

Distancing from Israel: Evidence on Jews of No Religion

Ariela Keysar

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Abstract Both the Cohen–Kelman paper and the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe paper acknowledge the importance of Jews of no religion, but both ignore a data source that could help resolve the disagreement between them, namely, the American Jewish Identity Survey (AJIS) 2001. This survey contains information about the attachment to Israel of both Jews by religion and Jews of no religion. AJIS 2001 shows that Jews of no religion are significantly less attached to Israel than Jews by religion. The share of American Jews who profess no religion has continued to grow. Strengthening the bonds between secular Jews and Israel is key to arresting the overall trend of distancing.

Keywords Distancing · Secular Jews · Israel · Jews of no religion · Jews by religion · AJIS 2001 · American Jewish Identity Survey

In their paper in this issue, Cohen and Kelman argue that non-Orthodox Jews in America are growing more distant from Israel “and will continue to do so.” Using a 2007 national survey of American Jews, yet not using trend data, they observe big gaps between young (under age 35) and old (65 and older) Jews in their attachment to Israel and attribute those gaps to intermarriage and weak Jewish social networks (few Jewish friends).

Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe, on the other hand, argue that attachment to Israel is stable: “Emotional attachment to Israel has varied within a narrow band, with no consistent pattern of increase or decrease.” They analyze several surveys focusing on people who identify themselves as Jewish, namely ‘Jews-by-religion,’ but

A. Keysar (✉)
Trinity College, Hartford, CT, USA
e-mail: Ariela.keysar@trincoll.edu

excluding those with Jewish background who profess no religion, namely ‘Jews with no religion.’

For testing the “distancing hypothesis” Cohen–Kelman ask that the growing segment of Jews who profess no religion not be overlooked. Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe also admit that: “Were one to employ a more expansive definition of ‘Jewish’ to include anyone of Jewish ancestry who does not identify with another religion, then the overall level of Israel attachment would be somewhat lower.”

Both papers ignore a data source that could help resolve the disagreement between them, namely, the American Jewish Identity Survey (AJIS) 2001. AJIS, unlike NJPS 2000, replicated the key religious identification and Jewish qualifying questions of NJPS 1990, making it the best resource for trend analysis. AJIS 2001 remains useful despite its age, because unlike other studies cited in the two papers, it covers all Jews, including those with no religion.

Solidarity with Israel of Young Jews

This author, a demographer, was the study director of AJIS 2001 and the associate director of the Longitudinal Study of Young Conservative Jews 1995–2003. This paper will begin by showing how the ties to Israel of young Conservative Jews evolved over time before moving to AJIS 2001.

The Longitudinal Study of Young Conservative Jews, sponsored by the Jewish Theological Seminary, tracked Americans and Canadians of the Bar/Bat mitzvah class of 1994/1995 over an eight-year period as they made their way from one educational milestone to the next. Starting with participants in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Survey in 1995, the same cohort was re-interviewed during high school in 1999 and again in 2003 during their college years. This project, called “Eight Up,” is unparalleled in other Jewish studies.¹ It offers rich information on the trends in Jewish identity of over 1,000 young North Americans who were raised in Conservative synagogues. Here we show how their feelings toward Israel evolved over time. We also provide some insights on Israel solidarity at the time when the Second Intifada occurred in Israel and the college students faced an upsurge of anti-Zionist expressions on campus. We look at North American Jews in the aggregate, not attempting here to draw distinctions between Americans and Canadians or other sub-groups (Chart 1).

Keysar and Kosmin (2000, 2004) show that solidarity with Israel has grown over time for the class of 1994/1995. The chart below illustrates that two-thirds of the college students say that Israel is “very important” to them. Despite, or alternatively as a response to, their experiences of anti-Zionist rhetoric on campus, college students report a remarkably high level of loyalty toward Israel. As Keysar and Kosmin speculated in the Eight Up report (2004), “With the Jewish homeland under

¹ The AJC surveys reported in the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe paper are not “true” longitudinal data; they do not track the same 1,000 respondents every year, and thus cannot show what has changed or remained constant with these people.

