Special Article
American Jews and Israel: A 60-Year Retrospective*

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Ever since Israel's founding, American Jews have contended with the freighted symbolism and complex realities of the Jewish state. How could it be otherwise? After living for nearly two millennia as a minority, scattered across much of the globe and dependent upon the tolerance of host countries, Jews around the world have been confronted since 1948 with a radically novel situation: A Jewish state in the land of their ancestors, with a Jewish majority exercising sovereignty and considerable military might, not only conducting its life according to the rhythms of the Jewish calendar and in the revived Hebrew language, but also defining itself as the homeland of every Jew and as the defender of Jews around the world.

Israel's existence has proven especially challenging for American Jews. Citizens of the largest and most powerful democracy, Jews in the U.S. have felt a special responsibility to protect and aid Israel. Yet simultaneously, American Jews have also maintained undiminished allegiance and profound gratitude to their land of residence, whose ethos from its inception has been shaped by the belief that America is the new Promised Land.

The complexities began to dawn on some American Jews immediately upon Israel's creation in May 1948. Initially, the dominant question was how to think about Zionism once Israel had come into existence, an achievement that fulfilled the primary goal of the Zionist movement. Here is how the 27-year-old Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg framed the dilemma little more than a year later:

What shall I do with my Zionism? I know that I am not alone with this problem, that it is now being much discussed. But I have yet to

hear any suggestion that really hits the mark . . . . The experience of
Israel, a nation in the making, is complex on the surface but in re-
ality simple—it is the problem of getting on with the job . . . . The
Diaspora has chosen to live on as such. How to make it live on cre-
atively and how to maintain inner identity between it and Israel—
these are the most important questions that face us today.¹

Little wonder Hertzberg subtitled his article, “A Movement in
Search of a Program.”

Meanwhile, on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, the po-
litical leadership of the new Jewish state was similarly struggling
to find a way of reframing its relationship with American Jewry.
The official Zionist ideology espoused by Israel’s political elite
“negated” the Diaspora, assuming that it was doomed to wither,
and expected Diaspora communities to play a subordinate role to
Israel in all Jewish affairs. Simultaneously, however, leaders of the
newborn state were acutely aware of their dependence on Ameri-
can Jewish largess to help absorb immigrants and build Israel’s in-
frastructure, and also hoped American Jews could influence their
government to aid Israel. As a result, Israeli leaders issued con-
tradictory messages to their American Jewish counterparts, some-
times pleading for more financial and political help and at other
times berating them for not immigrating to Israel—in Zionist parl-
ance, “making aliyah”—at so momentous a time in Jewish history,
or at least sending their youth to the Jewish homeland.

Matters grew so tense that leaders of some American Jewish or-
ganizations insisted upon a formal agreement to clarify the proper
relationship between the two sectors of the Jewish people.² In an
orchestrated exchange of statements, David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s
first prime minister, and Jacob Blaustein, president of the Ameri-
can Jewish Committee, did just that in August 1950. They both
agreed that American Jews would be “partners” with Israel, even
as “the integrity of the two communities and their institutions”
would be preserved. The primary role of American Jews was “to
do their share in the rebuilding of Israel, which faces . . . enormous
political, social and economic problems.” American Jews would

¹Arthur Hertzberg, “American Zionism at an Impasse,” Commentary 8, October 1949,
pp. 341, 345.
²The background to this historical clash and its resolution is traced in Zvi Ganin, An Un-
easy Relationship: American Jewish Leadership and Israel, 1948–57 (Syracuse, 2005), esp.
chaps. 3–6.
provide philanthropic and political support. As for aliyah, Ben-
Gurion swallowed his Zionist pride and limited himself to calling
upon American Jews to offer “their technical knowledge, their un-
rivaled experience, their spirit of enterprise, their bold vision, their
‘know-how,’” but immigrants would come to Israel only as “a mat-
ter of [their] own volition.”

While much attention has focused on Ben-Gurion’s reduced ex-
pectations—particularly his backing away from calls for mass
aliyah—the very demand by American Jewish leaders for such a
statement of understanding signaled the highly unusual nature of
the relationship between Israel and American Jewry. How often,
after all, do citizens of one country ask the government of a for-
eign sovereign state to issue a public explanation of their rela-
tionship? Making the agreement even more noteworthy is the fact
that the preponderant majority of Jews in the U.S. did not then,
and still do not now, have any family members who had emigrated
from modern Palestine/Israel. Blaustein, the AJC leader, was try-
ing to work out an understanding between the Israeli government,
on the one hand, and a population with no political or legal con-
nection to the Jewish state, on the other, and the deal that emerged
dramatized the extraordinary ties that would bind American Jews
and Israel over the next six decades.4

Another aspect of this agreement also continues to resonate.
When Israel was founded, some American Jewish leaders feared
the charge of “dual loyalty.” They therefore pressed Ben-Gurion to ac-
knowledge explicitly that American Jews “have only one political
attachment and that is to the United States of America,” and to
pledge not to “interfere in any way with the internal affairs of Jew-
ish communities abroad.” Ironically, the matter of interference
would come to loom ever larger with the passage of time, in both
communities. Israeli government officials and religious leaders
have repeatedly pressured American Jewish groups to follow their

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3“David Ben-Gurion and Jacob Blaustein: An Exchange of Views,” *American Jewish
Year Book* 53 (New York, 1952), pp. 564–68. At the time, AJC was the most prominent
non-Zionist Jewish organization in the U.S. On the divisions between Zionist and non-
Zionists leading up to the establishment of the Jewish state, see Menahem Kaufman, *An

4Charles S. Liebman, “Diaspora Influence on Israel: The Ben-Gurion–Blaustein ‘Ex-
lead on numerous issues, even as American Jews have increasingly intervened in internal Israeli affairs through their funding of political and social causes. What seemed a clear-cut taboo on mutual interference in the Ben-Gurion–Blaustein agreement has become ever more complex, as both parties try to maintain the fine and uncertain line between assistance and meddling.5

Indeed, many aspects of the relationship between Israel and American Jews have developed in unpredictable directions since the early years of statehood. The organized American Jewish community considerably expanded and deepened its involvement in funding Israeli ventures even as it engaged in a range of activities to lend political support to the Jewish state. Over time, what historian Zvi Ganin has called the “uneasy relationship” between American Jewish leaders and Israel has evolved into a partnership, albeit one sometimes marked by tensions and unpredictable turns. Through it all, the connection to Israel came to assume a far more prominent role in the public and private lives of American Jews, encompassing activities and preoccupations that no one could have anticipated in 1948.

This essay sketches in broad brushstrokes the multifaceted and rapidly changing nature of American Jewish engagement with Israel as it has evolved over the past six decades.6 It begins with an often overlooked question—how pervasive is Israel in American Jewish religious, cultural, educational, and organizational life? This is followed by detailed discussion of how American Jews think and feel about Israel, the role Israel plays in Jewish public discourse and institutional life, and the debates it has engendered within American Jewish society, which have attracted much attention over the years because they serve as measures of strengthening or waning Jewish solidarity.

Two preliminary comments are in order. First, the period from

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6 The roughly 120,000 American Jews who have settled in Israel since 1948 are not included in this discussion.
1948 to the present has hardly been uniform. The Israeli reality encountered by American Jews shortly after the founding of the Jewish state has changed repeatedly in subsequent decades. American Jewish attitudes have shifted direction frequently in response to changing conditions on the ground in Israel and also within American Jewish society, and the focus of Israel-centered activities has varied from one decade to the next.

There seem to have been three watershed events that redirected American Jewish-Israeli relations since the creation of the state in 1948: the momentous transformation of Israel and its place in the world occasioned by the Six-Day War in 1967; the rise of right-wing governments in Israel and the outbreak of the first intifada in the 1977–87 decade; and the emergence of Israel as both a victim of terrorism and a thriving economic success in the early years of the twenty-first century, coinciding with a decline in the attachment of American Jews to Jewish causes and institutions. A booklength study of American Jewish responses to Israeli developments in chronological sequence would be highly desirable. However given space constraints, this essay takes a thematic approach, necessarily telescoping some of the different time periods.

Second, no one knows with any degree of certainty how large a part of American Jewry is engaged with Israel. While survey research does provide some data about the percentages of American Jews who claim to have traveled there and say they feel a strong connection to Israel, it is far harder to quantify how often Israel is discussed around the dinner table or at social gatherings; how many American Jews check the Internet or their local press for the latest news from Israel; how often rabbis address the topic from the pulpit; and how commonly Israel arises in casual conversations between Jews and their friends, both Jewish and Gentile. Simply put, we do not know how frequently Israel impinges on the consciousness of the average Jew. Based upon the limited evidence available, researchers generally divide the American Jewish population into thirds: one third indifferent to Israel, another third moderately

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*Melvin I. Urofsky's survey of the history of American Jewish-Israeli relations, We Are One! American Jewry and Israel (Garden City, N.Y., 1978), only goes through the mid-1970s.*
connected, and the final third actively engaged. We shall have occasion to assess the validity of this tripartite division.

**ISRAEL IN AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE**

Historian Marc Lee Raphael has noted “an axiom among some of those who study American Judaism, especially sociologists, that Israel was a minor component in the religious life of American Jewry in the 1950s and the (early) 1960s, and that only with the Six-Day War of 1967 did Israel become a major component.” Raphael has his doubts. After quoting two historians who wrote that before 1967 “analysts of American Jewish life . . . had little to say” about Israel and the Holocaust, Raphael suggests: “They may be right with respect to ‘analysts,’ but they certainly are wrong in the area of the synagogue.” While Israel perhaps did not loom large until 1967 in the ways American Jews constructed their identities, during the first decades of statehood Israel gradually penetrated into the lives and institutions of American Jews. The impact of Israel on American Jewish life was a steadily evolving process. An important foundation was laid even before the creation of the state, and the first decades of statehood witnessed a significant expansion of religious, educational, and cultural engagement, with even more extensive contacts developing after 1967.

**Religion**

“It is justified to speak about a Zionized American Jewry represented in large measure by its religious movements,” observed Israeli historian Evyatar Friesel. Throughout Israel’s history, the

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American Jewish religious movements have played a critical role
within the organized Jewish community as promoters of Israel
and as educators about the importance of Israel. These efforts
were no doubt driven by elites within the movements, primarily
rabbis, but in time their work trickled down to the masses of Jews
who attended their synagogues and schools.

Prior to the establishment of the state, each of the Jewish de-
nominations defined and redefined its posture in regard to Zion-
ism. In its “classical” phase, the Reform movement rejected any
national component to Jewish identity or hope for the restoration
of Jews to Zion. But in the years immediately preceding the out-
break of World War II, the Reform rabbinate, grasping the neces-
sity for a Jewish haven for refugees in Palestine, developed a more
neutral approach, and by the time the state was established Reform
officially threw its support behind Israel, even as some holdout rab-
bis and lay leaders joined the American Council for Judaism, cre-
ated in 1942, to express their anti-Zionism. \(^{12}\) The Conservative
movement, by contrast, was led since its inception early in the
twentieth century by cultural Zionists, who regarded Zionism as a
movement for revitalizing Jewish life in the land of Israel and the
Diaspora. \(^{13}\) As early as 1917, the United Synagogue of America,
the congregational body of the movement, “joined with the Zion-
ists throughout the world in voicing the claim to a legally recog-
nized and internationally secured homeland for the Jewish people
in Palestine.” \(^{14}\) American Orthodox Jews were divided between a
minority that opposed Zionism as a religiously invalid refusal to
wait for the Messiah, and the Mizrachi movement, founded in
Russia in 1902, that espoused an Orthodox religious interpretation
of Zionism. \(^{15}\)

Once the state was established, the religious movements accom-

\(^{12}\) On the council, see Thomas A. Kolsky, Jews Against Zionism: The American Council

\(^{13}\) Naomi W. Cohen, “Diaspora plus Palestine, Religion plus Nationalism,” in Jack
Wertheimer, ed., Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary of Amer-

ccai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, who remained active in the Conservative
movement until the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1948, placed
Jewish peoplehood at the center of his ideology, and both he and his supporters were
staunch cultural Zionists.

\(^{15}\) Mizrachi stands for the Hebrew phrase mercaz ruhasi, meaning spiritual home.
modated to the new circumstances. Orthodox institutions were at a great advantage because religious life in Israel was, and has remained, officially Orthodox. From the earliest years of the Jewish state, American Orthodox groups forged bonds with Israeli counterparts. Already in the 1950s it was not unusual for Israeli religious leaders traveling to the U.S. on fund-raising and goodwill tours to visit only Orthodox or secular institutions, and for American Orthodox groups to raise money for favored Israeli Orthodox causes, mainly by appealing to adults, but also by enlisting school-age children to collect small sums of money.  

Jewish day schools, which in the 1950s were almost exclusively Orthodox, recruited teachers from Israel. This not only brought students into contact with individuals who pronounced Hebrew with an Israeli/Sephardi inflection, but also, since these teachers spoke little English, immersed them in classes conducted entirely in Hebrew. After the Six-Day War, the frequency of travel by American Orthodox Jews to Israel increased dramatically. The Orthodox were the most likely Jews to go there for vacation or to celebrate the Jewish holidays, and young Jews—as will be explained in greater detail below—began to spend a year of more studying in Israeli yeshivas. Such activities strengthened what Israeli sociologist Menahem Friedman has called “the Orthodox global village,” with Israel at its center.

The decades that followed Israel’s establishment coincided with the heyday of Modern Orthodoxy, which was dedicated to greater openness to the wider world and Jews of other persuasions. Under the leadership of its preeminent rabbinic leader, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Modern Orthodoxy and its central educational institution, Yeshiva University, embraced Israel. Soloveitchik was pivotal in a number of ways. First and most important, he rejected his own family tradition and the views of many other major Orthodox immigrant rabbis who maintained a non-Zionist position. After World War II, Soloveitchik identified as a Zionist, serving as honorary president of American Mizrachi and cultivating con-
tacts with non-Orthodox Zionists. Pointing out that Soloveitchik published several essays in the Hebrew-language journal Hadoar, Lawrence Grossman notes, “That the leading American halakhist would publish in a ‘secular’ Zionist organ says much about the nature of Religious Zionism in that era.” Moreover, Soloveitchik’s own thinking was capacious, emphasizing the common bond all Jews, secular and religious, shared by virtue of their collective “covenant of fate.”

American Mizrachi, which paralleled the Orthodox political party of the same name in Israel (later called the National Religious Party, NRP), also developed a women’s branch (there are today two of them, Amit and Emunah) and the youth movement Bnei Akiva that runs a camping network oriented toward preparing Orthodox youth for settlement in Israel.

American Orthodoxy’s non-Zionist wing found institutional expression in Agudath Israel, established in Europe before World War I by East European and German Orthodox rabbis opposed to Zionism. Buoyed by the influx of Holocaust-era refugees to America — some of whom, like the Satmar Hasidic sect, viewed even Agudath Israel as insufficiently militant in the battle against Zionism — the non-Zionist Orthodox sector came to embrace and speak for much of the Haredi and Hasidic population of the U.S. Agudath Israel of America currently aligns itself with two political parties in Israel, Agudath Yisrael (Hasidic) and Degel HaTorah (non-Hasidic). Despite its official non-Zionist position, American Agudath Israel has staunchly defended Israel, taking public positions on the hawkish side of the spectrum. In its most recent position paper on the Middle East, Agudath Israel explicitly announced that it “joins with all other segments of the American Jewish community in urging that the United States continue to promote the security and well-being of Israel,” a formulation anoma-

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19 For a critical assessment of the current state of Religious Zionism in the U.S., see ibid, pp. 31 - 54.

20 A report issued by the organization said “that despite fundamental differences with the government of Israel, Agudath Israel’s president met with President Kennedy at the White House in support of Israel’s security needs, as well as other top government leaders over the years.” The Struggle and the Splendor: A Pictorial Overview of Agudath Israel of America (New York, 1982), p. 117. I am grateful to Rabbi Avi Shafran for bringing this document to my attention.
alous for an organization that usually distances itself from other sectors of the American Jewish community.21

Conservative Judaism established a presence in Israel when it broke ground in 1958 for a center in Jerusalem opposite the campus of the Hebrew University on Givat Ram.22 Neve Schechter, as it was named, initially served as a base for American Jews visiting Israel. By the mid-1970s, under the leadership of Gerson D. Cohen, then chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, a far more ambitious set of goals was laid out, requiring all JTS rabbinical students to spend a year of study in Israel and envisioning Neve Schechter as a means to influence Israeli society and religion.23 A year of study in Israel has remained a requirement for rabbinical and cantorial students at JTS and the Ziegler Rabbinical School in Los Angeles; a shorter Israel study period is required of education students. The Israeli presence of Conservative Judaism was further boosted by the establishment in 1979 of the Masorti (the Hebrew term for Conservative) movement, which offers support to roughly 44 synagogues in Israel, many with a heavy English-speaking population.24 In 1984, Chancellor Ismar Schorsch transferred Neve Schechter into Israeli hands, and it became an educational training center for Masorti rabbis and teachers who would offer an alternative to Israeli Orthodoxy. Neve Schechter and these synagogues have served as a connecting point between American Conservative Jews and Israel, particularly when synagogue groups from the U.S. come to visit.

