table above). Significantly, more detailed analysis of 10-year age cohorts (not shown) demonstrates that the slide in Israel attachment occurs over the entire age range, and is not concentrated in only one or two adjacent age groups.

These findings test the assumption that the unfavorable historical events of the 1980s (the decade immediately prior to the National Jewish Population Survey) held chief responsibility for the depressed levels of Israel attachment among the young. If such were the case, then we should find a sharp drop in attachment at a certain point in the age spectrum, say those who are now in their 30's or early 40's. That is, we might expect that the older group who came of political age before a certain time would report high levels of attachment. In contrast, those whose memories

of Israel were forged primarily in the 1980s would feel more distant from Israel. Instead of finding a sharp differentiation between older and younger Jews, we find a gradual and nearly uniform slippage in Israel attachment as we descend the age ladder, from older, to middle-aged, to younger Jews. This pattern argues against assigning prime responsibility for the apparent erosion in Israel attachment to the events of the 1980s. Rather, larger processes account for such erosion as may have occurred.

Significantly, the age-related decline in Israel attachment is limited to those who have never been to Israel. Among those who have traveled to Israel, be it once or more often, age and attachment are unrelated; younger Jews who have traveled to Israel are as attached as their older counterparts. Only among those who have never been to Israel do we find a clear relationship between (younger) age and (lower) Israel attachment. (These NJPS results replicate and confirm the findings from the earlier studies of American Jewish national samples conducted in the 1980s.)

Traveling to Israel both reflects and provokes increased attachment to Israel. Those who visit Israel do so in part because of their prior attachment to Israel; in addition, the Israel experience undoubtedly leaves a pro-Israel imprint upon most travelers. To be sure, the direction of the relationship between involvement and travel to Israel is far from clear, but the higher levels of attachment among visitors are indisputable.

The NJPS data can also address the question of the likely endurance of the lower levels of attachment to Israel among younger Jews. Is this feature something that they will grow out of as they mature, or is it relatively permanent and enduring? After all, many younger adults have yet to experience Israel first hand. Many will come to be more involved in Jewish life as they marry, have children, and remain in one location long enough to acquire and thicken formal and informal relationships within the Jewish community. Perhaps as they enter the community in greater numbers with greater commitment, they will come to take on the distinctive attitudes of the active Jewish community, one of which is certainly attachment to Israel.

Contrary to this line of thinking, the analysis supports the notion that the age-related differences in Israel attachment are unlikely to evaporate once younger Jews come to approximate their elders' levels of Jewish involvement (if, indeed, they ever do). For those who have never been to Israel, a gap of nearly 18 points in the Israel attachment index separates those under 40 from those 60 and over. Once we control for Jewish involvement (a composite index made up diverse items pertaining to ritual practice, holiday celebration, communal involvement, and informal affiliation), the gap in Israel attachment between older and younger respondents remains almost as large as before. *In other words, even if we imagine (if only statistically) that younger Jews were as Jewishly involved as their elders, they would still manifest significantly less attachment to Israel. Younger Jews are not less attached to Israel "because" they are less involved in Jewish life at the moment. Rather, these results indicate that younger Jews' lower levels of attachment to Israel are better conceived as an enduring feature, one that may derive from long-term historical processes rather than a transitory consequence of their youthfulness.*

Writing in 1996, after reviewing survey evidence that at the time, ran counter to the distancing hypothesis, I nevertheless came to the following conclusion, in effect arguing with my own data. "If ... the cohort-based decline in Israel attachment [is real], then the apparent stability in aggregate Jewish involvement with Israel through the 1980's may well be followed by a slow and gradual but persistent erosion in Jewish support in the early part of the twentieth first

century” (Cohen 1996). Indeed, in survey data I collected in a national survey of American Jews in 1997 (Cohen 1998), this prediction proved true.

The results come from a national survey of 1,005 American Jews collected in a self-administered mail-back questionnaire by Market Facts, Inc. in 1997. The survey was undertaken as part of a larger study sponsored by the Florence G. Heller - Jewish Community Centers Association Research Center. They may be fruitfully compared with those from a similar survey on a similar sample collected in 1988 (Cohen 1991a).

