

Distancing or Transformation? Ties to Israel Come of Age

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Abstract I cannot meaningfully discuss the survey reports of engagement or disengagement. However, from my vantage point, there are broad areas in which Israel is a significant part of contemporary American Jewish life, including young Jews. The engagement with Israel that these phenomena reflect is a better informed, more pluralistic and more complex relationship that can no longer be measured on the old scale of blind loyalty and support. Perhaps that may not be much succor to the traditional organizations that currently mobilize and channel support for Israel (AIPAC foremost among them), but the relationship between American Jewry and Israel is transforming itself into something new and more mature.

Keywords Israel · Israel Studies · Students · Diversity · Transnationalism · Transformation

The following comments are based largely on my limited six-year experience of teaching Israel Studies at New York University, and many more years as an observer in Israel. I am an outsider to the American Jewish community, and properly cautious about making generalizations. I cannot even presume to talk about Jewish students on the NYU campus as a whole—only about those students that express enough interest in Israel to take courses on Modern Israel, or any one of a dozen courses offered at undergraduate and graduate level on aspects of Israeli politics, literature, society and international relations. Other students also find their way to me to talk about Israel as it crops up in their studies, or about campus discourse on the Israel–Palestine conflict. The comments that follow relate to those students that are already engaged with Israel, and are drawn from my own

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idiosyncratic experience, rather than sweeping generalizations based on any empirical research.

Although a small sub-set of the many Jewish students on campus, students interested in Israel have a passion to learn together with an open-mindedness that has deeply impressed me. Undergraduate courses on Israel are large and often oversubscribed—sometimes by as much as 50%. Applicants to graduate programs focusing on Israel Studies represent 10–20% of all applicants for doctoral programs in the very large department of Jewish Studies. These facts are gratifying for a professor of Israel Studies, but what do they tell us about larger trends and the attitudes of Jewish students in general?

The first thing that becomes clear is that today's students of Israel have a far more sophisticated and realistic view of Israel and the Middle East conflict than that of their parents' and grandparents' generation. They are more capable of separating an emotional empathy from their political views of Israel, and are very aware of the problems that face Israeli society. Criticism of one aspect or another of Israeli society and government policy does not mean that they are disengaged or distanced from Israel. They recognize that the accepted narratives about Israel's birth and history contain idealizations and myths that have been largely discarded by Israelis themselves and certainly by young people in Israel. In fact, American Jewish students appear to hold views more akin to those held by their age-group peers in Israel than to those held by many of their parents and community educators. And, like young Israelis, American Jewish students have no conception of pre-1967 Israel: the "Green Line" is, for them, a concept that is hard to understand.

Now that the "Arab–Israeli conflict" has become an Israeli–Palestinian conflict, these students are often willing to go places (intellectually and geographically) that their predecessors were not. Students with a serious interest in Israel are often also interested in the Middle East in general; and graduate students of Israel Studies frequently choose to study Arabic alongside advanced Hebrew studies. Their language studies often take them to Cairo, Damascus or Beirut for summer courses—which I suspect is a new development in the American Jewish student world.

The Israel that young Americans relate to is not a fragile construct struggling for recognition and survival. It is a robust society with a strong economy, real achievements in technological fields which shape the contemporary world, a vibrant culture, a thriving film industry, even decent wine and much more besides. Tel Aviv is now a favored locale among Mediterranean cities: it has beaches, music, excellent restaurants, and a thriving night life that never seems to stop. Once this was just an aspect of marketing, but no longer. Israel is now a multifaceted society that has real substance and is much more than the heroic hype of blooming deserts, kibbutzim and military prowess. Young people can and do enjoy Israel without having to make major ideological commitments. Although deeply troubled by the continuing crises of relations with the Palestinians and religious–secular relations domestically, young Americans find plenty to identify with in contemporary Israeli life. That is the real reason Birthright/*Taglit* is so popular. It isn't the traveling that so excites the participants; it is what they discover when they get there. Regardless of whatever message Birthright hopes to inculcate, the exposure to Israeli realities creates a

demand for scholarly courses on Israel when these students return to their own campuses. For many, curiosity is whetted and they wish to learn more.

Other young American Jews have a different experience of Israel. The growth of Torah education and Yeshiva institutions, primarily in Jerusalem but also in West Bank settlements, ensures that young modern orthodox men (and some women) spend one or two years living and studying in Israeli *yeshivot*. This too is a facet of Israeli life, even if it is intentionally self-isolated from the mainstream of Israeli society. The numbers of young Americans that have this sort of Israel experience (instead of the Birthright experience) is very significant indeed.

Yet another form of engagement is the transfer of modern orthodox young families to Israel. This is *aliyah* of a whole new sort. Clustering in certain neighborhoods of Jerusalem (particularly the German Colony) and in certain West Bank settlements near Jerusalem, these families enjoy the cultural/religious homogeneity of their new surroundings. For many of them, the settlements are the ultimate gated community, where their children can socialize with and marry almost anyone they grow up with. A surprisingly large number of these families are transnational: the wife and children live in Israel; the husband continues to work in America and commutes at weekends or every few weeks.

What is the bottom line? I cannot meaningfully discuss the survey reports of engagement/disengagement or distancing. My comments are based on a small sample of students from one campus, and my conclusions are impressionistic. However, from my vantage point, there are broad areas in which Israel is a significant part of contemporary American Jewish life, including young Jews. Engagement with Israelis is now better informed and more pluralistic. It has become a more complex relationship that can no longer be measured on the old scale of blind loyalty and support. Perhaps that may not be much succor to the traditional organizations that currently mobilize and channel support for Israel (AIPAC is foremost among them), but it appears to me that the relationship between engaged young American Jews and Israel is transforming itself into something new and more mature.

Author Biography

Ronald W. Zweig is the author of *Britain and Palestine During the Second World War; German Reparations and the Jewish World: A History of the Claims Conference*; and *The Gold Train*. He edited the *Journal of Israeli History* for 18 years, and published the complete edition of the *Palestine Post (1932–1950)* in electronic format. He is currently preparing a study of the Palestinian refugee question in Israeli–American relations.