

American and Israeli Jews: Oneness and Distancing

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Abstract This paper reviews the two submitted articles on “distancing.” In addition to a review and brief critique of methodological and measurement issues, I present a macro contextual argument to address the question of distancing between American Jews and Israel.

Keywords Distancing · Oneness · Relationships between American Jews and Israel

The relationships between American Jewry and Israel have been a core theme in understanding the American Jewish community and Israeli society. The complexity of the issues involves the exploration of ideologies and policies, attitudes and norms, behavior and values, economics and politics. Studying these relationships requires multiple research and theoretical strategies as the patterns unfold over time among people and places. No simple research design, no matter how elegant, and no body of empirical evidence based on cross-sectional surveys, however complete, is likely to systematically address the nuances of these relationships.

At the outset, therefore, the two papers that we are examining that attempt to shed light on changes over time in the closeness between American Jews and Israel are constrained by the theory/framework they are considering, the strategies of research they employ, and the data that they use. While we can all agree that the effort to study these processes is worthwhile, our expectations should be modest. The

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conclusions that these studies reach are by their very nature limited and should be viewed as tentative, particularly when assessing the direction of changes over time (and into the future) among young adults. Even if the two papers had reached the same conclusions (which they don't), the number of critical questions that remain unanswered is substantial. As a result, we applaud the academic exercise even as we remain skeptical of the implications drawn from these analyses.

I review briefly the highlights of the methods and the findings of the two papers, raising some questions about each, and then explore some of the omissions and limitations in the choices the authors have made in studying the issues. Needless to say, the policies and programs that are implied and suggested by these research efforts, when considered in the context of the future of the American Jewish community and its relationship to Israel, do not derive directly from the data that are analyzed but are inferred from unstated assumptions and implicit ideologies and theories.

The Issue

The key issue that is the focus of the papers is the trend over time in the attitudes of American Jews toward the State of Israel. The fundamental question is: Has there been a decline in the attachment of American Jews in the support of, and in the commitment towards, the State of Israel? Is there empirical support for the “distancing” hypothesis, defined as a declining attachment to Israel among young American Jewish adults? Using national surveys, Sasson, Kaddushin, and Saxe examine data from national surveys of American Jews over the last several decades. Their assessment is that “emotional attachment to Israel has varied within a narrow band with no consistent pattern of increase or decrease.” They conclude that the data show no consistent support for the distancing hypothesis and that young American Jews are likely to become more attached to Israel as they move through the life course.

In the Cohen and Kelman paper and in several previous papers by Cohen, the conclusion is that there has been a “broad scale erosion” among the American Jewish population particularly as reflected in the attitudes of the young compared to the older American Jewish population. Their earlier report, entitled “Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and their Alienation from Israel,” represented a clear message of “alienation” from Israel. Cohen–Kelman reinforce in their paper the “diminished attachment to Israel among younger Jews” and “a deep-seated and broad-based gap in Israel attachment between old and young.” From their assessment that there is “genuine alienation” and a “near-total absence of any positive feelings toward Israel,” Cohen–Kelman modify their conclusion by noting that “while less attached than their elders, most younger adult Jews still view Israel positively.” They base their empirical support of the distancing hypothesis on the age-related “decline” in Israel attachment in cross-sectional surveys. Based on their finding of age *differences* in several measures of attachment to Israel, they move from the rhetoric of alienation to “erosion” and conclude that age differences in these attitudes toward Israel are “birth cohort” effects (i.e., changes over time)

rather than life course effects (i.e., changes that occur as young adults move through the life-cycle).

Which conclusion shall we accept as reflecting the reality of American Jewish attitudes and values about Israel? Are American Jewish young adults alienated from Israel, and in contrast to their parents and grandparents is their support for Israel eroding, as Cohen–Kelman suggest? Or has there been continuing or stable support for Israel over several generations of American Jews? Do age differences in attitudes imply a life-course effect that may bring young adults to a greater level of support for Israel, as Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe suggest? It is possible that the research strategies and conclusions of both Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and Cohen–Kelman are so problematic and contradictory that we must remain agnostic until further research based on more systematic and reliable data is carried out. It is more plausible that both Cohen–Kelman and Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe are correct but that they may be addressing different dimensions of the relationship between American Jews and Israel. A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between American Jews and Israel suggests that their contradictory conclusions are more apparent than real. Before I suggest why this may be the case, let us take a closer and critical look at the evidence they present.