The results of the 1997 survey certainly point in the direction of diminished support for Israel. When asked about their emotional attachment to Israel, just 9% answered extremely attached (as opposed to 13% in the 1988 study), and only another 18% said very attached (versus 24% in 1988). In other words, a total of just over a quarter (27% in 1997, versus 37% in 1988) defined themselves at least very attached to Israel. When asked about how close they feel to Israelis, 8% said to a great extent (against 19% in 1988), and 41% answered to some extent (versus 54% in 1988). About a third do see Israel as extremely important to their sense of being Jewish. These results place Israel well down on the list of symbols and concepts that seem to resonate with American Jews. By contrast, even more, about half the respondents, said that Torah, High Holidays, the Jewish family, American anti-semitism, the Jewish People, and the Holocaust were very important to their sense of being Jewish.

With respect to their ideas of the good Jew, just 20% thought it was essential for a good Jew to support Israel, and even fewer (18%) had similar views regarding visiting Israel during one’s life. For most respondents, these behaviors were at least desirable, but about a third, in fact, found them irrelevant to their concept of a good Jew.

Most respondents (52%) agreed that Israel is critical to sustaining American Jewish life. Three-quarters also rejected the view that Israel doesn’t really need American Jewish charity any more (a view increasingly widespread among American Jewish donors). However, at the same time, just 11% believed that contributing to Jewish philanthropies is essential to their concept of a good Jew, joining 47% who think it desirable.

Clearly, different questions elicit varying levels of engagement with Israel; some items are more personal, others more theoretical and abstract. However, with some degree of caution, it seems fair to say that, in 1997, Israel can be termed very important to only about a fifth to a quarter of American Jews. Israel is of little importance to about a third of the population; it is of intermediate importance to just under half of American Jewry.

Israel Attachment in 1997

Do you agree or do you disagree with each of the following statements?

	<u>Agree Strongly</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree Strongly</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
Israel is critical to sustaining American Jewish life	15	37	29	5	14
Israel doesn't really need American Jewish charity any more	2	7	48	26	7

How emotionally attached are you to Israel?

Extremely attached	9	Not attached	27	Very attached	18
Don't know	4	Somewhat attached	42		

To what extent do you feel	<u>To a Great Extent</u>	<u>To Some Extent</u>	<u>Not At All</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
Close to Israelis	8	41	43	8

In thinking about your sense of being Jewish, how important are each of the following?

	<u>Extremely Important</u>	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Somewhat Important</u>	<u>Not Important</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
Israel	33	33	28	5	1

In your opinion, for a person to be a good Jew, which of the following items are essential, which are desirable, which do not matter, and which are undesirable (better not to do)?

	<u>Essential</u>	<u>Desirable</u>	<u>Does Not Matter</u>	<u>Not Desirable</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
Support Israel	20	51	28	1	1
Visit Israel during one's life	18	41	38	1	2
Contribute to J. philanthropies	11	47	40	1	2

The survey results were augmented and supported by the qualitative data Arnold Eisen and I collected for our study of American Jewish identity (Cohen and Eisen 1998; Cohen and

Eisen forthcoming). To take a compelling example, the limited extent to which Israel actually figures in the private lives of American Jewish consciousness was underscored for us by two focus group discussions conducted I conducted in 1995 with parents of Hebrew school youngsters in a suburban synagogue in New England. Both sessions opened with responses to very general questions on what parts of being Jewish the participants found attractive and unattractive. *None of the participants in either focus group so much as mentioned Israel during these initial conversations, each of which lasted about half an hour.* This failure was all the more startling in that I had moved to Israel about three years earlier from the same community, a fact well-known to the focus group participants. For these focus group participants, at least, Israel carries little real import in the private sphere of Jewish identity, the part that is closest to their inner core.

Distancing from Israel: Some Explanations

How can we understand the declining attachment to Israel?

One explanation looks to larger trends in American Jewish identity. Specifically, we focus upon the Jewish public sphere, an area of concern and activity that embraces politics, philanthropy, and large organizational life (Liebman and Cohen 1990; Cohen and Liebman forthcoming). The public sphere of American Judaism can be distinguished clearly from the intimate private sphere of self and family. It is also distinct from institutional worlds like the synagogue and the Jewish Community Center. The latter, while certainly public in one sense, are geared to meet the local and highly personal needs of individuals and families. They also serve their clienteles one at a time or in small groups. Major philanthropic organizations such as the federations, and politically oriented agencies such as the Anti Defamation League or the pro-Israel lobby (AIPAC), work on a very different plane, toward very different ends.

