

"Recent statistics indicate a change in feelings for Israel in the under 35s." How will this affect Israel? What might this mean to the Jewish Diaspora?

In 2007, sociologists Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman conducted a study to assess the degree of attachment to Israel felt by four distinct age brackets of non-Orthodox Jews – those over 65, 50-64, 35-49, and under 35 years. The results of these studies are startling and have raised a wave of panic in Jewish non-Orthodox communities in the Diaspora. The gradients represented by these results show a clear reduction of connection to Israel in young Jews. While 40% of Jews over 65 assert a strong attachment to Israel, only 20% of those under 35 share the sentiment (Weiss, 2007). In order to assess how the change in feelings for Israel in the under 35s is affecting the Diaspora and Israel, we first need to understand why these feelings have changed. I will begin by explaining why feelings toward Israel have drastically transformed since our grandparents' generation to ours, how this is creating factions in the Jewish Diaspora, and why we will have to wait to see how these changing feelings in the Diaspora will affect Israel.

Anti-Semitism

Jews over 65, whom I will from now on refer to as my grandparents' generation, grew up with a different need for Israel than my generation of Jews under 35. My grandparents grew up reading the poetry of Chaim Nachman Bialik, largely about the homicidal pogroms of Eastern Europe; and hearing echoes of Ze'ev Jabotinsky's warnings of pending anti-Semitic doom and the need for Jews to defend themselves. For my grandparents, undoubtedly the most influential factor of all was the Holocaust. The ever-present threat and the reality of anti-Semitism are the reasons why the establishment of the State of Israel was an especially powerful event for my grandparents' generation. Throughout my life, I have heard from my grandparents and their

friends about the importance of Israel in the context of a safe haven for Jews – a place for us and governed by us where we can celebrate our culture and practice our traditions without fear of reprisal. For my grandparents' generation, Israel represents a place where those traditions and cultural practices will live on infinitely. Perhaps more importantly to my grandparents' generation is that Israel is representative of the strength of the Jewish people; a strength that stands in strong juxtaposition to the weak and defenseless profile of Eastern European Jewry. In this way, Israel, to my grandparents' generation, is an answer to the question of how to most effectively respond to and heal from generations of anti-Semitism.

My generation has a very different perspective. Our connection to the state of Israel is not grounded in fear. Due in large part to Israel's existence, we have had the privilege of growing up in a world very different than that of our grandparents – one that is largely free of overt anti-Semitism. Public expression of our Judaism is no longer a liability, and we feel no imminent threat in said expression. We do not have to endure constant warnings regarding our physical safety, nor are respected members of the Jewish community warning us of existential danger - both of which were commonplace for our grandparents. As a result, the fundamental importance of Israel as a place for Jews to openly practice our religious and cultural traditions is a non-issue for my generation. We feel safe living as Jews. This is particularly true in Canada and the United States, where there is a near absence of religious persecution. We are Jews without fear.

Political Differences

An additional explanation as to why my grandparents' generation feels differently about Israel is that the Israel they grew up with is very different from the Israel my generation knows. From 1948 until 1977, when our grandparents were able to form and solidify their opinions about

Israel, it was governed primarily by the socialist, leftist Labor party. The young nation's first thirty years brought five wars including the War of Independence in 1947, Sinai War in 1956, Six Day War in 1967, War of Attrition in 1968, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Israel was not perceived by the Jewish community as the aggressor in a single one of these conflicts. Instead, she was viewed as the underdog that successfully fended off her attackers. As a result, my grandparents' generation has historical precedent to view Israel as a country that – though quite capable of defending herself – is constantly under attack from her neighbours and should use whatever means necessary to defend herself. In 1977, the dawn of my generation of under 35s, the political landscape of Israel changed dramatically when the right-wing Likud party came to power. Five years later, Israel fought the first war for which she was seen as the aggressor – the First Lebanon War. My grandparents' generation, which had lived through thirty years of a left-wing Israel forced to defend herself, saw the First Lebanon War as yet another defensive action against Arab aggression. However, it was my parents' generation's perception of this war that created the ideological split that led to the generationally divergent viewpoints of Diaspora Jews. Until the early 80s, defending Israel through advocacy was an easy task. There was a clear dichotomy of right and wrong: Israel was right for defending herself, the Arab world was wrong for attacking her unprovoked.

