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The conventional wisdom is wrong...

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Registration for this summer's Taglit-birthright Israel trips has broken all previous records. More than 40,000 young adults from North America have applied to participate. Even with concerns about security due to the missile attacks in the south, interest in birthright Israel has not slowed. It is likely that many, nearly half of those who have applied, will be placed on waiting lists.

How can one reconcile this unprecedented interest in Israel among North American Jewish young adults with the conventional wisdom that American Jews - and young adults in particular - are growing more distant from Israel?

The answer we arrived at following our comprehensive review of surveys conducted over the past three decades is that the conventional wisdom is wrong: There is no consistent evidence in surveys conducted among national samples of American Jews that either younger individuals, or adults, have grown more distant from Israel. On the contrary, the survey evidence reveals surprising resilience in American Jewry's connection to Israel.

In surveys conducted annually by the American Jewish Committee between 1994 and 2007, roughly three-quarters of American Jews agreed that "caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew." A comparable fraction (roughly 70%) indicated feeling "close to Israel" (either "very close" or "close"). To be sure, older Jews and those who identify with the Orthodox and Conservative movements reported higher levels of attachment than younger Jews and those who identify as Reform or unaffiliated. Still, even among the less Israel-connected segments of the population, the trends have been largely stable.

The fact that older Jews expressed comparatively higher levels of support for Israel in surveys conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the most recent surveys, is especially important. What this means is that the age-differences evident in individual surveys, which have been the primary source of concern of previous analysts, do not reflect generational differences in attachment to Israel. Such differences are not due, for example, to the declining proximity of successive generations to the Holocaust and founding of the state. Rather, age differences most likely reflect the social processes associated with aging. As today's younger Jews age, they will become more attached to Israel.

IT IS HARDLY surprising that observers expected waning American Jewish attachment to Israel. Since the 1980s, American Jewish elites have frequently clashed with Israeli officials over the monopoly status of Orthodox Judaism in Israel. During the 1990s, American Jews, like their Israeli counterparts, grew increasingly divided over the peace process, with hawks and doves alternately despairing in response to the twists and turns in the negotiations.

In recent years, Israel has also become increasingly controversial on some of the campuses where many American Jews study. For these reasons, and others, it would appear only reasonable to expect growing alienation among many American Jews. That the evidence does not support these expectations should be good news. It is an indicator of the important role that Israel plays in the identity of Diaspora Jewry and, on a practical level, evidence of the solid commitment of American Jews, whatever their political views, to the Jewish state.

If the past testifies to the resilience of American Jewish commitment to Israel, the future appears still brighter. Since 1999, more than 160,000 Diaspora Jewish young adults, mostly from North America, have participated in birthright Israel. These young adults increasingly view going on a birthright Israel trip as a Jewish rite of passage. Indeed, at current levels of participation, roughly 25 percent of those born after 1985 will likely participate in the program.

The number of participants in long-term study and volunteer programs in Israel, including those supported by the Jewish Agency's Masa program, is also increasing. Jewish young adults who visit Israel return with a strengthened sense of connection to the Jewish state. They spread their enthusiasm among family and friends, a fact which accounts for the exponential growth of birthright Israel.

As members of what Simon Rawidowicz once called "the ever dying people," perhaps Jews have difficulty accepting good news. But Jewish investment in a strong relationship between the Diaspora and homeland can be built on our aspirations as well as our fears. As Israel approaches its 60th year of independence, we can look forward to a stronger relationship between the Diaspora and Israel, built upon direct experience, first hand knowledge and personal relationships.

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The authors' new report, American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the 'Distancing' Hypothesis can be downloaded from <http://www.cmjs.org/>

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