The forces of personalism and privatization that have come to characterize American Jewish identity, and the diminished salience of their ethnic identification, have exerted a major impact upon Jews' engagement with the public sphere in recent years. That engagement, measured both by the comments of from depth interviews and by the responses to sample surveys, has noticeably and sharply declined. Today's Jews differ markedly from their predecessors in their perception of the public sphere, and differ too in the degree to which that sphere serves as the fulcrum of their own Jewish identities. The relative importance of the private sphere and the public sphere in Jewish identity has shifted in favor of the former. This development comes at a time when Israel involvement among American Jews has classically resided in the public sphere.

To elaborate, since the inception of the Zionist movement, the organized American Jewish community has pursued a largely two-dimensional relationship with the Jewish community of Israel (at first the pre-State settlement or Yishuv, and, since 1948, the State). One dimension of their relationship has consisted of lobbying Congress and the President to extend economic, military, and diplomatic support to Israel. The other dimension has comprised fund-raising to support pressing social welfare needs that largely flowed from the rescue of Jewish refugees and their re-settlement in Israel. More generally, the funds were meant to lend material support to a society perceived as having to expend a disproportionate share of its resources on security needs. Israel was perceived as the bulwark of Jewish survival in the second half of the

twentieth century, with American Jewry playing a key role in ensuring that the State had the wherewithal to perform that function.

Both the relation between the two Jewries (Israeli and American) and the perception of that relation have changed dramatically in recent years. The ultimate cause for that change is more deep-seated: The growing priority for American Jews is individual Jewish meaning, and the question is whether Israel enhances or detracts from that meaning. All too often, Israel is been judged and found wanting.

One change underlying the cooling American Jewish passion for Israel, surely, is the loss of the factor that had served to fuel attachment to Israel heretofore. The once-beleaguered Jewish State no longer seems to require the financial and political assistance it once did. Israel's army is strong, its economy booming. Fears for Israel's survival have abated. American Jews no longer feel that Israel needs their help to the same degree, and feel less compelled to offer it.

Their political and philanthropic contributions, they have reason to believe, are no longer as prized by Israelis as they once were. In the mid-1990s, several Israeli public figures said, in effect, to American Jews: "We don't need you." In his first visit to the U.S. after his election as Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin told AIPAC officials that Israel no longer needed their help lobbying Congress and the Administration. Shortly thereafter, Finance Minister Avraham Shochat commented that Israel no longer needed Israel Bonds - that Israel could (and soon would) borrow more cheaply on the open markets. Yossi Beilin, serving as Deputy Foreign Minister, observed that Israel no longer needed Diaspora contributions for social needs. And, in repeated statements, President Ezer Weizman announced that Israel needs nothing at all from the Diaspora, with the single exception of young Jewish bodies coming on *aliyah*. To be sure, these statements made their biggest impressions on top American Jewish leaders. But the sentiment conveyed ("We don't need you") certainly seeped down to the lower rank of pro-Israel activists.

Moreover, few American Jews read or speak Hebrew; only about 5-6% claim to understand the language, and very few read Hebrew literature in translation or seek out Israel films with subtitles. The subtleties of Israel's political process and ethnic mosaic elude comprehension far away, and are not covered in any detail by general or Jewish American media (Eisen 1998). Israel, in short, does not force itself on American Jewish consciousness; American Jews for their part seem not to mind the resultant distance. As one interviewee in Cohen and Eisen's *The Jew Within* study put it,

I certainly notice it [Israel]. I have an ear out for it more than I might for some other country. Yes, I notice it. I don't follow it very closely. I don't look for it and I can't name all the politicians that are important although I could name a handful.

[Other citations in this section also derive from the interviews with moderately affiliated American Jews conducted in the middle 1990's for Cohen and Eisen, forthcoming.]

The troubled state of the "peace process" in the middle 1990's may have contributed to the lack of desire to "follow it very closely" (Fein 1982, 1989). The vast majority of American Jews see themselves as pro-Israel. At the same time, many harbor ill-defined doubts, confusions, or objections to the State's policies, particularly when the Israeli leadership emanates from the Right. Yet they resist aligning themselves with American Jewish groups and informal networks

that publicly dissent from official Israeli government policy -- whether out of a sense of professed ignorance, or more tellingly, out of a sense that they lack the moral standing to dissent. In private, though, they do not shy away from criticism in conversations. As one interviewee remarked,

I think there are many different cultures that can lay a claim to Israel's soil as their own. I think the Palestinians have been displaced. I think that is terribly unfortunate and I don't think that should happen. I think that some kind of home for the Palestinians is correct. So, I am glad that Israel is finally doing something in that direction. I don't know if this is the answer, but at least some progress is being made.