After the First Lebanon War, there were Jews in my parents' generation who saw Israel's actions as inappropriate and not representative of the Israel or the aforementioned dichotomy that they had come to know. This generation of Jews raised a new generation of similarly minded Jews - Zionist but openly critical of Israel when they did not agree with her actions. These Jews – both of my parents' generation and my generation of under 35s - do not feel part of the mainstream pro-Israel community. Many feel pressure to choose either a liberal or Zionist

identity, and do not see the two as reconcilable. As a result, there are many Jews under 35 who are abandoning their critical, though still pro-Israel ideology in favour of a liberal identity. Fortunately for Israel, we are now witnessing the formation of liberal pro-Israel advocacy groups that are attractive to these “lost Jews.” I will address these groups and their impact on the Jewish Diaspora later in this essay.

Simultaneously, there were Jews of my parents’ generation who felt that Israel’s actions were appropriate and necessary as a way to pre-empt an imminent attack. Whether there was evidence of an impending attack or not, the multiplicity of prior conflicts in which Israel had been attacked without provocation were engrained into the collective psyche of many of the Jews of my parents generation. This cohort of Jews raised a generation of Jews with similar ideologies – Zionist, fully in line with, and happy to defend Israel’s policies. It is this group to which the mainstream Jewish community caters. The reason this group feels less of an attachment to Israel does not have to do with the ideological alienation experienced by liberal Zionists; rather it is because of an epidemic of apathy afflicting most under-35s, regardless of heritage.

General Apathy

Globalization and easy access to information have changed the ways in which my generation views and perceives the world. My grandparents’ generation did not have Internet or television in their formative years. They were not bombarded with news, issues, causes, pleas, and heart-wrenching images from all across the globe. Instead, their community news was locally focused and accessed through local newspapers and institutions – both synagogue and school. Their awareness of Israel was acquired from the local Rabbi, or from traveling friends

and family. The relative dearth of information about the happenings of the rest of the world posed no distraction to their attention, energy, and passions—those lay safely aligned with Israel.

Additionally, Jewish communities were much more tightly-knit and there were a few core issues that were considered paramount. Two of these were the importance of marrying Jewish and of raising Jewish children. This was an important way of ensuring Jewish continuity and battling anti-Semitism, earlier established as one of the driving forces behind the Jewish identities of my grandparents' generation. Only 13% of Jewish marriages prior to 1970 were out of the faith ("Njps: rates of," 2001). This figure, when translated, means that the vast majority of Jewish couples were raising Jewish children, who thus were highly likely to be raised in a pro-Israel environment.

In contrast, my generation of under 35s, which is officially referred to as 'Generation Y,' and more sardonically as the 'Apathetic Generation' on the whole, does not generally feel passionately about any specific issue that does not directly affect us (Grow, 2010). We are constantly bombarded with an overwhelming amount of news, information, and causes, to the point where we seldom align ourselves with any issue, for there are simply too many. Traveling to Israel is no longer seen as a priority or special treat. A trip to Europe, Asia, or Australia is perceived as more romantic and desirable. We no longer feel uniquely connected to Israel because we can connect ourselves with any place in the world through the click of a button – we feel more attached to the global community than the Jewish community.

In direct correlation with this lack of connection to Judaism and Israel – and the aforementioned general sense of apathy – is the rise of inter-marriage and assimilation. Since 1996, over 47% of Jewish marriages have been out of the faith ("Njps: rates of," 2001). Studies

also show that households of non-Orthodox Jews under 40 are reporting the lowest levels of affiliation and participation in Jewish institutions in history (Cohen & Kleiman, 2008). This means that the majority of Jews are marrying out of the faith, not affiliating, and are more likely to raise children who are ambivalent towards Israel.

These feelings of apathy, which lead to a lack of connection to Israel and even Judaism, are largely responsible for the shift in feeling toward Israel for the under 35s.

Meaning for Diaspora

It is clear from the discussion above that there are two main issues eroding the Diaspora: feelings of apathy leading to disassociation with the Diaspora Jewish Community and divergent political ideologies leading to factions within that community. It is not enough to recognize the issues, we must consider realistic ways to address them.

General apathy and intermarriage are depleting the Diaspora. The pool from which we draw Jewish Zionists shrinks with every Jew who marries a non-Jew, every Jewish family that does not associate with the Jewish community, and every Jewish family that ignores its inherent connection to Israel. Because my generation of under 35s is the future of the Jewish Diaspora, if we do not take the reins with gusto, we will be responsible for its destruction. It is our job to engage our Jewish peers. We must create programs and organizations that appeal to them and help them understand the dire importance of Israel and of the worldwide Jewish community.

The second and arguably more imperative meaning for the Diaspora is an immediate need to appeal across the gamut of Zionist ideology – from left of liberal to right of conservative. Fortunately, action is already being taken in this direction – there are organizations sprouting up

to provide a voice for all types of Zionists. It is possible that, with regard to feelings toward Israel in the under 35s, we are already seeing a positive shift.

