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American Jewish Attachment to Israel:

An Assessment of the “Distancing” Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

Widespread concern exists within the American Jewish community about declining American Jewish attachment to Israel. Concern has been fueled by social scientific analyses which, both conceptually and empirically, suggest declining attachment. The present paper examines these arguments, along with evidence from national surveys conducted over several decades, and critically assesses the emerging narrative about American Jewry's growing distance from Israel. Substantial evidence exists that challenges this narrative and the development of programs such as Taglit-Birthright Israel, which brings large numbers of Diaspora young adults to Israel, suggests that just the opposite trend is underway.

INTRODUCTION

The perception of declining American Jewish attachment to Israel, especially among young adults, has become a taken-for-granted element in the intellectual landscape of Israeli and American Jewish elites. Jewish scholars and public intellectuals seek to explain the “distancing” of American Jewry from Israel in frequent columns in the Jewish and Israeli press (see, for example, Chazan, 2007; Rosner, 2007; Waxman & Della Pergola, 2007). How to galvanize the interest of younger American Jews has become a focus of broad discussion (see, for example, lectures at the 2008 Herzliya conference by Yehezkel Dror and Leonard Saxe).¹ A new anthology on Diaspora-Israel connections includes several essays that assume the declining centrality of Israel among American Jews (Ben Moshe & Segev 2007; see contributions by Wexler, Seliktar, Bayme, and Sheffer). The distancing narrative has reached the mainstream press, including a cover story in *The Economist* (“Second Thoughts about the Promised Land,” 2007). It has also been cited to bolster a critique of the “Israel Lobby” as unrepresentative of the views of ordinary American Jews (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2006, p. 14).

Notwithstanding widespread discussion and apparent broad consensus, neither the scholarly literature nor survey evidence consistently supports the view that attachment to Israel is declining among American Jews. The present paper reviews this literature and reanalyzes available survey data to examine the current state of American Jewish attachment to Israel.

DISTANCING HYPOTHESIS

The present paper is not the first to challenge the narrative of American Jewish disengagement from Israel. "Since the early 1980s," writes Steven M. Cohen in an article published in 1996, "[j]ournalists, social scientists, Jewish communal leaders, and Israeli officials, among others, have surmised that American Jews have grown less enamored of Israelis, less interested in Israel, and less active in supporting Israel" (1996). However, Cohen argued, this supposition is not borne out in the survey evidence: "From 1986 to 1993, identically worded measures of Israel attachment fluctuated in a narrow range in apparently near-random fashion..." indicating no significant change in American Jews' attachment to Israel (1996, p. 366).

Cohen attributes widespread but misplaced anxiety over "distancing" during this period to a variety of factors, including the critical reactions of American Jewish leaders to Israeli policies, as well as to reports, dating back to the mid-1980s and authored by Cohen himself, showing evidence of lower levels of attachment to Israel among younger age groups (see Cohen, 1986, 1989). But the article concludes on a cautionary note: "The patterns in Israel attachment associated with age certainly point to the possibility of broad-scale erosion among the American Jewish population over the medium term" (p. 371).

In a series of reports, articles, and books published in the years following the 1996 article, Cohen and colleagues discern evidence that

erosion in support is underway. Cohen and Eisen's *The Jew Within* (2000) compares a 1997 survey with an earlier one to demonstrate the distancing phenomenon: "When asked about their emotional attachment to Israel, just 9 percent answered "extremely attached" (as opposed to 13 percent in a similar survey in 1988), and only another 18 percent said "very attached" (versus 24 percent in 1988)" (Cohen & Eisen, 2000, p. 143). A subsequent paper, comparing trends in Jewish ethnicity and religiosity, repeats the comparisons referenced in *The Jew Within* (see Cohen 2001, p. 17). Later, writing in the journal *Commentary*, Cohen and Wertheimer (2006) substantiate their claim of declining American Jewish attachment to Israel with similar comparisons, but this time of surveys conducted in 1989 and 2005.²

However, published reports on trends in Israel attachment are far from uniform in their conclusions. Thus, for example, in their study of American Jewish Committee annual surveys conducted between 1986 and 2002, Phillips, Lengyel, and Saxe (2002) report a stable and apparently high level of attachment to Israel throughout the entire period. Similarly, they report that for roughly three quarters of survey respondents, caring about Israel is important to their Jewish identities, and that this proportion remained stable between 1983 and 2001. Echoing Cohen (1996), however, the researchers warn that there "may be a long term decline in support for Israel as younger Jewish-Americans are slightly less likely to report feeling very or fairly close to Israel than older cohorts" (p. 13).

In 2003, another researcher, Frank Luntz, examined the feelings of Jewish young adults about Israel in a series of six focus group discussions. Recruitment for the focus groups focused on Jewish young adults who had not visited Israel and were not active in any Jewish organizations. The research report, “Israel in the Age of Eminem,” concluded that young adults’ “association with Israel is frighteningly weak and ill-defined” (p. 7). Moreover, there exists a “distance and detachment between young American Jews and their Israeli cousins that...has not existed in the American Jewish community until now” (p. 14). However dramatic Luntz’s findings, given the characteristics of those recruited to the focus groups, it is not clear that the findings are a reliable indicator of the age cohort as a whole.

Contributing to the development of the distancing narrative are several books, including one by Stephen Rosenthal (2001) and another by Ofira Seliktar (2002). Both authors examine conflicts between American Jewish elites and their Israeli counterparts during the 1980s and 1990s. American Jewish leaders clashed with one another and Israeli government officials over a number of issues, including the definition of a Jew for immigration to Israel; recognition of non-Orthodox conversion and marriage rites; the Jonathan Pollard spy case; Jewish settlements in the territories conquered by Israel in 1967; and Israeli responses to the Palestinian intifada. Both books contend that during the 1980s and 1990s liberal American Jews became increasingly disaffected with Israel due to their opposition to its policies regarding religion and state and the Palestinians. In the

context of an historical narrative of these disputes, Rosenthal (2001, p. 171) cites American Jewish Committee surveys to substantiate the claim that American Jews as a whole have grown more distant from Israel.³ Seliktar (2002) also references recent surveys conducted by the American Jewish Committee to advance a similar argument. However, notwithstanding her claim that “Israel’s centrality in American Jewish life reached an all time low” in 2000 (p. 200), she provides no longitudinal analysis.

More recently, Cohen and Kelman (2007) draw together several themes from this literature. Citing mostly Cohen’s earlier work, they describe a “mounting body of evidence” pointing to “a growing distancing from Israel of American Jews...most pronounced among younger Jews” (p. 2). In reference to age-cohort differences observed in a 2007 survey, they conclude that “we are in the midst of a massive shift in attitudes toward Israel, propelled forward by the process of cohort replacement, where the maturing younger cohorts that are the least Israel-engaged are replacing the oldest cohorts that are the most Israel-engaged.” Consequently, they predict a “long term and ongoing decline in Israel attachment” in the years to come (p. 11). The report does not examine historical trends directly, or attempt to ascertain whether observed age-cohort differences are greater than those noted in earlier studies. Notably, however, Cohen and Kelman’s analysis of the 2007 survey finds no support for the contention that liberal opposition to Israeli policies has caused general disaffection from Israel (pp. 12-13).