In the late 1980s, when the Conservative movement issued its first and only statement of principles, Israel figured prominently in the document as a source of religious inspiration:

21"National Public Policy Position Paper: 2008 National Leadership Mission to Washington, July 16, 2008," p. 21. The paper also calls Jerusalem "the eternal capital of Israel," and on p. 22 urges the U.S. government to refrain from pressuring Israel to "relinquish any of its sovereignty over the Holy City." I have not been able to determine when this formulation about joining "with all other segments" of the Jewish community was first introduced, but it was certainly before 1990.

22Earlier, in the 1920s, the Jewish Theological Seminary built the Yeshurun Synagogue on King George Street in Jerusalem, donating it as a gift to the city. This largess has long been forgotten.

23The background to this decision is discussed in detail in Eli Lederhendler, "The Ongoing Dialogue: The Seminary and the Challenge of Israel," in Wertheimer, ed., Tradition Renewed. vol. II, pp. 233-43.

24On the Masorti movement, see http://www.masorti.org/about.html
We rejoice in the existence of Medinat Yisrael (the State of Israel) in Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel), with its capital Jerusalem. We view this phenomenon not just in political or military terms; rather, we consider it to be a miracle reflecting Divine Providence in human affairs. We glory in Israel; we celebrate the rebirth of Zion. The brit (covenant) between God and the Jewish people created an unbreakable bond between us and the Land of Israel. Throughout the ages we have revered, honored, cherished, prayed for, dreamed of, and sought to settle in Jerusalem and the Land of Israel.

The Reform movement also has affirmed Israel in post-1948 declarations of principle. In 1976, its Centenary Platform declared Reform Jews to be "bound to . . . the newly reborn State of Israel by innumerable religious and ethnic ties . . . We have both a stake and a responsibility in building the State of Israel, assuring its security and defining its Jewish character." At the same time, it affirmed the legitimacy of the Diaspora and the historic universalism of Reform Judaism: "The State of Israel and the Diaspora, in fruitful dialogue, can show how a people transcends nationalism even as it affirms it, thereby setting an example for humanity, which remains largely concerned with dangerously parochial goals." With this declaration, Reform highlighted its continuing belief that Zionism must fulfill a universal, rather than just a narrow national, mission.

In 1997, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinical association, addressed the subject of Israel, reaffirming both its Jewish and universal roles:

The restoration of Am Yisrael [the Jewish People] to its ancestral homeland after nearly two thousand years of statelessness and powerlessness represents an historic triumph of the Jewish people, providing a physical refuge, the possibility of religious and cultural renewal on its own soil, and the realization of God's promise to Abraham: "to your offspring I assign this land." From that distant

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22 "Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective," www.ccar.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=41&pg_id=4687&pg_id=1656
moment until today, the intense love between Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael has not subsided.

We believe that the eternal covenant established at Sinai ordained a unique religious purpose for Am Yisrael. Medinat Yisrael, the Jewish State, is therefore unlike all other states. Its obligation is to strive towards the attainment of the Jewish people’s highest moral ideals to be a mamlechet kohanim [kingdom of priests], a goy kadosh [holy nation], and l’or goyim [light unto the nations].

The statement also itemized obligations American Jews have toward Israel, including promoting its security, offering financial support, and recognizing Hebrew as indispensable to Jewish study. It even went so far as to address the charged question of aliyah:

While affirming the authenticity and necessity of a creative and vibrant Diaspora Jewry, we encourage aliyah to Israel in pursuance of the precept of yishuv Eretz Yisrael [settling the Land of Israel]. While Jews can live Torah-centered lives in the Diaspora, only in Medinat Yisrael do they bear the primary responsibility for the governance of society, and thus may realize the full potential of their individual and communal religious strivings.

Confident that Reform Judaism’s synthesis of tradition and modernity and its historic commitment to tikun olam [repairing the world] can make a unique and positive contribution to the Jewish state, we resolve to intensify our efforts to inform and educate Israelis about the values of Reform Judaism. We call upon Reform Jews everywhere to dedicate their energies and resources to the strengthening of an indigenous Progressive Judaism in Medinat Yisrael.27

Toward that end, the Reform movement has built an infrastructure in Israel. The World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) is based in Jerusalem. In 1978, the movement established the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) as an affiliate of what is now called the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), its American congregational body. ARZA represents Reform in Israel and has founded the Israel Action Center, which lobbies and litigates for religious pluralism there. The Reform movement also built a campus in Jerusalem for a school that trains Israeli rabbis and cantors, and where American rabbinical and cantorial students spend their mandatory first year of study in Israel. While a Reform

kibbutz, Yahel, was established in the northern Negev in 1977, only recently has the movement taken concrete steps to encourage aliyah.28

Given their unofficial status in Israel, the non-Orthodox movements have had to contend with a common dilemma — how to support Israel, even as they sharply resent the way the government and the religious establishment treat them. During the first three decades of Israeli statehood Reform and Conservative leaders largely ignored the question of religious pluralism. But the issue came to a head in the 1980s, when efforts were made to solidify Orthodox control over “Who is a Jew.” The debates in the U.S. that this struggle engendered will be discussed below.

How have the official pro-Israel positions espoused by the American Jewish religious movements filtered down to their members? Liturgy has been one important avenue. David Ellenson has noted that liturgical works “are ideal sources for examining how the State of Israel is envisioned by many modern American Jews. As religious documents, they incorporate the religious myths and symbolic language that provide the framework for how most American Jews view and understand Israel.”29 Given the low percentage of American Jews who attend synagogue services, skeptics may wonder how influential such compositions are, but for those who do attend, liturgy frames how Israel is to be understood as a religious phenomenon. Moreover, prayers specifically for Israel are often offered at dramatic and very public moments of the religious service, underscoring even more that country’s significance.

The prime example is the “Tefila Li’shlom Ha-Medina” (Prayer for the Welfare of the State), recited just after the Torah reading


and before the return of the Torah scroll(s) to the ark on the Sabbath and festival days. In many congregations, it is customary to stand during its recitation. Composed toward the end of 1948 under the auspices of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, it appeals to God to protect the state and guide its leaders; bring peace to the land; and gather in Diaspora Jews. Most controversially, it begins and ends with messianic overtones, referring to the establishment of the state as the “first flowering of our redemption,” and concluding with an explicit plea for the arrival of the Messiah “to redeem those who long for Your salvation.” The prayer was adopted in its totality by Modern Orthodox congregations, but those of the Agudath Israel outlook, not to speak of those even more explicitly anti-Zionist, have rejected the prayer due to its messianic overtones. Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist prayer books offer abridged versions, and in recent years the prayer’s messianic and militaristic references have occasioned fresh debate among non-Orthodox Jews.

Israel figures in the liturgies of the various movements in other ways as well. In every service, the traditional prayer book asserts the sanctity of the land of Israel and the historical aspiration for a Jewish return to Zion, and Modern Orthodox congregations unselfconsciously apply the theme to contemporary Israel. Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative prayer books have reworked such references in keeping with the theological outlook each movement takes toward the current reality of Israel. Summing up his survey of these revisions, David Ellenson concludes:


"The Art Scroll edition, the most widely sold Orthodox prayer book, omits the prayer. This prompted the Rabbinical Council of America, the Modern Orthodox rabbinical group, to commission its own edition of the Art Scroll prayer book, which includes it.


"On the adoption of Israeli synagogue practices by American Orthodox congregations see Chaim I. Waxman, “Israel in Orthodox Identity: The American Experience,” in Ben-Moshe and Segev, eds., Israel, the Diaspora, and Jewish Identity, pp. 58–59. Waxman attributes these borrowings to young Orthodox Jews’ year or more of study in Israeli yeshivas.
The exclusively nationalistic or secular elements of the Zionist dream and contemporary incarnation of those political elements in the state are underplayed, if not entirely rejected. Israel, though a refuge for Jews in a time of persecution, is seen instead as an ultimate expression of the religious and moral hopes of the Jewish people. Universalism informs and animates this vision of the Jewish state, a vision that is highly consonant with the American and Diasporan context that inspired it.  

Since American Jewish religious movements express through liturgy both their religious conceptions of Israel and their self-understanding as American Jews, congregants attending synagogues of all stripes are exposed to repeated reminders of Israel’s religious significance for them.

In addition, many synagogues hold special services in honor of Israel. These include celebrations of Yom Ha’Atzma’ut (Israel Independence Day) and Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day, marking the city’s unification in 1967). “Hatikvah,” the national anthem of Israel, and popular Israeli tunes are sung on such occasions, and some celebrations also feature Israeli-style foods. Many synagogues recite special prayers for Israel and host guest speakers on Israeli subjects. On the more somber side, some American congregations mark the eve of Israel Independence Day (what is called in Israel Yom Hazikaron) with a special service to mourn those who lost their lives in Israeli wars. Tisha B’Av, the fast day commemorating the destruction of the two temples and loss of Jewish sovereignty in ancient times, is marked in traditional synagogues with prayers for the restoration of that sovereignty, and non-Orthodox congregations as well sometimes incorporate Israel into the day’s services.

Synagogues of all stripes have organized group trips to Israel, often led by the rabbi or some other congregational leader. In a 2006 survey, for example, 80 percent of Reform educators reported that their congregations had organized such a trip in recent years. The publicity surrounding these visits, and especially the subse-
quent reports of the participants, serve to cement the connection between Israel and the congregation even for members who stayed home.

Rabbis have devoted countless sermons and articles in synagogue bulletins to Israel. Sometimes these are occasioned by newsworthy events occurring in the Middle East, the anniversary of Israel's founding, or the presence of an eminent Israeli guest. The role of the synagogue as the "marshaling ground" to rally support for Israel was graphically illustrated when the 1973 war broke out on Yom Kippur, a time when most Jews were in the synagogue.

Although there is no record of the topics of all American rabbinic sermons, historian Marc Lee Raphael has scrutinized a sampling of sermonic material and synagogue bulletins in the first decades of the Jewish state in order to gauge the popularity of Israel as a theme. This is what he found:

Of course, not every synagogue in the two decades prior to 1967 was sympathetic to Zionism, but overwhelmingly this was the case. Even the most superficial inspection of synagogue bulletins in these years reveals that rabbis regularly delivered sermons on the subject of Israel. Whether, as Nathan Glazer has argued, this had "remarkably slight effect on the inner life of American Jewry," is hard to prove or disprove, but the evidence for its omnipresence is great.

In Conservative and Reform synagogues all over the country, and in numerous Orthodox congregations as well, rabbis spoke about the War of Independence, the massive migration of Jews from Arab lands after this war, the Suez Crisis, and, regularly, the social, economic, political, and religious situation in Israel. In Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., printed collections of High Holiday sermons and sermon titles listed in synagogue bulletins indicate that it was commonplace for one of the four or five Holy Day sermons rabbis delivered (some preached during the Memorial Service on Yom Kippur, some did not) to dwell on the topic of Israel. And nearly every synagogue in the United States supported an appeal for Israel Bonds in the middle of a High Holiday worship service.

It is of significance that appeals for Israel were delivered precisely on the days when the greatest number of Jews attended synagogue services. It should also be noted that Raphael refers to the

pre-1967 period; Israel has loomed even larger in synagogue discourse since then, sometimes to rally Jews on behalf of a beleaguered Israel, sometimes to bemoan the country’s failings.\textsuperscript{38}

In addition, Israel impinges on synagogue life in subtle ways that American Jews have come to take for granted. Most dramatically, in virtually every non-Orthodox synagogue prayers are pronounced in Israeli Hebrew—or at least in Sephardi Hebrew. Few American Jews have mastered the precise Israeli inflection, but Ashkenazi pronunciation has virtually disappeared, despite the fact that the preponderant majority of American Jews descend from Ashkenazi families.\textsuperscript{39} Sephardi Hebrew is so ubiquitous that few can even remember when congregations altered their practices. As early as 1936, Hebrew Union College and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform), the Jewish Theological Seminary (Conservative), and the National Council for Jewish Education signed a declaration in favor of transliterating Hebrew according to Sephardi pronunciation. Around the time of Israel’s founding, the United Synagogue and the Rabbinical Assembly (both Conservative) endorsed such an approach, particularly for schools.\textsuperscript{40}

It would take decades for the changeover to occur: as late as 1961–62, only 35 percent of Reform congregations reported using Sephardi Hebrew.\textsuperscript{41} Rabbis and cantors may well have been the driving forces, and they, in turn, were shaped by the schools that trained them. Israelis serving as counselors at summer camps also accelerated the change. A history of the Reform movement’s Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute traces the shift in pronunciation of Hebrew to a particular time and person, describing the influence of one Israeli “music and dance specialist” on the shift to Sephardi Hebrew. At the camp before 1961, the Hebrew word for Israel was transliterated as “Yisroel” and the day of rest was called “Shabbos,” but afterward the campers were speaking of “Yisrael” and

\textsuperscript{38}Raphael contends that Israel-centered activities in synagogues diminished in the late 1990s and were replaced by local Jewish concerns (p. 131), but he wrote this before the second intifada and the 2006 war in Lebanon, which may once again have cast Israel as a victim in need of help.

\textsuperscript{39}See Liada Motzkin, \textit{Aleph Isn’t Tough: An Introduction to Hebrew for Adults} (New York, 2003).

\textsuperscript{40}Emily Katz discusses these declarations of intent in “That Land Is Our Land,” pp. 278–79.

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid, p. 279.
“Shabbat.” They undoubtedly brought the novel pronunciation back to their home synagogues.\textsuperscript{42} Orthodox synagogues, for the most part, continue to adhere to the Ashkenazi pronunciation even today, mainly because so many of their members attended U.S. and Israeli yeshivas where the pronunciation of prayer and other religious texts continued to be Ashkenzi. However, it is not uncommon to hear Sephardi Hebrew in such synagogues as well.

Music has served as still another tool employed by synagogues to heighten consciousness about Israel. It has become common for Sabbath and festival prayers to be sung to the melodies of Israeli songs. Writing of his upbringing in an Orthodox synagogue during the 1950s, Lawrence Grossman recalls that “the hazzan, on festivals, would chant the prayer, ‘ve-havienau le-tzion berinah’ (‘bring us to Zion in joy’) and the subsequent request for the restoration of the sacrificial system to the tune of Hatikvah, and the congregation would spontaneously rise.”\textsuperscript{4}\textsuperscript{1} Other examples of this same tendency in synagogues of all stripes are the singing of a passage from the Kedushah, the focal point of the cantor’s recital of the service, to the tune of the (formerly) popular Israeli song, “Erev shel Shoshanim,” and setting the words of the liturgy appealing to God to return to Jerusalem (“veliyerushalyim irkha berachanim tashuv”) to the iconic Naomi Shemer song of 1967, “Yerushalayim Shel Zahav.”

Cantors and prayer leaders routinely adapt to the words of the prayers Israeli pop tunes, melodies composed for Israeli song festivals, and Yemenite or other Middle Eastern Jewish tunes that arrive via Israel. Even the somber High Holy Day prayer Unetaneh Tokef is sung in some congregations to a modern Israeli melody. Musicologist Boaz Tarsi notes the significance of such deviations from the usual liturgical music: “The use of Israeli songs in designated sections of the liturgy [is] plainly not within the parameters of nusah [the accepted, age-old prayer melody]. But more than merely a departure from tradition, the deliberate superimposition of tunes from the new Jewish state transforms the practice into a separate genre . . . . The participants can be presumed to notice that the cantor deliberately departs from the tradition in order to


\textsuperscript{4}Grossman, “Decline and Fall,” p. 34.
include the Israeli tune.” One wonders if this is necessarily true. While these melodies may spark a conscious association with Israel for some congregants, for others they may represent the reverse: it has become so completely natural to incorporate such music that Israeli songs in the synagogue have become, unselfconsciously, part of the cultural heritage of American Jews.

Even more visible referents to Israel are present in synagogues. Many display the Israeli and American flags in the sanctuary or social hall. For a period of time, it was popular to face parts of the buildings, particularly sanctuaries, in Jerusalem stone. Synagogue displays often include photographs of members taken during group trips to Israel. Not to be overlooked are Israeli-imported kippot (skull caps) and talitot (prayer shawls) donned by worshipers. And then there are the gift shops, which, in the words of one historian, have “introduced countless American Jews to Israeli culture and life.”