In 2003, Jewish philanthropists in the United States noticed that Jewish university students were not feeling connected to Israel. They hired a Republican pollster to conduct a study. The findings, released in 2010, are arguably more startling than the 2007 study at the root of this essay. It found that these young Jews considered the mainstream pro-Israel Jewish community alienating (Beinart, 2010). They felt that they had no voice in largely secular Zionist lobby powerhouses like CJPAC in Canada and AIPAC in the United States, which align themselves with Israel's policies. Rather, they sought a forum where they could openly discuss and criticize Israel, and collectively express their views as liberal Zionists. In response to these sentiments, J Street was formed. J Street is a largely secular, progressive, Zionist lobby group that represents liberal Zionists in the same way that CJPAC and AIPAC represent their more conservative counterparts.

The act of creating a platform for liberal Zionists is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing in that liberal Zionists have a place where they can express their Zionist leanings, whereas before the creation of J Street they were largely disenfranchised from Israel advocacy. It is a curse because it has laid bare - in an undeniable way - the factions within the Diaspora. Rather than there being one unified Diaspora for Israel, it is possible to pit the politically liberal against the politically conservative in such a way that is apparent to the entire world, which in itself poses a threat to Israel. If we are able to organize an Israel-centred community and engender Israel-advocacy activities that include these differing ideologies, we are more likely to remain unified in support of Israel and perpetuate positive feelings toward Israel in our peers and in our children.

Effect on Israel

Jews under 35 are not primarily responsible for financial support and advocacy of Israel. Due to this fact, it is difficult to definitively assess the effects that my generation's disparate viewpoints are having on Israel's position. It will only be when we become financially and educationally responsible for Israel's Diaspora support (which I predict will occur over the course of the next twenty to thirty years) that we will know the true effects on Israel. Until then, I can only speculate.

If Israel remains low on the priority list for non-Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora, Israel will be negatively affected in the long term. Fewer Jews will visit or move there, negatively affecting tourism and the economy. More importantly, though, the connections between Diaspora Jews and their Israeli counterparts will erode beyond repair. There will be fewer Jews advocating for Israel in their hometowns, on their campuses, and we will be more likely to see Canadian politicians elected who do not consider political and financial support of Israel a priority. These Jews, in turn, will raise a generation of further disassociated Jews and the negative cycle will continue and strengthen. Alternatively, if we are able to engage unaffiliated and dissociating Jews, there could be very advantageous effects for Israel – increased tourism, more friendships and stronger relationships between Diaspora and Israeli Jews, increased *aliyah*, more political advocacy, and continued financial support.

If the Jewish community ignores differing political views with regard to Israel, then educated, pro-Israel Jews will disengage from advocacy and financial support of Israel. I believe that the effects will be very similar to what will occur if Jews remain apathetic to Israel – except that in this case it will be groups of Jews that feel isolated from the Jewish community because

of their Zionist ideology. The creation of pro-Israel groups for a wide range of political voices, though, lessens the probability of diminished advocacy and financial support for Israel. Instead, we are likely to see a range of support for Israel – the financial support, advocacy, and political reinforcement we currently see in the established channels. Additionally, as support comes from those with a more liberal standpoint, it is more likely that there will be engagement with Palestinians who have similar liberal leanings. More importantly, though, is that if more pro-Israel groups come into existence, and if these groups cater to a wide range of Zionist voices, our children will have a place to express their Zionism. As such, they will be more likely to offer financial and political support to Israel when they come of age and the torch passes to them to assume responsibility for support of Israel in the Diaspora.

Though the findings of the 2007 study are startling, there is reason to be hopeful for my generation of Jews under 35. Those of us with strong Jewish and Zionist identities remain dedicated to the Diaspora and to Israel. Movements are already in place to attract Jews susceptible to disassociation and to invigorate their Jewish and Zionist identities. Birthright Israel, which was founded in 2000, has been praised for jump-starting Jewish and Zionist identities in 18-26 year olds (Saxe et al, 2001). Since 2007, over 20,000 Jews annually have visited Israel through Birthright (“Richest US Jew,” 2007). These Jews – who had not had the opportunity to visit Israel on an organized trip prior to Birthright – were transformed. They became excited about Israel, and eager to locate an outlet for their passion and vigor (Saxe et al, 2001).

In every generation, the Jewish people have feared destruction. The difference between past generations and mine is that the fears were external. For the first time in our history, in a very real way, we are facing this threat from within. It is upon us, as it was in past generations, to

guard and preserve our identities and to pass the torch to the generations that come after us. The 20 percent of under 35s with strong Jewish and Zionist identities have the torch. It is up to us to reach out and transform apathy into activism for the sake of the Diaspora and Israel.

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