

CHANGING AMERICAN JEWISH ATTITUDES TOWARD ISRAEL

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There is less of an emotional affinity and sense of shared identity with Israel among younger than among older American Jews. Efforts to increase the proprietary feeling among young people—that Israel is theirs—may be helpful, although a more substantive connection between American Jews and Israel will be built only by strengthening American Jewish identity itself.

Over the years, two-thirds of American Jews have consistently agreed with this statement, "If Israel were destroyed, I would feel as if I had suffered one of the greatest personal tragedies in my life." That finding has always been a conversation-stopper; it is not clear what the respondents mean or how many different attitudes are buried in the corporate response.

One cleavage seems initially paramount: between those attitudes that have their main roots in the benevolent imperative to defend Israel and those attitudes that are rooted in a more substantive sense of emotional affinity, kinship, and shared identity with Israel (which naturally carries the defensive imperative as well). There is no way to neatly disentangle those two conditions, but even as constructs, they may be useful in the effort to assess unsentimentally the pattern of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel—and the role of Israel in American Jewish identity.

One caveat is always necessary before plunging into general observations and survey cues about American Jews as a whole. American Jews do not exist as a whole. Although these observations necessarily apply to the majority, there is a minority in the wings that, especially in this case, requires attention at some point.

SHARED IDENTITY WITH ISRAEL

It has been said that Israel is the religion of American Jews. That witticism is either meant to suggest that most American Jews have no other religion, in which case, we are

in trouble, or just that Israel is central to their Jewish identity.

But for most American Jews, Israel has never been the primary center of American Jewish identity. Historically, American Jewish attitudes toward Israel have largely had the remoteness of philanthropy, rather than the intensity of a shared identity. The famous Pittsburgh platform of the American Reform movement in 1885 proclaimed, "We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine...nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning a Jewish state." A typical sentiment of a later generation of immigrants was expressed by Mary Antin, who recalled that, at recent Russian Passover Seders, "What said some of us at the end of the long service? Not 'may we be next year in Jerusalem,' but 'next year in America.'"

Of course, that was all before Hitler and the post-Holocaust State of Israel. But even after those early cataclysmic and momentous events, the prevalent attitude toward Israel remained defensive and philanthropic. In a 1948 survey of Jews in Baltimore (Sklare & Ringer, 1958), almost everyone supported the idea of the State, and their money flowed. However, most saw the role of Israel primarily as giving "displaced persons a chance to live and rehabilitate themselves." One interviewee said that they "should have a little place to call their own."

Almost all observers have seen the year 1967 as a watershed in American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. But, for most Ameri-

can Jews, even that shocking revelation of Israel's vulnerability—and the triumphalism about Israel's victory—started as an intensification of the defensive and philanthropic mode. The flow of money became a torrent, and as the dependency of Israel on the support of the American government became apparent, organized American Jewish efforts on the public affairs front grew rapidly.

It did begin to appear, however, that more substantive feelings were developing, with the help of other factors. In the years surrounding the occurrence of that Middle East war, America was in the grip of fevered searches for ethnic identity. The civil rights era spawned a strong and therapeutic black consciousness movement. "Black is beautiful" was followed by "yellow is beautiful," and "brown is beautiful." But there was a larger canvas. Advantaged white American youth, especially on elite college campuses, were making their own fevered searches for more satisfying communities, connections, and meanings. On the elite level, it was a period of youth ferment reminiscent of the 1920s—but one that was much more intense and extensive, if only because of the massive increase in the size of the college population.

To be expected, disproportionate numbers of Jewish youth threw themselves into that personal identity ferment, and for many of them, Israel served as the focus. I have often told the story of the Jewish "flower children," who came from all over the country to the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. They were partly defined as having vehemently broken with the stale ties of their past. Yet, on the morning after the 1967 Middle East war broke out, a large contingent came into my office, asking to use the mimeograph machine so that they could produce pro-Israel leaflets to pass out among their cohorts.

