

# Tablet

## Wrong Numbers

Peter Beinart's argument about Israel and liberal American Jews is built on misread data

BY THEODORE SASSON AND LEONARD SAXE | May 28, 2010 7:00 AM



Peter Beinart.

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Debate about Israel among American Jews has taken a new turn, with Jewish advocacy organizations such as [AIPAC](#)<sup>[1]</sup> and the [Anti-Defamation League](#)<sup>[2]</sup> increasingly under attack from inside and outside the community. The latest salvo is CUNY journalism professor Peter Beinart's recent [essay](#)<sup>[3]</sup> in the *New York Review of Books*. Beinart claims that the Jewish establishment has blindly supported the illiberal policies of the Israeli government and, in so doing, has alienated American Jews, particularly non-Orthodox young adults. The urgent task, he writes, is to save liberal Zionism in the United States, "so that American Jews can help save liberal Zionism in Israel."

Our response to Beinart and others who share his view of a profound and growing schism between liberal American Jews and establishment advocacy organizations is not based on political differences. Rather, our concern is that he and others have allowed their own political allegiances to color their interpretation of the views of the broader American Jewish public. In so doing, they give a distorted impression of American Jewish opinion and overlook important developments in the relationship of American Jews to Israel.

No doubt many liberal American Jews, like their Israeli counterparts, recoil at certain policies of the present Israeli government. Among members of the American Jewish public as a whole, however, liberalism is not associated with alienation from Israel. Studies of American Jewish opinion, conducted under various auspices and using different methods, report no relationship between general political views and emotional attachment to Israel. For example, in the study cited by Beinart, Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman concluded that "political identity, for the general population, has little bearing upon feelings of warmth toward or alienation from Israel." Our own analyses of other survey data support the same conclusion.

Perhaps more surprisingly, these studies provide little evidence that as a group young adults are more liberal with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than members of their parents' or grandparents' generations. For example, in a 2007 [study](#)<sup>[4]</sup> of the American Jewish Committee's annual surveys, Bard College professor Joel Perlmann found that respondents under age 40 were *less* likely than older respondents to support establishment of a Palestinian state and the dismantling of Jewish settlements on the West Bank. A study we conducted of Boston Jewry under the auspices of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies similarly found that respondents under 40 were less willing to support dismantling settlements.

The evidence is also unkind to the common-sense view that American Jews are more willing than Jewish Israelis to make difficult compromises for peace—a notion that is at least implicit in Beinart's call to American Jews to save liberal Zionism in Israel. According to a [survey](#)<sup>[5]</sup> conducted in March by Hebrew University's Truman Institute, 68 percent of Jewish Israelis support establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel and 56 percent support dismantling most settlements in the territories as part of a peace settlement. According to a [survey](#)<sup>[6]</sup> conducted during the same month by the AJC, just 48 percent of American Jews support establishment of a Palestinian state. The question regarding dismantling settlements is not directly comparable: Israelis were asked whether they support dismantling "most settlements" whereas American Jews were asked whether they support dismantling "all," "some," or "none." Still, the comparison is instructive: Just 8 percent of American respondents indicated support for dismantling "all settlements" and just 56 percent for dismantling "some settlements."

Cross-national comparisons of survey data are tricky, and the pattern in other surveys may be somewhat discrepant. But the notion that Israeli Jews are less ready to compromise for peace than American Jews rests on a shaky empirical foundation.

Beinart's assertion of a large and growing generation gap between younger American Jews and their parents and grandparents on the subject of Israel also rests on a shallow reading of the data. As our colleagues Cohen and Kelman have shown, younger respondents do express less attachment to Israel than older respondents. But, as they explain, this is mostly because the younger age cohort includes a larger number of intermarried respondents, who as a group express a lower level of attachment—and not only to Israel but to all things Jewish. To the extent the younger respondents in the Cohen-Kelman study were less emotionally attached to Israel, it was not because they were more liberal.

Moreover, as we pointed out in our [published response](#)<sup>[7]</sup> to the original Cohen-Kelman report, younger Jews have reported lower levels of attachment to Israel in most surveys going back as far as there are data to analyze. Younger Jews were less attached to Israel in the National Jewish Population [Surveys](#)<sup>[8]</sup> of 2000 and 1990. They were less attached in the AJC surveys going back to the mid-1980s. If, in [tabletmag.com/.../print/](http://tabletmag.com/.../print/)

fact, young Jews are always less attached than older Jews, then the differences in age groups are likely related to lifecycle rather than generation. As Jews age, they become more attached to Israel. In other words, the younger Jews who reported a middling level of attachment to Israel in the mid-1980s grew up to become today's over 60 group, which reports a high level of attachment.

