

Distancing, Yet One

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Abstract In the debate about whether distancing has occurred between American Jewry and Israel one of the two sides is more convincing than the other, but both sides focus on samples of the more identified Jewish population thus ignoring the more marginal that are quite crucial in adjudicating this debate. Age specific cross-sectional data from the more broadly representative NJPS unequivocally show a blurring among the younger of the strong sense of interest, affective involvement, responsibility and caring that American Jewry historically displayed toward Israel and its needs. However, the demonstrable existence of similar patterns of Jewish identification in the U.S. and in Israel provides powerful evidence to persisting coherence in contemporary symbolic and institutional perceptions over the opposite thesis of a Jewish identification stemming from the variable circumstances of local contexts. Jews in the U.S. and in Israel may be distancing from each other, but they still are part of one Jewish peoplehood.

Keywords Jewish identification · Representative sources · Data biases · Age cohort differences · Distancing · Identificational maps · Coherent perceptions

At a time when over 80% of Jews worldwide are located in only two countries, namely Israel and the United States (DellaPergola 2008), it is significant that the two major components of the global Jewish collective should entertain a viable mutual relationship and understanding or at least sustained reciprocal interest. When addressing the contemporary meaning and content of Jewish peoplehood, each major Jewish community indeed fulfills an important role in defining the perceptions of the other. As such, the nature of Jewish identification in one country

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also influences the essence of the broader association for other Jews who live elsewhere. The following comments reflect my longstanding interest not only in the empirical assessment of contemporary Jewry, but also in the evaluation of the policy implications of current trends.¹

Extremes of the Debate

In the debate about the hypothesis that distancing has occurred between American Jewry and Israel—both the State as such and the Jewish community within it—one of the two sides is more convincing than the other, as we shall see. But the two sides have more in common than they would acknowledge: they are both using data not suited to provide full support to their respective arguments.

If pondered judgment has to be expressed about behaviors and attitudes among a given collective of individuals, that collective should be defined most broadly and thoroughly and it should be systematically covered by relevant documentation. Population-wise in the U.S., this implies using national surveys that cover the whole gamut of individuals, from the most to the least identified with the referent category—in this case Jewish—and also address the topics of central relevance—in this case attitudes about and/or direct connections with Israel. This cannot be provided either by local Jewish community studies that cover only limited geographical areas or by general national social surveys that include small samples of Jews and do not address questions of specific Jewish interest. Two well-known and accessible representative national surveys that do respond to these essential criteria are the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) and the American Jewish Identity Survey (AJIS) both completed in 2001 (Kotler-Berkowitz et al. 2003; Mayer et al. 2002). NJPS in particular was the subject of criticism because of alleged technical problems (Kadushin et al. 2005). However, attentive examination of NJPS demographic findings in the context of other information available for the last decades (DellaPergola 2005) vindicates the survey and suggests that it can be used as a reliable tool in the study of American Jewry. However both sides in the present debate have chosen to focus on samples of the more identified segments among the Jewish population instead of the broader Jewish population and identification spectrum offered by NJPS.

In this issue, one research team Sasson et al. (2010) uses data from the surveys of the American Jewish Committee. The AJC surveys have been conducted annually by the marketing firm Synovate since the early 1980s. Survey respondents are recruited from a consumer panel, and each annual survey includes about 1,000 respondents. The surveys repeat verbatim a number of questions regarding Israel each year—as well as additional demographic and attitudinal questions—and utilize standard response options. This allows for comparisons over time. However, it would be inaccurate to define the panel of respondents as longitudinal. Unlike the fore-mentioned set of studies, a truly longitudinal study would re-interview the same

¹ For some of the following materials I am indebted to my colleagues Shlomit Levy, Uzi Rebhun and Dalia Sagi.

respondents year after year, thus allowing an assessment of any changes over time among the interviewees. Moreover, the surveys track the opinions of self-identified Jews by religion only. Individuals of Jewish ancestry who do not define themselves as Jewish are not included in the samples. Thus, the analyses reported here only pertain to trends among individuals for whom Judaism is their declared religion, omitting the more marginally identified.