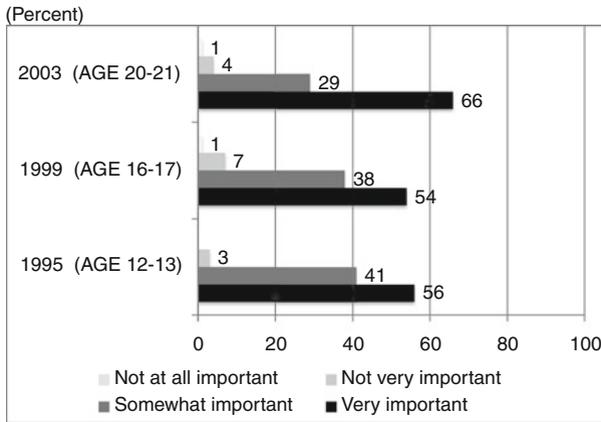


Chart 1 How important is Israel to you? (Percent). Data: the longitudinal study of young conservative Jews 1995–2003. *n* = 969 students responding to all three surveys

severe attack, identification with Israel has become a more important element of their [the students’] personal Jewish identities.”

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe also observed an increase in emotional attachment to Israel during 2000–2005 and attributed it to Jewish solidarity with images of Israelis suffering under suicide bombings and terror attacks.

In the words of one student:

I think Israel is so important to the Jews, and am so grateful that we have such a place to flee to if we [any Jews living in Diaspora] ever need it.

One might argue that the Bar/Bat mitzvah class of 1994/1995 is an elite group that does not represent the overall Jewish population. They were raised in Conservative synagogues to parents who were synagogue members. In addition, more than half of them had visited Israel by the time of their high school graduation and some visited during college. In all 60% of this cohort has visited Israel, far higher than the national average (as will be shown by the AJIS 2001 data below). However, they show some patterns similar to those of other young Jews. For instance, they have become less religiously observant than they were during high school, when they lived at home. Indeed, some of them are critical of Israel:

I am least proud about the inter-religious fighting that goes on. I am also a bit embarrassed by the Ultra-Orthodox movement in Israel. They have a free pass through their life and do not have to serve in the military. They get money from the government just to study Torah.

... Frankly I have some ethical issues with religious States. I believe in the fundamental ideal of a separation between church and State.

American Jews have a vision of a Jewish state and democratic state, which operates on the basis of American values: pluralism, openness, tolerance, freedom and separation of church and State. American Jews sometimes forget the complicated political, national and religious contexts of the Middle East. That lack of

understanding can create and fuel disconnections and explains their lack of involvement in Israel programs.

Is Israel becoming less central in American Jews' consciousness? Well, it depends on which segment of American Jewry.

Comparison Between Jews-by-Religion & Jews-no-Religion

Mayer et al. (2002) found a linear relationship between where American Jews locate themselves on the religious-secular spectrum and their attachment to Israel. Those who describe themselves as "religious" were twice as likely to have visited Israel as those who describe themselves as "secular." Similarly, those who describe their outlook as "religious" were more than three times as likely as those with "secular" outlook to say that they are "very attached" to Israel.

Broadening our horizon further beyond Jews who describe their religion as "Jewish," we utilize the same national data of the AJIS 2001 to test the distancing theory by comparing Jews-by-religion and Jews of no religion. We also present an analysis by age group.

The most important finding that rejects the distancing hypothesis is that travel to Israel was stronger in 2001 than in 1990. This was true for both religious and non-religious Jews. Travel to Israel is probably both a cause and an effect of attachment to Israel—for purposes of this paper questioning the distancing hypothesis, the direction of causality is not important. As with other dimensions of Jewish connections, there are large gaps between Jews-by-religion and Jews of no religion in their ties to Israel. In 2001 Jews-by-religion were twice as likely to have visited Israel compared with their no-religion counterparts (38 and 17%, respectively).

Both Jews-by-religion and Jews-no-religion increased their travel to Israel as compared to 1990. In fact, the gap between the groups was very slightly smaller in 2001 than that reported in NJPS 1990 (31% of Jews-by-religion and 11% of Jews with no religion had then visited Israel) (Kosmin et al. 1991). Although the level of involvement of the non-religious Jewish population is by far lower, we don't find evidence that it is decreasing further; rather it follows the general pattern.

As illustrated in Chart 2, the inverse linear pattern holds between the two main segments of American Jewry. While more than half (62%) of those who identify as Jews-by-religion are very or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel, more than half of Jews with no religion are not (not at all or not very) attached to Israel.