Looking beyond the evidence from general opinion surveys, Beinart's claim of young adult indifference to Israel becomes even less persuasive. Since 1999, more than 300,000 young adults from North America have applied to Taglit-Birthright Israel<sup>[9]</sup>, and nearly 200,000 of these applicants have participated in the 10-day educational trips—the vast majority from the ranks of the non-Orthodox. At the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies<sup>[10]</sup>, we have surveyed this population at frequent intervals over the past decade. Their political views on how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are unaffected by the program, and most do not engage in any form of Israel advocacy when they return. But they do feel a strong connection to Israel. In a recent study<sup>[11]</sup> of participants five to eight years after their trips, 58 percent reported feeling “very much” connected to Israel. Conversely, just 12 percent reported feeling “a little” or “not at all” connected. The program influenced their behavior as well as their sense of connection: 42 percent reported reading Israeli newspapers online, and 40 percent reported having returned for a second visit.

To be sure, those who apply to Taglit do not represent their entire age cohort. Their number, though, is huge. During 2010, Taglit will send about 32,000 American Jewish young adults to Israel (and turn away thousands more). Another 8,000 will participate in long-term study and volunteer programs under the auspices of the Jewish Agency's MASA<sup>[12]</sup> program. These young adults have sisters, brothers, parents, and friends; their impact on an entire generation's ties to Israel has yet to be fully measured, but is by no means slight.

As a result of these initiatives, for the first time, in some studies a larger share of young adults report having been to Israel than older adults. For these young adults, Israel is a central part of their identities in a way that was simply untrue for the vast majority of their parents' generation. They have more direct ties<sup>[13]</sup> to Israel including Israelis they met during their trips. They are more likely to return to study, volunteer, or work. And they are more likely to connect to Israel in the United States, through film, music, food, and via the web. Israel advocacy—of either the AIPAC or J Street variety—is just a part of the broader repertoire of connections that young adults increasingly maintain with Israel.

Although Beinart may not be a reliable guide to American Jewish opinion in the past or present, he may yet prove to be a bellwether. When he writes that under the Netanyahu government lines are being crossed and Zionism increasingly seems at odds with liberalism, he expresses the sentiments of an influential segment of the American Jewish intelligentsia. The tension between American Jewish liberalism and the policies of the current Israeli government is real, and the prospect of substantial alienation in the future cannot be dismissed. It should be remembered, however, that American Jews have had plenty of experience with U.S. administrations they did not support politically. For the foreseeable future, diverse personal connections, alongside a basic belief in the need for a Jewish state, will help the next generation of American Jews remain committed to Israel even in the face of distressing political developments.

*Theodore Sasson is senior research scientist at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University and an associate professor of international studies at Middlebury College. Leonard Saxe is professor of Jewish Community Research and Social Policy at Brandeis University and director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and Steinhardt Social Research Institute.*

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URLs in this post:

[1] AIPAC: <http://www.aipac.org/>

[2] Anti-Defamation League: <http://www.adl.org/>

[3] essay: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/?pagination=false>

[4] study: [http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp\\_526.pdf](http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_526.pdf)

[5] survey: <http://truman.huji.ac.il/poll-view.asp?id=325>

[6] survey: [http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlTl2PHKoG/b.5915517/k.D620/2010\\_Annual\\_Survey\\_of\\_American\\_Jewish\\_Opinion.htm](http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlTl2PHKoG/b.5915517/k.D620/2010_Annual_Survey_of_American_Jewish_Opinion.htm)

[7] published response: <http://ir.brandeis.edu/bitstream/handle/10192/23015/IsraelAttach.030308.22.pdf?sequence=1>

[8] Surveys: <http://www.tabletmag.com> <http://www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?id=33650>

[9] Birthright Israel: <http://www.birtrightisrael.com/site/PageServer>

[10] Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies: <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/>

[11] study: <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/Taglit.GBI.10.22.09.final.pdf>

[12] MASA: <http://www.masaisrael.org/masa/english/>

[13] direct ties: <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/Direct%20Engagement.Sasson.pdf>

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