By making Bezalel [the principal Israeli art school] as accessible as Bloomingdale’s, the American synagogue gift shop provided an opportunity for American Jews to encounter the Holy Land without leaving home. The very concept of “home” is in fact key to understanding the selling of Israel in the American synagogue gift shop. Almost without exception, synagogue gift shops counted Israeli patina menorahs and mezuzahs, olivewood ashtrays and letter openers, coins fashioned into key chains and jewelry, as part of their inventory in the 1950s/60s. These objects and the context in which they were sold reveal a multiplicity of messages about the postwar American Jewish home and the newly established Jewish homeland in the Middle East. They illuminate the explanatory potential of material culture, the power and agency of display, and the importance of the synagogue gift shop as a vehicle for forging a place for Israel in the American Jewish home.

At a time when few American Jews traveled abroad, gift shops enabled average Jews to own a piece of Israel. And even after international air travel became more common and affordable, gift

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45 The front of the sanctuary in the synagogue I attend is faced in Jerusalem stone.
shops have continued to stock Israeli merchandise, serving as tangible links to the Jewish state. Clearly, synagogues—the religious institutions of American Judaism—help mediate Israel to American Jews, reminding them of their connections to that land. Less clear is whether the average congregant sees the State of Israel as a religious phenomenon, or, alternatively, as an aspect of Jewish peoplehood. This question has been studied only for the Reconstructionist movement. Summarizing their research, Steven Sharot and Nurit Zaidman write:

Although the Reconstructionist ideology provided a clear rationale for regarding Israel as a symbolic focus of Judaism, most respondents appeared to think about Israel in ways that were divorced from what they regarded as their religious concerns. Reconstructionist prayer books, like Conservative and Reform prayer books, present Israel in religious terms; but the prayer book image of Israel appears to have little influence on how American Jews perceived the “real” Israel in relation to their religion.

Sharot and Zeidman contend that, for most Reconstructionist Jews, Israel "symbolizes the survival of the Jewish people.”

Jewish Education

During the first decades of Israeli statehood, synagogue schools were the primary educational vehicles of American Jews, but day schools have gradually emerged as important factors as well. Both types of schools (as well as some Jewish schools not under religious auspices) set themselves the goal of socializing young Jews as members of the Jewish people and forging a strong bond with Israel. A manifesto published in 1933 captured the aspirations of some educators who were reconceiving Jewish education in the U.S. as a Zionist enterprise with a sharp focus on the Jewish settlement of the land of Israel:

Survey research conducted during the 1950s in one growing American suburb found that 43 percent of Jews claimed to have Israeli souvenirs in their homes, although most had never traveled to Israel. Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society (2d. ed.; Chicago, 1979), p. 229.

Palestine [should] become the dynamic, integrating force of our primary curriculum. It is Palestine, or Palestinianism, that gives meaning to our ceremonial observances, to our worship and prayers, to our language and literature, as well as to much of our present environment. Why then not make the introduction of Palestine the first step in the process of integrating the child into Jewish life?  

Translating this educational ideal into a classroom reality has not been easy. Not only must Israel vie with many other topics in the jam-packed hours devoted to Jewish study, but it also is quite distant, both geographically and conceptually, from most Jewish children, and there is no consensus among educators as to what Israel education should entail.

There are a few studies that track how Israel has been taught in Jewish schools. A perusal of curricula collected by bureaus of Jewish education in Buffalo, Cincinnati, New Haven, New York, Greater Miami, and St. Louis suggests that modern Israel was included in most religious and community schools during the 1940s and 1950s. In a survey of several Jewish communities conducted during the 1950s, however, only 48 out of 1,000 Jewish educators reported teaching about Israel as a discrete subject, although the authors note that Israel and Zionism were usually touched upon in lessons about Jewish history and current events. Immediately after the Six-Day War, slightly under half of schools surveyed claimed to teach about Israel as a separate topic, with Reform and community-sponsored schools most likely to do so. The purpose of this instruction, according to the educators, was to create “a positive attitude toward Israel” in the children, and thereby influence the parents as well.

The two decades after the Six-Day War marked a golden age for the publication of textbooks and other instructional materials about Israel by the religious denominations, Israel-based organizations, and commercial publishers. Furthermore, “in this period,
Israelis (several hundred shlihim [emissaries sent by Israel or Israeli institutions] as well as many others living abroad) were becoming a quantitatively significant staff presence in American Jewish schools." 

By the 1970s, a new survey concluded that 63 percent of schools taught about Israel as a separate subject, but also noted continuing confusion about the goals of such courses and about which aspects of Israel should be stressed. 

Research conducted in the 1980s claimed that a staggering 98 percent of responding schools said they taught about Israel, with schools under Reform auspices ranking higher than the others. But the schools tended to focus on Israel to foster Jewish pride, and so presented an idealized Israel, with little emphasis on teaching about the reality of life in Israel, the religious implications of the establishment of the state, or the value of aliyah.

Teaching about Israel seems to have lost much of its importance over the last two decades. Historian Marc Lee Raphael provides an example:

"[In one Seattle Reform congregation, the curriculum of the 1960s and 1970s had an Israel component in the fourth through sixth grades, an Israel component in the seventh through eighth grades, and an Israel component in the pre-confirmation and confirmation year. The 2000–01 curriculum did not have an Israel unit in any of those years, substituting in its place American Jewish community, ethics, holidays, prayer and (especially) prayer book, and the principles of Reform Judaism. Israel seemingly offered American Jews a strong sense of pride and identity in the 1950s and 1960s, but the ingredients of Judaic identity today come from sources other than the holy land."

Similarly, a recent study of Israel education under Reform auspices concluded that "the goals of teaching about Israel continue to be expressed in broad and diffuse terms. Most [educators] ... were unable to articulate a clear and precise vision for teaching Is-

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53 Barry Chazan, "Israel in American Jewish Schools in the Mid-1970s," Jewish Education 52, Winter 1984–85, pp. 10–11. These results should be treated with caution since the response rate to the survey was very low.
55 Raphael, Judaism in America, p. 131.
Teaching about Israel was considered a good thing, but "what to teach, how to teach, and, most importantly, why to teach Israel to American Jews" were not thought through. Barry Chazan suggests a reason for the change: "Rabbis, teachers, principals, and Jewish communal leaders have openly shared their increasing ambivalence vis-à-vis teaching about Israel, and they sadly admit that their confusion has sometimes made it difficult for them to be effective gatekeepers of this subject," he writes.

One experienced teacher at a communal high school lamented that whereas in the 1980s students still identified with Israeli leaders as heroes, this was much more difficult 20 years later. Undoubtedly, media coverage of Israeli actions is one factor that helps explain the shift. Another element that should not be overlooked is the transformation that has occurred in the outlook of American Jews—a heightened preoccupation with personal meaning and interest in the building of local communities, at the expense of global collective Jewish identity, an attitudinal transformation we shall discuss below. Here is the grim assessment of Barry Chazan, who has tracked the teaching of Israel in American Jewish educational institutions over several decades:

The state of Israel in American Jewish education is moribund. It is time to say loud and clear: Israel plays an insignificant role in the world of contemporary Jewish education, and contemporary Jewish education plays an insignificant role in shaping the world view of young Jews vis-à-vis Israel.

Educators seem unwilling to discuss Israel in ways that challenge their students. Studies of curricula have repeatedly shown the extent to which Israel is viewed through the prism of American Jewish values. Material about Israel is "replete with themes central to the creed of American liberalism: humanitarian and social justice, modernism, progress, support for the underdog . . . ." This example from a text written during the 1970s harks back to the arguments that Louis D. Brandeis, soon to be named to the U.S. Supreme Court, made in his early career. These arguments have shaped the way in which many American Jews view Israel today.

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*Personal conversation with the author in December 2007.


*The analysis is that of Ackerman, "Israel in American Jewish Education," p. 182.
Supreme Court, made a century ago, identifying Zionism with Americanism:

Israel's story is full of adventure... there are many similarities between America and Israel's history... Both required pioneering under great hardship, a sharp break with the past, an open mind toward the future. Israel's founders in many ways repeated the struggles of America's pilgrims, colonial settlers, western pioneers... [Israel] is a model, a pilot for undeveloped lands trying to become modern and independent.

A second example from another text book strives to generate sympathy for Israel using a different America-centered pitch:

[It is] a country which has been through so many wars and terrorist attacks... has built so dramatically and achieved so much... has absorbed so many poor and down trodden people and given so many shamed outcasts a sense of dignity.

Such passages do not introduce a living, vibrant Israel with a distinctive culture and society, but a facsimile of America.

It has certainly not helped matters that Jewish supplementary schools and even, to some extent, day schools, have failed to teach modern Hebrew effectively, and thus a bridge to Israel that might have been constructed by language and literature cannot be crossed. A survey conducted by Steven M. Cohen in 1986 asked Jewish adults to rate their competence in Hebrew. Claiming at least minimal competence were 41 percent of Orthodox Jews, 9 percent of Conservative Jews, and 5 percent of Reform Jews. Given that Orthodox Jews constituted less than 10 percent of the American Jewish population, it appeared that no more than 7 percent of American Jewish adults claimed any competence in Hebrew, a finding that adds credence to Leonard Fein's observation that "Hebrew school in this country is mainly remembered as the place where Hebrew wasn't learned."

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61Both are quoted ibid, pp. 182–83.
The presence of large numbers of Israeli teachers in American Jewish schools adds another dimension to the challenge. The precise percentage of teachers of Israeli origin is a matter of scholarly disagreement. Writing in the mid-1990s, Walter Ackerman concluded, “Today it is doubtful that Jewish education in the United States could function without Israelis,” but a subsequent study found that Israelis constituted only 9 percent of teachers in day and supplementary schools. Their presence, in whatever quantity, serves to introduce young Jews to real-life Israelis who can speak with first-hand knowledge about contemporary Israel, thereby serving as authentic mediators between the American students and the Jewish state. But these teachers have emigrated from Israel, rendering them ambivalent at best about a country they themselves decided to leave behind, and thus, ironically, those educators who are best informed about Israel may not qualify as its ideal representatives.

Not surprisingly, there has been much discussion in Jewish educational circles about ways to improve Israel education. This is how David Breakstone, an Israeli, framed the issues more than two decades ago:

The purpose [of Israel education] is not (or not only) to foster love for the country, to assure future pledges to the U.J.A., to create ties to the Jewish people, to provide a spiritual homeland, or to inspire positive attitudes. Rather, it is meant to produce “good” Jews, “authentic” Jews... in the sense of becoming conversant in the language of Judaism... not to Hebrew or any other spoken means of communication, but to a Jewish gestalt.

It is unlikely that this situation will change until a strong rationale and a coherent curricular focus for Israel education are developed that take into account the constraints of American Jewish educational institutions.

Still, several factors suggest the need to temper the prevalent negative assessment of Israel education. As late as 1995, when...
Conservative youths who had recently become bar/bat mitzvah were asked to identify "two people, dead or alive, that you consider to be Jewish heroes," the top vote-getters, excluding family members and Biblical figures, were Israeli leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Golda Meir.\textsuperscript{67} While these results hardly attest to a deep knowledge of, or connection with, Israel, they do suggest the significance of Israeli heroes in the imagination of these young Jews. Whether similar responses would be given today, we do not know.

There remain many settings in which American Jews of all ages encounter modern Israeli society through instruction in Israeli Hebrew and texts about Israeli life.\textsuperscript{68} American Jews can study modern Hebrew in any of the following settings: early-childhood programs in some communities run on the principle of complete immersion in Hebrew, to the point where it is the only language of conversation even in the playground;\textsuperscript{69} Hebrew classes offered across a spectrum of Jewish day schools from Modern Orthodox through Reform; a few supplementary schools—most notably Kesher in Newton and Cambridge, Massachusetts— that provide Hebrew-speaking settings and have demonstrated records of success;\textsuperscript{70} Hebrew language courses offered at almost 100 colleges and universities across the country;\textsuperscript{71} and, finally, Ulpan courses sponsored by communities and organizations that place adults in

cosponsored a conference on Israel education in the summer of 2007, and the proceedings are scheduled to appear online. My thanks to Howard Deitscher for sharing the papers with me.


\textsuperscript{68}In this paragraph I have relied greatly on a survey of Hebrew language programs conducted by Rachael T. Ellison, "Connecting the Dots: Mapping the Field of Hebrew Language Acquisition for Innovation and Advocacy" (Unpublished paper prepared for the Avi Chai Foundation, 2007).

\textsuperscript{69}On the Maalah Program designed by the Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary, see Julie Gruenbaum Fax, "All Hebrew, All the Time: A growing number of L.A. schools now use a language-immersion program to get students beyond 'shalom,'" \textit{Los Angeles Jewish Journal}, March 17, 2005. http://www.jewishjournal.com/articles/item/all_hebrew_all_the_time_20050318. Other programs, such as Nitzanim, Notzatzim, and Hebrew in America, sponsor programs in locales as diverse as San Diego, Detroit, and Bergen County, New Jersey.

\textsuperscript{70}On Kesher, see www.kesherweb.org. Similar efforts in other communities are described at www.caje-co.org/high/hebrewimmersion.htm and www.kellsandiego.org.

\textsuperscript{71}As of 2003, Hebrew was offered in 93 college programs. The National Association for Professors of Hebrew (NAPH) has a membership of over 200. http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/naph/index.html
Many of these varied programs make use of newspaper articles drawn from the Israeli press and videotapes of Israeli television, which serve as sources of information about modern Israel. To be sure, all of these together impact on no more than a fraction of American Jews and, for the most part, cannot claim that their graduates speak and read with fluency. They do, however, impart an understanding of aspects of Israeli culture, from the latest slang and hit songs, to insight into current political or social trends.

Another important point is the distinct difference between many of the day schools, on the one hand, and supplementary schools, on the other. Even the casual visitor to a day school—whether Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or communal—will notice walls festooned with reminders of Israel, time set aside for learning Israeli songs and dances, and attention paid to Israeli Hebrew and culture. These schools also tend to hire a significant percentage of teachers who speak Israeli Hebrew (with the pluses and minuses this entails, as noted above). Day schools celebrate key commemorations of Israel's history, often inviting well-known guest speakers and alumni who have made aliyah to give presentations at such programs, and they serve as the backbone of Salute to Israel parades.

In the Orthodox sector, moreover, and to a lesser degree in other full-day Jewish high schools, students are strongly encouraged to spend a year in Israel after graduation before starting college (for the ultra-Orthodox, the subsequent college option is far more restricted). Some stay for another semester or even an extra full year. To be sure, the primary purpose of such programs is not usually to strengthen the bond with Israel, but rather to bolster

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72 There seems to be no clearing-house for adult ulpanim, which are sponsored by Jewish community centers, federations, major organizations, colleges of Jewish studies, and synagogues.
77 Two major curriculum projects for day schools, NETA for lower schools and Tal Am for secondary schools, both emphasize building strong connections with modern Israel. They have been adopted by several hundred day schools. See http://www.netahebrew.org/index.htm and http://www.talam.org/about.html
73 Samuel C. Heilman, in Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy (Berkeley, Calif., 2006), pp. 112–22, traces the history of the Orthodox “year in Israel” and describes the common phenomenon called “flipping out,” when these young men and women “slide to the right” in religious observance and outlook, and bring their newfound piety back to the U.S. By the mid-1990s a researcher found that up to 90
Jewish identity through immersion in intensive Jewish religious or cultural experiences. Nevertheless, whatever the initial motivation, these high schools succeed in having their students spend significant time in Israel. Indicative of the status this confers on these schools in the community is that many of them "use the number of their graduates who go to Israel as part of their publicity campaigns for prospective students," and place advertisements in the local Jewish press that list, alongside the names of the colleges to which their graduates were accepted, the names of Israeli programs in which those graduates have enrolled.75

A period of serious study in Israel has thus become the norm for graduates of Orthodox day schools, and a serious option for products of non-Orthodox schools. The Jewish Agency, in fact, has set up an entire apparatus, called MASA, to help steer prospective high school graduates through the range of program options.76 One cannot overstate the impact of intensive study in Israel upon at least two generations of Orthodox youth and an important sector of their non-Orthodox counterparts, both in the formation of their Jewish identities and their relationships to Israel.77

Informal Jewish educational experiences often complement what young American Jews are learning in school. One widespread albeit limited exposure to Israel comes through participation in Salute to Israel parades and other Israel-themed fairs and festivals held in Jewish communities around the country. As they construct
floats and exhibits, learn Israeli songs and dances, don special garb—even if only colorfully decorated T-shirts—tens of thousands of young people join with their teachers and, often, their parents, to celebrate Israel's independence each year. The longest-running of these events, initiated in 1964, is a mammoth parade up Fifth Avenue in Manhattan that usually draws over 100,000 participants and up to a million onlookers. If nothing else, these celebrations, and the smaller ones in other communities, have placed Israel on the mental calendar of huge numbers of American Jews of all ages. The founder of New York's parade went one step further, declaring that through this event, "The State of Israel gave Jews the freedom to appear in public as Jews." 78

Informal educational experiences of longer duration have contributed richly to young people's evolving relationship to Israel. For those who are exposed to summer camps with rich Jewish programming, to Zionist youth movements, and to teen trips to Israel—admittedly a minority—Irael comes alive differently and often more immediately than in schools. 79

Beginning around the time of Israel's establishment, a small number of summer camps were established with strong Zionist missions. A few, such as the Massad and Ramah networks, tried to conduct camp programs entirely in Hebrew, with bunks and buildings taking on Israeli place names, artwork depicting Israeli settings, and songs and dances drawn from the developing Israeli repertoire. 80 The Hebrew-speaking camps were augmented by other...

