

Beyond Distancing: Jewish Identity, Identification, and America's Young Jews

Chaim I. Waxman

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Abstract Although the arguments of both Cohen–Kelman and Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe are well presented and are based on careful analyses of the data each utilized, the Cohen–Kelman thesis is more convincing because there is a variety of evidence supporting it and because its argument with respect to connectedness with Israel fits within a larger framework of patterns of American Jewish identity and identification.

Keywords Young American Jews · Jewish identity · Identification · American ethnic groups

Steven Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman argue that younger, non-Orthodox Jews have significantly lower and declining attachments to Israel. Their argument is based largely on analyses of data from the 2007 national survey of American Jews. Ted Sasson, Charles Kadushin, and Len Saxe argue, based largely on their analysis of American Jewish Committee studies over a 13 year period (1994–2007), that there has not been a significant change in the patterns of connection of young American Jews to Israel, and that in every decade connections to and support for Israel tend to increase with age.

Both arguments are well presented and both are based on careful analyses of the data utilized. On that basis per se, I am somewhat reminded of the Rabbi of Anatevka and am tempted to say that they are both correct. Obviously, however, that cannot be so because the positions are so opposite of one another. In their response to Sasson and colleagues, Cohen–Kelman attempt to narrow and define their disagreements with Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe by emphasizing that their distancing hypothesis applies to only a segment of the non-Orthodox American Jewish population and not to any of

C. I. Waxman (✉)
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
e-mail: waxmanci@rci.rutgers.edu

the Orthodox, and they suggest that the distancing phenomenon is particularly prevalent among the intermarried. The Cohen–Kelman thesis is stronger and more convincing because it is consistent with findings in my own research over the past several decades.

An analysis comparing the identification patterns of Jewish baby boomers with those of their elders, based on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, found lower rates of identification among the baby boomers (Waxman 1996, 2001, 2003). The 2000/2001 National Jewish Population Survey found that the major Jewish membership organizations in the United States suffered a nearly 20% decline in affiliation over the decade of the 1990s alone. It also found that younger American Jews are less likely than their elders to strongly agree that “Jews in the United States and Jews around the world share a common destiny.” They are also less likely to strongly agree that, “When people are in distress American Jews have a greater responsibility to rescue Jews than non-Jews”; and they are less likely to strongly agree that, “I have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world.” If the patterns among younger American Jews reflect changes over time, we are witnessing not only declining degrees of emotional attachment to Israel,¹ but also declining rates of other measures of communal affiliation. Jews are less likely to be members of secular Jewish communal organizations. There are declining rates of Jewish ethno-religious homogamy, specifically, Jewish in-group marriages. Jews are less likely now than in the past to reside in ethnically and religiously heterogeneous neighborhoods, and they view living among Jews as less valuable. American Jews today tend to have fewer Jewish friendships, and an increasing number of Jews state that their best friends are not Jewish. Jews are also donating less money to Jewish causes (Waxman 2009, 2010).

When we look at patterns of Jewish philanthropy, even before the recent economic downturn and the Madoff scandal, the data indicate that Jewish philanthropists are more likely to make their largest gifts to non-Jewish philanthropies. This becomes even more significant when we see that more money is being given by fewer Jews. Younger Jews are generally less involved in Jewish life, and they are less committed to Jewish philanthropy. Giving to the Jewish community is no longer the obligatory mitzvah it once was. It is now discretionary, and younger Jews are more likely to give to general, non-Jewish causes than to the Jewish community (Wertheimer 1997; Tobin 2001, p. 6; Tobin et al. 2003, p. 38).

Those who do give to Jewish causes give significant proportions of their philanthropy to support Israel, including social welfare, absorption, health, education, and cultural causes. Once again, younger Jews are less likely to give to Israel than are their elders (Ukeles Associates, Inc. 2002, p. 15).

Jews give much less to religious causes than do other Americans. Jews are less likely to belong to a synagogue than Christians are to belong to a church, and are also less likely to contribute to a synagogue than Christians are to a church. Jews are

¹ It should be emphasized that the issue is that of emotional attachment. In terms of political support, America’s Jews are overwhelmingly pro-Israel, which should be no surprise; polls consistently find that most Americans are pro-Israel.

also much less likely to contribute to national religious organizations than are Christians (Tobin 2004, p. 285).