Even the politically radicalized Jewish youth, of whom there were also a disproportionate number, were driven to identity by reactions to the 1967 war among left-wing groups with which they had been associated. The mythology of Israel as the handmaiden of American imperialism, crushing non-white

people, became common in those circles. For example, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee published a cartoon depicting the Star of David with a dollar sign superimposed, asking whether readers knew "that the famous European Jews, the Rothschilds, who have long controlled the wealth of many European nations, were involved in the original conspiracy with the British to create the State of Israel." Such ideological sentiments triggered defensive reactions and strengthened more general tribal feelings, with Israel at their center. Strengthening this emotional tide was the passionate movement for the emigration of Soviet Jewry to Israel, which followed the 1967 war.

At this point it did appear that Israel had become a critical and substantive part of American Jewish identity. The federations adopted that premise. Donations soared, mainly around the focus of Israel, which notably dominated the slogan, "We Are One."

In more recent years, however, it has become increasingly evident that the youthful surge of attachment to Israel displayed in the 1960s has not been replicated in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, only one of ten American Jews aged 60 or over said they had no emotional attachments to Israel, compared with four of ten aged 18 to 39 (Kosmin et al., 1991). A similar generational diminution of avowed closeness or attachment to Israel has been found in recurring American Jewish Committee *Annual Surveys of American Jewish Opinion*, from that conducted by Steven Cohen in 1989 to that conducted by Market Facts Inc. in 1997. And in a 1997 survey by the Perlmutter Institute of Brandeis University of about 7,000 randomly selected federation members in a dozen Jewish communities, about twice as many of those over 64 as those under 45 (45% to 24%) said they felt "very close" to the Israeli people.

These survey cues have been corroborated by naked-eye observers, but some of those who are deeply involved in Jewish organizational life may not easily see this trend because most visible to them are the minority of

youth who are today striving to strengthen their identity, including their relationship to Israel. On the whole, however, there is less of an emotional affinity, of closeness, of shared identity with Israel among younger than among older American Jews.

AMERICAN JEWS AND THE DEFENSE OF ISRAEL

In some circles, it has been widely believed that one reason for the alienation of many younger American Jews from Israel has been the perceived "hawkishness" of some recent Israeli regimes. These regimes have been controlled by the Likud Party, and this particular charge about the alienation of American Jewish youth has been made by Labor Party sympathizers.

It is true that most American Jews, young and old, are Labor Party sympathizers. Involved in that preference is a certain sense of cultural and political compatibility with that Party, its origins, and traditions. But also invoked in this preference is the fact that the Labor Party is generally seen as the more dovish, i.e., the more willing to compromise on territory in exchange for peace. And American Jewry is largely dovish, in those terms. The 1997 Brandeis survey, for example, set up a six-point hawk/dove scale, reflecting attitudes on such issues as freezing settlements and working more closely with Yassir Arafat. Some 45 percent of federation members emerged as consistent doves and only 12 percent as consistent hawks. This was a typical result.

Much attention has been paid recently to an apparently growing rift among American Jews on these matters of Israeli policy. However, the evidence is not so much that the dove/hawk ratio has shifted as that the willingness to speak out publicly on those Israeli policies has changed. It was once considered bad form for organized American Jews to disagree publicly with Israeli policy, especially when addressing American policymakers. That convention has cracked, and the relative novelty of public discord draws the usual lip-smacking attention of the

media. In April, 1988, the *New York Times* had this headline: "Jewish Groups Go to Capitol Squabbling Among Themselves."

The crack in the old convention about a united front in public first appeared at the time of the ill-fated 1981 "Lebanese incursion" by Israel, the associated excesses of which created a new level of open criticism by American Jews. At that time, the prevailing attitude about criticism was apparently changed forever, buttressed perhaps by an increasing confidence in both the strength of Israel and the constancy of American support. However, by the mid-1980s, American Jewish support of Israel had quickly returned to its full level, as did the dovish/hawkish ratio among American Jews.

