

Beyond Attachment: Widening the Analytic Focus about the American Jewish Relationship to Israel

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Received: 22 November 2009 / Accepted: 4 June 2010 / Published online: 18 August 2010
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Abstract In this article, I briefly review the competing claims of the two sets of authors (Cohen and Kelman versus the Sasson team), noting their points of convergence and divergence. Second, for all of their differences, implicit in their analyses I detect an under-explicated conception of the relationship between Jews in America and Israel, one that warrants a fresh exploration going forward, leading me to call for much-needed exploratory research about these questions. Finally I situate the discussion about needed future research in terms of the how we ought to envision the relationship between “town and gown” in creating knowledge about and for the Jewish communal-organizational world.

Keywords American attitudes about Israel · American Jewish identity · Political perception

The editors of *Contemporary Jewry* are to be commended for creating a broader professional forum for discussing and evaluating the two papers about the “distancing hypothesis.” It gives us a chance to do our professional job—to scrutinize the quality of the analysis and its conceptual framework, to consider the extent to which there is empirical support for the authors’ claims, and finally to lay out a research agenda to further advance the field.

I’ve organized my comments into three parts. First, I briefly review the claims of the two sets of authors, noting their points of convergence and divergence. Second, for all of their differences, implicit in their analyses I detect an under-explicated conception of the relationship between Jews in America and Israel, one that warrants a fresh exploration going forward, leading me to call for much-needed exploratory research about these questions. Finally, I situate the discussion about

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needed future research in terms of how we ought to envision the relationship between “town and gown” in creating knowledge about and for the Jewish communal-organizational world.

The Two Papers and What They Contend

Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe offer a thoughtful scrutiny of the widely shared view that in recent decades American Jews have become increasingly distant from Israel. They cite the numerous analysts who have written about this shift over the years, and focus on Cohen and Kelman’s 2007 “Beyond Distancing” report as the most recent salvo in what they term a “narrative of decline.”

Using published summary reports from the American Jewish Opinion studies gathered between 1989 and 2008 by the American Jewish Committee and the actual datasets for the surveys of 2000–2001 and 2003–2005, Sasson et al. subjected the “distancing” claims to a longitudinal analysis, and they found that the overall level of “attachment” among American Jews has not declined in the past two decades. Instead it has fluctuated within a range of 10–15% in the period between 1989 and 2008. This leads them to conclude that at the aggregate level American Jewish attachment has remained more or less steady, although there are indications of a downward trend in the most recent year. The Sasson team’s analysis documented that there are age-related differences: younger Jews have lower levels of attachment than their older counterparts, but again, the differences have remained steady over time.

Cohen and Kelman focus on younger, non-Orthodox American Jews, the group they consider being most “at risk”. Based on a single cross-sectional survey conducted in early 2007 they show that the youngest respondents are the least emotionally attached and the most alienated of all of the age cohorts. As compared to earlier studies by Cohen, the estrangement of the young from Israel has become more defined.

Both teams of researchers seek to explain why there is an age gap in attitudes about Israel. The conventional wisdom holds that younger Jews are increasingly alienated due to their uneasiness with Israeli policies towards Palestinians, yet both teams rule out this explanation for lack of empirical support. So, the two teams wonder, are these observed differences due to life stage or because of birth-cohort effects?

At this point the two teams diverge. Cohen and Kelman call it a birth-cohort effect, meaning American Jewry is on the verge of a sea-change in its relationship to Israel. They attribute this shift in attitudes to the changing composition of the American Jewish population, and they see intermarriage in particular as the main “driver.”

They do not explain why the younger respondents start off more distant from Israel than their elders, yet over the years the gap between younger and older people remains roughly the same, despite the fact that over time we’d expect these new views to “infiltrate” the older groups’ views. Instead, as the Sasson team shows, the age gap remains steady, more or less, which in its view suggests that as people age, their views about Israel change.

Sasson and colleagues go as far as they can in sorting out the extent to which the difference in views of older and younger respondents arises from their time in history (birth cohort or generation) rather than being related to their youth (life stage). They find no evidence of birth cohort differences in the data, but as they note, the 11 year time frame they scrutinize may be too limited. During that limited period the higher level of Israel-attachment among older cohorts has not been diluted as new waves of (formerly younger) people inevitably mix into the older age strata.