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79 The history of Jewish youth movements and summer camps has not been adequately studied. Some publications on the topic are J.J. Goldberg and Elliot King, Builders and Dreamers: Habonim Labor Zionist Youth in North America (New York, 1993); Shlomo Schulsinger-She'ar Yashuv, ed., Kovetz Massad (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1989); Zola and Lorge, eds., A Place of Our Own; Katz, "This Land Is Our Land," chap. 5; Michael Brown, "It's Off to Camp We Go: Ramah, LITF, and the Seminary in the Finkelstein Era," in Wertheimer ed., Tradition Renewed, vol. 1, pp. 821 – 54; Seymour Fox with William Novak, Vision at the Heart: Lessons from Camp Ramah on the Power of Ideas in Shaping Educational Institutions (New York, 1997); Amy L. Sales and Leonard Saxe, "How Goodly Are Thy Tents": Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences (Hanover, N.H., 2004).

ers, such as the Moshava camps of the Bnei Akiva religious Zionist youth movement; the Tel Yehudah camps run by Hadassah; and Habonim, sponsored by the youth movement of that name, all of them incubators of strong Zionist commitment. Also, camps under Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform auspices featured significant Zionist content even though this was not their primary focus.

Reflecting on the Israel dimension of Zionist camps, one observer noted the extent to which "camp settings actually come closest to suggesting our idealization of Israeli life." Housed in a rustic setting and evoking an ambience of communal living where campers might, at any moment, break out in Israeli song and dance, these camps have served as surrogates for an imagined Israel, devoid of warfare, urban blight or poverty. As one former camper explained: "Camp Moshava was my Israel. I had Israeli counselors and a world that felt more Israel to me than the real Israel. After one summer [in Israel] I never went again during the years I attended Moshava."

Ethnographer Riv-Ellen Prell has argued that a disproportionate percentage of baby boomers who assumed leadership roles in American Jewish life came out of the Jewish camping experience of the 1950s and 1960s, much of it Zionist and Israel-oriented. The same might be said of American Jews who made aliyah in the decade following the Six-Day War. However the ideologically driven Jewish camping movement has fallen on hard times. Hebrew-language-centered camping has virtually disappeared over the past two decades, as have a number of camps sponsored by Zionist youth movements. Insofar as Jewish camps today have an ideological slant, it is toward one or another of the religious movements. Israel is not their central concern, and only a portion of their programming is focused on it. While camps offering Jewish content still teach Israeli songs and dances, have Israel days, name their bunks after Israeli places, employ some Israeli Hebrew in

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*ibid, pp. 77-106.
camp activities, import Israelis to serve as counselors, and in other ways expose campers to some aspects of Israeli culture, Zionism is not really on the agenda.

With the waning of Zionist-oriented summer camping, teen trips to Israel grew in popularity. Synagogues, schools, federations of Jewish philanthropy, and the religious movements have sponsored such trips, often billing them as a reward for participation in other programs. Thus the capstone of a high school program—full-day or supplementary—would be a heavily subsidized class trip to Israel for juniors or seniors, or participants in youth activities sponsored by a federation would receive a free trip. By the 1990s, the teen trip was no longer viewed primarily as an opportunity to express solidarity with the people of Israel, but rather as an educational experience needed for the socialization of young American Jews. An article on “Israel Experience” programs put it well: "This new conception of the Israel trip places it squarely within the context of the great twentieth-century search for methods and structures for teaching Jewish values and developing Jewish identity. According to this conception, the trip is a new Jewish educational framework for affecting the Jewish personality and identity of the young person who visits Israel."85

While there are no precise figures for how many Jewish teens have participated in Israel summer programs, the numbers certainly rose during the 1980s and 1990s. According to Barry Chazan, approximately 36,500 Jewish teens between the ages of 13 and 19 went to Israel on organized educational trips from 1992 through 1996. This number, Chazan writes, represented approximately 14 percent of all North American Jews in that age group, or roughly 2 percent of the eligible Jewish youth population in any one year.86 Virtually all participants were affiliated with Jewish institutions—mainly the youth movements of the religious denominations, Jewish community centers, Young Judea, or B’nai B’rith Youth. In 1996, 100 sponsoring organizations offered nearly 250

85See Elan Ezrachi, “Encounters Between American Jews and Israelis: Israelis in American Jewish Summer Camps” (Ph.D. diss., Jewish Theological Seminary, 1995). Ezrachi found (p. 90) that in 1978 there were some 283 Israelis at 68 North American summer camps.
87Barry Chazan, What We Know About the Israel Experience (New York, undated), p. 5.
distinct programs for teens. Safety concerns related to the outbreak of the second intifada in late 2000 brought a drop in the number of American participants, but enrollment in teen programs would have shrunk in any case, given the fact that students who waited just a few years could be eligible for free trips funded by Birthright Israel.

Began in late 1999, Birthright Israel—or Taglit, its Hebrew name—has sent some 200,000 Jews aged 18–26 from around the globe, but primarily from North America, on free trips to Israel. Funded primarily by philanthropists but also to some extent by federations of Jewish philanthropy and the Israeli government, Birthright represents the most dramatic effort to expose young Jews to Israel, albeit on a ten-day, whirlwind experience. Over two dozen organizations serve as subcontractors for the program, each with a slightly different emphasis. Some, for example, specialize in backpacking and hiking on nature trails, others stress visits to Jewish religious centers, and still others explore the Sephardi heritage. All trip operators are expected to include on their itineraries the main Israeli tourist venues—archaeological excavations; battlefields sites; key cities; political, social-welfare, and high-tech institutions of modern Israel; and holy places.

Needless to say, this represents a huge financial undertaking. A recent study of the program presented its three overarching goals:

- To reach a sector of young American Jewry (popularly known as the “unaffiliated”) that had been regarded as de-

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89 A book-length overview of the program is Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity (Hanover, N.H., 2008). A listing of parameters given to the tour operators appears on pp. 104–05.
tached or alienated from Jewish life and provide it with an Israel experience;
• To launch young, unaffiliated Jews on a “Jewish journey” that would lead them to a lifelong involvement with Jewish life;
• To create links among these young Jews, the State of Israel, and the Jewish community in the years to come.\textsuperscript{90}

This list makes plain that Birthright is about far more than Israel, which represents but one dimension of a strategy to strengthen the Jewish identity and engagement of young Jews. The leadership of the American Jewish community, deeply concerned about securing the commitment of these Jews to engage in organized Jewish life, has come to see Israel as a means to jump-start the process. Indeed, studies of participants both in teen Israel programs and in Birthright Israel indicate a positive short-term effect. As Israeli sociologist David Mittelberg has put it, “interventions such as a focused, ‘quality’ Israel experience are shown to have a statistically significant and considerable positive impact on the various components of participants’ Jewish identity.”\textsuperscript{91} Writing a few years later, the same scholar offered the following prescription: “The visit to Israel, and especially the well-crafted Israel experience, provides a window of opportunity. If structurally integrated into the first third of every Jewish American life, rather than into the last third of the lives of a third of America’s Jews, it could help bring American Jewry safely into the next century with its ethnic identity intact.”\textsuperscript{92}

Close observers of Israel programs have puzzled over why they have such an impact. Some note that the participants spend their time in a “bubble,” making scant contact with Israelis other than their bus driver, tour guides, and security guards. Anthropologist Harvey Goldberg went along on a high school tour sponsored by

\textsuperscript{90}Ibid, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{92}David Mittelberg, \textit{The Israel Connection and American Jews} (Westport, Conn., 1999), p. 130. Saxe and Chazan, \textit{Ten Days of Birthright Israel}, pp. 137–54, reach the same conclusion based on pre- and post-trip evaluations by the participants.
the Reform movement's National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY). Noting that the group was "basically being insulated from its surroundings," Goldberg came to the conclusion that this was a deliberate strategy of the organizers to maintain their own authority and "merge modern Israel into the ideology and educational program of NFTY." Studying a similar program sponsored by a Zionist youth movement, sociologist Samuel Heilman was struck by the strong preoccupation of the teens with their peer group rather than with the larger Israeli environment. It seemed to him that "the primary product of the summer" was "not a set of connections to Israel but to one another . . . . In essence, as the group becomes one of the only constants in an ever-changing fluid environment, it grows in importance, filling the life-world of the participants." Both Israel and Judaism became secondary, serving as backdrops "for an American teen adventure."

Sociologist Shaul Kelner observed similar patterns during a Birthright trip he studied. Much of the impact, he concluded, derived from its social dimension and group-building. Afterward, participants remembered the partying and dancing as vividly, if not even more vividly, than climbing Masada. Thus the social experience of those Kelner calls "pilgrim-tourists" invests the trip with meaning no less than the parts of Israel to which they are exposed. According to Kelner,

for participants in programs like Birthright, Israel becomes an integrative symbol representing the individual's own fleeting experiences of collective effervescence and embodies sensations during a group tour of Israel. The symbol's other, more normative, associations [such as to ancient Jewish history and the heroism of the Israeli military] are not lost. Indeed, the symbol's ability to sustain new content attests to its robustness. The canonical meanings may even be reinvigorated by the infusion of the potent personal meanings.94

Such "pilgrim-tourism" can also take another form—visits to Israel by adults and family units. Although we lack precise statistics, trips taken by nuclear and extended families to mark bar and bat mitzvah milestones in Israel are extremely popular. Especially for the well-to-do, this experience has become a standard family-

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93Kelner, "The Impact of Israel Experience Programs on Israel's Symbolic Meaning," p. 127.
bonding event, and a small industry has emerged that caters to families wishing to combine celebration with touring. Family trips to Israel are also taken on other occasions, as is evident to any traveler to Israel during school vacation times, especially over the summer, when flights are filled with young families. And then there are the various missions organized by synagogues, Jewish organizations, and special-interest groups that range from gay and lesbian Jews to adults volunteering at archaeological digs, army bases, and social-service programs. All of these constitute engagement in informal education, although they serve social and recreational purposes too.

A surprisingly low number of American Jews avail themselves of this broad array of travel options. At no time since Israel's establishment has a majority of American Jews ever been to the Jewish state. The peak of visits to Israel was probably reached during the mid-1980s, when some 40 percent of American Jewish adults claimed to have traveled to the country at least once, and one in six said they had visited at least twice. There was a fall-off in travel beginning with the outbreak of the first intifada in late 1987, further exacerbated by the Gulf War of 1991. By the time of the 2000–01 NJPS, the percentage of adults who claimed they had gone at least once had dropped to 35 percent, with more going from the Northeast and South than from the Midwest and West. Adults between the ages of 45 and 54 were the most likely to have been to Israel, perhaps reflecting the surge in travel in the decades after the Six-Day War. The survey also found a clear correlation with levels of Jewish affiliation: 58 percent of the highly affiliated had been to Israel as compared to just 25 percent of the unaffiliated. Synagogue members, participants in other Jewish organiza-

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95 A sample of opportunities for such trips can be found at http://www.goisrael.com/ Tourism__Eng/Tourist+Information/Jewish+Themes/Bar-Bat+Mitzvah+in+Israel.htm
98 Steven M. Cohen, “Relationships of American Jews with Israel: What We Know and What We Need to Know,” Contemporary Jewry 23, 2002, p. 133; Noam Monty Penkower, At the Crossroads: American Jewry and the State of Israel (Haifa, 1990), p. 7. The drop that occurred during the second intifada, 2001-04, was even sharper.
tions, donors to Jewish charities, and in-married Jews were far more likely than others to have traveled to Israel. 99

Viewed comparatively, the 35 percent of today’s adult American Jews who have been to Israel is dwarfed by the 66 percent of Canadians Jews and 73 percent of both Australian and French Jews who have.100 It is hard to avoid the conclusion that although the free trips offered by Birthright Israel may well meet a particular need of American Jews, the fact that they are even necessary stands as damming evidence of a major weakness in the American Jewish connection to Israel: in most other wealthy, Western Jewish communities the majority of Jews have seen fit to spend their own money to visit the Jewish state.

Surveying the large infrastructure of formal and informal educational programs devised by American Jews to expose young people to Israel, an overall trend becomes apparent. During the first few decades of Israeli statehood, American Jews behaved as patrons to an Israel in need of material and political support; accordingly, the predominant emphasis of travel to Israel in the early years was philanthropic.101 With the passage of time, the roles have reversed. It is now Israel that serves as a resource to help “needy” American Jew shore up the Jewish identity of their youth.

Birthright Israel, we recall, is not mainly about Israel per se, but about deepening the Jewish commitment of unaffiliated American Jews, and the available evidence suggests that, at least in the short term, it works — participants return claiming to be more engaged in Jewish life. While we are still unsure to what extent this is due to the enjoyable social experiences, the first-time encounter with a large and thriving Jewish society, or sparks of Jewish identity ignited by the people they meet and sites they visit, the desire of educators, communal professionals, and philanthropists to

99The figures are taken from NJPS 2000-01, “Connection with Israel,” www.ujc.org/page.aspx?pid=46232. When only the estimated 4.3 million American Jews who identify as “strongly connected” to Judaism are considered, the percentage of travelers to Israel rises to 42 percent. The breakdown by subgroups is in David Mittelberg, “Jewish Continuity and Israel Visits,” in Ben-Moshe and Segev, eds., Israel, the Diaspora, and Jewish Identity, p. 33.


101Older American Jews can recall being asked to bring instant coffee, toilet paper, jeans, and pens to Israeli relatives and friends as late as the 1970s.
expose young American Jews to Israel—at considerable expense—highlights just how much the leaders of American Jewry are convinced they need Israel to ensure Jewish continuity in America. Deep, ongoing engagement with Israel is at best a secondary objective.

**Jewish Culture**

American Jewish culture has absorbed Israeli influences with growing intensity over the past 60 years. Indeed, it is often difficult to set a clear demarcation line between American Jewish and Israeli cultural expression. This is true of much Jewish dance, Jewish music—especially the large part of it that is in Hebrew—and Jewish food, as evident in the proliferation of Israeli-style kosher grill restaurants. In the realm of literature, American Jews are avid consumers of books about Israel and by Israelis. Although no quantitative information is available, it is almost certain that most American Jewish leaders regularly read online Israeli newspapers (in English) to keep up with developments in Israeli life. Rabbis and academics specializing in fields of Judaica routinely spend summers and sabbaticals in Israel. In sum, the most Jewishly engaged elites feel a need to immerse themselves in Israeli culture.

The importation of Israeli cultural influences began slowly during the first decades of statehood. In the 1950s and 1960s, several popular Israeli singers and dancers arrived on America's shores to perform. Songs were also imported by Israelis who came to work in Jewish summer camps and with youth movements. So much popular Israeli music found its way into the U.S. that several of the camps compiled songsters (shironim) consisting almost entirely of Israeli songs. Over time, some of these songs came to be seen by Americans—Jews and non-Jews—as emblematic of Jewish music, even though they was previously unknown to American Jews or their European forebears. Thus when some representation of Jewish music is needed at baseball stadiums whose sound systems broadcast various types of ethnic music, the snappy “Jewish” tune

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is Havah Nagilah, based on a Hasidic tune sung in Jerusalem and subsequently imported to the U.S.\textsuperscript{163}

In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, Israeli popular songs such as Naomi Shemer’s “Yerushalayim Shel Zahav” and Ron Eliran’s “Sharm el-Sheikh” were the rage in American Jewish institutions. After a decline in interest that set in during the 1980s, a revival seems to have occurred in recent years, spurred by young Jews eager to bridge the cultural worlds. Observing a performance at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York given by Israeli singer-songwriter Din Din Aviv in 2008, a reporter noticed that the house was “packed with Israeli fans of Aviv who live in New York and American Jews clutching her CD. After the show, they jabber in a mix of Israeli-accented English and American-accented Hebrew while standing in line to pose for pictures with Aviv.” The organizer of the event explained he was seeking to “bring Israelis and American Jews in New York closer together — and closer to Israel,” and he was convinced that “there is a hunger to connect to Israel and the challenge is to satisfy that and give people a meaningful way to connect.”\textsuperscript{164}

A number of choral groups have also disseminated Israeli music in America. While most of these are local in their scope of operations, some travel around the country and even abroad. The best known is the Zamir Chorale, which was founded in 1960 by former Massad campers and continues to perform today. Its repertoire includes choral music drawn from various settings and eras in Jewish history, and it performs many Israeli compositions. For the baby-boomer generation that both provided its original singers and populates much of its audience today, Zamir supplied a trans-denominational and trans-political gateway to Israel by catering to the entire range of the Jewish religious and ideological spectrum. Describing a concert Zamir was planning to mark Israel’s 60th anniversary, Mati Lazar, the conductor, observed: “These songs connect us to how we felt in the beginning about Israel. Music can stimulate memory. When you hear certain songs or prayers you can feel where you were when you first heard it, you can feel again the emotion you felt at the time . . . . It’s easy to get stuck in intellec-
tual conversations about Israel, but music can bring you to another truth. You may not get every answer but you’ll remember what you once knew.” This is a strong testament to the power of such concerts to evoke bonds with Israel.