Jewish philanthropy has been Americanized. Jews, like other Americans, are selective in the charitable causes that they support. They typically opt for philanthropies with which they have some attachment, either emotional or personal.

As with United Way and other general community fund-raising ventures, Jewish giving to umbrella charities such as the United Jewish Communities campaigns has declined. Sometimes it is replaced by targeted-giving ventures which have probably contributed to the decline in the rate of givers, even when the overall sums contributed do not decline, due to increased sums given by direct givers. In other words, a greater amount is given by a smaller number of people. Contemporary American Jewish patterns of philanthropy increasingly conform to the pattern of the decreasing ethnicity of America's Jews. Increasingly, their ethnicity appears to be what Herbert Gans (1979, 1994) termed "symbolic ethnicity," which "wears thin." American Jewish ethnicity is not linguistically significant—most American Jews are illiterate in Hebrew, Yiddish, and any other Jewish language—nor does it significantly influence friendships, mate selection, or neighborhood (Waxman 2001, pp. 81–118).

Young American Jews are increasingly less likely to distinguish between the Jewish and American components of their identity. For these Jews, the two are seen as inseparable parts of the American Jewish identity package in which the boundaries between Jewish religious beliefs and values and American national beliefs and values have disappeared. The two belief systems, the religious and the national, have synthesized into an inseparable whole, with American Jews assuming that many liberal American values are actually Jewish values and, indeed, the most essential ones. The declining group ties of contemporary American Jews is manifest in the religious as well as the broader Jewish communal sphere. Like many of their non-Jewish countrymen, young American Jews increasingly shun organized public religion and are now turned inward. Their religious and/or spiritual quest and activity takes place in the private sphere, as they search for that which is meaningful to them. These are the patterns of the broad spectrum of America's Jews and they are especially pronounced among the young, unaffiliated, non-traditional, and intermarried. As Cohen–Kelman indicate in their response to Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe:

Approaching the question of Israel attachment only at the level of data neglects the broad terrain on which American Jewry is experiencing significant cultural, social and institutional change. Inter-marriage, the waning influence and power of institutions, the decline in denomination affiliation among younger people, the dramatic growth of Jewish organizations outside of the Federation-family system, the growth of the independent mega-donors and other individual philanthropists, and an increasing emphasis on meaning-seeking and purposefulness rather than ethnic bonds and loyalty point to significant changes in American Jewish life. Surely the relationship between American Jews and Israel is neither insulated nor isolated from these other trends, and only in that context can we truly understand what the data mean.

In the final analysis, the significance of the distancing between young American Jews and Israel is far overshadowed by the distancing of young American Jews from

the Jewish people and from historical Judaism. It is not simply a matter of “two worlds of Judaism,” as discussed several decades ago by Liebman and Cohen (1990). Neither is the distancing of young American Jews from Israel analogous to the differences between Jerusalem and Babylon some 2,000 years ago. What is taking place is not simply another variation or even version of Judaism. Rather, many young American Jews are so much a part of the American “salad bowl” that, to a large degree, they have lost much of their own unique character. Theirs may not be “straight-line assimilation” (Warner and Srole 1945; Gans 1979, 1994) but they have little or no idea of the differences between what is Jewish and what is American, especially liberal American.

In a comprehensive analysis of immigration and assimilation, Richard Alba and Victor Nee examined the socio-cultural and economic experiences of a variety of American immigrant groups (Alba and Nee 2003). Their detailed account of the European and first East Asian groups of immigrants indicates high rates of acculturation and linguistic assimilation in the first generation and the decline of the neighborhood along with significant educational and economic advances among their children. By the third generation, there are high rates of intermarriage and a variety of manifestations of “symbolic ethnicity.” Alba and Nee then turn to more recent Asian as well as Latino immigrants and find that, although there are important institutional differences between them and the earlier immigrants, assimilation is still a powerful force affecting them.