Another interviewee in *The Jew Within* study objected strongly to the militarism associated in his mind with Israel. Though perhaps unavoidable, in light of past and current confrontation with Israel's Arab neighbors, the militaristic aspects of Israel are nevertheless unappealing to this New Haven architect, community volunteer, and father of three boys:

The Arab/Israeli conflict is something that I find very hard to access. I feel ambivalent about it. I think the sites would be phenomenal to see the history of it. But the militarism of it, it's always there. There is a strength and a vigor about it that I have trouble relating to because I am an American.

For yet another interviewee, it is the perceived prominence of right-wing political forces, especially when associated with what he regards as the "Orthodox lunatic fringe," that drives him to distance himself from Israel:

Frankly, even being vaguely associated with the Orthodox lunatic fringe in Israel, the [far right-wing] Kach groups [who call for the expulsion of Palestinians], and [Ariel] Sharon [a leading right-wing political figure known for his hard-line stands toward the Arabs], [I] have to say when Israel does something like that, that it's not my Israel. I'm not responsible for that.

The war and peace issues may have functioned as a minor irritant in most Jews' perception of Israel. However, over the years, what has come to be known as "the religious pluralism" question has captured even more attention among American rabbis and communal leaders, as well as the rank-and-file. One reason for this shift is their resentment of traditionalist Orthodox Jews. In addition, American Jews more readily assume they have more moral standing in debating, criticizing, and intervening in Israel's decision-making processes affecting religious issues than on those affecting Israeli security. A New Yorker in her sixties, was quite emotional when speaking of perceived religious discrimination in Israel. "I am very, very upset about the religious stranglehold that all these coalition parties have on making Israel's decisions. I think that Americans can have an influence, certainly not in politics, but in policies in the religious sphere."

At various points, Israeli political and religious leaders have been embroiled in heated debate over such issues as whether converts to Judaism who were converted by non-Orthodox rabbis would be regarded as Jewish under Israeli immigration law. Other matters of controversy entail whether non-Orthodox institutions should receive government funding to the same extent as that received by comparable Orthodox institutions; or whether sexually mixed Conservative and Reform prayer groups, would be permitted to pray within sight of the Western Wall. These

issues touch directly upon the Jewish sub-group identities of moderately (and actively) involved American Jews, almost all of whom identify with a major Jewish denomination (Lazerwitz et al. 1998, 40). It is thus no surprise that as many as 80% of the 1997 survey respondents agreed with the statement, “I get upset when Orthodox Jews in Israel try to limit the practice of Conservative and Reform Jews in Israel.” The slight is taken personally. One interviewee touched the heart of the matter when he said:

What I have become much more aware of is how, despite being a somewhat observant Jew, Israel is the one place where I would have the most trouble practicing my brand of Judaism because it's not recognized by the State of Israel.

Many American Jews feel that Israel symbolically belongs to them, or should. Perceived denigration of Conservative and Reform movements, ultimately at the behest of highly traditional Orthodox groups, thus seem equivalent to stealing Israel away from them, from the Jewish people as a whole, and limiting symbolic attachment to the Orthodox. Writing about these matters in 1989, I explained the reactions to questions on the pending “Who is a Jew?” legislation among a national sample of American Jews thusly:

The theme running through these responses is one of fear of potential rejection by Israel. Respondents felt that, by passing the proposed legislation, Israel would be rejecting their brand of Judaism, their family members [especially non-Jewish in-laws and many of their children], their friends, and their claim to a special attachment to the Jewish state, which they regard as a center and refuge for all Jews, not just the Orthodox. (Cohen 1989c, 48)

American Jewish sentiment about Israel, then, needs to be understood against the backdrop of antagonistic feelings toward the Orthodox, and in particular the more traditional or Haredi Orthodox (Cohen 1989c: 48). Several items in the 1997 survey indicated that this disaffection is not only significant, but likely growing. At one time, at least until the late 1960s, the Orthodox stood, in the eyes of many American Jews, for the highest standards of piety and Jewish commitment, even if their commitment and learning were seen as personally unattainable for their non-Orthodox admirers. Unlike Israelis, many of whom have long resented Orthodoxy's official power and political influence, few American Jews have historically harbored deep antipathy to the Orthodox among them. This seems to have changed in recent years. In 1997, almost four fifths of the respondents (79%) disagreed with calling the Orthodox the most authentic Jews. Majorities of survey respondents also agreed that the Orthodox are narrow-minded (51%), and that they (the respondents) are bothered by Orthodox Jews' feelings of superiority (52%).