Israeli dancing has played a parallel role. The decade of the 1950s saw a burst of interest in international folk dancing, and American Jews eagerly embraced Israeli dancing as their own distinctive style. Writing about “Hora Hootenannies and Yemenite Hoedowns,” historian Emily Katz has traced how thousands of American Jewish young people participated in Israeli dance festivals held at Carnegie Hall in Manhattan, or, less formally, practiced Israeli dance steps in summer camps and youth programs at synagogues and Jewish community centers in many communities, in the process learning the Israeli songs to which the choreography was set. Here is one description from the early 1960s:

Visit any group of young Jewish girls and boys, from Bangor, Maine, to Corpus Christi, Texas, from Vancouver, Canada, to San Diego, California—the length and breadth of the country, and see how those children dance a hora and sing Israeli songs . . . . We, the middle-aged folk of today, had nothing like it in our youth. As Jews, we lost our identity in . . . the jitterbug. A special Jewish dance for the young? Unthinkable when we were young, except at Jewish weddings.

For American Jews, Israeli dancing at a time when folk dancing was all the rage provided a perfect medium for expressing “ethnic pride and a whiff of national difference without challenging the limits of American cultural pluralism.”

During the same period, a number of Jewish organizations—most notably the American-Israel Cultural Foundation—imported Israeli high culture to the U.S., ranging from visiting performances by the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra to traveling
exhibits of Israeli art. American fascination with Israeli archaeology was largely triggered by the arrival, in the fall of 1967, of an exhibit about Masada at New York's Jewish Museum that had been planned before the Six-Day War. Those who backed these endeavors were trying both to aid Israel's fledgling economy and highlight its cultural sophistication. Their efforts succeeded as the arrival of high Israeli art and ancient artifacts was met with great enthusiasm both from critics and from Jewish audiences. Not accidentally, these displays also highlighted the cultural affinities between the emerging Jewish state and America, and affirmed the triumph of the Jewish people over the forces that had just recently nearly annihilated it.

Israel also began to figure in American books during the first years of statehood. Between 1948 and 1967, well over 150 books on Israeli life rolled off the presses of American publishing houses. Some were written by non-Jewish admirers, such as Robert St. John (Shalom Means Peace, 1949); James McDonald, America’s first ambassador to Israel (My Mission in Israel, 1951); and James A. Michener (The Source, 1965). Others were by Jewish writers, such as Ruth Gruber (Israel Without Tears, 1948) and Zelda Popkin (Quiet Street, 1951.) The popular breakthrough novel was, of course, Leon Uris’s Exodus (1958), a panoramic description of Israel’s struggle for independence, which sold over four million copies and was made, in 1960, into a motion picture that enjoyed great success (perhaps partially because the hero, played by Paul Newman, looked like a quintessential WASP, and fell in love with a non-Jewish woman).

Since 1967 there has been a cascade of books, films, and television programs about Israel, the sheer volume of which is vastly disproportionate to the country’s small size. The emergence of Israeli and Palestinian studies as academic fields has swelled the scholarly literature. On the popular level, the emphasis gradually

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110 These books are discussed in Katz, “This Land Is Our Land,” chap. 1. Michelle Mart examines images of Israel in American popular culture during the 1950s in Eye on Israel: How America Came to View Israel as an Ally (Albany, N.Y., 2007).
111 For a listing of many dozens of academic books about Israel published over the past decade and a half, see http://aaupnet.org/news/2006/bfu/israel/list.html
shifted away from *Exodus*-style heroism toward critical analyses of Israeli policies regarding the Palestinians and sober assessments of the country’s internal challenges, as well as some satirical treatments. Compare, for example, the high-minded *Raid on Entebbe*, a made-for-TV movie about the rescue of hijacked Israelis in the Ugandan capital, aired in January 1977; *Munich*, the 2005 film describing, with considerable moral ambiguity, Israel’s retaliation for the massacre of its athletes at the 1972 Olympics; and *You Don’t Mess with the Zohan*, a 2008 movie that treated the (mis)adventures of an Israeli secret agent with utter irreverence.

Writers of serious American fiction have been slow to incorporate Israel into their work. Insofar as American novelists of Jewish origin touched upon Jewish themes at all in the post-World-War-II period, they generally addressed the immigrant experience and generational conflicts within families. Gradually, though, Israeli life began to impinge on the consciousness of American Jewish writers. Among the most notable explorations was Phillip Roth’s *The Counterlife* (1987), partially set in Israel, in which the hero recreates himself as a right-wing “settler” in territory conquered during the Six-Day War. Surveying the literary scene at the end of the twentieth century, Sylvia Barack Fishman noted the extent to which works of fiction had begun to use Israel as a spiritual site for the exploration of the most basic existential issues. As American Jews journey psychologically and physically to and from Israel, they wrestle with their own personal counterforces. Israel is the place where the American Jewish writers confront the counterlife; it has become the sacral center, if not the geographical center, of the American Jewish psyche.112

Movies made in Israel have increasingly drawn the attention of American Jewish filmgoers. The annual Israel Film Festival, founded in 1981, plays in Los Angeles, Miami, and New York—the three largest American Jewish communities—and now showcases more than 60 Israeli films, old and new.113 A perusal of the titles screened at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival in July 2008 indicates that the theme with the most entries was “Israeli Di-
On the East Coast, the 2007 Boston Jewish Film Festival featured a panel discussion with three Israeli filmmakers who were assigned to address the following phenomenon: “Israeli films have roared into the limelight this year, winning critics' kudos and top prizes at major film festivals across the globe. Why has 2007 been so spectacular? What’s the Israeli film industry’s contribution to this success? Why are Israelis flocking to see homegrown films in unprecedented numbers? And what’s the ‘it’ factor that makes Israeli cinema so stubbornly and astonishingly unique?”

The fact that Meir Fenigstein, a Tel Aviv native who studied at the Boston College of Music, created the Israel Film Festival and remains its driving force exemplifies the role of Israelis as cultural mediators for American Jews. Some Israelis who have settled in the U.S. (or who regularly travel there on business) have come to play a key role in the transfer of Israeli culture to America. Though estimates vary, most authorities put the number of Israelis living in the U.S. at 100,000–150,000, most of them concentrated in the New York area, Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, and, more recently, Atlanta and San Diego. There are several Hebrew-language newspapers—two in Los Angeles alone—and the Israeli expatriates import newspapers, musical performers, films, and other Israeli cultural products. And while Israelis have tended to avoid engagement with the organized American Jewish community, preferring to socialize within their own subgroup, there is a definite cultural spillover effect on some American Jews.
Of the varied aspects of Israeli culture, highbrow literature has had the least impact on American Jews. True enough, English translations of the works of major Israeli poets and novelists began appearing as early as the 1960s, but sales have been disappointing. Commenting on this, literary scholar Alan Mintz writes:

When it comes to the generality of committed Jewish laypeople who are affiliated with Jewish institutions and are involved with the life of the community, it is difficult to find much recognition of the names of Israeli writers, not to mention experience reading their works. In the elite of the community—the rabbis, the educators, the lay and professional leaders of organizations and federations—the name recognition may be there, but familiarity may extend only to the political views of the writers, say those of [Amos] Oz or [David] Grossman, and not to their main literary works. Even university teachers of Jewish Studies tend to regard Hebrew literature not as a source of current cultural creativity that makes claims upon them as intellectuals but as one area of academic specialization among many others. In the end, however, the muted reception of Israeli writing in America is less a reflection of the absolute number of its “users” than a sign of a failure of these writings to become part of the intellectual discourse of the American Jewish community and its cultural repertoire.119

Mintz contrasts the scant appreciation for serious Israeli literature with the popularity of sagas that glorify Israel, which serve the need of American Jews to shore up their own identities. "The glow of the heroic-romantic version of Israel abets this process; the moral realism of the Israeli literature . . . apparently does not."120

Summarizing Israel's impact on American Jewish religious, educational, and cultural life, it is hard to dispute the view that American Jews have only a shallow grasp of the real Israel.121 They relate to Israel selectively, with an eye to their own preoccupations as Jews. This situation is really not surprising, nor is it likely to change. After all, how many Italian- or German-Americans can

119 Alan L. Mintz, Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and its Reception in America (Syracuse, 2001), p. 3.
120 Ibid, p. 41.
121 The point has recently been made in a documentary by Paula Weiman-Kelman entitled “Eyes Wide Open,” which follows American tour groups and some individuals as they encounter Israel.
read Italian or German, let alone follow the press and the literature produced in Italy or Germany? How many Korean or Japanese Americans keep up with high culture in their native lands? And we must recall, as well, that Israel is not a point of origin for most American Jews, and few have family members or close friends living there.

Sixty years after Israel's establishment, the goal of forging a strong global Jewish culture with Israel at its center is not only yet to be attained—it has not even been articulated by American Jewish leaders and educators. What has evolved instead is a more subtle and perhaps shallow connection, in which aspects of Israeli culture impinge on American Jews when they visit their local religious, educational, and cultural centers. Reminders of Israel abound in the public gathering places of American Jews and in many of their private homes. But American Jews cannot seriously engage with their Israeli counterparts so long as the two literally and figuratively speak different languages.122

**ISRAEL AND THE AMERICAN JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL WORLD**

If American Jews in their private lives and their synagogues, schools, and Jewish community centers engage with Israel in a wide yet shallow fashion, the same cannot be said of their organizations. It is, in fact, impossible to understand the history of national Jewish organizations and many local ones without taking into account their intense involvement in Israel-related issues.

One of the remarkable transformations to occur in the first years of Israel's statehood was the eclipse of American Zionist organizations as the central agencies working with Israel and their replacement by the major national organizations. With the exception of some women's Zionist groups, the larger mechanisms of Zionist work in the U.S. were pushed aside by the mainstream agencies,

122To conduct such pan-Jewish discourse, of course, there would have to be Israeli partners, and the available evidence suggests that while Israelis maintain a strong interest in America, they have far less understanding of or patience for American Jewish concerns. A recent call for Israelis to rethink their attitude is Yechezkel Dror, "Revolutionizing Diaspora Ties." Jerusalem Post, April 28, 2008, http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1208870512370&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FPrinter
which took over as partners with Israel.\textsuperscript{123} It is today hard to think of a large national American Jewish organization that does not include Israel in its portfolio, a point highlighted by the membership of no less than 55 "major Jewish organizations" in the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the umbrella body for agencies heavily invested in issues having to do with Israel.\textsuperscript{124}

The rise of non-Zionist organizations as the dominant partners with Israel was promoted by David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, who saw no difference between Zionists and non-Zionists after Israel's creation, since, he pointed out, neither fostered aliyah from the U.S. If, then, all that American Zionists were doing was helping Israel financially and politically, the same task could be taken up even more effectively by all American Jews. Hence Ben-Gurion did business with the leaders of non-Zionist organizations, and these proceeded to invade the turf of the Zionist Organization of America, taking over its roles as lobbyist and fund-raiser for Israel. Before long, the federations of Jewish philanthropy became the major arm of American Jewry in raising money for Israel, and a newly created American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs, founded in 1953 and later renamed the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), assumed responsibility for lobbying.\textsuperscript{125}

Gradually, other organizations included Israel on their agendas. We have already noted the role of Jacob Blaustein of the American Jewish Committee as a go-between for the non-Zionist organizations and Israel, and in 1962 the formerly non-Zionist AJC opened an office in Israel; the Anti-Defamation League followed suit 15 years later.\textsuperscript{126} After the 1967 war, Daniel Elazar wrote, "insuring the survival of Israel has become the heart of the defense

\textsuperscript{123}Daniel J. Elazar, Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry (Philadelphia, 1976), p. 200. For a long time Hadassah was an exception to the decline of American Zionist organizations, perhaps because it was also deeply involved in American domestic-policy issues. But it too has been losing significant numbers over the past decade as veteran members die off. Judy Siegel, "Hadassah Confronts Financial Problems, Dwindling Membership," Jerusalem Post, June 16, 2008, http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=121530996081

\textsuperscript{124}On the Conference of Presidents and its constituent groups, see http://www.conferenceofpresidents.org/index.asp

\textsuperscript{125}These developments are chronicled in Urofsky, We Are One, pp. 278–97.

\textsuperscript{126}Marianne Sanua, Let Us Prove Strong: The American Jewish Committee, 1945–2006
functions of the American Jewish community. Even the community-relations agencies are now spending a high proportion of their time and resources trying to increase support for Israel in the United States.”127 With the already noted involvement of religious, educational, and cultural agencies in the Israel arena, the prominent role played by federations in Israeli social welfare, and the advocacy carried out by American Jewish community-relations organizations, few national bodies were left out of the mix. Subsequently, many dozens of additional groups were founded by American Jews to serve as liaisons with Israel. The 2007 edition of the *American Jewish Year Book* lists over 100 organizations in the U.S. claiming an involvement with Israel, a figure that does not include all the “friends of” organizations established to raise funds for individual Israeli institutions.

What have these organizations done for Israel? Predominantly, they have raised money. Not surprisingly, the largest sums were donated in times of crisis. Describing the American Jewish response to the Six-Day War, for example, Arthur Hertzberg wrote: “It is ingrained in the American Jewish soul that the correct response to a danger is to give money. This was certainly the immediate reaction to the Middle East crisis [of 1967] . . . . There are innumerable stories from every Jewish community throughout the United States not only of giving on a fantastic scale by people of large means, but also of the literal sacrifice of their life savings by people of modest means.”128 After crises passed, some of the American organizations managed to identify new ones, and thus sustain “emergency” fund-raising year after year.

During the first 50 years of statehood, the federations, in conjunction with the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), became the primary fund-raising arm for Israel, channeling money through the United Israel Appeal (UIA) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Israel used these funds for housing, vocational training, social welfare, rural settlement, youth care,


preschool and higher education, and, most important, absorption of new immigrants. Over the first three decades of Israel’s existence UJA transferred over $3.7 billion dollars to Israel via the UIA and the JDC, and during the next three decades sent double that sum.

However, the percentage of total funds raised by the federations that were allocated for Israel plummeted. In the prime year of crisis, 1948, nearly three-quarters of federation receipts went to Israel; in the next year of crisis, 1967, the figure topped 78 percent. By the decade of the 1990s, though, the percentage set aside for Israel dropped into the 40-percent range, and early in the twenty-first century it declined to under 25 percent. The decline stems primarily from the flat campaigns of federations, which have led to cutbacks for all agencies. Since local needs, the first priority of federations, were becoming more pressing, and Israel’s economy was improving substantially, it became difficult to justify continuing to send huge sums to Israel.