Despite the stereotypes usually invoked, there is no evidence that Israel's policies on the Palestinians and peace have been a significant factor in the alienation of American Jewish youth. There has been no significant difference between the age groups when the respondents were measured as to hawkish or dovish attitudes. For example, in the same Brandeis survey that showed a considerable age gap in expressing closeness to the Israeli people, about the same proportion of those under 45 as those over 64 (13% to 12%) proved to be consistent hawks; in fact, slightly fewer of the younger than older federation members (38% to 45%) proved to be consistent doves.

Furthermore, it would be foolish to automatically connect the concern about Israel's security with dovishness or hawkishness in any given individual. For a large part, American Jewish doves and hawks disagree with each other only on the kind of strategy that they think will best secure Israel. As a matter of fact, the majority opinions of American Jews have usually not been far from the surveyed majority opinions of Israelis on these issues.

On the other hand, there is some tendency for hawkishness among American Jews as a whole to be statistically related to the intensity of felt relationship to Israel. Among federation members, twice the proportion of

hawks as doves said they felt "very close" to the Israeli people (59% to 29%). More tellingly, every time that Israel has seemed dramatically threatened over the years, the hawkishness level of American Jews has demonstrably risen. In the early 1990s, for example, during the *Intifada* and when Israel was targeted by Iraqi missiles, Steven Cohen found that the expressed attachment of young Jews to Israel rose measurably, along with their militant defensiveness. Under those circumstances, the attachment and the militant defensiveness of older Jews also rose somewhat in tandem.

That kind of volatility has been common at times of crisis for Israel and can be partly explained by the phenomenon of the "ambivalent dove": Many of those with dovish impulses are conflicted by a simultaneous lack of trust in Israel's adversaries. Thus, about 7 out of 10 in the Brandeis survey of federation members said that the Israeli government should try to work more closely with Arafat; however, about 7 out of 10 also said that the PLO can never be trusted to make a real peace with Israel. At times when Israel is dramatically threatened, the defensive nerve trumps strategic attitudes for many and leads to an increase of hawkishness among those who are otherwise dovish.

These configurations throw some light on the fact that American Jews, of all ages and strategic dispositions, have always been and continue to be strongly and consistently defensive of Israel's security. Earlier findings, for example, have shown that Jews critical of Israeli policy have been as strongly active on behalf of basic American support of Israel as those who are less critical. It is the sense of emotional affinity, of shared identity that seems to be dwindling among Jewish youth—with its implications for American Jewish identity.

THE DYNAMICS: PROBLEMS AND REMEDIES

For remedial purposes, it is helpful to identify, as much as possible, the source of this generational gap in shared identity with

Israel.

It is not as though older generation American Jews started out as Zionists or with strong feelings of shared identity with Israel. As a whole, they were in a defensive and philanthropic stance. However, that defensive posture eventually had a consequence that it has had for fewer among our younger generations. After all, a defensive stance can obviously be a bridge toward a more substantive identity. There is always the *proprietary* factor, a highly underestimated element of group identity. To various degrees, we feel emotionally bound to a group, a family, a way of life, group customs just because they are *ours*. That proprietary factor can become operative when we are engaged in a common group effort against external attack.

The emotional impact of supporting the post-Holocaust State after its establishment and after the watershed 1967 war apparently gave many older generation Jews a strong and abiding feeling that Israel was *theirs*, and some sense of shared identity has persisted *for them*. The case could be made that Middle East events in later years have not carried as emotionally threatening a quality as those of earlier years. Israel has thrived and become strong; American deterrent support has seemed to have become more assured. There is less need to circle the wagons.

However, other, more basic factors have been at work. In more recent years, American Jews have had less defensive anxiety *in general*. Reasons to feel anxious about their status in America have dwindled spectacularly since mid-century.

The behavioral evidence of the sharp drop in anti-Jewish attitudes in America is even more startling than the survey evidence. To take just one example, Jews have been elected to the U.S. Senate and to the House of Representatives in a proportion three times higher than their population. Of course, if only the college-educated and law-educated Jewish and general populations were compared, the disproportion would not be that high. It is significant, however, that most of those Senators and Representatives, well known as Jews,

have been elected by constituencies that were about 95 percent non-Jewish. That could not have happened in America fifty years ago.