Taken as a whole, the evidence marshaled to demonstrate American Jewish distancing from Israel seems no more compelling today than when Cohen (1996) first identified and dismissed the distancing hypothesis. The comparisons across pairs of surveys, cited as evidence in more recent studies by Cohen and Eisen (2000), Cohen (2001) and Cohen and Wertheimer (2006), must be regarded with skepticism in light of the trend data reported by Phillips, Lengyel, and Saxe (2002). The age-cohort differences, first identified in the 1980s, may perhaps reflect genuine generational differences; for example, a result of the declining proximity of successive generations to the Holocaust and founding of the state. Alternatively, age-cohort differences might just as well indicate a tendency for Jews to grow closer to Israel as they age. Finally, the claim that American Jews have grown more distant from Israel due to opposition to Israeli policies does not receive consistent support in this literature (cf. Cohen & Kelman, 2007).

To understand developing trends, it also seems important to note how the landscape for interaction with Israel has changed over time. Particularly noteworthy is that in late 1999, Birthright Israel, a large scale educational endeavor to engage Diaspora youth with Israel was launched (see Saxe & Chazan, forthcoming). As of early 2008, more than 160,000 young adults from around the world had participated (nearly 75% from North America) and more than 100,000 others were on waiting lists. Evaluative data (see, e.g., Saxe et al., 2007) indicate that the program has its strongest effects in enhancing the connection of Diaspora youth to Israel. The potentially transformative impact of participation in Birthright Israel has

received little attention in this literature (but see Cohen & Kelman, 2007).

To further assess claims regarding declining American Jewish attachment to Israel, we next examine national surveys conducted over the past two decades. To be sure, the study of historical trends in Jewish attitudes regarding Israel is challenging. Large scale surveys of American public opinion, such as those administered by the Gallup agency, ask relatively few questions regarding Israel and do not report findings for the subpopulation of Jews. Such surveys can provide important context for interpreting Jewish opinion (as we show below) but cannot address trends among Jews. Alternatively, the large, random sample surveys of American Jewry, such as the National Jewish Population Surveys of 1990 and 2000, have asked differently formulated questions regarding attachment to Israel, making comparisons across surveys impossible. The most consistent longitudinal data on American Jewish opinion regarding Israel, and hence our primary evidence in the present paper, derive from the annual surveys of the American Jewish Committee.

METHODOLOGY

The primary source of data for the present paper are the annual surveys of the American Jewish Committee (AJC). The AJC surveys have been conducted annually by the marketing firm Synovate (previously Market Facts) since the early 1980s. Survey respondents are recruited from Synovate's consumer panel, and each annual survey includes about 1,000 respondents. The surveys repeat a number of questions regarding Israel each year—as well as additional demographic and attitudinal questions—and utilize standard response options. The surveys track the opinions of self-identified “Jews by religion” only (see Perlmann, 2007a). Individuals of Jewish ancestry who do not define themselves as Jewish are not included in the samples.⁴ Thus, the analyses reported here only pertain to trends among individuals who identify themselves as Jewish.

More important is whether the AJC samples adequately represent individuals who identify as Jewish, and whether samples drawn from year to year are relatively consistent in terms of their internal composition. A systematic comparison of the AJC samples to the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) (United Jewish Communities, 2003) and the American Jewish Identity Survey (Mayer, Kosmin, & Keysar, 2001) concludes that in most respects the AJC samples are comparable to the other two (Perlman, 2007a).⁵ The exceptions concern marriage (the AJC samples have higher marriage rates) and income (the AJC samples include more lower-income respondents).⁶ The

significance of these relatively small differences for the study of opinion about Israel would be negligible; nevertheless, in the analyses reported below, both income and marital status are controlled whenever possible.

Although the AJC surveys have been administered annually since the early 1980s, only since 1994 were data gathered in a telephone interview (earlier surveys were conducted by mail). For comparability purposes, the focus here is on the telephone surveys. For the years 2000-2001 and 2003-2005 full data sets were analyzed. For earlier and more recent years for which full data were unavailable, paper reports were consulted for summary statistics. Finally, to corroborate our findings, additional surveys, including NJPS 1990, were analyzed.

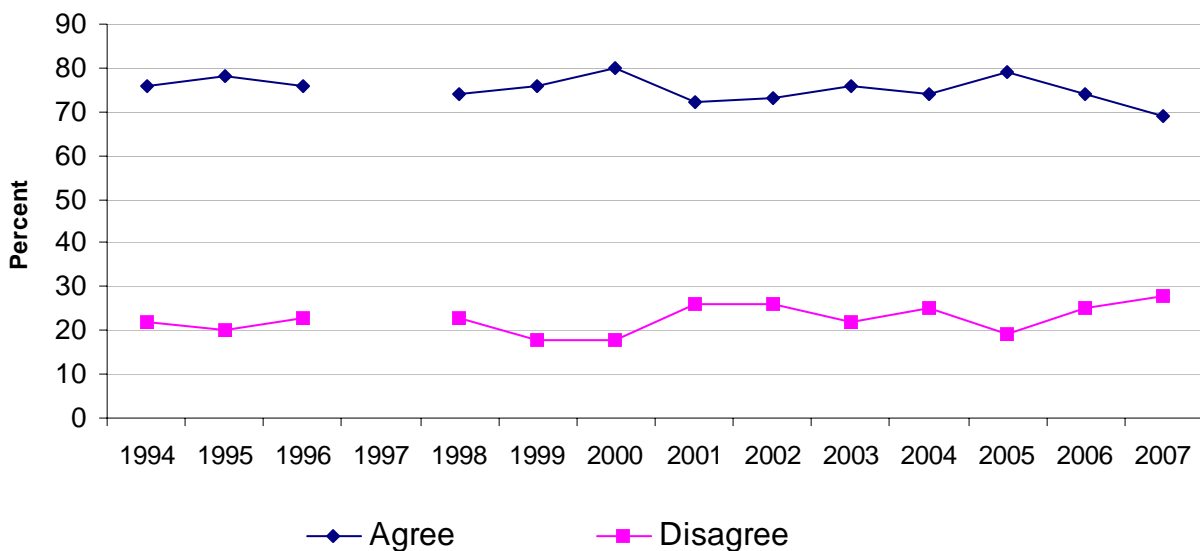
FINDINGS

Trends in Israel Attachment

The Annual Survey repeats two questions related to attachment to Israel almost every year. One question, included every year except 1997, asks respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: "Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew." As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of respondents agreeing that Israel is a "very important" aspect of their Jewish identity holds stable throughout the entire time period. Approximately three quarters of the sample view Israel as "very important." Although the trend in the last three years is negative, it is not a statistically significant trend, and, in any case, it represents a return to the levels seen in