These patterns support the claim of weak bonds and disconnection with Israel among the fastest-growing segment of the Jewish population, namely, Americans who describe themselves as of Jewish parentage or upbringing but not of Jews-by-religion.

Similar to the findings of Cohen-Kelman (2009), young Jews are less attached to Israel than older Jews. However, AJIS 2001 highlights the larger age gaps within those with Jewish background and the smaller age disparities among those who identify as Jews-by-religion (Table 1).

In both segments those who are age 65 and over are the most likely to be emotionally attached to Israel. Nevertheless, small sample sizes preclude the presentation of more refined five-year age groups.

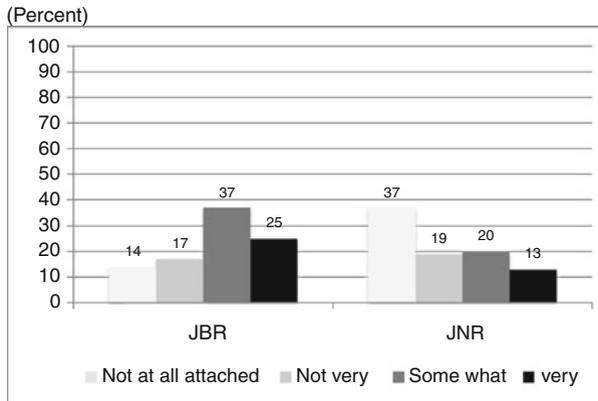


Chart 2 How emotionally attached are you to Israel? (Percent). Data: AJIS, 2001. *n* = 618 Jews-by-religion: JBR; *n* = 273 Jews-no-religion: JNR

Table 1 “Somewhat” or “very” emotionally attached to Israel by age

	Jews-by-religion (%)	Jews-no-religion
18–34	56	14
35+	63	40
Total	62	32

Data: American Jewish Identity Survey, 2001

n = 618 Jews-by-religion: JBR; *n* = 273 Jews-no-religion: JNR

Discussion

Cohen and Eisen claim that contemporary American Jewish society is experiencing an increasing personalization of religious life (Cohen and Eisen 2000). Yet this is a general trend associated with a secularization process in the general American population. The proportion of American adults who profess no religion, the “Nones,” increased sharply from 8.1% in 1990 to 15% of the adult population in 2008 (Kosmin and Keysar 2009b). At the same time, compositional changes are apparent in the Jewish population as well. The share of cultural Jews, Jews who identify by ethnicity alone, has grown from 20% of the American Jewish population in 1990 to 37% in 2008 (Kosmin 2009). Unfortunately both papers—Cohen–Kelman as well as Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe—failed to use available data on this growing part of the American Jewish population when assessing the distancing hypothesis.

An analysis of the AJIS 2001 reveals that cultural Jews, often classified as Jews of no religion, have weak connections to Israel. Given the composition of the current American Jewish population and considering high intermarriage rates, that segment of the population is likely to grow, thus distancing American Jewry further from Israel.

Notwithstanding this, a crucial observation that Cohen–Kelman make is that “about 60% of younger adult Jews who are not Orthodox profess some attachment to Israel. While less attached than their elders, most younger adults still view Israel positively.” Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe also point to the high level of support by a majority of survey respondents toward Israel.

It is accurate but insufficient to observe, as both these papers do, that Jews with no religion are less attached to Israel than Jews-by-religion. The question is how to give cultural Jews more of a reason to be attached to Israel. The obvious answer: more Jewish culture. Israel visits, educational programs and ongoing communication ought to be developed with a focus on modern and secular Israel beyond its religious attractions.

It is likewise insufficient to observe, as Cohen–Kelman do, that younger Jews are less attached to Israel than older ones. They assert that this is a cohort effect—meaning that younger Jews will continue to be less attached to Israel as they age. This may well be the case. On the other hand, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe argue reasonably that it may well be an age effect, in which case young Jews will “grow closer to Israel as they grow older.” The only way to resolve this disagreement is through a national longitudinal-panel study of American Jews, tracking their attitudes and behaviors over the course of life. Such a study would truly reveal if in fact American Jews are distancing themselves from Israel and why.

Author Biography

Dr. Ariela Keysar, a demographer, is Associate Research Professor of Public Policy and Law and the Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. She was a principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey 2008, the largest survey of religion in the U.S., covering over 50,000 respondents. Ariela Keysar was the study director of the American Jewish Identity Survey 2001.