Another avenue through which American Jews contributed to the development of Israel’s infrastructure was their purchase of Israel Bonds. Especially during the early years of statehood, these bonds were critically needed to sustain Israel’s vast absorption and military costs. Describing the allure of bonds to Jews in Miami—consistently one of the top markets for them during the 1950s—historian Deborah Dash Moore writes:

Unlike the Central Jewish Appeal [of the local federation], Israel Bonds gave Miami Jews a direct, continuous, and powerful tie with the Jewish state and a concrete means of building the Jewish homeland. Increasingly Miami Jews responded to the message of the constant campaigns. Israel became their homeland, too, through their wholehearted investment in its economic future. Lacking strong ties to their new homes, Miami Jews preferred to purchase bonds that gave them a stake in a surrogate home. Although government speakers often presented Israel as besieged, an island of democracy in a hostile sea, this imagery always accompanied an emphasis on defense, on action, on an aggressive preparedness. Jews in Miami could

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130 These figures are graphically available in the entry “American Jewish Contributions to Israel (1948 – 2004)” at www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/ujatab.html
appreciate this stance in other Jews, especially when those others were ready to face the dangers. Israel provided an arena to implement frontier visions they could not imagine pursuing in Miami. Israel offered them a future, a chance to help create a new Jewish society, and the power and glamour of statehood. Since they could not seize these perquisites in Miami or even in Miami Beach, they encountered little resistance to adopting Israel as the source of their redemption. Israel guaranteed the Jewish future, and bonds guaranteed Israel. The link was simple, the identification was direct. Bonds were a powerful vehicle to implement dreams.\textsuperscript{131}

By 1993, over $13 billion dollars had been invested in Israel Bonds, including over $1 billion in that year alone; for the rest of the decade annual sales hovered between $900 million and a bit over $1 billion. With the passage of time, though, many of these bonds were held by large banks and investment houses, and so stopped serving their earlier psychological function.\textsuperscript{132}

In addition to general fund-raising for Israel, federations have also sought to play a more hands-on role through partnership programs. In the 1970s, Project Renewal was launched as a cooperative venture between the Israeli government and the federations to improve conditions in disadvantaged Israeli neighborhoods. Local community officials in Israel were given a direct say in how funds would be spent, and individual U.S. federations took on responsibility for a particular "twin" city, even exchanging visits with its inhabitants. Thus Project Renewal enabled American activists to come into direct contact with Israeli beneficiaries, providing the Americans a far more realistic understanding of Israeli conditions and of the flesh-and-blood individuals whom they supported.\textsuperscript{133}

By the late 1990s, another version of twinning was developed by federations jointly with the Jewish Agency for Israel, called Partnership 2000. Individual federations worked with a twin city, or area, in Israel, improving economic life, providing educational opportunities for young Israelis, delivering services to patients afflicted


\textsuperscript{133}For an evaluation of the program, see Arnold Gurin and David Rosen, Project Renewal and North American Jewish Communities: Ongoing Effects (Waltham, Mass., 1991), esp. pp. 1, 26–29.
with Alzheimer’s disease, and training Ethiopian immigrants, to cite a few examples.\(^{134}\)

For several decades, funds sent by the federations dwarfed all other American Jewish aid to Israel. That began to change in the 1980s, and by the time Israel reached its 50th birthday American Jews were transferring twice as many dollars to Israel through the various “friends of” agencies as they were via UJA contributions.\(^{135}\)

Every major Israeli university, hospital, museum, and cultural center, as well as quite a few yeshivas and non-Orthodox religious institutions, established fund-raising vehicles in the U.S., and Israeli political parties have done so as well. Each of these makes possible targeted giving by American Jews eager to support a favorite cause.\(^{136}\) Among the largest of the organizations is the New Israel Fund (NIF), founded in 1980 to support agencies it deemed “progressive causes in Israel.” To date, the NIF has disbursed over $200 million to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, various agencies that promote Arab-Israeli coexistence, Panim—Jewish Renewal, rape crisis centers, and the like.\(^{137}\)

This tendency mirrors the shift occurring in American Jewish domestic philanthropy away from the federation umbrella structure to what some have called “boutique giving.” While this change in form does not necessarily imply a decline in the overall amount of money allocated, it has generated anguished questions about the future of American Jewish philanthropy, and, in terms of Israel, has raised the prospect of a disengagement from Israel—if not from specific Israeli causes—by a great many American Jews.\(^{138}\)

\(^{134}\)Thus Washington, D.C., works with the city of Beit Shemesh and communities in Judea; Chicago with three cities in the Negev; Boston with Haifa; New York with Jerusalem; and Los Angeles with Tel Aviv.


\(^{137}\)http://www.nif.org/about

One factor that helps explain the change is a general detachment of American Jews from organizations, a process parallel to the erosion of civic engagement in American society as a whole. Looking specifically at the moderately engaged Jewish population, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, authors of *The Jew Within*, traced how "the forces of personalism and privatization" impelled many Jews to withdraw from the Jewish public sphere into a far more private domain. Regarding Jewish organizations as "remote and irrelevant," the Jews they studied were disenchanted not with Israel, but with organized American Jewish life.¹³⁹

Another reason for the drop in UJA giving may be the shortening of distance between American Jews and Israel brought by quicker transportation and improved communications technology. One observer has noted the extent to which American Jews had, in the past, relied upon the UJA to serve as a mediating institution that informed them about ways to help Israel, but that function was now obsolete. "The high costs of gathering information about needs for and uses of donations encouraged the formation of a central organization. This suggests another explanation for the decline in funds donated overseas. The costs of information have declined, reducing the need for a central system to collect and distribute funds."¹⁴⁰

We should also not minimize the dampening effect upon giving that Israeli leaders have when they publicly downplay the importance of American Jewish philanthropy. An Israeli ambassador to Washington recently crisscrossed the U.S. extolling Israel as the "land of milk and start-ups," and prime ministers of Israel have berated Jewish fund-raising campaigns for depicting hungry Israeli children. Most notably, Yossi Beilin, a one-time leading Israeli politician, has urged the UJA to get out of the social-welfare business entirely. The expression of such views makes it harder to convince American Jews to channel their money to Israel.¹⁴¹


Despite the changing patterns of giving, American Jews still contribute large sums to Israel. But even so, in the words of one observer, "because such giving is spread over a wide range of causes, its overall impact within Israel is by definition diffuse and the resulting influence, slight." This has become the case especially in recent years, as Israel's Gross National Product has risen to unprecedented levels and the average income of Israelis compares favorably to that of workers in other Western countries, diminishing further the cumulative impact of American Jewish philanthropy. On the other hand, the recent scandal involving envelopes stuffed with cash given to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert suggests that the infusion of American Jewish dollars for particular ideological causes and on behalf of otherwise marginal groups has had greater impact than we know.

Beyond their financial contributions, American Jews have developed organizational mechanisms to advocate and lobby in support of Israel. Here, the community-relations field has been central. The large national organizations, which embraced the cause of Israel virtually since the founding of the state, seek to explain to the American government why it ought to side with Israel, stressing that country's democratic character and the parallels in its history to the American experience. Their efforts are complemented by local Jewish community relations councils, which also defend Israel, an activity generally encouraged by the national umbrella agency for these councils, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), formerly the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC). Several organizations concentrate on setting the record of Israel straight in the media, including CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America), founded in 1982, and the Israel Project. Since the outbreak of the second intifada, dozens of additional groups have emerged to train Jews to interpret Israeli policies—especially regarding the conflict with the Palestinians—on campuses and in other civic settings. Many of these are run by

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143 On JCPA's Israel Advocacy Initiative, see http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/organizations.php3?action=printContentItem&orgid=54&typeID=1347&itemId=21305&User_Session=05d15482bf42df77744193a74d0fd9d
federations, the Jewish campus organization Hillel, and the religious movements. A number of foundations have put resources into such endeavors. Thus the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, in cooperation with Hillel and a network of national Jewish organizations, created the Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC), and the Grinspoon Foundation has trained hundreds of college students as Grinspoon Israel advocacy fellows to act as campus organizers for Israel. 

Another model is the David Project for Jewish Leadership, which has developed over 100 high-school programs and 16 gap-year programs in Israel to prepare young American Jews to stand up for Israel when they enter college. In its own words,

The David Project has a long-term strategy — to populate the campuses with educated, trained, and confident college students, to prepare high school students and Jewish teens to be proactive Israel activists, and to activate the Jewish community in response to the growing anti-Israel discourse. Our strategy is based on a unique analysis for understanding and communicating to others the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Our approach enables participants to understand the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict by promoting critical thinking, historical accuracy, moral decision-making and activism.

By arming young Jews with information about Israel's policies, such efforts give students the ability to stand their ground when Israel is bashed. But the programs also have certain drawbacks. For one thing, they make room for few if any doubts about Israeli policies, and so may seriously narrow their target population, alienating students who are generally pro-Israel but do not want to engage in apologetics. And perhaps more important, they focus almost exclusively on geopolitics, thus losing the opportunity to expose American Jews to the lives of Israelis in all their complex-

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145http://davidproject.org
146For a report on how Israel advocacy projects can impact negatively on some young people, see Jason Nielson, “Young Adults Avoid Israel Advocacy: People in their 20s and 30s Less Involved Than Others,” Boston Jewish Advocate, June 19, 2003.
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...ity. This has been noticed by a competitor organization, the Orthodox outreach group Aish Hatorah, which proposes an alternative path to Israel advocacy, saying, "We need to show the world what Israel is beyond the conflict [with the Palestinians]; we need to show people how Israel innovates and creates."148

The most visible and controversial form of American Jewish advocacy for Israel is the lobbying that seeks to influence American government leaders. The most important lobbying group is AIPAC, which targets members of the U.S. Congress. With a membership said to exceed 100,000, AIPAC can enlist an army of volunteers anywhere in the U.S. to try to sway their representatives in Washington. In addition to AIPAC, at least 30 local pro-Israel political action committees (PACs) operate around the country, drawing mainly upon Jewish supporters. Among them are City PAC, based in Chicago, which, since 1984, has supported candidates for political office who are sympathetic to Israel, Florida Congressional Committee PAC, and Washington PAC, which bills itself as the second largest pro-Israel PAC, presumably after AIPAC. 149

Lobbying for Israel has generated stiff criticism over the years. In response to the uptick in American economic and military aid to Israel following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, for example, some prominent Americans began to grumble about the undue influence of the Israel lobby. George Ball, the former undersecretary of state, expressed concern in the early 1980s that "America . . . seems disabled by domestic constraints from effectively promoting peace or restraining Israeli adventurism," and he was joined by Sen. Charles Mathias (R., Md.), who believed ethnic groups “sometimes press causes that derogate from the national interest.”150 As Israel-U.S. military and political ties grew, so did this type of criticism.

The most recent eruption occurred during the administration of President George W. Bush, which was extraordinarily sympathetic to Israel’s security interests. In their book The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt charged...
that the pro-Israel lobby—and most specifically AIPAC—was highly effective in pushing U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction even against American national interests—for example, in opposing the Palestinian cause, invading Iraq, and threatening Iran—while managing to spread the “myth” that what is good for Israel is also good for the U.S. According to Mearsheimer and Walt, the lobby holds considerable sway over the White House, the media, and especially Congress, deriving its clout from its army of activists who have the power to punish recalcitrant legislators at the ballot box.

Truth be told, their book is civil and polite toward the pro-Israel community when compared to the more rabid conspiracy theories about Jewish control of American institutions of government, which are, in turn, rooted in age-old anti-Semitic stereotypes. Even the most cursory Internet search will highlight the extent of the paranoia that surrounds discussion of lobbying efforts on behalf of Israel. Despite these attacks, American Jews who support Israel continue to invest their political capital on behalf of the Jewish state, a sure sign that they feel “at home” in America.

There are pro-Israel American Jews who express dissatisfaction with AIPAC for allegedly marching in lockstep with Israeli policies, and recently these dissenters have established a counterpart named J Street. With an initial operating budget of $1.5 million—as compared with AIPAC’s $100-million endowment—J Street draws support from several small organizations with a dovish perspective, such as Americans for Peace Now; the Chicago-based Brit Tzedek v’Shalom (Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace); and the Tikkun Community, centered around the magazine of that name. Its first public act was a set of endorsements of candidates for Congress in 2008.151

The J Street mission statement says:

J Street was founded to promote meaningful American leadership to end the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts peacefully and diplomatically. We support a new direction for American policy in the Middle East and a broad public and policy debate about the U.S.

role in the region. We believe ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in the best interests of Israel, the United States, the Palestinians, and the region as a whole.\textsuperscript{132}

It is too early to speculate on J Street's eventual impact.

What motivates the large American Jewish organizational infrastructure that raises money for Israel and advocates on its behalf, even when no crisis confronts the Jewish state? Already during the 1950s, sociologists Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum found extraordinary levels of support for both activities: 91 percent of Jewish respondents in the growing suburb they named Lakeville approved of raising money for Israel, and 63 percent favored influencing U.S. foreign policy in favor of Israel. A far smaller percentage belonged to Zionist organizations, leading the authors to conclude that "while willing to take a political stand in connection with their Jewish identity, the majority of our respondents do not favor Zionist organizations as the vehicle for exercising such influence. Zionist organizations are viewed as agencies whose sole concern is with Israel; the majority of our respondents reject the necessity of adherence to a specialized pro-Israel association." Instead, they wanted general-purpose Jewish organizations to assume the responsibility.\textsuperscript{153}

Beyond the altruism and sense of solidarity that motivates American Jews to back Israel, we should not overlook the positive role such aid to Israel has played in building organized Jewish life in the U.S. Writing in the mid-1970s—a peak time for Israel activism—political scientist Daniel Elazar concluded:

Jews who would deny the necessity for complete dedication to Israel's cause are, in effect, read out of Jewish communal life, while those who occupy the most important positions in Jewish communal life are usually people who can claim to be playing some significant role in the maintenance of Israel's security. Fund-raising for Israel, with its constantly accelerating demands, has become the most visible Jewish communal activity and has been the stimulus for the general increase in funds raised for across-the-board Jewish purposes in the

\textsuperscript{152}http://www.jstreet.org/about/about-us

\textsuperscript{153}Sklare and Greenblum, \textit{Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier}, pp. 225, 226. Other factors shaping these attitudes were undoubtedly vicarious pride in Israel's successes and repressed guilt feelings over American Jewish failure to act on behalf of European Jews during the Holocaust.
United States since the end of World War II. This has not only had certain direct effects, but also the substantial indirect effect of enhancing the Jewish federations, the organizations whose task it is to raise the funds.\textsuperscript{154}

By dedicating resources to Israel, Jewish organizations achieved credibility with the large numbers of American Jews for whom this priority resonated.

Involvement with Israel has also given Jewish organizations a political role far transcending the small population of American Jews they claim to represent. As supporters of Israel, Jewish organizations have been thrust onto the international stage. Lay and professional leaders of the federation world, AJC, the Anti-Defamation League, and other pro-Israel organizations routinely host and visit the top echelon of American elected officials, and travel the globe to meet with heads of state, foreign ministers, and leaders of industry and finance, fulfilling their self-defined roles as advocates for Israel. It is hard to think of any other American ethnic group whose organizations command so much attention from the most powerful world leaders, attention they attract because of their involvement with Israel.\textsuperscript{155}

Moreover, serious involvement with Israel has also given Jewish organizations a specifically Jewish purpose. Historian Eli Lederhendler has captured the point well:

Links with Israel provide Diaspora philanthropy with an explicitly Jewish function that complements its health-and-welfare-related or social functions. In a very real sense, the ability to forge philanthropic ties with Israel is crucial to a Diaspora community's ability to carry on a more intensive organizational life. . . . Donating funds to Israel is an investment in Diaspora Jewish life, even as it represents tangible input into Israeli society . . . . When the Jewish Diaspora places financial resources at Israel's disposal, it must use its own human resources in particularly focused ways: it must exert leadership, articulate priorities, mobilize a following, and — not least — assert its role as a Diaspora vis a vis Israel.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{154}Elazar, Community and Polity, pp. 80–81.

\textsuperscript{155}The negative side to this high-powered political involvement, discussed above, is the routine grumbling, if not conspiratorial accusations, about the role played by the "Israel lobby."

\textsuperscript{156}Lederhendler, "The Diaspora Factor in Israeli Life," p. 121.
Just as in an earlier era defense organizations asserted American Jewish primacy by virtue of their leadership role in combating anti-Semitism, during the years of Israel's statehood organizations that could demonstrate their effectiveness in channeling money to Israel or mobilizing strong lobbying on its behalf have gained credibility as leading actors in American Jewish life. For much of the past 60 years, intense involvement with Israel gave these agencies a positive Jewish mission, catapulting them into the limelight.

WHAT AMERICAN JEWS THINK ABOUT ISRAEL

Surveying Jewish Attitudes

Despite all that American Jews do for and about Israel, the media and Jewish organizations show far more interest in tracing what American Jews think about Israel. For the general media, the ebb and flow of American Jewish attitudes make for interesting news stories, and if criticism of Israel is on the rise, reporters can focus on how American Jews are wracked by tensions and anguish. Jewish organizations, for their part, feel a need to take the pulse of their constituents, on the assumption that wavering feelings toward Israel may presage a broad decline in attachment among American Jews.

Within weeks after the establishment of Israel, AJC sponsored a survey of Jews and Christians in Baltimore to measure their attitudes toward the new state. The questions posed were themselves quite revealing of Jewish preoccupations at the time. For example, to test a respondent's knowledge of the situation, the survey asked where the fighting over the Jewish state was taking place, who were the participants, whether any Western country had been actively involved in governing Palestine, and what name was given to the new state. The pollsters found that Baltimore Jews passed with flying colors, three-quarters answering all questions correctly.