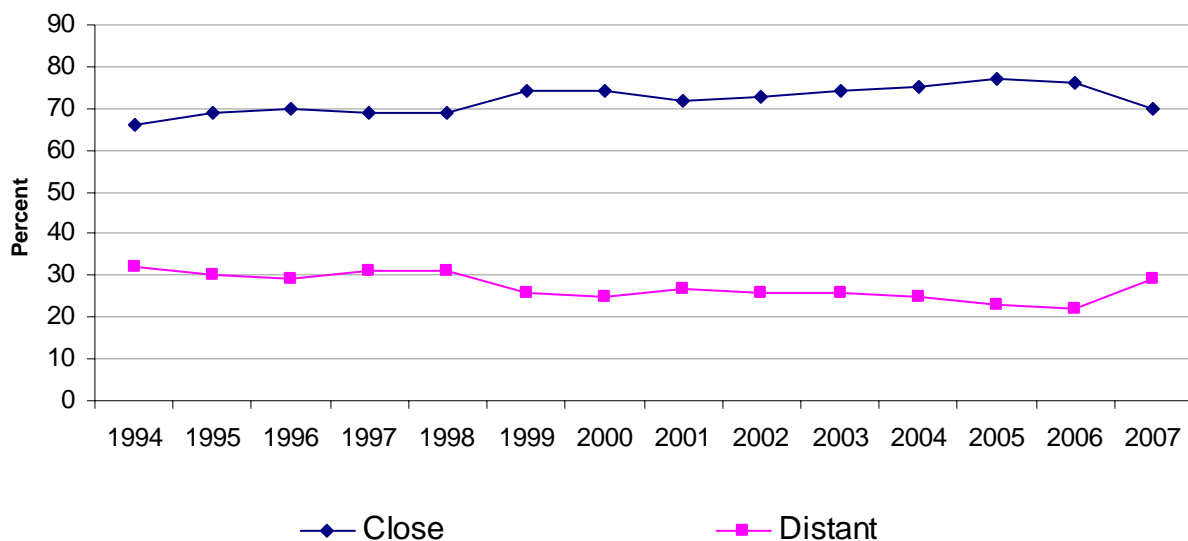
2000—prior to the intifada and to 9/11. In absolute terms, it remains that an overwhelming majority of survey respondents see Israel as very important to their Jewish identity.

Figure 1: Caring about Israel



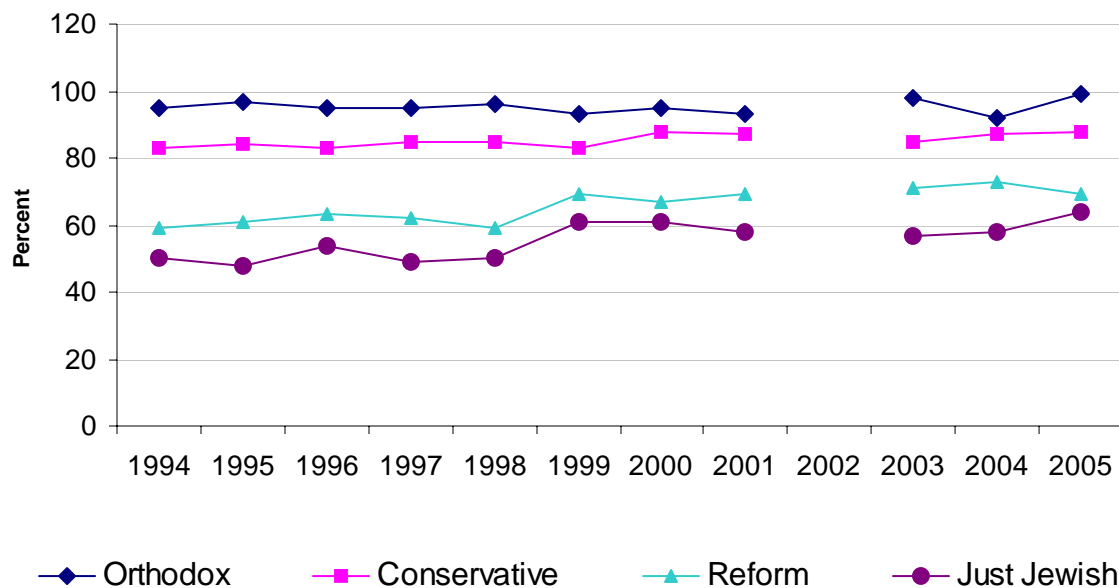
The second question, included every year, asks “How close do you feel to Israel?” The possible response categories include very close, fairly close, fairly distant, and very distant. Figure 2 shows the trend line comparing those who indicated that they feel close to Israel (“very close” or “fairly close”) with those who indicated that they feel distant. Between 1994 and 2005, the proportion feeling close to Israel increased by 11 percentage points, from 66 to 77 percent of the sample; between 2006 and 2007, it declined by seven percent. For the period as a whole, the spread between those indicating “close” and “distant” increased by a modest eight percent. Given the reported margin of error in these surveys, this is close to being a flat response—at best a substantively unimportant increase of one or two percent.⁷

Figure 2: Close to Israel



Stability in the proportion of respondents indicating closeness to Israel is evident across the denominations. As shown in Figure 3, the proportion of Reform Jews feeling close to Israel increased from 59 percent in 1994 to 69 percent in 2006 (the most recent year for which disaggregated data were available). During the same years, the proportion of Conservative Jews feeling close to Israel increased from 83 to 88 percent, and the proportion of "Just Jews" from 50 to 64 percent.

Figure 3: Close to Israel, by Denomination



Complete data sets for 2000-2001 and 2002-2005 surveys were available for more in-depth analysis.⁸ The multivariate analysis that follows provides several advantages over the reported frequencies described above. First, the analysis identifies those factors that predict attachment to Israel, and thereby improves our general understanding of the phenomenon. Second, by holding constant those factors, the analysis permits a more rigorous test of the distancing hypothesis.

Analysis of the two questions on Israel attachment reveals a high degree of correlation, making it possible to create a single, dichotomous index of Israel attachment. The multivariate analysis focuses on the factors related to the index in the combined 2000 and 2005 surveys—the years in which questions related to all of the key predictor variables were asked. The four columns in Table A1 show a series of nested logistic regressions. In each column, the variables marked by one or two asterisks are statistically significantly related to attachment to Israel in an equation that holds all other items constant. The numbers show the ratios of each item to its reference. For example, in Column 2, with all other factors held constant (including the subjective importance of travel to Israel), attachment to Israel among those who visited the country once is 1.78 as great as those who have never visited; among those who have visited twice or more, attachment is 2.98 times as great as among those who have never visited.

In the complete model displayed in Column 4, the factors associated with attachment to Israel further include age, intermarriage, marital status, religious denomination, “How important would you say being Jewish is in your life?”⁹, Jewish organizational activity, and agreement with a statement, “The goal of the Arabs is... the destruction of Israel.” With each of these factors held constant, as in Column 4, the survey year (2000 versus 2005) retains its statistical significance. Thus, controlling for these variables among the self-identified Jews who responded to the AJC surveys, one finds that there is still a modest but statistically significant increase in the index of Israel attachment between the years 2000 and 2005. That said, the raw survey data for 2006 and 2007 (not yet available for analysis) suggest a subsequent modest dip, reversing the gains of more recent years, though as noted, considering the margin of error, the conservative interpretation is that support for Israel is basically stable.