These data, then, point to feelings of aversion to the Orthodox. The latter's forthright adherence to traditional Jewish attitudes sharply contrasts with the voluntarism characteristic of American society generally and American Jewish identity in particular. Orthodoxy sees Judaism as demanding punctilious ritual observance, establishes clear criteria for the right way to be Jewish, and enjoins Jews to reproach fellow Jews for failing to abide by Jewish law. None of these are particularly popular views among most American Jews, and neither – apparently – are the chief proponents of such views. Most American Jews deplore internecine conflict among Jews, and that they resent being judged as less good Jews because they are less observant or less believing. Their resentment of Orthodox claims to Jewish superiority in America carries over to

feelings about the Orthodox in Israel, and more generally, to images and feelings about Israel generally.

It is telling, we believe, that significant numbers of American Jews still explicitly regard Israel as an important part of their being a Jew, despite all the factors that tend in the opposite direction. The question, of course, is why. How does Israel nourish American Jews' sense of themselves as Jews? One interviewee, when asked about the type of Jew that he would like his nearly newborn son to become, answered:

The issue about him being religious doesn't matter. I would definitely want him to go to Israel. That was very, very powerful for me. I think I would want him to understand a lot of the history of the story and identity... the strong identification about being Jewish. That's going to be crucial. That's why Israel is very important.

Several interviewees remarked that Israel is important to them as “a safety net,” a “sanctuary” in case Jews should face persecution elsewhere in the world. Others spoke of their pride at Israel's military prowess. Still others said they felt completely unconnected to the State. As another interviewee put it,

If I never get there, I don't think I will have been completely unfulfilled. It's not like I need to go to feel completely Jewish.

A woman fondly recalled a visit to Israel years ago, but still expressed near-indifference to Israel at the time of the interview:

When I was there, it was overwhelming day to day. But I don't feel a real connection to it. Sometimes I feel bad about that. I don't have a huge connection. It's not the first thing I read about in the papers.

Her current indifference is even more striking in that she is among the minority of American Jews who have actually visited Israel, and she had a particularly positive experience to boot. Proponents of the Israel experience as a Jewish educational enterprise will no doubt be disheartened by such comments; but, in fairness, we found many more examples of individuals recalling their trips to Israel as exciting events in their lives. One person said, “I just loved it... just loved it. Loved being in Israel. I loved it more than I thought I would.” Interviewees emphasized various aspects of the experience, all of which were in some way connected to the their emergent Jewish identities. One man, for example, felt moved by the feeling of ties to the distant Jewish past:

One has to confront the fact that you have a wall or something and you see this piece of rock that people have been praying at, you know, for so long, and you have to confront a sort of mysticism. That actually holds some appeal to me.

A thirty-something woman, who grew up amidst a small Jewish minority in a small city in Texas, stressed relief at being part of the majority for once:

Oh yeah, I loved that [my first visit to Israel]. I thought that was great. I had never seen a Jewish bus driver or all of that kind of stuff. Just the idea that everybody around you is Jewish, it was such an opposite. I had such a strong awareness [growing up] that no one around me was Jewish, but that I was

standing out as being a Jewish child. I didn't have that much experience at that time. It seemed so noteworthy that everyone around you was Jewish, and you didn't have to have a sort of tense feeling that something bad might happen, or that people somehow might cross you and you would have to stand up for something.

Surveys report that about two thirds of American Jews say they want to go to Israel, nearly double the number who have already been there. Yet at the same time, several considerations inhibit the fulfillment of these intentions. One factor is of course concern about safety. "I'd love to take my family, but it's too scary for me now," said Rachel. For others, the trip has simply not meshed with family schedules as yet. "I know I have to go," said Joy. "We will go. When the kids are older." More often, we heard a generalized interest in going unaccompanied by any definitive plans to do so, as in these comments by Paul. "I would like to go. I would have a feeling of coming to a second home. I have heard so many things about it, and my friends felt strongly [about being in Israel]."