157 During the course of interviewing several dozen Jewish leaders about American Jewish organizational life in 2006–07, I asked interviewees to identify the organizations they considered the most important in Jewish life. Almost invariably, organizations primarily involved with Israel were at the top of the lists.
They also found that native-born males with more education and higher incomes were most likely than others to answer all questions correctly.158

As some American Jews were fearful at the time that Jews might be charged with “dual loyalty” if they identified too closely with Israel, the survey probed this area too, finding that Jews with high levels of Jewish engagement expected domestic anti-Semitism to decline, whereas the least involved Jews were more worried about a rise. Still, the authors concluded, “being pro-Israel posed no threat, insofar as most of our respondents were concerned, to loyalty to the United States. The two countries stood for two different kinds of commitments and ties, neither of which clashed with the other and both of which were essential to our respondents’ total image of themselves as American Jews.” As for their views on the creation of Israel, 90 percent approved the establishment of the state and U.S. recognition of it. Finally, the survey found that while degree of commitment to Jewish life had no correlation with being pro- or anti-Israel, it did correlate with the intensity of a Jew’s response to Israel.159

In a 1957 study of a community identified as Riverton, Marshall Sklare found that 94 percent of Jews expressed favorable feelings toward Israel.160 A few years later Sklare and a colleague published another survey, of a community they called Lakeville, which first used a question that subsequently became a standard gauge for researchers to measure attachment to Israel: “If the Arab nations should succeed in carrying out their threat to destroy Israel, would you feel a very deep, some, or no personal sense of loss?” Ninety percent of respondents answered they would feel some loss, 65 percent describing it as “deep”; 10 percent said they would feel no sense of loss. The researchers probed for factors behind these responses. Some Jews considered such a tragedy tantamount to another Holocaust. Others saw it as a loss of pride in Israel’s achievements (“They are fellow coreligionists who have struggled hard.

159Ibid, pp. 448, 450, 440, 442.
They have done wonderful things. They're wonderful people; I'd hate to have anything happen to them.

And still others identified with Israeli Jews simply as fellow Jews ("Being a Jew, you can't help but feel for other Jews."). For those who expressed no sense of loss, humanitarian impulses apparently transcended any special feeling for fellow Jews ("I feel a deep sense of personal loss whenever a democratic nation is submerged.").

Immediately after the Six-Day War, the authors of the Lakeville study returned to the scene and questioned Jews again. Most respondents reported feeling very concerned in the period leading up to the war in late May and early June 1967. Based on his interviews, Sklare described the mood as follows: "a psychological reaction probably occurred, namely, that if the Israelis are bearing the brunt of the struggle, the least that we comfortably situated American Jews can do is worry. Those who deprive us of this function will make us feel like bad Jews whereas we wish to consider ourselves to be good Jews."

The Jews of Lakeville also responded to the war by strongly supporting the Israeli position and increasing their philanthropic contributions during the crisis. Here, too, Sklare astutely took the measure of his interview subjects:

Strange as it may seem, our respondents even today connect their own actions with the Israeli victory. If the winning of any war ever depends upon superior financial means, the Six-Day War was not such a war: by the time the first public (if not private) fund-raising meetings could be convened, victory was a foregone conclusion. But sober businessmen long experienced in problems of procurement, of manufacturing, and of transportation, acted as if the money they contributed one day could somehow miraculously be turned into the sinews of war the very next day. Because they wanted to believe in such a miracle, the emphasis was not upon pledges—the usual form of Jewish fund-raising—but on a different approach: the giving of cash.

Sklare goes on to note how completely the identification with Israel was acted out by Jewish givers: when the swift Israeli victory obviated the need for war aid, philanthropists quickly shifted their

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rationale and signaled that their largess would “keep Israel from losing the peace.”

For all of this immediate outpouring of worry and dollars, Sklare was forced to conclude that neither the crisis nor the war made a fundamental impact on the essential orientation of his interviewees in regard to Israel. Few changed their views on the types of support they were prepared to offer, whether through philanthropy, seeking to influence U.S. foreign policy, prioritizing Israel over local Jewish causes, encouraging their children to live in Israel, or immigrating there themselves.

If the Six-Day War had only a limited impact on the behavior of American Jews, spurring them to higher levels of philanthropic and lobbying support but not forcing them to rethink their ways, it did have a greater impact on how American Jews thought about Israel. Writing in the wake of the Yom Kippur War, Norman Podhoretz explained the “Zionization” of American Jewry:

“When in 1967 and then again in 1973, the Jews of Israel were suddenly and violently hurled into mortal peril, the Jews of America responded not as people doing something in a philanthropic spirit for others; they responded as though their own lives, their own families and their own homes, were immediately and imminently at stake. The feeling was—and is—that if Israel were to be annihilated, the Jews of America would also disappear.”

American Jews, Podhoretz went on, feared they might cease to exist, either through physical annihilation for the second time in one century, or voluntarily, because “the burden of Jewish history is just too grievous to bequeath to one’s descendants.” Whatever

163 Ibid, p. 113.
164 Ibid, pp. 123–24. A similar view is presented by Chaim I. Waxman, “The Limited Impact of the Six-Day War on America’s Jews,” in Eli Lederhendler, ed., The Six-Day War and World Jewry (Bethesda, Md., 2000), pp. 99–115. Lederhendler disagrees, speculating that the war “threw into relief the apparent gulf between Israelis (who could fend for themselves) and Jews (who could not). . . . While Jews celebrated their solidarity with Israel, they also became more conscious of what their own lives as non-Israeli Jews lacked in cultural and political terms—and hence, what was required to make such lives more worthwhile and more capable of being sustained. In this paradoxical cultural dialectic, the confrontation with a victorious Israel became the basis for an enlivened Diasporism.” Eli Lederhendler, New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–70 (Syracuse, 2001), pp. 190–91.
166 Podhoretz ascribes this phrase to Irving Kristol, ibid, p. 43.
their reasons, American Jews in the decade following the Six-Day War seemed more intensely focused on Israel, determined to provide the means it needed to ensure its survival.

They also incorporated Israel into their own self-conception as Jews. Writing in the mid-1980s about the “civil religion” of American Jews, Jonathan Woocher noted the “centrality of Israel” in that civil faith. Striking evidence could be found in a survey of Reform Jews conducted in 1970, which found that 80 percent of respondents regarded support for Israel as essential to being a “good Jew.” Reform, a Jewish subgroup that was traditionally cool to Zionism and had, in the past, displayed relatively low levels of engagement with Israel, had shifted position dramatically.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, sociologists began to sense a weakening of this intensely pro-Israel posture in the American Jewish community as opinion research found evidence that declining percentages of American Jews felt a strong sense of engagement with Israel. Some of the change was attributable to the growing chorus of criticism expressed by some American Jewish elites about specific Israeli policies (the details will be discussed below), and American Jews may also have been influenced by declining sympathy for Israel among American non-Jews.

In a series of surveys conducted over a 20-year period, sociologist Steven M. Cohen has tracked the ebb and flow of American Jewish attachment to Israel. Snapshots of his findings portray the nature of the changes:

The result of the 1997 survey certainly point in the direction of diminished support for Israel [as compared to a survey conducted in 1988]. When asked about their emotional attachment to Israel, just 9 percent answered “extremely attached” (as opposed to 13 percent in the 1988 study), and only another 18 percent said “very attached” (versus 24 percent in 1988). In other words, a total of just over a quarter (27 percent in 1997, versus 37 percent in 1988) defined themselves as at least very attached to Israel. When asked how close they feel to Israelis, 8 percent said “to a great extent” (against 19 percent

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in 1988), and 41 percent answered "to some extent" (versus 54 percent in 1988). About a third do see Israel as extremely important to their sense of being Jewish. These results place Israel well down on the list of symbols and concepts that seem to resonate with American Jews. . . . With respect to their ideas of the good Jew, just 20 percent thought it was essential for a good Jew to support Israel, and even fewer (18 percent) had similar views regarding visiting Israel during one's life. For most respondents, these behaviors were at least desirable, but about a third, in fact, found them irrelevant to their concept of a good Jew. Most respondents (52 percent) agreed that Israel is critical to sustaining American Jewish life. Three-quarters also rejected the view that Israel does not really need American Jewish charity any more (a view increasingly widespread among American Jewish donors).

Almost a decade later, Cohen reported on another survey conducted in late 2004 and early 2005; in this case, his point of comparison was with opinion research he had conducted in 2002, during the peak of the second intifada. His overall finding: "Respondents were less likely than in comparable earlier surveys to say they care about Israel, talk about Israel with others or engage in a range of pro-Israel activities." Twenty-six percent claimed they were "very emotionally attached to Israel," compared with 31 percent who said so a couple of years earlier. Nearly two-thirds said they followed the news about Israel closely, down from 74 percent in 2002, while 39 percent said they talked about Israel frequently with Jewish friends, down from 53 percent in 2002. When respondents were asked how much "caring about Israel" mattered for their personal Jewish identity, 48 percent said it mattered "a lot," as compared to 58 percent in 2002. And on the question of whether "caring about Israel is a very important part of my being Jewish," 57 percent answered affirmatively, compared with 73 percent of respondents in similar survey undertaken in 1989. As to their views of Israeli policies, more than two-thirds said they were at least sometimes "disturbed" by Israel's policies or actions, and nearly

as many said they were “confused.” Almost 40 percent said they were sometimes “alienated” by Israel, and 13 percent said they were “sometimes uncomfortable identifying as supporters of Israel,” with an additional 14 percent “not sure.” Finally, slightly more than a third said they were often or always “engaged” by Israel, while 47 percent said they were sometimes engaged and 18 percent said they were never engaged.171

The results of surveys conducted over a 60-year period indicate that American Jewish attitudes fluctuated, in part based upon how seriously Israel seemed to be in jeopardy and in part based on general American attitudes toward Israel. This was demonstrated most recently in a survey conducted after the 9/11 attacks: between January and October 2001, the percentage of American Jews who claimed to be “somewhat” or “very” attached to Israel rose from 72 to 82 percent; conversely, the self-described “not attached to Israel” Jews declined from 27 to 18 percent.172 Clearly, the sense that Israel and the U.S. were facing similar threats and the feeling that non-Jewish Americans felt this kinship as well made American Jews more comfortable in attaching themselves to Israel. But the drop in the percentage of Jews expressing attachment to Israel from 2002 to 2004, noted above, shows that this did not last long.

Opinion research also makes it possible to study variations in attitudes toward Israel between American Jewish subgroups:

1. Gender: Beginning in the 1980s, researchers found that Jewish women tended to take more hawkish positions than men on Israeli policy, and were more likely to oppose political candidates deemed unfriendly to Israel.173 Data from the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 2000–01 provided further evidence that women, on average, identified with Israel more than men. Respondents who said that Israel was “very important” to them broke down as follows: 55 percent of Orthodox men and 78 percent of Orthodox women; 50 percent of Conservative men and 54 percent of Conservative women; 42 percent of Reform men and 38 percent

171 Steven M. Cohen, “Poll: Attachment of U.S. Jews Falls in Past 2 Years,” Forward, March 4, 2005, pp. 1–ff. Only people who claimed to be Jewish by religion were polled, the most Jewishly engaged American Jews.


of Reform women. When it came to visiting Israel, among
in-married families with children, women outscored men in
all three of the main religious movements: Orthodox—91 percent
of women versus 81 percent of men; Conservative—61 percent
of women versus 55 percent of men; and Reform—34 percent
of women versus 32 percent of men.174

2. Denominational Affiliation: The difference between denominations was already evident in the weeks leading up to the Six-Day War, when, in a survey of opinion, Orthodox rabbis and synagogue leaders expressed the most concern about Israel's situation, outpacing Conservative rabbis and synagogue leaders, and even more so those affiliated with Reform.175 Harris polls conducted in the early 1980s confirmed the same about rank-and-file members of these movements, as did a survey by Steven M. Cohen showing that more ritually observant Jews felt more attached to Israel than those less observant.176 The 1990 NJPS asked respondents whether they had traveled to Israel: 58 percent of Orthodox Jews answered in the affirmative, as compared to 37 percent of Conservative Jews and only 22 percent of Reform Jews.177

That pattern has held consistently in a series of later surveys. Despite the strong similarities in the official positions of the three major movements about the importance of Israel, levels of attachment are highest among Orthodox Jews, lower among Conservative Jews, and lowest among Reform Jews. To cite one example, the 2000–01 NJPS found that 72 percent of Orthodox Jews claimed strong emotional attachment to Israel, as compared to 54 percent of Conservative Jews and 22 percent of Reform Jews.178

3. Marital Status: Jews married to other Jews have the highest

175Charles S. Liebman's survey cited in Gilboa, Israel in the Mind of American Jews, p. 11.
176Ibid. p. 12.
levels of attachment to Israel, followed by single Jews; Jews married to non-Jews lag far behind. A recent study of the interplay between marriage and Jewish connectedness finds that among those under 40, 86 percent of the in-married call themselves “pro-Israel,” and so do 83 percent of the single. When presented with the statement, “Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew,” fully 79 percent of the single respondents agree, as do 83 percent of the in-married. Of the in-married, 62 percent feel proud of Israel at least often (if not always), as do even more—67 percent—of the singles. By contrast, rates of attachment to Israel plummet among Jews who are intermarried. 177

There has been some speculation that Jews who intermarry are already somewhat disconnected from Jewish life, and therefore their declining attachment to Israel is merely a symptom of their alienation. However, the high rate of identification with Israel that single Jews evince suggests that the act of intermarrying and the complications it brings constitute an important factor in dampening attachment to Israel. 180

4. Age: Levels of attachment to Israel—and to the Jewish people—decline by age groups. One analysis based on the 2000–01 NJPS has found that those aged 35–44 are less likely than their elders, 55–64, to strongly agree that “Jews in the United States and Jews around the world share a common destiny” (35 percent vs. 44 percent). They are less likely to strongly agree that “when people are in distress, American Jews have a greater responsibility to rescue Jews than non-Jews” (25 percent vs. 32 percent); and they are less likely to strongly agree that “I have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world” (25 percent vs. 32 percent, again).

In response to a question asking whether they have “a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people,” the percentage answering “yes” slides down with each ten-year age cohort, so that 72 percent of Jews over age 65 agree, as compared to only 47 percent of adults under 35. 181 A recent report on attachment to Israel, based

181Ibid, p. 5.
upon surveys conducted by AJC, concludes that “respondents 40 and above are more highly attached than those under 30, and those over 70 are markedly more highly attached.”

Why this should be so is a matter of debate among social scientists. Some contend that younger Jews have always expressed less attachment to Israel than their elders, and therefore their responses must be understood as an “age effect” due to their stage in life, and would presumably change when they got older. Others point to a drop in attachment to Israel among younger Jews specifically over the past few decades, suggesting that their views are attributable to a “cohort effect,” their having a very different experience of Israel than older Jews, and so less likely to pass with time.

5. Leadership Positions: Some surveys conducted in the 1980s and 1990s indicated that leaders of Jewish organizations exhibit far higher levels of engagement with Israel than rank-and-file Jews. The leaders travel to Israel more frequently, know more Israelis, display more knowledge about the country, may even have considered living there, and believe—much more than non-leaders—that were it not for Israel there would be much less “vitality in American Jewish life.” Some have used these findings to suggest that Jewish leaders are out of step with their communities and are unfit for leadership because they do not reflect the true wishes of their constituents. This view often emanates from critics on the left who want Jewish organizations to distance themselves from Israeli policies and espouse more dovish positions.

183 The age-effect analysis is presented ibid, pp. 16–19, and the cohort-effect analysis in Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel (New York, 2007). The two studies rely upon different data sets.
184 Steven M. Cohen, Israel-Diaspora Relations: A Survey of American Jewish Leaders (Tel Aviv, 1990), p. 8; and Gerald B. Bubis and Steven M. Cohen, “What Are the Professional Leaders of American Jewry Thinking about Israel?” Jerusalem Letter (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs), March 15, 1989. I am not aware of any follow-up research on leadership attitudes since then.
Debating Israeli Policies

One does not need opinion polls to know that American Jews do not share monolithic views about Israel. Indeed, while a strong consensus was successfully built in the early years of the state, since then communal discussions have more typically been marked by serious disagreement not only about Israeli policies but also over what, if any, limits should be placed on Jewish criticism of those policies.

In the decades before Israel’s founding, the key dividing lines were over the desirability and feasibility of establishing a Jewish state. Debates between Zionists, non-Zionists, and anti-Zionists during the first four decades of the twentieth century created deep rifts in American Jewish life. In response to the Nazi menace and, eventually, the destruction of European Jewry, most opposition faded, but at the margins both the extreme religious right (such as the Neturei Karta) and the Reform left (embodied by the American Council for Judaism) opposed Israel — and still do. Pro-Soviet communists also opposed Israel — except for the brief period that the Soviet Union supported Israel’s creation — and their spiritual descendents have never completely disappeared.

