

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?

After the founding of the State of Israel, the Polish-Israeli poet Natan Alterman penned the haunting legacy of Israel's fallen soldiers: "We are the silver platter upon which the Jewish state was given to you." But silver does not gleam indefinitely; without polishing, it will tarnish. Likewise, the State of Israel, vulnerable despite her many accomplishments, needs the active and continued political, financial and spiritual support of world Jewry to maintain herself as a vibrant Jewish democracy. North American Jewry in particular has been instrumental in lobbying and fundraising on behalf of Israel; in turn, Israel has served as a unifying religious and national focal point in the education and personal experiences of many—if not a majority of—Jews. However, recent research indicates that feelings of attachment to Israel decline with each subsequent generation, and that attachment to Israel is lowest among Jews who are under the age of 35. Over the upcoming decades, it is this age group that will be responsible for supporting Israel if/when she needs it, as well as for maintaining Judaism, bridging Jewish communities and raising the next generation of Jewish children. The main consequence of failure, God forbid, may include grave threats to Israel's security. The most promising course of action for North American and Israeli Jews may be to develop new, vibrant, education-based initiatives for children, young adults and college students, as well as to continue and strengthen Birthright-Israel programs.

One of the most prominent recent studies investigating North American Jewry's attachment to Israel is Professors Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman's 2007 paper,

“Beyond Distancing.” This study, based on 1704 responses from non-Orthodox American Jews, found that attachment to Israel among Jews decreases with each generation, with Jews under 35 years old the least attached to Israel of any group.¹ The study provided a number of important observations². Degree of attachment to Israel was unrelated to participants’ political orientation, but it was related to intermarriage; intermarried Jews were most likely to be alienated from Israel, which the study defined as never feeling proud of Israel, and/or feeling no attachment whatsoever. However, a trip to Israel dramatically increases feelings of attachment. Older Jews, however, who have memories of the State of Israel’s founding and its subsequent wars for survival, do not have that same need to visit Israel in order to feel attached to it. While the majority of Jews—around sixty percent—do harbor positive feelings about Israel, the decline of attachment with each subsequent generation, say the study’s authors, indicates that the trend is expected to continue.

I would identify two aspects of change in feeling towards Israel among today’s young generation. The first is indifference—simply a lack of connection. As Cohen and Kelman show, there is a correlation of indifference to Israel with intermarriage. I would suggest what underlies intermarriage compounded with a lack of connection to Israel is lack of connection to Judaism. Other Jews do care about their Judaism, but are content in their own Diaspora communities, and are complacent in their attitude towards Israel, which they see as separate from themselves. Sometimes, complacency not only breeds a gulf between the two largest Jewish communities in the world, but also creates a vacuum

¹ Cohen and Kelman, p. 6. Responses of the 124 Orthodox participants were excluded, and the authors note that Orthodox attachment to Israel has remained consistently high.

² Ibid., p. 20-21.

that, in certain conditions and in certain individuals, may be filled by anti-Israel zeitgeist, the second aspect of attitudinal change. The complacent contingent, meanwhile, stands silently by.

As can be seen all over the Jewish and non-Jewish media, some young Jews are increasingly being won over by the arguments of the political left, harsh critics of Israel, and even, in some cases, outright anti-Israel factions. The new, leftist Jewish lobby group on the American political scene, the self-proclaimed “pro-Israel, pro-peace” J Street, has been the subject of recent controversy and concern. For example, J Street publicly opposed the United States’ February 2011 veto of a United Nations resolution that would condemn all Israeli settlement construction in Judea and Samaria. This stance earned criticism from the Israeli government, though some MKs, whilst criticizing J Street’s position, voiced their intention to continue trying to work with the new lobby³. At the most recent J Street Conference, which boasted 500 participating college students, some audience members were startled to hear the room cheer when an Egyptian journalist speaker proclaimed, ““The hatred against Israel will not end” from Egypt until the Palestinians have freedom⁴.” While Ben Sales, a concerned observer, wrote that he believes most J Streeters are indeed pro-Israel, he correctly noted that in order to be pro-peace, one must be anti-hatred of all kinds.

When they wrote in the year 2000⁵, Cohen and Liebman believed that the network of North American philanthropic and political support (the “Mobilization Model”) was heading towards obsolescence, based on official Israeli comments in the

³ Hoffman.

⁴ Sales.

⁵ Cohen and Liebman in Gal and Gottschalk, eds., p. 3-24.