The lesson is explicit. Israel resonates sufficiently with American Jews' sense of who they are as Jews -- part of a people with a history, a minority people that has finally become a majority in one place in the world, a religious people that began its encounter with God at sites in the holy land -- to provoke a desire to visit. It is not just another vacation spot in their eyes, or merely a place rich in historical meaning. It would mean a homecoming of sorts. They have heard a lot about the place, and know it is valued by their community. But Israel is not central to who American Jews are as Jews -- and so the need to visit it, or learn about it, or wrestle with its importance to the Jewish people -- is far from pressing.

The Personally Engaged: A Challenge for Policymakers and Practitioners

Notwithstanding the general tendencies outlined above, some significant small number of American Jews today regularly visit, call, and write their friends and family members in Israel. They closely follow news of Israel in the Jewish as well as the general press. They know some Hebrew, and are at least somewhat familiar with Israeli society and culture beyond the question of Israel-Arab relations. They maintain direct relations with Israeli people, not just formal ties with institutions. They may have business relationships as well. Many of them envy American Jews who make *aliyah*, and would be satisfied, if not pleased, were their own children to do so. Such American Jews may be characterized as those who spend the major portion of their lives in the United States, but who have significant emotional lives in Israeli society as well.

While not unknown among Conservative and even Reform Jews, these sorts of relationships are more typical of many Orthodox communities. Among them, for example, spending a year in Israel between high school and college is the norm, and where at least a few families in their synagogue have made *aliyah*.

Among the most committed Jews are found the greatest number who see Israel as a source of personal meaning. These Jews also are easily mobilized in the public support of Israel. In other words, the two sorts of relationships with Israel -- the classic variety conducted in the public sphere of politics and philanthropy, the other in the private sphere -- are by no means exclusive. For the most committed of Jews, the private and public spheres of Judaism reinforce one another.

Given the relative strength in the private sphere of Jewish life, the most fruitful policy for enriching American Jews' relationship with Israel lies in expanding the number who draw powerful, enduring, and compelling personal meaning from their relationships with Israel and Israelis. This would mean policies aimed at augmenting the meaning of Israel for those who are now (still) politically and philanthropically active. It also means trying to elevate erstwhile mere "tourists" (among the third of adult American Jews who have visited Israel) to a more serious and personal engagement with Israel.

Relationships built around this struggle to develop a personally meaningful Israel necessarily mean engagement in the private as well as the public arena. The struggle would render Israel relevant to one's private identity as well as one's public commitments.

Policymakers and practitioners need to identify other struggles where the moral, symbolic, political, and financial support of Jews from one country can be utilized on behalf of Jews in the other country. Environmentalism, feminism, civil liberties, democracy, and consumers' rights suggest themselves as causes that might draw small, but culturally significant, numbers of Jews from both societies together. Israeli and American Jews should welcome one another's participation in their own struggles.

Orthodox Jews throughout the world are pioneers in advocating their particular vision of Israel, and in advancing the interests of their own communities, institutions, and programs. They also exhibit, as we suggested, the highest rates of personal involvement in Israel. The two phenomena are connected. Other Diaspora Jews and Israelis would do well to adopt the Orthodox model, not in substance, of course, but in form. That is, they should feel free to advance their particular, ideologically driven visions of Judaism and of Israel regardless of where they live.

The endeavor to forge meaningful and enduring cultural relationships between Israel and American Jewry, and more broadly, Israel and the Diaspora, is a daunting one. Yet, the construction of such relationships, or perhaps just the search for effective ways to do so, constitutes a national priority for the State of Israel in the 21st century, and an essential feature of the contemporary Zionist movement.

What We Need to Know

In light of the forgoing analysis, I would recommend that we study very closely the 10% or so of American Jews who have constructed a meaningful and compelling personal relationship with Israel. How did they do so? Perhaps it has been through visits, getting inside Israeli homes, and establishing or strengthening ongoing relationships with Israelis who were accessible to them -- former Americans, now olim; business associates; colleagues; family; and so forth. Letters, then telephone, and now e-mail have served to sustain and cement these relationships. They subscribe to the *Jerusalem Post* and/or the *Jerusalem Report*. They do give to Jewish Federation campaigns, but giving is a minor expression of their feelings for Israel.

Somehow, we need to explore what a personal meaning of Israel consists of and how it is nurtured. The foregoing analysis suggests several questions for research.