Once the state was established, a strong American Jewish consensus developed to support it. Aside from the left and right extremes, a wall-to-wall coalition of Jewish organizations promoted Israel as a bastion of democracy surrounded by totalitarian states that were directly linked to and armed by the Soviet bloc. While this functional solidarity persisted well into the

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186Neturei Karta today supports Iranian policy. Rabbi Dovid Weiss was quoted in Tehran expressing the hope that Israel would soon cease to exist — although with a minimum of bloodshed. See “Neturei Karta Rabbi to Iran Newspaper: Israel Will Cease to Exist,” Ynet, August 16, 2006, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3291956,00.html. The American Council for Judaism continues to function. See http://www.acjna.org/acjna/default.aspx
187Edward Alexander and Paul Bogdanor, eds., The Jewish Divide Over Israel: Accusers and Defenders (New Brunswick, N.J., 2006) includes several essays about radical leftist assaults on Israel. On p. xi it quotes Irving Howe, who wrote in 1970, “Jewish boys and girls, children of the generation that saw Auschwitz, hate democratic Israel and celebrate as ‘revolutionary’ the Egyptian dictatorship. Some of them pretend to be indifferent to the anti-Jewish insinuations of the Black Panthers; a few go so far as to collect money for Al Fatah, which pledges to take Tel Aviv.”
1980s, cracks began to appear as early as 1973 both over Israeli policy in the territories conquered in 1967 and over whether mainstream American Jewish organizations should tolerate criticism of Israeli actions.

These issues came to the fore with the founding of Breira, an organization that disagreed with the Israeli position on the territories. According to its in-house, official history, Breira believed "that there can be an alternative to the endless cycle of war and violence between Israel and the Arabs, and that American Jews committed to a strong Jewish state could actually encourage Israel to do more than it was doing to initiate peace talks." Although Breira's actual membership numbers were minuscule, some sympathizers held positions in major Jewish organizations, and so attracted attention to the group. Moreover, some Breira firebrands called for dismantling the existing Jewish communal structure, which they deemed unrepresentative, and suggested that American Jews should signal their displeasure by withholding financial contributions from those organizations and from Israel.

The response was swift, as opponents of Breira fiercely denounced it and publicly cast its members as traitors to the Jewish people and collaborators with the enemies of Israel; some Breira people lost their jobs as a result. Similar responses greeted a successor organization, New Jewish Agenda. The dissenters from the communal consensus, in turn, vilified their critics as witch-hunters, McCarthyites, and slanderers. It is doubtful that any other internal controversy has provoked such intemperate rhetoric and mud-slinging in the American Jewish press and organizational world since World War II.

Matters did not improve substantially afterwards. Beginning with the election of the first Likud government in Israel's history in 1977, American Jews were jolted out of their easy support for Israel by a series of uncomfortable developments. It was bad enough that a community consisting predominantly of political liberals found itself forced to swallow the elevation to prime min-

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ister of Menachem Begin, once an underground Revisionist leader and still an unapologetic hawk. Then came the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982, followed by the jailing, in 1985, of Jonathan Pollard, an American Jew who admitted to stealing military secrets for Israel. By the end of 1987 the first intifada erupted, filling American TV screens with harsh scenes of violence on the West Bank. American Jews found it hard to stomach the seeming role-reversal of Palestinians with slingshots playing David to the Israeli Goliath.


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199 The title of a typical debate, between Theodore R. Mann and Burton S. Levinson, in *Moment* 13, March 1988, pp. 18ff.
Since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the mood of American Jews—as of Israelis—has shifted sharply from euphoria at the prospect of Israeli-Palestinian peace, to disappointment at the continuation of the violence, to horror at the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 by an Orthodox right-winger, to renewed hope in connection with the Barak-Arafat-Clinton summit at Camp David in 2000, to anger about the Palestinian refusal to accept the settlement offered and the second (or Al Aqsa) intifada that followed, to empathy and solidarity after the events of 9/11, and to worry over continuing anti-Israel rhetoric on American campuses. It is too soon to gauge the full impact of these rapid shifts on American Jewish sentiment.

The Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict has not been the only issue to divide American Jews. During the 1970s and 1980s considerable rancor was generated over Israel's insistence on controlling the movement to rescue Soviet Jewry. Two major American organizations vied over policy: the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, created by the mainstream Jewish organizations, allied itself with Israeli policymakers and worked to channel emigrants to the Jewish state, while the grassroots Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry took the position that Jews from the Soviet Union, like other refugees, should be free to settle where they wished. Partisans of each group denounced the other as Israeli officials sought to stage-manage events behind the scenes.

Most controversially, Israel has figured in the internal religious skirmishes of American Jewry. Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s (and continuing, in a milder form, since), American Jews stood at loggerheads over efforts by Israeli religious parties, which are Orthodox, to control Israeli domestic policy on matters of personal status. This “Who Is a Jew?” controversy included such questions as who may be registered as a Jew, who may au-

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21 The latest treatment of the subject is Henry L. Feingold, “Silent No More”: Saving the Jews of Russia, the American Jewish Effort, 1967–89 (Syracuse, 2007), chap. 5. For a study written from the perspective of the Union of Councils, see Stuart Altshuler, From Exodus to Freedom: A History of the Soviet Jewry Movement (Lanham, Md., 2005).
authorize religious conversions, which rabbis are qualified to officiate at marriages and convert non-Jews, and a host of related matters. The Israeli religious parties used their political clout as partners in governing coalitions to induce changes in policy that further strengthened the Orthodox monopoly on Israeli Judaism already embodied in the country’s Chief Rabbinate.

These efforts have had powerful repercussions in the U.S., where adherents of the non-Orthodox movements far outnumber the Orthodox. Opinion surveys conducted during the most contentious “Who is a Jew?” controversies demonstrated that many American Jews believed that Israel was disenfranchising them.

Orthodox Jews, however, rallied to the defense of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and supported the political hardball played by the religious parties. Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist leaders—Reform being the most vocal—used their pulpits to rail against the absence of religious pluralism in Israel and to denounce the Chief Rabbinate and the religious parties. Some threatened to tell their congregants to withhold philanthropy from Israel, and there were synagogues that decided not to host Israeli politicians who cooperated with the Orthodox.

The battles over religious pluralism highlighted and magnified a larger rift emerging in American Jewish life between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. Survey research has demonstrated a significant gap between the two in regard to the disposition of the territories Israel captured in 1967, the Orthodox being far less willing to agree to territorial compromise on land they deem holy to Jews. During the pullout from Gaza in 2005, Orthodox organizations

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202 Steven M. Cohen noted, “The theme running through responses is one of fear of potential rejection by Israel.” Cohen, “Relationships of American Jews with Israel,” p. 147.
203 At least one prominent Orthodox rabbi in the U.S., the Lubavitcher Rebbe, actively fueled the flames and urged the religious parties on.
were sorely torn between their tradition of support for the Israeli government, on the one hand, and sympathy for the Israelis dispossessed of their homes, on the other. Using a baseball metaphor, one leader of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America successfully urged his organization not to condemn the pullout, saying, “American Jewish Zionists have box seats, and we have the right and obligation to support our team. But we are not playing. Only members of the team, even those who are benched, have the right to take part in team meetings. We fans talk strategy, but the only ones with the right to decide matters are the team members.”

Subsequently, however, Orthodox organizations mounted a campaign against turning over any part of Jerusalem to the Palestinians, and the Orthodox Union passed a resolution declaring that “in exceptional circumstances [it may] take public positions contrary to those of the Government of Israel.”

Writing of this shift, Lawrence Grossman notes that American Orthodox Zionism, which had previously kept silent even when it disagreed with particular Israeli policies, now “was no different from such dovish organizations as Americans for Peace Now and the Israel Policy Forum, except that its attacks on Israeli policies would presumably come from the right rather than from the left.”

This observation brings into sharp relief a dramatic transformation of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. Whereas American Jews once argued over whether to support or oppose the Zionist enterprise, and then over whether dissent from Israeli policies was even permissible, they are now arrayed in rival camps, arguing about how Israel should behave.

This was an inevitable development, given America’s strong traditions of free speech and the outspoken nature of America’s Jews. It was not only unrealistic to imagine that Jewish organizations could long stifle dissent, but also unhealthy. Debate over Israeli policies is a form of engagement and participation, if only from afar. Public silence or conformity in regard to Israel may signal indifference and apathy.

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206 David Luchins, quoted in Yossi Shain, _Kinship and Diasporas in International Affairs_ (Ann Arbor, 2007), p. 112.
209 “In surveys of American Jews conducted . . . in the 1980s, those most critical of Israeli policies were also most attached to Israel.” Cohen and Liebman, “Israel and American
It is highly significant that, for better or worse, the longest and most vituperative debates in American Jewish life over the last three decades have been about Israel. Other divisive issues, such as the role of women in Jewish life or the religious status of homosexuals, were resolved relatively swiftly within the individual denominations. However disagreements over Israeli policies in the territories and the proper relationship between synagogue and state in the Jewish state go on and on, and become increasingly bitter. They seem to have become a permanent feature of American Jewish culture, both causing and demonstrating deep fissures in the American Jewish community.

WHAT ISRAEL MAY MEAN IN THE AMERICAN JEWISH PSYCHE

Israel has played an enormous role in the American Jewish imagination and in virtually every nook and cranny of organized American Jewish life over the past 60 years. American Jews have celebrated Israel’s triumphs and agonized over its intractable dilemmas. A minority of American Jews has taken the trouble to see Israel firsthand; many more have demonstrated identification with Israel, following its struggles and achievements, at times with swelling pride, at times with great concern. American Jews have rallied in the streets, collected billions of dollars of aid, and invested their political capital to influence their government to support Israel. And while mobilization has been the most dramatic expression of American Jews’ connection with the Jewish state, Israel, in turn, has become a ubiquitous presence in their institutions and a powerful influence on their culture.210

Still, critics fault American Jews for their limited understanding of how Israeli society works and their scant grasp of Israeli Hebrew. How deep are the connections, they ask, when only a small minority has friends and relatives in Israel, or in other ways experi-
periences person-to-person contact with Israelis? Most disappointing to Israelis, only an infinitesimal fraction of American Jews has settled in Israel to join in the construction of the greatest Jewish project of recent centuries.211

This psychic and physical distance between most American Jews and Israel has led some to worry that the two Jewish communities will inexorably drift apart. According to one estimate, merely 5 percent of American Jews “can be classified as deeply personally attached to Israel,” as measured by maintaining an active business or social connection with Jews living in Israel and receptivity to having their own children settle there.212 Sixty years after Israel’s founding, large percentages of American Jews maintain, at best, an episodic relationship with the Jewish state, paying closer attention only in times of crisis or when personally touched by Israel, as when a relative returns from a positive experience there, such as a Birthright trip.

The changeable quality of American Jewish interaction with Israel makes it difficult to determine easily what Israel means to large swathes of American Jewry. Can one speak of American Jews as Zionists if few orient their lives in America around Israel or seriously contemplate settling there? If not, is the term “pro-Israelism”213 more suitable, because it speaks simply of the support American Jews have offered to insure the viability of a Jewish state they may never visit? Is Israel best understood primarily as a symbol of Jewish vulnerability, and therefore a cause to rally Jews when it appears to be endangered? Or should it be seen, in the formulation of the late Charles Liebman, as the heim of American Jews, the parents’ home, or in the case of Israel the surrogate parents’ and surrogate grandparents’ home. One visits it on occasion, one sends money (without ever having the bad taste to inquire how that money is spent), and one wants very much to feel that life goes on there as

211Approximately 120,000 American Jews have settled in Israel. In recent years, some 2,000 have immigrated annually, the large majority of them Orthodox. “North American Immigration to Israel Continues to Climb,” Israel Insider, July 4, 2007, http://web.israelinsider.com/Articles/Briefs/11628.htm
213On the difference between pro-Israelism and Zionism, see Sharot and Zaidman, “Israel as Symbol and as Reality,” p. 151.
it always has (which is why the type of Jew to whom Israel is heim expects and wants all Israelis to be religious, regardless of how uninterested he himself may be in religion). 214

Or, as the Israeli political scientist Yossi Shain has recently argued, are American Jews in this transnational age no different from other diasporas in the ways they relate to their homelands, offering political and financial support as best they can out of a sense of kinship? 215

Israel has emerged as a militarily and economically strong state, no longer as dependent as it had been earlier upon the largess and political aid of American Jews. As American Jews are less captivated by the mobilization model of rising to the defense of an embattled Jewish state, Israel-related causes that resonated in the past may have decreasing relevance for American Jews. In the decades to come American Jews will need to confront a different set of challenges.

First, they must come to terms with the full implications of Jewish sovereignty. How do Jews who have grown used to minority status and only limited self-government relate to a Jewish state that governs itself, manages its own social problems, and pursues its own policies? This question has already surfaced in regard to the difficult decisions Israel has taken in its decades-long struggle with antagonistic Arab neighbors, and, as time goes on, American Jews will have to confront further ramifications of Israeli sovereignty, some of which will not necessarily be to their liking, and certainly will be far from their own experience as a small minority whose relation to power has been very different.

Second, American Jewish thinkers will have to determine whether their own internal deliberations about Jewish identity, the nature of modern Judaism, and the meaning of being Jewish can be enriched by intensive contact with Israelis struggling with the same issues, or whether the two communities must go their separate ways. So far only small numbers of American Jews and Israelis have addressed these deeper issues together.


215. "I consider the case of the Jewish diaspora and its links to Israel to be an archetypical rather than idiosyncratic one. This case provides a fully developed paradigm of relations between diaspora and homeland." Shain, Kinship and Diasporas, p. 161, n. 1.
Third, American Jews will have to think through how their own culture will intersect with Israel’s. Until now, Israel’s cultural influence has come almost via osmosis, in a largely unreflective fashion. Will American Jewish cultural leaders give priority to teaching the Hebrew language as a Jewish lingua franca, or at least as the indispensable key to Jewish literacy? Will they create a far more purposeful, self-conscious cultural interaction? Will Jewish intellectuals in the U.S. open a dialogue with their Israeli counterparts not only about geopolitics, but also about deeper questions of Jewish culture and values?

Fourth, American Jews will have to puzzle out the goals and direction of Israel education in their schools. What do they want their children to learn about Israel, and toward what ends? And now that trips to Israel have come to be seen as an essential vehicle to strengthen American Jewish identity, will the organizers of such programs give more thought to what they want “pilgrim tourists” to take away from these trips about Israel, Judaism, and Jewish identification?

Fifth, how will American Jews address the considerable psychological divide between themselves and Israeli Jews? Each Jewish community has developed distinctive ways to relate to such concepts as family, land, responsibility to fellow Jews, philanthropy, and pluralism.216 Can these differences in outlook be bridged? Will the two communities even want to learn from and with each other?

Sixth, and most globally, as the nature of Jewish identity is re-defined by succeeding generations of American Jews, how will they fit Israel into their emerging conceptions? Will the new social networking and Web-based technologies encourage stronger connections and more common ventures with Israelis, or will they drive these communities further apart?

With varying degrees of intensity, Israel has been a prime concern for those American Jews who have identified with some aspect of organized Jewish life over the past 60 years, and that is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Until now, American Jews have peered at Israel through a metaphorical kaleidoscope.

216 This is the subject of Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman’s book, Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences (New Haven, 1990).
Looking into the view-finder from the literal and psychological distance of America’s shores, they have selectively seen shards of Israeli life. The colorful pieces of Israel they have noticed are far from the total reality; at best, they reflect only a partial set of images. Over time, moreover, their focus has changed: American Jews once were most proud of Israel’s pioneering spirit and its creation of a haven of refuge for downtrodden coreligionists; later they most admired Israel’s military might and its kibbutzim; and more recently they have focused on its technological prowess and scientific research. At different times, Israel symbolized very different aspects of Jewish civilization — liberation from exile, David fighting Goliath, Jewish cultural renaissance, concern for fellow Jews, and religious renewal. And alas, at other times it has come to represent, for some, religious intolerance, Goliath fighting the Palestinian David, chauvinism, and arrogance.

Looking through the other side of our figurative kaleidoscope, we see the last six decades of the American Jewish experience in sharper relief. Israel has figured prominently both in the pride of American Jews and their insecurities, their desire, on the one hand, to fit into America, but also, on the other, to express themselves as a distinctive group with its own culture and religion, songs and dances, institutions and leaders, making its mark on the international stage. American Jews have borrowed freely from Israeli forms in order to reconstruct their own culture. Israel has provided American Jews the opportunity to gather en masse in public places to demonstrate solidarity, and also to argue vociferously with each other about the meaning of being Jewish and the central values of Judaism.

Whatever the future may hold, the dynamically evolving and multilayered relationship with Israel has been the most sustained, exhilarating, maddening, controversial, and emotion-laden drama of American Jewish life over the past 60 years. It may also have been the most significant.

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