Cohen and Kelman frame their entire article around the higher alienation of the young compared to the old, and yet in the middle of their article the authors write that “[t]he erosion in Israel engagement has taken place over the entire age spectrum,” a point which they do not substantiate (although presumably Cohen is again comparing the 2007 levels of support to those of his earlier surveys). The Sasson team’s longitudinal analysis directly undercuts this assertion insofar as it applies to the 11 year period for which there are data.

So we seem to be at an impasse, because we lack the data needed to look carefully and comprehensively at the question about distancing over the longer haul. Would that we had a time series of American Jewish views about Israel that extended back to 1967 or earlier!

How Can We Advance the Discourse?

While the two sets of authors have addressed some of the necessary building blocks, their analyses do not take into account other crucial analytic elements. They have sparred over some of the ongoing difficulties we face regarding the increasingly complex American Jewish population. Clearly it is important to trace how changes in the overall contours of the American Jewish population play out in terms of changing outlooks and stances about Jewishness and about Israel. As the American Jewish population diversifies, this is more difficult to do.

The second element needed for this analysis (aside from understanding the changing composition of American Jewry) is a more nuanced picture of what is involved in “relating to Israel.” The conception implicit in both sets of analyses is too simplistic. The Sasson team is stuck with the limited measures employed in the AJC studies (caring about and closeness to Israel). To their credit, Cohen and Kelman have formulated some new survey items especially for this survey, and while their creativity is commendable, I wonder about the adequacy of these items—what psychologists would call their psychometric properties—for capturing and summarizing the variety of concerns, beliefs and feelings, things that come together under the heading of “Israel.” Consider the set of items they used to indicate closeness to/distance from Israel:

Israel’s destruction would be a personal tragedy
Worried US will not be an ally of Israel
Caring about Israel is important part of being a Jew
Identifies as pro-Israel, Zionist, a supporter of Israel

Disagrees that Israel occupies land belonging to someone else
 Comfortable with the idea of a Jewish State
 Comfortable self-identifying as a supporter of Israel
 Talks about Israel to Jewish Friends,
 Talks about Israel to Non-Jewish friends,
 Drawn to stories about Israel
 Agrees strongly: "If Israel were destroyed, I would feel as if I
 had suffered one of the greatest personal tragedies of my life."

Cohen and Kelman tallied these up as a single scale, where "more is better," with no comment about how the questions inter-correlate, or how they distribute in multidimensional space. This single-scale strategy means that the highest marks go to people who are "all Israel all of the time" no matter what the circumstances.

However, there may be a number of considerations involved in how a person "processes" the ongoing stream of events coming out of Zion: the policies and developments in the region; the information and perceptions people have of these issues; the hopes, fears and other concerns that come together underneath the tracking measures. For instance, there are Israelis and Jews who are increasingly concerned about Israel's integrity as a democratic society as well as its being the Jewish homeland. For some people having a more complex view of the issues and considerations may itself be a correlate of deep connection to and involvement with Israel.

My own areas of professional expertise as a socio-psychologist come into play here, because since 1989 I have studied American Jews and how they relate to being Jewish. I have an additional qualification in this area, insofar as my doctoral training and dissertation focused on political perception about war and peace in the Middle East. In the early 1980 s American Jewish views about Israel were characterized by "*high emotion but low information.*"¹ The situation at that time was different. The access to news was more limited and not as accessible in real time, the sources of information were more centralized and there was less direct access to news reports from Israel. The rate of visiting Israel was lower. We had not yet lived through the optimism following Camp David and Sadat's visit and then the hard realities of Oslo and its aftermath. There had not been any Intifada or suicide bombs.

Since then we've experienced a roller-coaster of changing prospects from high hopes for peace to ongoing, intensified conflict. The nature of "the other side" has changed. We've seen issues that once belonged to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict, like terrorism and security (and religious fundamentalism), morph into concerns that affect the world more broadly. This is all to say that the climate in which we ask people to think about Israel is much more complex than it was in the days of the founding of the State, or in the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War. And of course the image of Israel as an actor in the region and the world has also

¹ The source of my dissertation data was the "Images in Conflict" Study, sponsored by USAID, a cross-national study of attitudes, beliefs and opinions about war and peace in the Middle East. It involved simultaneous surveys of Israelis, Palestinians, Egyptians living in the Middle East, and of Israelis, Palestinians, Egyptians and Jews living in the U.S.A., conducted between March 1 and April 24, 1982, prior to the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. Described in B. Horowitz 1987.

changed substantially. It's hard to believe that American Jewish views about Israel can be summarized as a single "attachment scale."