The other team Cohen and Kelman (2010) uses data of the 2007 National Survey of American Jews drawn from a consumer opinion panel, also by Synovate. The authors believe that the sample may under-represent the most traditional Orthodox Jews (who are, in any event, dropped from their analysis) as well as some highly unengaged Jews (those who do not claim their religion is Jewish but who identify as Jews nonetheless). In addition, according to the authors, a consumer-oriented sample may over-represent the culturally conventional (particularly if they are unmarried)—the types of people with a greater than average interest in consumer issues, with middle-brow cultural tastes. The likely effect of these biases with respect to those under age 35 is to present them as more engaged with Israel than the universe from which they are drawn that includes more people with lower purchasing power or who are simply indifferent to the topic. One has to presume that the “real” levels of attachment to Israel among those under 35 are lower than reported in this sample.

Based on these premises, Sasson and his associates maintain that comparisons of different rounds of the same survey over time do not unveil any erosion in interest toward or support of Israel among American Jews. On the other hand, Cohen and Kelman do find a generational weakening of the interest toward Israel among American Jewry, the lowest level being obtained among the youngest adults.

To evaluate these contrasting findings, one should consider that one of the paramount findings in Jewish social research over the last decades in the U.S. and Canada is the growing proportion of Jews (and of North Americans in general) who do not define their religious identity (DellaPergola 2008; Kosmin and Keysar 2009). These people may constitute one fifth or more of the broadly defined total core Jewish population, i.e. the aggregate of Jews and Jewish connected individuals who are not professing another religious identity. The percentage of people without or not interested in religion may be higher in total American society. Those Jewish-connected persons who do not manifest a Jewish religious identity may be expected to be quite selective in many of their other demographic, socio-economic and attitudinal characteristics. Failing to include these people and limiting the observation to persons who explicitly choose the Jewish religion or with characteristics that closely match them, seriously biases the results. Such bias plagues precisely the crucial matter being debated, namely the amount of identification in America with one—though not the sole nor necessarily main—parameter in the definition of one’s own Jewishhood.

It should be added that excluding from the analysis those who might at first be considered the weaker, more assimilated or indifferent sections of the Jewish collective unveils a singular analytic dissonance. Indeed, when the discussion focuses on the demography and total size of U.S. Jewry, great efforts are displayed to include these more marginal fringes, and their quantitative extent is the object of high profile

negotiations (Thighe et al. 2009). But when these “peripherals” tend to weaken the overall intensity of the identification profile, they are readily forgotten on the grounds that the topic at stake is not assimilation but a more substantial aspect of Jewishness. One cannot have it both ways: if American Jewry must be larger, it is because of the inclusion of more of the peripherals; and if American Jewry must be more coherently identified, then its size must necessarily become smaller.

The Facts

To independently tackle the question of whether or not distancing between American Jews and Israel is taking place, we examine the evidence from NJPS. Before proceeding, we shall acknowledge that our principal focus here is not the absolute size of different population groups involved which might be debatable, but the identificational differences between different population groups which stand within the consensus of the research community. In our own NJPS data processing, a four-fold typology was established as a parsimonious tool to assess U.S. Jewish identification: (1) the self-assessed Orthodox, (2) other Jews by religion who prefer a religious denomination other than Orthodox *and* are members of a Jewish organization of any sort, (3) non-Orthodox Jews by religion who are not members of a Jewish organization, and (4) other respondents who initially did not report that they were Jewish but were eventually included among the NJPS Jewish population counts because they were recognized as Jewish-connected (DellaPergola et al. 2009).

Answers to five different questions concerning different aspects of Israel attitudes were compared, and an average score of the five was also computed (Table 1). Not unexpectedly, self-defined Orthodox Jews were those with the strongest level of attachment to Israel. The second strongest degree of attachment obtained among non-Orthodox Jewish members of a Jewish organization. Non-Orthodox Jews who were not members of a Jewish organization displayed much less attachment to

Table 1 Percent choosing most intensive category, selected questions about Israel, by Jewish religious denomination and Jewish organization membership—U.S. 2001

Variables	Orthodox	Other Jewish, Jewish org. member	Other Jewish, Jewish org. non-member	Jewish-connected
<i>N</i> (unweighted)	412	1,820	1,834	372
Maximum possible total	100	100	100	100
1. Israel spiritual center of Jewish People	80	58	49	61
2. Important caring about Israel	72	52	32	48
3. Israel needs financial support American Jews	67	62	46	43
4. US Jews, Israel share common destiny	70	39	25	42
5. Emotional attachment to Israel	69	35	20	13
Average score 1–5	71.6	49.2	34.4	41.4

Israel. Finally, the Jewish-connected displayed a level of Israel attachment intermediate between the two categories of membership, but in any case more on the lower than on the higher side of the whole response gamut.