The Empirical Evidence

To critically evaluate these papers and their findings we need to know how they define Jews, who are the Jewish adults being studied, and how they measure distancing. First and foremost we need to know something about the samples that they use, survey-response rates, data quality, and the statistical analysis that they employ to measure changes over time. In all of these areas, the papers have serious limitations and/or we lack sufficient information for a reliable assessment. Let me highlight some of the methodological and measurement problems. Many of these problems are acknowledged by the authors and are part of the cautions to be exercised in assessing their findings.

Jews in these surveys are selected on the basis of responses to the question on religion. It is unclear which Jews are thereby omitted and what these self-exclusions reveal about the representativeness of the data on young Jewish adults. The data are part of market surveys conducted by telephone or over the Internet. Who responds to these market surveys? Again, who is excluded? We don't know and therefore cannot assess potential data biases. One set of results are presented for the currently non-Orthodox. However, religious denominational categories vary over time among the same persons; an examination of these categories at one point in time to assess retrospective affiliation or prospectively to forecast denominational correlates may be distorting. A person in her 60s who self-defines as a "Conservative" Jew cannot assume to have been a "Conservative" Jew throughout her life course any more than a young adult who defines herself as "just Jewish" can assume to remain denomination-less or "just Jewish" in the future.

Equally problematic is the fundamental assumption that the attitudes and emotional attachments to Israel, however measured currently, are stable over time or

over the life course. Would we expect that a married Jewish person over age 65 living in Florida expressing in 2008 some positive views about Israel (in a telephone market interview) would have 40 years earlier (in the 1960s) at age 25, unmarried and living in California, expressed similar attitudes? Not likely. Simply put, inferences based on studying differences in attitudes by age at one point in time (and by variables such as denominational identification) while constrained by the data available (the absence of longitudinal or panel data) are fraught with serious methodological limitations. Is it reasonable to argue that attitudes, values and indicators of emotions, feelings and caring do not vary over the life course? There is no firm research basis for assuming stability in these attitude measures over time; attitudes are not static but vary in context, whether they are attitudes about Israel or about other issues.

And a final methodological conundrum: Do multiple cross-sectional surveys reveal longitudinal patterns? Most would argue that they often do not. The consistency over time in data from several surveys may reveal data coherence, but it may also reveal consistent distortion and repeated biases! And without some more attention to the number of cases in these surveys by age, response rates, and Jewish identity in the broad sense (including those formally converted to Judaism and self-identifying), we are wandering in the dark shadows of inference and assumption that make us skeptical about drawing reliable conclusions.

The statistical analysis of Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe is a major advance over the limited descriptive data presented by Cohen–Kelman. The use of multiple cross-sections in their paper is a serious attempt to move beyond description toward systematic analysis. Testing some important correlates of attitudes is to be applauded as a model for other Jewish community studies. However, both papers ignore the changing context of Israeli society and the American Jewish community. Including several measures of attitudes and emotions, even if increasing validity, misses the structural contexts.

A final limitation of the samples reported on involves the heterogeneity of the American Jewish population (e.g., social class, region, gender). How this heterogeneity relates to attitudes to Israel remains unclear, but it is unlikely to be trivial. In particular, how the relationships between heterogeneity and attitudes have changed over time has not been studied systematically.

Despite these limitations and omissions, what conclusions can we draw from these studies? It appears to me that the data may be consistent with arguments of both decline and stability in the relationship between American Jews and Israel since they may reflect different segments of the American Jewish population and changes both over the life course and by birth cohort. Invoking some broader analytic framework may help resolve some of the issues and offer more convincing policy guidelines.

The Macro Structural Context

I have argued that “distancing” primarily occurs in the changing structural contexts of both communities (Goldscheider and Zuckerman 1984; Goldscheider 2004). Jews

in Israel and in the United States have been moving in very different directions over the last several decades and are likely to become even more polarized in the future. The oneness in culture and ideology that had characterized these communities in the past is weakening.

Jews in the United States define themselves and are in large part comfortable both as Jews and as full citizens of the place where they live. They are part of legitimate and accepted ethnic-religious communities, consider themselves a significant part of their societies, but distinctly identify as Jews. They have developed complex local, national, and international institutions, life styles, and cultural forms that enrich their ethnic and religious expressions. For while Jews have assimilated and become secular in some ways, their communities have become stronger and more viable in other ways. They have developed creative responses to their Jewishness and new expressions of Judaism in a secular context, at the same time that they have experienced assimilation. The overwhelming majority of Jews are committed to Israel and the continuity of the Jewish people, but their “home” is where they live, where they expect to continue living, and where they are raising the next generation to live.