1990s. However, as Steven Bayme pointed out, there was no guarantee that North American Jewry would not once again be needed to rally political and monetary support⁶. One intifada and two wars later, Iran publicly threatens to wipe Israel off the map, and several countries in the Middle East have been plunged into revolution. Israel's security seems precarious indeed. There is no guarantee that the peace treaty with Egypt will hold, nor that Jordan, another peace partner, will not fall; those borders are now somewhat insecure. Lebanon and Syria to the north are Hezbollah terror strongholds, supported by Iran. Israel withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip in 2005, only for Gaza to be taken over by Hamas and become a hotbed of terrorist activity. Israel cannot afford for the same thing to happen in Judea and Samaria. For one thing, the strip of land between Netanya and the West Bank is just 15 km long—perilously thin if the West Bank becomes an enemy territory, as a Hamas victory would undoubtedly turn it. And, as the release of the Palestine Papers recently revealed, the Palestinian Authority is well aware that any future peace deal would include the incorporation of certain settlement blocs—including those in East Jerusalem—into Israel. By publicly opposing U.S. support of Israel at the U.N., and instead encouraging a more J Street-ified indictment of Israeli policy on the world stage, J Street undermines and compromises Israel's future security needs. And despite all this, J Street and its members self-identify as pro-Israel. If this is the new, young face of Israel support, then the future of North American-Israeli political relations hardly looks friendly. If American Jews do not support Israel, why should the U.S.? Thankfully, Israel does have a friend in Canada, particularly in Prime Minister Stephen Harper, but Canada too was ostracized when it stuck to its principles and

⁶ Bayme in *ibid.*, p. 25-35.

defended Israel during Operation Cast Lead. And Canada, unfortunately, does not possess veto power at the United Nations.

The existential dangers associated with the reckless attitude of the new left are dire. Under Jewish-sanctioned international pressure, Israel could well be squeezed into relinquishing control of the territories, which would embrace the revolutionary climate of the rest of the Middle East. Controlled by terrorists, guerilla warfare and rocket fire would be unleashed upon Israel from Gaza, the new Palestine and whichever other states decide to join in the attacks. Faced with this situation, I believe that North American Jewry would once again rally in defense of Israel, but by then it might be too late to recover the security Israel once enjoyed. This would affect the lives of Israeli citizens—Jewish and Arab alike—in obvious ways; their physical security would be at risk and their economy would take the boot from lack of tourism and heightened defense spending.

An endangered Israel would also affect Diaspora Jewry. I remember how, during the recent intifada, many potential tourists were afraid to travel to Israel. Traveling to Israel positively influences people's Jewish identity (as I describe below), and so decreased travel to Israel would deprive Diaspora Jews of experiencing that vital Jewish connection. This scenario, of course, assumes that Israel would survive a crushing political and terror onslaught. For even though the modern State of Israel has been described hopefully in several denominations' *siddurim* as "*reishith ze'mihath ge'ulatheinu*" ("the beginning of the flowering of our redemption"), in reality there is no guarantee that this experiment in national autonomy will indeed turn out to be the final redemption many Jews pray it will be. I believe (though I hope that this would not be the

case) that were the State of Israel—not to speak of its population—destroyed, a significant number of Jews would feel distraught to the point of abandoning Judaism altogether. The destruction of Israel would also usher in a new, all-too-familiar era of precariousness for world Jewry. As Jews, we cannot know what the future will bring; but our nation does know first-hand the horrors than can happen to a people without a home of their own.

I am inclined to wonder whether the rising generation’s detachment from Israel and/or its inclination to be critical of Israel stems from the virulently anti-Israel atmosphere that has sprouted on many university campuses and among high-positioned academics over the past few decades⁷. Alexander and Bogdanor show how the young anti-Israel activists of the 1960s and 70s became professors and Middle Eastern Studies department heads of the 21st century. Israeli Apartheid Week, now in its seventh year, seeks to damage Israel through sanctions and slander, comparing the democratic state to apartheid South Africa. Sherwood Park MP Tim Uppal has introduced a bill in Ottawa condemning Israeli Apartheid Week as cloaked anti-Semitism⁸. This is a valiant goal, though one that will—and already has been—met with hostility from detractors, who say that it devalues free speech⁹. Unless the bill passes—or, perhaps, even if it does—Jewish activists who care about Israel should organize and create events to counteract the harmful message of Israeli Apartheid Week. More versions of the already-tried “Israeli Culture Week” could present Israel in a positive light. Pro-Israel law school societies could be formed to publicly reenact famous Israeli court cases, with the aim of

⁷ See Alexander and Bogdanor.

⁸ Griwkowsky.

⁹ For example, see reposting of MP Libby Davies’ rebuke: <http://canadian-firebrand.blogspot.com/2010/03/tim-uppals-anti-israeli-apartheid-week.html>

showcasing the freedom-fostering Israeli democratic process. Pro-Israel organizations, including students, could put together a “Great Israeli Science Fair,” open to all, to show off the tremendous accomplishments of Israel’s medical and technological research. Pro-Israel artists—especially screenwriters and playwrights—should do their part, as they did to further Holocaust education, by creating culture that highlights Israel’s intellectual, artistic and humanitarian achievements¹⁰.