The overall picture of largely stable Israel attachment throughout the 1990s and 2000s can be corroborated by examining a parallel set of surveys conducted by Synovate (and its predecessor, Market Facts) on behalf of Cohen (1986) and Cohen and Kelman (2007).¹⁰ The surveys employed sampling procedures similar to those described above but were conducted by mail (1986) or mail plus Internet (2007). The earlier survey included larger proportions of Orthodox respondents (10% versus 7%) and synagogue members (51% versus 40%)—

sampling characteristics that would tend to bolster Israel attachment in the earlier survey. Table 1 compares responses on the small number of Israel-related items that were formulated in an identical fashion. These additional comparisons fit the general overall picture. American Jewish attachment to Israel has remained largely stable over more than 20 years; there is even, in the comparisons shown in Table 1, the suggestion of an increase in attachment.

Significance of Age

The overall level of attachment to Israel has not declined over the past two decades, but what of younger Jews? Is it true that younger American Jews are more distant from Israel than their counterparts a generation ago? In the 2005 AJC survey, the most recent one that has the full data set available (see Table A2), only the oldest age group, those 60 and older, is significantly more connected to Israel than the youngest group (those under 30). In the combined 2000

and 2005 data (see Table A1), however, respondents 40 and above are more highly attached than those under 30, and those over 70 are markedly more highly attached. Thus, in a snapshot image of American Jewry, younger respondents appear less attached to Israel than older respondents.

The key question regarding such age-cohort differences is whether they are related to on-going social processes (a “life-cycle effect”), or whether successive generations of American Jews have developed progressively weaker ties to the Jewish state (a “birth-cohort effect”). In reporting a recent survey, Cohen and Kelman (2007) reject the life-cycle interpretation, arguing instead that their cross-sectional evidence indicates declining attachment across birth-cohorts among non-Orthodox Jews:

That each age group is less Israel-attached than its elders suggests that we are in the midst of a long-term and ongoing decline in Israel attachment. The age-related differences cannot be

Table 1: Additional Comparisons

	1986	2007
"Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew." (% agree)	63%	70%
"If Israel were destroyed, I would feel as if I had suffered one of the greatest personal tragedies of my life." (% agree)	61%	64%
"Do you consider yourself to be a Zionist?" (% yes)	27%	29%

attributed primarily to family life-cycle effects, if only because the age-related declines characterize the entire age spectrum from the very old to the very young. Rather, we are in the midst of a massive shift in attitudes toward Israel, propelled forward by the process of cohort replacement, where the maturing younger cohorts that are the least Israel-engaged are replacing the oldest cohorts that are the most Israel-engaged. (p. 11)

Insofar as Cohen and Kelman interpret their data as indicative of birth-cohort effects rather than life-cycle effects, they conclude that “the gaps today will influence the stance of American Jewry toward Israel for years to come” (p. 5).

The multivariate analysis of the AJC surveys described above would appear, at first glance, to also support the birth-cohort hypothesis. Age differences in attachment to Israel remain statistically significant after the introduction of controls for factors known to be related to aging, including travel to Israel, Jewish organizational involvement, income and attachment to Jewish identity and /or denomination (as indicated in Tables A1 and A2; income is not shown in these tables). Since controlling for factors relating to aging does not reduce age-cohort differences, one possible implication would be that life-cycle must not be the key factor determining age-cohort differences but rather birth-cohort.

However, employed in this fashion, the multivariate analysis of cross-sectional data is best understood as a means to estimate historical and future trends on the basis of limited information. A much more direct test of the “life-cycle” versus “birth-cohort” hypotheses would examine the longitudinal data. If it could be shown that successive birth-cohorts of Jews actually maintained their characteristic levels of Israel attachment over time, then the birth-cohort hypothesis would receive further support. What then do the historical data show regarding age-cohort differences?

Figure 4 and Figure 5 show age-cohort differences in attachment to Israel in the AJC surveys for the years 1994-2006. If attachment to Israel were declining across the generations, then one would expect to see evidence of such decline in the longitudinal data. Specifically, we would expect the proportion of respondents in the older two age categories indicating strong support of Israel to decline over time as younger respondents replaced older respondents within each category. The evidence, however, points in the opposite direction: respondents in the two older categories either grew more attached over time (Figure 4) or their level of attachment remained unchanged (Figure 5). In either case, there is no evidence of decline due to generational succession.

Figure 4: Close to Israel, by Age-Cohort

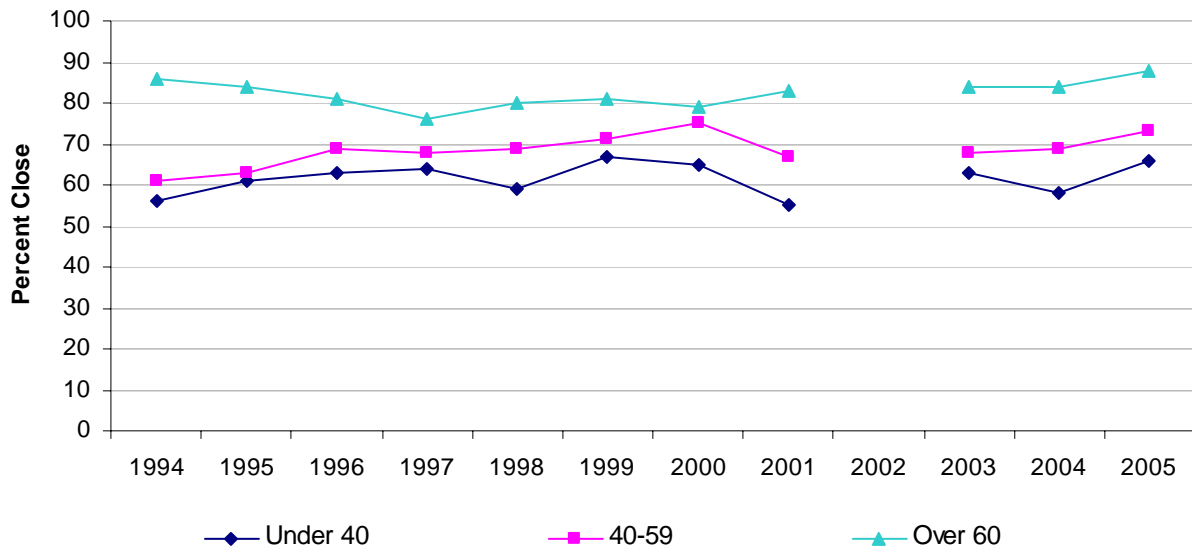
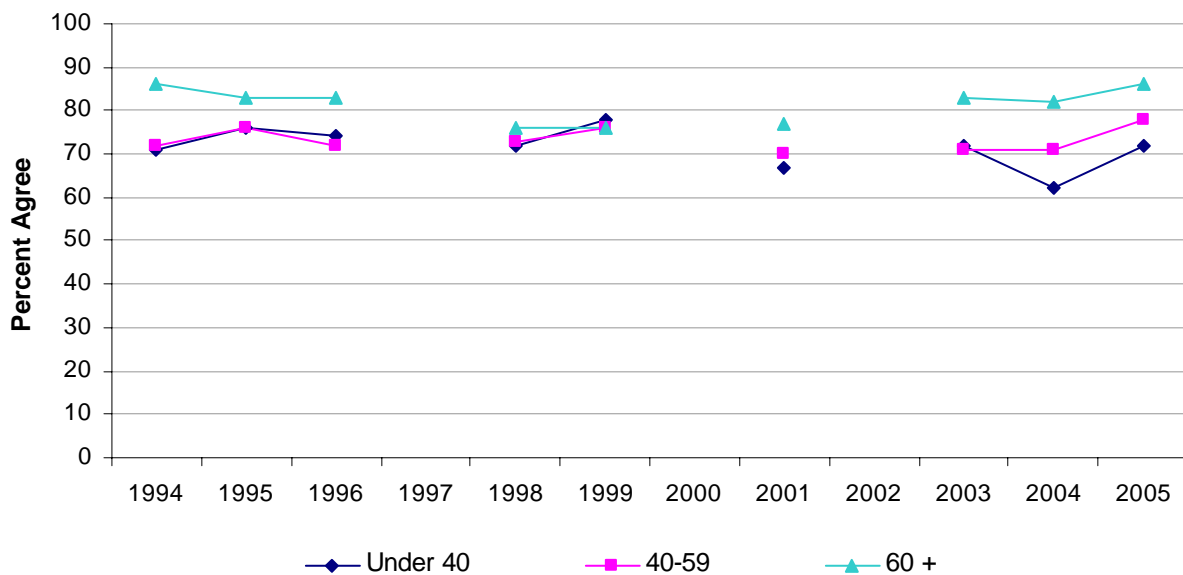