In his earlier work on Italian Americans, Alba averred that the ethnicity of American Jews is different because it entails both ethnic and religious components. When Italian Americans marry, they increasingly do not marry Italian Americans, but they do marry other Christians. Because Jews are also a religious group, he suggested, their rate of intermarriage is much lower and, thus, their ethnicity is likely to remain stronger for a longer period of time than for other white Americans (Alba 1985). In the more recent work, Alba and Nee point to the rise of the Jewish intermarriage rate to about 50% or more, and they explain that “about a third of Jewish-Christian couples participate in Jewish congregations and raise their children as Jews, while others join Christian churches or create a non-denominational family culture” (Alba and Nee 2003, p. 283).

American Jews are now much more likely to live in ethnically and religiously diverse neighborhoods than in predominantly Jewish ones. Overwhelmingly, they speak only in English and are illiterate in any Jewish languages. Their rates of belonging to religious or ethnic organizations have been decreasing, as have their rates of contributing to Jewish causes. Increasing numbers of young American Jews assume that many liberal American values are actually Jewish values and, indeed, the most essential ones.

Being Jewish is no longer a stigma in American society and culture; it is in many respects a prized status. It is “in” to be Jewish in America, and a record number of senators, congresspersons, and university presidents are self-identified Jews. Thus it is somewhat ironic that, while it is socially more acceptable and even desirable to identify Jewishly, the identity and identification of American Jews today are less firm and encompassing and much more American. In contrast to the past, where persecution and stigmatization led some Jews to reject their Jewish identities and identification, contemporary young American Jews are not rejecting it; rather, it is

much more circumscribed and much less controlling. Judaism has become a “symbolic ethnicity.”²

As for Israeli-Americans, Uzi Rebhun suggests that Israeli Jews assimilate into the American social mainstream in the first generation and that, “Over time, the pendulum of the emotional ties and attachment to two geographic areas tends to become distant from the land of origin in favor of the new and immediate physical environment” (Rebhun 2009). This suggests that their patterns of American assimilation are not very different from those of others of similar racial and socio-cultural backgrounds.

In a recent paper, Saxe et al. provide evidence indicating that the Birthright Israel program has had significant impact on strengthening the connections between the young American Jewish participants and Israel, on strengthening the probability that the participants will marry Jews and, even for those who do not, strengthening the probability that they will raise their children as Jews (Saxe et al. 2009). For a variety of reasons, however, that program reaches only a minority of its potential population. As Saxe and colleagues point out, Birthright Israel “applicants come from somewhat more engaged backgrounds than those who do not apply to the program” (p. 9). The broad population of unengaged young American Jews does not even apply for the program. In addition, there have always been financial constraints on the program which not only limited the number of participants but also the initiatives undertaken to reach the broader population, and those constraints have increased significantly since 2008. Also, for all of its impressive accomplishments, its impact on the overall level of connectedness of America’s Jews with Israel still remains to be seen. Moreover, Saxe and colleagues found that the program did not increase the likelihood of its participants’ volunteering for Jewish causes (p. 24), and the program participants, like other young adults in contemporary America, generally avoid institutional affiliations even after their Israel experience (p. 36). Without communal reinforcement, the long-term impact of the program is thus still very much open to question.

Much as one might wish that the argument of Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe was true, the weight of evidence from a variety of sources suggests that emotional attachment to Israel is part of a much broader package of Jewish religio-ethnic consciousness which is increasingly less compelling structurally and more diffuse, voluntary, and individualistic in American society. If that is the case, the idiosyncrasies of the data on which Sasson and colleagues relied need to be more fully explained.

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² It should be noted that, although these are the patterns which prevail in “normal” times, evidence suggests that when there is a significant crisis in the homeland, ethno-religious expressions among some diaspora nationalists do tend to increase (Jacobson 1995). Among a significant number of American Jews, this was evident in increased philanthropic contributions and volunteering on behalf of Israel during the Second Lebanon War in 2006.

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Author Biography

Chaim I. Waxman is Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Jewish Studies, Rutgers University; Senior Fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute; and a former President of the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry. He specializes in the sociological study of Jews and Judaism, including America's Jews, Orthodox Jewry, Jewish identity and identification, Israeli society and culture, and Zionism.