The first concerns the measure of attachment. To what extent has attachment to Israel indeed been declining, be it over time, or over generations (that is, with respect to age-related variation)? Which sectors of American Jewry are more or less attached to Israel?

Next, how can attachment be conceptualized and further refined. It comprises such emotions and behaviors as philanthropic support for Israel, political involvement, cultural activities, and learning and knowledge of Hebrew. What are the objects of attachment and how are they differently understood? Specifically, how do American Jews feel about the Land, People, Government, Religion, and Culture of Israel?

Next, what affects attachment and to what extent? How influential have been each of the following factors, discussed at length above:

- a. Concerns over the treatment of Conservative and Reform Judaism in Israel.
- b. Confusion over and disagreement with Israeli war-and-peace policies.
- c. The declining importance of Peoplehood generally, and of politics, philanthropy, and organizational life more pointedly.

Last, we need to understand how some people manage to formulate a very personal relationship with Israel. What does it mean for a small group of American Jews to have Israel serve as a very meaningful part of their Jewish identity? How did they get that way? What is the role of visits, reading material, family, business ties, and personal relationships?

Certainly, these are not the only questions we need to answer. But I do contend that they are among the most interesting, urgent, and policy-relevant.

Epilogue

The foregoing paper was written before the outbreak of hostilities around September 28, 2000. The dramatic increase in lethal encounters among both Israelis and Palestinians certainly has occasioned changes in the ways American Jews relate to Israel.

The persistence of ongoing hostilities in Israel have had two sorts of very profound effects upon the relationship of American Jews with Israel and, more specifically, on the conditions and opportunities for educating them to matters pertaining to Israel and its relationship to being Jewish.

On the one hand, the hostilities have sharply curtailed participation in Israel-based education programs, arguably, the primary instrument for deepening and enhancing engagement with Israel. Amidst over two decades of documented declining attachment to Israel, the one definable group not to have experienced such declines are those who have been to Israel, often in educational programs.

The contraction of participation in these programs is troubling in many ways, some less readily apparent than others. For years, these programs (both short- and long-term) have been the incubators of future generations of Jewish educators, rabbis, communal professionals, academics, and lay leaders. The Israel experience helped mold them and produced life-long networks of relationships. The curtailment of these sorts of experiences means the possible emergence of a

“lost generation,” cohorts of Jewish young people who are lost to the possibilities of intensive Jewish and Israel-related personal and professional involvement.

On the other hand, the hostilities have a positive side as well. They have generated a sharp increase in attachment to, concern for, and involvement in Israel. American Jews see themselves engaged in defending Israel’s moral and political standing, amidst environments that are perceived as rife with antagonism to Israel, if not, at times, outright antisemitism. The drop in visiting and the rise in concern call out for explanation. Typically, more concern has meant more visiting. Here the opposite pattern has taken place, raising questions about the nature of the concern for Israel as well as the very practical question of whether some of that concern can be tapped to at least partially reverse the drop-off in rates of travel and study in Israel.

The near-collapse in Israel-experience participation comes on the heels of rising participation toward the end of the previous decade. The arousal of Israel-related attention comes on the heels of a long-term decline in Israel-attachment, arguably stretching from the end of the 1970s until, approximately, the Netanya bombing on Passover 2002.

The increased attention to Israel, while welcome, raises a number of worrying concerns and related policy questions:

1. To what extent will this attention be sustained? Even if hostilities continue, will American Jews retain a deep and passionate commitment to Israel, and to what extent? Indeed, what is the very nature of that commitment, especially in light of the resistance to visiting Israel?
2. The attention on Israel is highly focused upon conflict, hostilities, defense, public relations, victimization, and all the war-and-peace matters. To what extent is this focus obscuring or even inhibiting attachment to Israel in other ways?
3. Specifically, given the synergistic relationship between commitment to Israel and commitment to Jewish Peoplehood, to what extent can revived attention to Israel be utilized to build and re-build American Jews’ commitment to Jewish Peoplehood?
4. In the current context, and with these challenges in mind, how can the diverse instruments of Jewish education be mobilized to attain three objectives:
 - a) Sustain the renewed attachment to Israel;
 - b) Broaden the attachment beyond matters of war-and-peace and victimization; and;
 - c) Move beyond concern for Israel alone to a more profound and powerful connection with Jewish Peoplehood worldwide.

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