Figure 5: Caring about Israel, by Age-Cohort

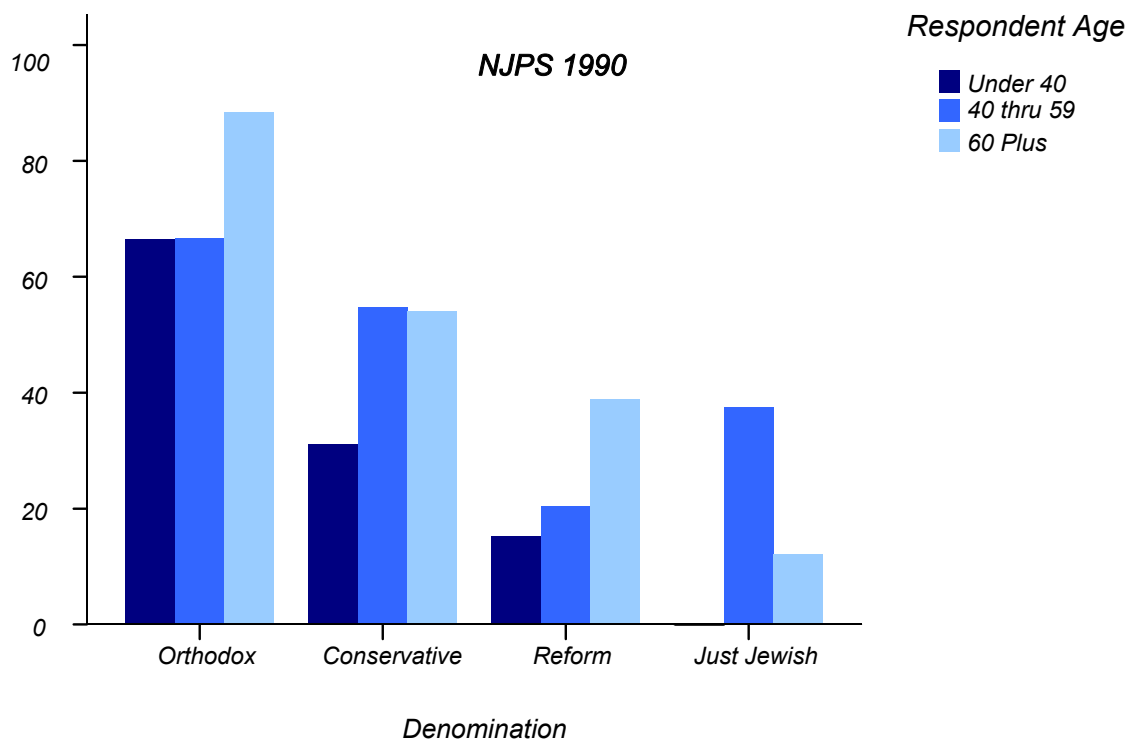


Further corroboration of the historical trends can be obtained by examining published reports of surveys conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. Such surveys indicate that age-cohort differences were evident more than a generation ago. For example, respondents in a 1975 survey of Boston Jews were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “The existence of Israel is essential for the continuation of American Jewish life.” Noting that although a majority of respondents agreed with the statement, the authors of the report write, “It is apparent that there is a general trend for older Jews and Jews of earlier generations to be more in agreement... It appears that agreement...declines as one gets further from the foreign-born, first

generation” (Fowler, 1976). Similarly, in the report on the 1986 national survey (discussed above), Steven M. Cohen observed that “attachment to Israel is relatively less frequent among Jews under 40, than in the older groups...[T]he middle aged, and above all the elderly, care more deeply about Israel than those born after World War II” (1986, p. 17).

Finally, reanalysis of the 1990 NJPS reveals significant age-cohort differences among non-Orthodox Jews nearly a generation ago. Figure 6 shows responses by age-cohort and denomination to the question: “How emotionally attached are you to Israel?” Reform Jews over age 60 were 2.5 times as

Figure 6: Percentage Extremely or Very Attached to Israel



likely to indicate a strong connection to Israel as those under 40. Conservative Jews in the older two age-cohorts were nearly twice as likely to indicate a strong connection. (The pattern among “Just Jews” is discrepant, with none under 40, and just 12 percent of those over 60 indicating strong attachment.)

In sum, age-differences have been a consistent feature of the survey evidence on American Jewish attachment to Israel. Such differences cannot be explained by other typical variables related to aging—they are not due, for example, to the fact that older respondents tend to be members of more Jewish organizations or are more likely to have traveled to Israel. However, such differences are evident in surveys from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, and no evidence shows that attachment has declined across the generations. The conclusion that best fits these observations is that American Jews have tended to become more attached to Israel as they grew older, but that their increasing attachment to Israel is unrelated to other key social processes associated with aging that we have measured.¹¹

Political Orientation

The AJC surveys asked a number of questions regarding respondents’ general political views and their views regarding Israel. It is therefore possible to test the hypothesis, much discussed in public and scholarly discourse, that liberal Jews have grown increasingly detached from Israel due to their opposition to Israel’s policies.

American Jews do indeed appear to be somewhat divided in their views on the future of the Israeli Occupied Territories and the establishment of a Palestinian state. As Figure 7

indicates, however, most respondents locate themselves in the center with respect to the future of the Occupied Territories, stating that Israel should keep some territories and, by implication, surrender others. There has been no clear trend toward greater polarization regarding the future of the Occupied Territories. On the question concerning the possible establishment of a Palestinian state (see Figure 8), respondents have been fairly evenly divided, though the general trend has been in favor, albeit with a sharp drop in support during 2001-2002, the peak years of the second Palestinian uprising. The most recent findings for 2006 and 2007 also show a modest drop in support for a Palestinian state.