As I documented in *Connections and Journeys* (Horowitz 2000/2003), there are numerous outlooks and ways of relating to Jewishness that have bearing on how Israel (as well as other elements) are perceived. Rather than one or two overarching shared narratives about Israel, we are more likely to see various "sentence fragments" today than a full-blown romance novel. For the better part of the last half century, two things have united American Jewry: the Holocaust and Israel. While the Holocaust has continued to exert a powerful hold on the American Jewish psyche, Israel, particularly in the past 15–20 years, no longer serves to reliably rally American Jews or engender group solidarity. Instead it has come to elicit a wider range of reactions. Investigating the variety of American Jewish responses to the various narratives and scenarios is one thing worth significant further inquiry.

The Needed Knowledge Base

The knowledge base for looking at American Jews' relationships and attitudes to "Israel" is paltry, considering the significance of this concern. The major socio-demographic studies of American Jews have not included much about American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. There are strong organizational pressures to avoid venturing into areas that might be viewed as dealing with Israeli "politics." Unfortunately, as long as we ignore such domains we will be getting a less nuanced understanding than we need of American Jews' connection to Israel. When I designed and directed the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study I managed to craft a question that explored more, potentially, than "attachment" alone. In an effort to avoid any controversy, I framed the question as one related to fundraising: "I would give more money to Israel if there were peace between Israelis and Palestinians." In 1991, 25% agreed, which I interpreted to mean that their sense of connection to Israel was compromised by the ongoing conflict. (The views of the 75% who did not agree with this statement couldn't be readily interpreted. They might have meant "I continue to give to Israel no matter what," or, "peace would not make me give to Israel either") (Horowitz 1993). This particular example was an *indirect* approach to the issue necessitated by institutional concerns. We would be better served and learn a good deal more if we were able to explore these issues more systematically and directly.

Furthermore, the reliance on large-scale quantitative studies that have been the mainstay of the knowledge base for American Jewish policy-planning are not adequate for delving deeply into areas that require new exploration. The surveys have sufficed for tracking the levels of the things we know about, but when things begin to change in nature rather than in degree, the survey approach is not by itself able to continue to illuminate the changing content of this connection. At this point we should investigate the changing phenomena close up, in order to get a nuanced understanding of the issues and dynamics at work, and from this to articulate a more complex framework for describing the images, beliefs and opinions about Israel held by American Jews.

Sasson's recent report on American Jewish attitudes about Israel, based on a series of focus groups, is a useful contribution (Sasson 2009). However, like Perlmann's thoughtful analyses of the existing data (Perlmann 2007b), the focus is limited to political opinion about Israel, whereas I believe we need a broader transnational framework that considers how American Jews (and Jews elsewhere) experience Israel and its relationship to Jewish people-consciousness in the world and in their lives. As the structure and dynamics of the Jewish communal-organizational world changes, the sponsorship of research will continue to come from organizations interested in using the data for some purpose or another. The challenge for scholars is to be able to carry out thoughtful and systematic work that will speak to the policy concern on the table, while retaining independence and the chance to vet their findings in professional forums like this one.

I conclude that with our current conceptualization and the existing data-gathering we lack the means to seriously investigate American Jews' views about their relationship with Israel. We want to know more about how American Jews relate to Israel and where that fits within their psyches, as part of their overall political perception. We don't have this because we haven't developed a clear enough picture of what the key features are, and for this we need some further investigation.

In sum, while I find the Sasson team's analysis to be thorough regarding the data we have on hand, I am frustrated by the limited time frame for which we have systematic data to examine these issues. Although I find Cohen and Kelman to be unpersuasive in terms of the data they bring to bear and in their emphasis on intermarriage as the main driver changing American Jewish attitudes, I would indeed want to continue to investigate the complex nature of American Jewish connections and reactions to Israel. It isn't all that simple.

Author Biography

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