The focus on attitudes and emotions as the basis for the growing disenchantment between American Jews and Israel may minimize the depths of the gap between the communities. It also misses the point that often American Jews relate emotionally to the *ideals* of Israel not to the reality of a changing Israeli society. In the past, there were major commonalities of background and experience between American and Israeli Jews. Both were heavily influenced by their European origins; many were raised in families that were rooted in Yiddish culture and where Yiddish was spoken. Many struggled with second-generation status and shared the cultural and social disruptions of secularization and assimilation. Most importantly, they shared the struggles of economic depression, war and Holocaust in Europe, and the rebuilding of the lives of Jewish refugees. They shared in the most tangible and dramatic ways the establishment and building of the State of Israel. They also shared limited exposure to Jewish education. Traditional Jewish ritual observances were rejected as part of the past, while national Jewish rituals were developed as substitutes. In short, there was a shared sense of origin, experience, and objective, even while living and building two different societies.

New generations emerging in Israel and in the United States are more distant from Europe, from the commonalities of language; the Holocaust has become history and immigrant origins are far away, as are the struggles of pioneering in Israel and upward mobility in the United States. The different experiences of America and of Israel as societies have shaped the lifestyles and the values of these two communities. Not only have the past commonalities declined, but new gaps have emerged. Three critical elements of social life illustrate this gap between American and Israeli Jews.

We start with women. American Jewish women have been at the forefront of social changes in the liberation from traditional sex roles and family relationships. Many American Jewish men have shared and adjusted to these changes in the workplace and in families. In contrast, Israeli men and women tend to have much more traditional family and social roles. Family relationships are more patriarchal,

and work patterns for women are more often part-time and driven by economic considerations. And it is not at all clear that egalitarian values shared by American Jewish men and women are shared in Israel.

A second related shift involves the shift in Israel's ethnic composition (Asian/African and Russian) at both the leadership and at the population level. Language and life-style barriers have increased and imply diverse cultural origins and limited communication between communities.

These gender and ethnic differences are tied to the growing educational and occupational discrepancies between American Jews and Jews in Israel. The increase in the levels of education of both Jewish men and women, and their attainment of high levels of occupation and income, have been among the best documented aspects of American Jewish life. But college-educated, white-collar professionals are largely characteristic of a relatively small segment of the Israeli Jewish community—mostly of European origins. Add the gender and ethnic dimensions to these social class gaps, and the basis emerges for polarization of the experiences and orientations of the two groups.

The most serious manifestation of the gap between the two communities is religion. Judaism plays an important role in the lives of American Jews. In its diverse forms Judaism remains one of the major anchors of Jewish identity for American Jews, marking Jews off from others, personally and institutionally. Rabbis are among the most articulate and conspicuous of the leadership of the general American Jewish community. In contrast, the political and politicized nature of religion in Israel precludes serious communication between religious leaders of both societies, since neither Conservative nor Reform rabbis have legitimacy as rabbis in Israel. Add in the increasing role of women in American Judaism, and you have the stark contrast between the legitimacy of Reform and Conservative rabbis in America, on the one hand, and American women rabbis viewed in Israel as American exotica (or worse!) on the other. In America, religious pluralism is normative and accepted and American Jews are committed to the view that the multiple expressions of Judaism are legitimate and important. These forms of Jewish religious expression and religious leadership are de-legitimated in Israel.

The trajectories of Jews in America and in Israel are therefore moving in directions that are likely to strain the relationships between the communities. As each moves through its own developments, each is moving further away from the other. Changes in gender roles, social class, ethnic origin, language, and religion are rending apart the bonds of commonality between Israeli and American Jews. Differences between Jews in and outside of Israel are likely to become accentuated, despite the connecting and neutralizing power of television and communications, of e-mail, and of visits in both directions.

At the same time, there may be a basis for developing new alliances and new relationships between these communities. It is most unlikely that the old pattern of relationships can be sustained with the transformed Israeli society and American Jewish community. American Jews depend on Israel as one strong anchor of their Jewishness; in turn, Israel needs American Jews to teach it about tolerance and pluralism, egalitarian relationships, Jewish family values, and the value of education.

Two Jewish communities, yes; one Jewish people, yes. New inter-relationships between American Jews and Israel, yes, again. These complexities are unlikely to be revealed through the changing attitudes of younger and older Jews in the cross-sectional surveys that we have available.

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