Figure 7: Keep All, Some or None of the Occupied Territories

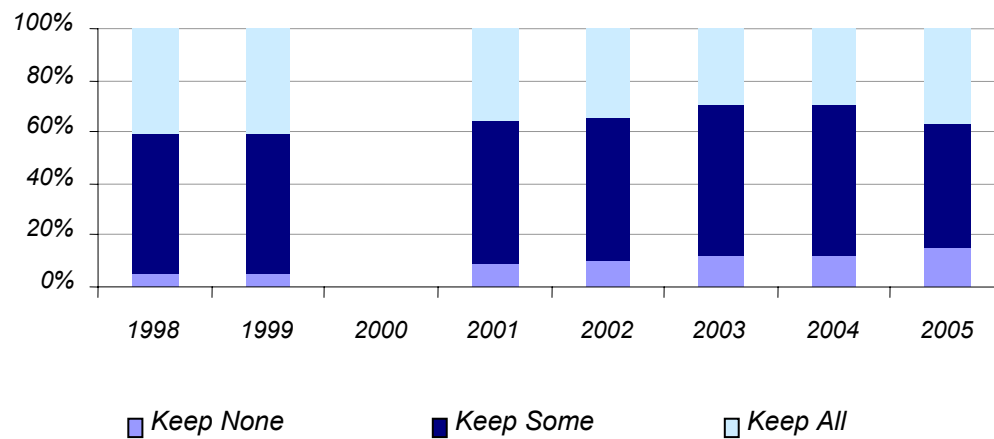
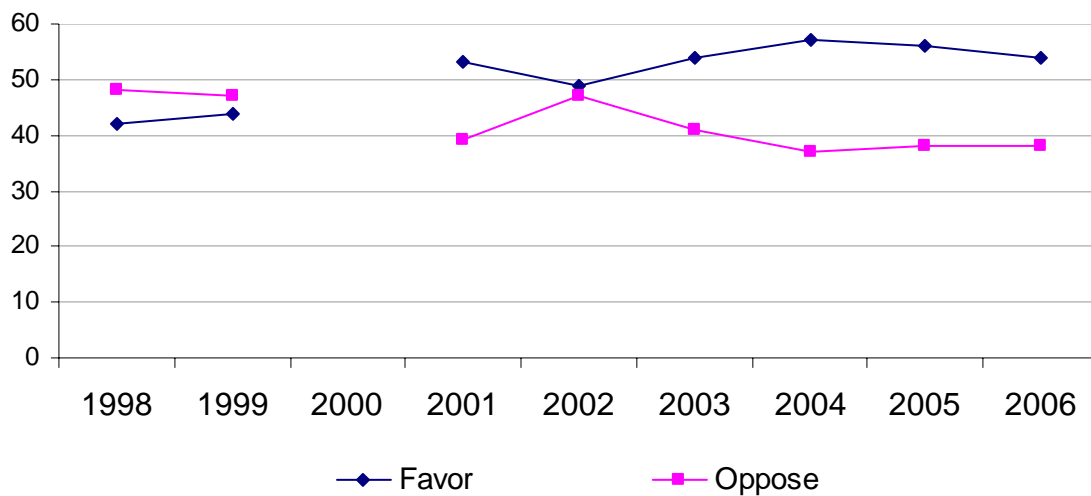


Figure 8: Favor/Oppose Palestinian State



What then is the relationship between political views and attachment to Israel? As Table A1 indicates, respondents' general political orientation on a continuum from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative" is not related to attachment to Israel. All things being equal, liberals and conservatives do not differ in their level of attachment to Israel.

The dynamics regarding political views relative to Israel are more complex. The relevant questions were not asked in the 2000 survey and therefore are not included in Table A1. Table A2 shows the multivariate analysis for the 2005 data alone. The results are mixed. The respondents' views on whether to trade land for peace are unrelated to their levels of attachment to Israel (results not shown). Opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state is, however, moderately related (odds ratio 1.57) to attachment to Israel. For a subsection of American Jewry, including especially Orthodox and those opposed to dismantling any of the settlements, strong attachment to Israel is related to opposition to a Palestinian state. For most American Jews, however, opinions regarding Israel's conflict with the Palestinians are independent of feelings of attachment to the Jewish state.

DISCUSSION

The data analyzed in this paper do not necessarily show American Jews to be highly connected to Israel in an absolute sense, although a large majority consistently agrees that Israel is a “very important” aspect of their Jewish identity. As with previous studies, the data show that Israel attachment varies with age, denomination, inmarriage, and visits to Israel. Other variables also appear to be significant in particular years. For those looking for detachment, there is plenty of evidence to be found in these surveys: younger American Jews and those who define themselves as Reform or unaffiliated express comparatively lower levels of attachment to Israel. The current study shows, however, that no significant decline is evident in the survey data for the period extending from the early 1990s to the most recent years. In addition, the study demonstrates that age-cohort differences today are comparable to those reported in the past and are thus most likely related to life-cycle and aging. Finally, the study indicates that general political orientation and views regarding the future of the Occupied Territories are largely independent of feelings of attachment to Israel.

In light of this evidence, why, we might ask, has the “distancing narrative” gained such widespread currency? A cynic might argue that bad news regarding Diaspora-Israel relations spreads so easily because it makes good headlines and justifies the mobilization of philanthropic resources for various causes, such as Diaspora Jewish education and Israel experience programs. That very well may be

part of the story. But the factors Cohen (1996) identified as responsible for widespread concern over the connection of American Jewry to Israel are still in evidence: visible conflicts among American Jewish elites over Israeli policies; a steady flow of bad news regarding the peace process; lower levels of attachment to Israel among young adults; and an historically high rate of intermarriage. These factors certainly lend plausibility to the distancing hypothesis.

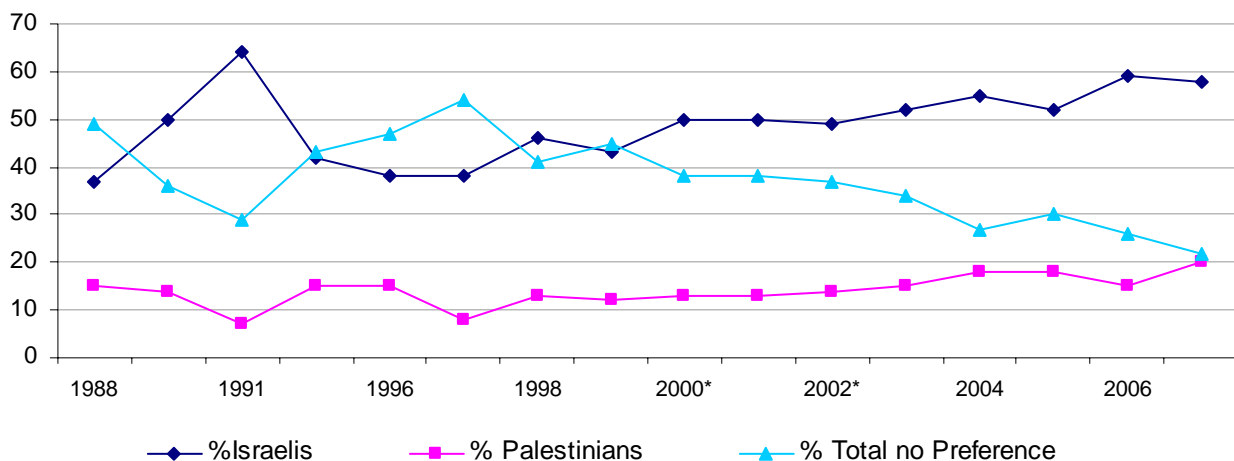
In light of the many plausible reasons American Jews might have grown more distant from Israel, how might we account for the contradictory evidence? What factors might have buoyed American Jewish attachment to Israel during a period in which so many observers reported and predicted a decline? Two factors stand out as particularly relevant: the general political climate and Jewish travel to Israel.