Having established the nature of the relationship between different modes of Jewish identification and Israel-oriented attitudes, it is now essential to verify the incidence of each different group in this Jewish identification typology within each of the major age groups (Fig. 1). Age indeed is a proxy for the time that goes by—the elderly representing the past, and the younger the present.

Based on weighted NJPS returns, the two major changes over time are evidently the significant decline, if not collapse, of the *non-Orthodox Jewish organization members*—one of the groups with a stronger Israeli orientation; and the steep rise of the *Jewish connected*—one of the groups with a weaker Israeli orientation. The *Orthodox*, the most strongly Israel-oriented group, are fairly stable across age groups with some visible increase among the younger. *Non-member non-Orthodox Jews by religion*, also of a weak Israel orientation, predominate in the central age-groups, but decline among the younger in what seems to be a generally diminishing interest toward the liberal Jewish religious denominations. All in all, the two groups with a weaker Israel orientation increase from 47% of all Jews age 65 and over, to 70% among Jews below 30.

The unequivocal inference from these cross-sectional cohort data is a gradual weakening over time of the relationship of American Jews toward Israel. Analyses that only focused on the Jewish religiously identified population were bound to fatally ignore the least identified layer of the total Jewish population that appeared to be growing cohort after cohort, year after year. Only by incorporating the latter would a more balanced picture and more plausible conclusions be obtained. These data point to an unmistakable blurring among the younger of the strong sense of interest, affective involvement, responsibility and caring that American Jewry has historically demonstrated toward the State of Israel and its Jewish community.

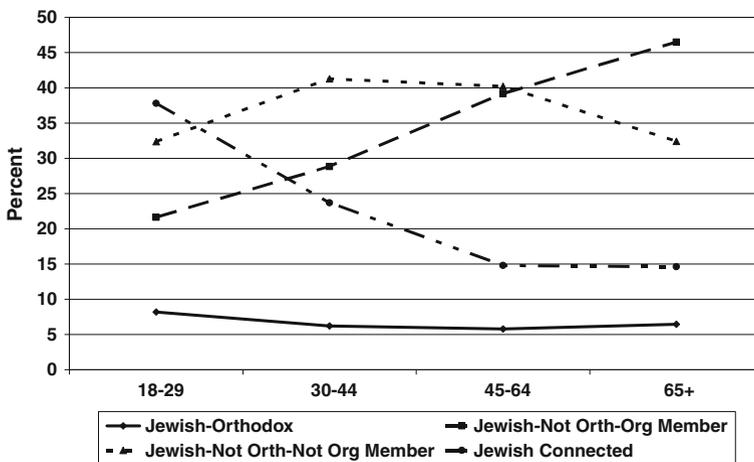


Fig. 1 Four-fold Jewish identity typology, within age-groups—U.S. 2001

The exception to this judgment would come if it could be demonstrated that, getting older in the course of their life-cycle, American Jews tend to systematically recover a closer sense of attachment to Israel. The only way to prove such a point would be to have at our disposal repeated National Jewish Population Surveys inclusive as in the past of the more marginally identified fringes of the collective. It would thus be possible to compare the same birth cohorts getting older over time. Combined use of past NJPSs of 1970, 1990, and 2001 was indeed successfully implemented on a variety of issues providing fine insights (DellaPergola 2005; Rebhun 2001; Rebhun and Levy 2005). But, unless a decision is taken to renew the periodical undertaking of such surveys, the cognitive opportunity to monitor the changing profile of American Jewry will be lost.