We must also make sure that we provide sufficient Israel education to Jewish children. Nowadays, even Jewish day school students who are inclined to identify as pro-Israel critically question the Israel education they are been given in school. They wonder, legitimately, whether they are learning the complete story¹¹. According to Rosenblatt’s interviewees, this attitude may stem from a broader mistrust about what adults teach them. Regardless of the reason for these teenage wonderings, it is clear that young people are thinking about the Jewish state with increasingly critical minds. Rosenblatt, based in the New York-New Jersey area, researched different suggestions about what to do about Israel education: more school courses on Modern Israel, exposure to Israel itself as early as possible, and bringing in Israelis with multiple viewpoints, so that students feel comfortable that they are gaining multiple perspectives. From personal experience, I believe these suggestions would be very effective for American and Canadian schools that don’t already run such programs. During my elementary school years at the Edmonton Talmud Torah, we were taught by Israeli teachers, conducted research about Israel and Israeli heroes as early as grade four and had Israeli pen pals in grade six. We

¹⁰ An example of combining science and art that promotes Israel: a cutting-edge, artificial walking device for paraplegics developed in Israel was featured on the 2010 Christmas episode of the Fox television show “Glee.”

¹¹ Rosenblatt.

learned Israeli dances and songs, and watched clips of Israeli children's shows. I currently teach grade ones at a Conservative Hebrew School, and my students are enthralled by stories about Israel and pictures of important religious landmarks. But, in this day and age, culture may not be enough in the long run; history and Israel advocacy education must start at a young age so that when Jewish children mature into Jewish young adults, they are able to pursue their education and careers while facing a climate of increasingly anti-Israel sentiment and feeling confident that they have the tools to defend Israel. Without this ability, Jewish young people may end up feeling shame about the Jewish state instead of due pride. Meanwhile, Jewish organizations should actively encourage Jewish students who are attached to Israel and who are active in Israel advocacy groups such as Hasbara to pursue careers in academia. Maybe in this way the anti-Israel tide in universities will turn over the next few decades.

Another way to reduce complacency, according to Cohen and Kelman, is to bring Jews to Israel, which tremendously increases their likelihood of developing an attachment to the country. Another study, "Generation Birthright Israel," found that the free, 10-day Birthright Israel trips positively reinforce participants' Jewish identity. After such trips, which began in the year 2000, participants are more likely to feel part of the Jewish people and to marry other Jews¹². This year, J Street attempted to launch its own Birthright trip, but was rejected by Birthright¹³. Steven M. Cohen opined that young people want to rally around a cause, and that Israel trips are so reinforcing for Jewish identity that it was actually a big mistake for Birthright to reject a J Street Birthright

¹² Saxe, p. 5-7.

¹³ Shefler.

trip¹⁴. I remain torn about Birthright's decision in this case, as I understand both Cohen's argument and also why Birthright would not want to give a platform to an organization seen as achieving results that harm Israel. But incorporating what Cohen says about the role of attractive causes would be a very worthwhile thing. Perhaps Birthright should try to incorporate even more trip options than they already have, focusing on popular social justice issues and other subjects of interest to participants. There could be medicine-based trips, teaching-based trips, trips where participants work with refugees from Darfur and other parts of Africa, archaeological trips, etc. The possibilities for Birthright are seemingly endless.

It may comfort highly attached Jews to know that this is not the first generation in which young Jews have seemed to be worryingly drifting away from specifically Jewish attachment and activism. In *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry*, Gal Beckerman argues that the 1960s era was one in which masses of young Jews were drawn to universal ideals and goals in the spirit of Judaism, such as the Civil Rights Movement, but were becoming increasingly detached from a particularly Jewish identity. The struggle to save Soviet Jewry, argues Beckerman, changed all that. Confronted with the Soviet Union's ingrained anti-Semitism and quest to suppress its citizens' Judaism, American Jewry rallied to save the spiritual lives of Soviet Jewry. Beckerman writes that this accomplishment helped Jews find their collective voice after failing to save European Jewry from the Holocaust inferno.¹⁵

Even though we may disagree with each other over religion, politics and other matters, I believe that the Jewish people ultimately care deeply about one another and

¹⁴ "BJP Archive", *Youtube*.

¹⁵ Beckerman, p. 5-9.

will unite when it is needed. Unfortunately, it is often easier to unite in times of distress than during years of plenty. In times of relative peace and stability like the present, we must act like our forefather Joseph, who prepared for the seven years of famine by stockpiling food during seven years of abundance. We must constantly be working to strengthen the Jewish people's connection to Israel and Judaism, in which the Land of Israel plays an integral role—it is, after all, because of our Jewish heritage and history that our homeland was reborn in Israel, where we originated, and not Uganda. For Jews, Israel must not become just any other country in the world. Not only is Israel Judaism's spiritual center, but, whether or not Diaspora Jews feel comfortable admitting it, Israel is our life saver should our freedom and security as Jews ever be jeopardized (which I hope will not be the case). But, of course, it's not just about preserving the security of the Diaspora. Unlike the vast majority of Diaspora Jewry, Israelis have sent their children, siblings, fathers, to serve in the Israeli army. The Jewish blood spilled since 1945 by the enemies of the Jews has all been that of Israelis defending their country against aggressors. Israelis have earned the right to live and prosper in Israel, and we, Diaspora Jewry, must ensure that we do our part to assert and maintain that right.

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