The General Climate of Opinion

American Jews formulate their attitudes in much the same context as other Americans. If American opinion of Israel became more favorable over the past 12 years, then that would tend to support feelings of attachment among Jews. Insofar as the American public is polled regularly by Gallup (as well as other survey companies) regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, this hypothesis can be readily tested. The standard Gallup question asks respondents: “In the Middle East situation, are your sympathies more with the Israelis or more with the Palestinians?” This question is repeated at regular intervals, often several times per year. Below, the trend data for the period 1988-2006 are reproduced (Figure 9, see Saad, 2007).

Between 1996 and 2006, the proportion of Americans indicating support for both the Israelis and the Palestinians increased as the proportion indicating “no preference” declined. The tilt toward Israel though is unmistakable: During the period in question, the proportion indicating pro-Israel sentiment increased by 21 percentage points (from 38 to 59 percent), whereas the proportion indicating pro-Palestinian sentiment increased by five percentage points (from 15 to 20 percent) (Saad, 2007). To the extent that American Jews participate in the broader political culture, the increasingly pro-Israel orientation of the American public likely provided support for specifically Jewish feelings of attachment.

Figure 9: Long-Term Trend in Middle East Sympathies



*Numbers for 2000-2003 data points represent average of two or more polls per year

Travel to Israel

The multivariate models discussed above (and displayed in Tables A1 and A2) indicate that travel to Israel is among the strongest predictors of attachment. Increasing Jewish travel to Israel would therefore likely push attachment to Israel upwards. Looking broadly at available survey data, there is moderate evidence of an

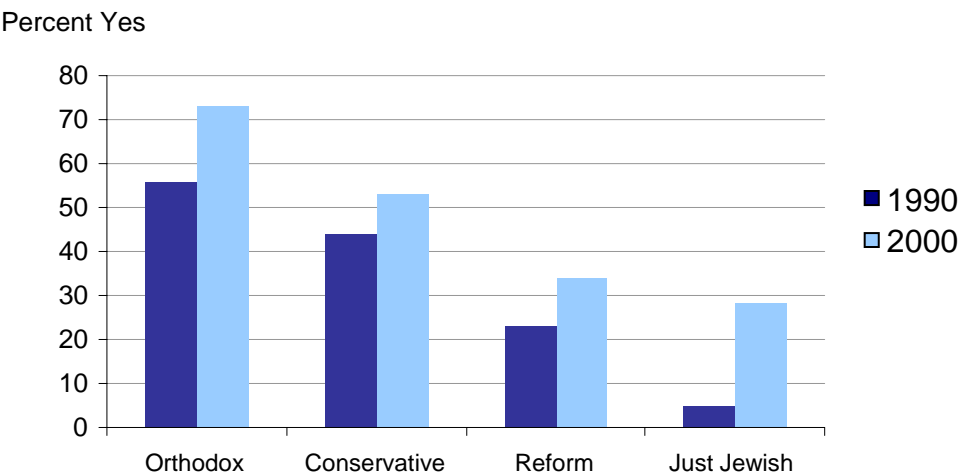
increase in Jewish travel to Israel (Table 2). Moreover, comparing the 1990 and 2000 NJPS, the evidence of increased travel can be seen across all of the denominations (Figure 10).

Further evidence of the significance of increased travel to Israel can be drawn from studies of the Israel experience program Birthright Israel (Saxe et al., 2004; Saxe, Sasson, & Hecht, 2006;

Table 2: "Have you ever been to Israel?"

	1986 Cohen/ AJC	1990 NJPS	1991 Cohen/ AJC	2000 NJPS	2005 AJC Annual Survey	2007 Cohen- Kelman
Yes	33	33	37	41	40	40
No	67	67	63	59	60	60

Figure 10: "Have you ever been to Israel?"



Saxe et al., 2007). As noted earlier, since 1999, the program has brought tens of thousands of American Jewish young adults to Israel and recent analyses suggest that for some cohorts born after 1985, 25 percent or more of the cohort will participate by the time they are 27 years old (and no longer eligible). Evaluative studies of Birthright Israel (see Saxe et al., 2007) indicate that alumni of that program report high levels of attachment to Israel and often discuss their experiences with family and friends.

Thus, for example, a survey of nearly 12,000 participants in Birthright Israel trips during winter 2007, administered three months following the trip, finds substantial differences in connection to Israel between trip participants and a control group of applicants to the program who did not go. Specifically, in an equation that adjusts for pre-trip differences between participants and non-participants, the estimated probability of participants feeling “very much” connected to Israel is nearly triple (62 versus 21 percent) that of the non-participants (Saxe et al., 2007). Such findings are typical of those reported in several years of evaluation research on the program and testify to the impact of Israel travel on feelings of attachment. In short, a modest increase in the proportion of American Jews traveling to Israel likely helped to sustain American Jewish attachment to Israel in recent decades, and the success of the Birthright Israel program

(together with others) implies the likelihood that such upward pressure on Israel attachment will continue in the future.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the most consistent source of data regarding American Jewish attitudes toward Israel over time—surveys conducted by the AJC—suggests that American Jewish attachment to Israel has largely held steady for the period 1994-2007. Those data further suggest that age-cohort differences in attachment to Israel are likely related to life-cycle rather than the diverse experiences of successive generations. As American Jews grow older, they tend to become more emotionally attached to Israel. Finally, although divided over the peace process and ultimate disposition of the Occupied Territories, American Jews apparently distinguish between their political views on Israeli policy and their attachment to the Jewish State. Comparable data from other surveys conducted during the study period corroborate these findings. Taken as a whole, these data provide strong reasons for rejecting the prevailing pessimism regarding the future relationship of American Jews to Israel.

To be sure, prognostications regarding the future must also attend to the other side of the ledger. Thus, for example, some worry that increasing rates of intermarriage will lead to declining levels of Israel attachment. That may prove true, but intermarriage is likely a symptom of lower levels of Jewish education and Jewish experiences in earlier generations (see Chertok, Phillips, & Saxe, forthcoming). Interestingly, there is some evidence that Israel attachment actually increased among the

intermarried during the period 2000-2005, perhaps an indicant of the strengthening Jewish education of this group.

Second, although survey research allows one to take a snapshot of the views of a large number of individuals and generalize to the population, survey instruments are relatively crude measurement devices. Qualitative research conducted in parallel with the present study reveals, alongside feelings of emotional attachment, considerable ambivalence about Israel's policies regarding the Palestinians, Arab citizens of the state, and religion and state (Sasson, forthcoming). How such feelings might develop in the future is not fully predictable on the basis of the recent past.