An Important Caveat

More detailed inspection of the answers provided to over 90 questions related to Jewish identification in the U.S. unveils the mutual relations of proximity and distance that exist between different aspects of Jewish identification (DellaPergola et al. 2009). The detailed correlations between the many variables can be graphically represented using Smallest Space Analysis—SSA (Guttman 1968) (see left part of Fig. 2). The resulting map represents a configuration of the total perception of Jewish identification among the total American Jewish population. Different domains of Jewish identity distribute around a common origin partitioning the space into wedge-like regions. These domains are: the normative and traditional (religious rituals and norms), family and friends (life-cycle), education (socialization and learning), community and organization (voluntarism and philanthropy), culture and history (including memory of the Shoah and politics), and mutual responsibility (local needs and Israel). The innermost Jewish identification cluster includes several primary indicators of Jewish peoplehood: feeling Jewish, the importance of being Jewish in life, feeling part of the Jewish People, the importance

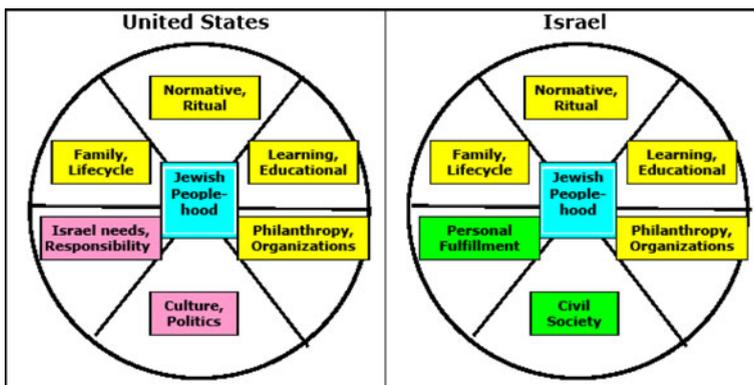


Fig. 2 Schematic representation of Jewish identity in the United States and in Israel, ca. 2000

of being part of and supporting Jewish organizations, having a rich spiritual life, and giving children a Jewish education.

Separate maps for the different Jewish identification sub-populations (not displayed here, see DellaPergola et al. 2009) show that among the more strongly identified by personal religiosity and by community activism, perceptions of the various possible domains of Jewish identification appear—as in Fig. 2—clearly ordered and separated. Instead, the communally unaffiliated and the loosely Jewish connected display a drift of markers from one domain to another and a far less organized identification pattern. But, significantly and perhaps surprisingly, even among the least identified, the domain representing mutual responsibility and fulfilling Israel's needs retains a sufficiently clear, separate definition within the total Jewish identification space. This means that in spite of the existing distancing between American Jewry and Israel, as argued by Cohen and Kelman and as supported by our own data, at least at the cognitive if not at the operational level, the perception of Israel's meaning is not completely lost.

SSA identification maps for the total American Jewish population can be compared with similar maps for Jews in Israel (Levy et al. 2002; Levy 2008) (see right part of Fig. 2). The two maps do not address possible differences in the frequencies of Jewish behavioral or attitudinal indicators but only portray the relative positions of the various Jewish domains within the overall identificational space based on the correlations between the respective answers. Perhaps contrary to expectations, the overall structure of Jewish identification perceptions in the two countries is very similar. Notably, in both countries a feeling of belonging to the Jewish People occupies the same central position as the origin and the synthesis of other domains of Jewish identification which in turn occupy very similar radial positions. The only two differences which can be observed are that identification with Jewish culture, history and politics among U.S. Jews occupies the same position that participating in civil society occupies for Israeli Jews; and, respectively, identifying with responsibility for Israel's needs, occupies the same position that personal fulfillment and living in Israel occupies in the latter country. These differences are eminently plausible considering the different nature of, and opportunities for Jewish experiences in Israel and in the United States.

The demonstrable existence of overarching and shared global patterns of Jewish identification is no minor finding. It provides powerful empirical evidence for the proposition of resilience of transnational coherence in contemporary Jewish symbolic and institutional perceptions over the opposite thesis of a Jewish identification that essentially stems from the variable circumstances of the different local national contexts. Jews in the United States and in Israel may be distancing from each other, but they are still part of one and the same concept of Jewish peoplehood.

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