And for a large proportion of American Jews, concern with Israel's security has always been intertwined with a concern for their own security. The tribal sense among American Jews subsequently grew after it became clear that the support of America was essential for Israel's security. By 1997, only one-quarter of federation members said that Israel could defend itself without American help. If America were to turn away from Israel, it would obviously be turning away from American Jewry.

It is quite possible that the increased tribal sense developed not so much because of Israel itself but because of the bonds that were built among American Jews while they were working together on behalf of Israel. And indeed, for what it is worth, one-half of federation members say they feel very close to other American Jews, compared with one-third who say they feel very close to Israelis.

However, anxiety is considerably lower among younger American Jews, both about their status in America and about American support for Israel. Two-thirds of federation members say that "the United States will never abandon Israel."

In any case, it could be a classic American story retold: the weakening of group cohesion because the chief bonds having held it together were defensive and are no longer needed for that purpose. A defensiveness for Israel still holds for younger American Jews, but at an emotional level that has not created the proprietary feeling it once did. And a strong proprietary feeling is at least a bridge to a sense of shared identity.

There is another factor that is undoubtedly more profound. One might look at the substantial minority of young American Jews who are trying to establish a stronger Jewish identity in religious and ritualistic terms. Jack Wertheimer (1993) has described them as "a passionate minority of Jews which has invested a lot of energy in creating and nurturing...religious revival." They have had notably little trouble including Israel as a

strong part of their identity and of achieving a sense of shared identity.

On the other hand, the *majority* of Jewish youth has had more difficulty incorporating Israel into their generally weakening identity, except in defensive terms. Yet, the defensive motive in itself usually needs other, stronger reinforcement, such as an independent search for identity and community, in order to create more durable bonds—and even if it is strong enough, it does not travel well across generations.

So there is merit in the oft-expressed idea that a substantive connection between American Jews and Israel will be more widely built only by strengthening American Jewish identity itself. But, of course, that is the large task with which Jewish institutions are already deeply preoccupied. For that task, they have not yet found a blueprint, and there probably is none. American Jewish identity has been eroded by powerful American and modern circumstances. It is probable that only shifts in those external circumstances can alter those erosive effects.

Some shift may be already happening. One can discern in America at large a returning search for religious and communal connections—a search that needs to be cherished (as well as watched for pathological edges). The "passionate minority" that Wertheimer describes is part of that returning search. The nurturing of this minority by the Jewish institutions, as "inreach," is necessary for strengthening not only Jewish identity but also relationships between American Jews and Israel.

It is not that the less passionate majority of younger Jews can be written off. Their continuing defensiveness on behalf of Israel is not without significance—and not just in the short run with respect to American foreign policy. In addition, their benevolent protectiveness means that they maintain *some* connection with their Jewishness. Human nature generally abhors rootlessness. The existence of a strong "passionate minority" across denominations may someday provide the magnet for the return of marginally connected Jews who are searching. Certainly it will be more difficult without such a vital core.

In the meantime, of course, among that majority, efforts to extend the *proprietary* feeling toward Israel in particular can possibly bear some fruit as long as some marginal connections, even if mainly defensive, still exist. That defensive feeling could itself be replenished by some weakening of support for Israel by America, not so much perhaps by a weakening of America's willingness but its lessening capacity in this changing world.

Programs to increase feelings among that majority that Israel is *theirs*, to span growing cultural differences, would presumably include, among other things, massive interchanges of longer duration than part of a summer school vacation; a vast improvement in the ability to speak Hebrew; and some mutual reconciliation with respect to religious practices. More than 9 out of 10 federation members are seriously offended by efforts to delegitimize Reform and Conservative practices; many more are alienated by such Israeli efforts than by Israeli foreign policies with which they disagree.

Such programs have already been mounted by many institutions and may increase pro-

prietary feelings among some small part of that majority, which is all to the good. However, more clearly understanding all the dynamics involved may help tear away the sentimental veil from American Jewish/Israeli relationships and enable the application of realistic institutional remedies—not only to those relationships directly but also to the profoundly related problem of American Jewish identity itself.

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