Finally, as the quasi-experimental evaluation studies of Taglit-Birthright Israel demonstrate, feelings of connection to Israel are highly susceptible to influence. Initiatives that increase travel and exchange between the two Jewish populations clearly contribute to stronger feelings of attachment. Birthright Israel is rapidly expanding and may soon reach a critical mass of Jewish young adults. Its success suggests that an even closer, more personal and meaningful relationship between Israel and the American Jewish Diaspora, may be on the horizon.

NOTES

1. To access the speeches, see:
www.herzliyaconference.org/Eng/_Articles/Article.asp?CategoryID=248&ArticleID=1931
<http://cmjs.org/files/Herzilya.022108.pdf>.
2. "In 1989, a national survey conducted for the American Jewish Committee found 73 percent of Jews agreeing that 'caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew'; in 2005, a mere decade-and-a-half later, the corresponding figure had fallen to 57 percent." (Cohen & Wertheimer, 2006:34).
3. "Two decades of opinion polls conducted by sociologist Steven Cohen for the AJC highlight the diminishing role of Israel in the American Jewish consciousness" Rosenthal, 2001, p. 171.
4. Perlmann (2007a) estimates that a broader definition of Jewish that includes both Jews by religion and "Jews for any reason" would include a population larger by one sixth. For a similar discussion, see Saxe et. al., 2006. A sample drawn from such an expanded universe would include relatively more respondents with weak attachment to Israel. Insofar as our emphasis is on trends rather than the absolute level of attachment, the exclusion of "Jews by ancestry" should not influence our findings.
5. The National Jewish Population Survey of 2000 likely under-represents non-Orthodox Jews (see Saxe et al., 2006). To the extent the AJC samples resemble the NJPS samples they likely feature the same distortion. We present our findings with statistical controls for denomination, or separately for each denominational grouping, so such distortions do not influence our findings.
6. Insofar as Synovate assembles its sample for consumer research, respondents tend to be somewhat more conventional and interested in consumption.
7. Synovate's reported margin of error of 3% is misleading. It is based on the assumption that the survey of Jews is a random sample of the Jews on Synovate's list. In the first place, in some years the sample was stratified and in some years weighted. Both these procedures that are standard to survey research call for special software for analysis and that software generally increases the margin of error. But the data are not available from Synovate to adjust for these procedures so the reported margin of error must stand, and our own analyses also assume a random survey. But the randomness refers to Synovate's list, which itself is not random and has a low initial cooperation rate. The true margin of error must be higher than 3% but cannot be calculated.
8. See Perlmann 2007b for a recent analysis of the factors associated with attachment to Israel in the AJC data sets.
9. Because we have included the importance of being Jewish, which is highly related to denomination, not all the denominations are significantly different from "Just Jewish" as might have otherwise been the case.

The model was chosen to control for possible sample differences between the two years on matters that were related to support for Israel.

10. Longitudinal comparisons across all other sets of surveys known to the authors are impossible due to differences in question wording and response categories. For example, NJPS 1990 asks, “How emotionally attached are you to Israel” whereas NJPS 2000 asks, “How close are you to Israel.” Several surveys administered by Steven M. Cohen since the 1980s employ identical questions (e.g. the question on “emotional attachment” is asked in surveys conducted in 1997 and 2007) but disparate response categories.
11. The possibility that attachment to Israel increases with age but independently of religiosity, Israel trips, and organizational engagement, is underscored by an association between aging and a propensity to agree with the statement, “The goal of the Arabs is not the return of occupied territories but rather than destruction of Israel.” In 2005, 85% of respondents over 60 tended to agree with the statement, compared to 64 % of respondents under 30 (with other age cohorts arrayed in between, in a stepwise fashion).

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Logistic regression on Israel Attachment for 2000/2005 of key predictors

	(1) Close to Israel	(2) Close to Israel	(3) Close to Israel	(4) Close to Israel
Year (2000/2005)	1.065 **	1.068 **	1.078 **	1.064 *
Under 30 Reference				
Age 30-39	1.140	1.155	1.397	1.360
Age 40-49	1.215	1.521	1.969 *	1.953 *
Age 50-59	1.297	1.826 *	2.445 **	2.268 *
Age 60-69	1.404	1.693	2.329 *	2.095 *
Age 70+	1.908 *	2.111 *	2.936 **	2.747 **
Reference: Jewish Spouse				
Spouse not Jewish	0.233 **	0.372 **	0.558 **	0.542 **
Not married	0.515 **	0.625 **	0.799 **	0.797 **
Reference: Never Been to Israel				
Been to Israel Once		1.782 **	1.924 **	1.889 **
Been to Israel More than Once		2.980 **	2.616 **	2.689 **
Travel to Israel important to Jewish Identity		3.218 **	2.242 **	2.251 **
Reference: Just Jewish				
Orthodox			1.660	1.481
Conservative			1.541 *	1.531 *
Reconstructionist			0.491	0.534
Reform			0.740	0.763
Being Jewish Important to Identity			1.959 **	1.898 **
Jewish Organizational Activity important to Jewish Identity			1.476 **	1.478 **
Arab goal is destruction of Israel				1.771 **
Social political identification				1.051
				(1.10)
Observations	1896	1893	1881	1855
Pseudo R-squared	0.06	0.22	0.28	0.29
Log Likelihood	-1086.33	-901.87	-823.15	-797.97
DF	8.00	11.00	17.00	19.00

Absolute value of z statistics in parentheses

* significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

Table A2: Logistic regression on Israel Attachment for 2005 of key predictors

2005	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Close to Israel	Close to Israel	Close to Israel	Close to Israel
Under 30 Reference				
Age 30-39	1.150	1.511	1.620	1.544
Age 40-49	1.336	1.841	2.219	1.837
Age 50-59	1.269	1.976	2.450	2.200
Age 60-69	1.929	2.849 *	3.950 **	3.405 *
Age 70+	3.116 **	5.082 **	6.045 **	5.432 **
Reference: Jewish Spouse				
Spouse not Jewish	0.281 **	0.534 **	0.666	0.694
Not married	0.559 **	0.829	0.854	0.851
Reference: Just Jewish				
Orthodox		1.616	1.112	1.008
Conservative		1.287	1.173	1.180
Reconstructionist		0.906	0.685	0.588
Reform		0.596 *	0.628 *	0.656
Being Jewish Important to Identity		2.479 **	2.002 **	1.927 **
Jewish Organizational Activity important to Jewish Identity		2.094 **	1.643 **	1.549 **
Reference: Never Been to Israel				
Been to Israel Once			1.641	1.575
Been to Israel More than Once			2.297 *	2.234 *
Travel to Israel important to Jewish Identity			(2.48)*	(2.34)*
Travel to Israel important to Jewish Identity			2.419 **	2.447 **
Oppose Palestinian State				1.566 *
Arab goal is destruction of Israel				1.812 **
Social political identification				0.985
Observations	939	931	928	865
Pseudo R-squared	0.07	0.24	0.30	0.31
Log Likelihood	-519.22	-421.09	-386.02	-350.21
DF	7.00	13.00	16.00	19.00

Absolute value of z statistics in parentheses

* significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%



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