The Ruderman Program for American Jewish Studies

Israel - a Unifying or a Divisive Issue among American Jews?

by **Alon Pinkas**

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The Ruderman Program for American Jewish Studies is a unique and groundbreaking academic program established in 2013 at the University of Haifa. The Ruderman Program covers a wide range of issues pertaining to Jewish life in the United States, American society and the long-lasting and important bond between the American Jewish community, the State of Israel and Israeli society. The main goal of the program is to strengthen the relationship between Israeli society and American Jewry, by expanding current knowledge, distributing it, and creating a well-founded educated community to act in academia and Israeli professional fields. The Ruderman Program has two branches: one is a multidisciplinary and comprehensive MA studies program; and the second is promoting research on American Jewry, past and present, and creating a knowledge base for decision makers, opinion leaders, policy makers, professionals and for all those who take part in public discourse in Israel.

The second research paper published by the Ruderman Program was written by Alon Pinkas, former Consul General of Israel in New York City. His article, ***Israel - a Unifying or a Divisive Issue among American Jews?***, examines the status of Israel among American Jewry since the establishment of the State of Israel until today. Pinkas attempts to answer a series of questions concerning the complex and ambivalent relationship between the two largest Jewish communities in the world – What place does Israel hold in American Jewry's consciousness? Has the relationship with the State of Israel strengthened or weakened over the years? What is American Jewry's attitude towards Zionism and what have been the turning points in their attitude towards Israel?

If we look at the ambivalent relationship between American Jewry and Israel from a historical perspective, there are two notable insights: the first is that Diaspora Jews' assistance to Israel and to Israeli society is the largest and most impressive philanthropic enterprise in the history of nations. It is doubtful whether the Zionist movement would have accomplished its impressive achievements and succeeded in establishing a State for the Jewish people in Israel, without the help of Diaspora Jews and American Jews in particular. The second insight is that each time the State of Israel cooperated with world Jewry (rather than disregarding it) both sides benefited considerably from their relationship.

The dangers inherent in American Jewry's distancing from Israeli society are crucially important for Israel's future. The State of Israel makes decisions relating to Diaspora Jews and American Jewry in particular without taking into account their position on the matter. Decisions like these create tensions and divisions within the Jewish community, and may alienate American Jews from Israel and Israeli society. This situation harms both American Jewry and Israel. Hopefully, the present research paper will deepen awareness as to the importance of the relationship between American Jewry, Israel and Israeli society.

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Alon Pinkas – Biography

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During a diplomatic and political career from 1991-2004, he was a member of the U.S. -Israel Strategic Policy Planning Group, headed by President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Ehud Barak. A member of the Israel-Syria peace negotiating process 1999-2000, the Israel-UN negotiating team on withdrawal from Lebanon and border demarcation in 2000 and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process negotiations 1999-2001.

Since then, a consultant and adviser to Tigris Financial Group, BSGR and Cycurity specializing in strategic planning, crisis management and business diplomacy. Particularly in Israel and the United States.

Since leaving government service, he was also on the Boards of Directors of Ormat Industries, Brainstorm Bio-Med Stem Cell research and solutions, BMW Israel and IEI: Israel Energy Initiative.

A graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Georgetown University, Washington DC, he is also a frequent contributor to various international TV outlets, newspapers and think tanks.

Summary Points

- ❒ Israel plays neither a distinctively unifying or patently divisive role in American-Jewish life. It is both, and in equal measure, because different issues affect different sectors and individuals within the American Jewish community.
- ❒ Israel's role and place in the life and perceptions of American Jews has more to do with how they define themselves as a community and as Jews than with how they perceive Israel.
- ❒ A significant majority (Approx. 70%) of American Jews feel "very" or "somewhat" attached to Israel. In this regard, Israel remains a central issue—sometime unifying, sometimes divisive—for them. So there is no doubt that, since 1967, Israel has held a special and unique place in the collective American-Jewish mind.
- ❒ The bond between American Jews and Israel remains strong and their commitment to the country is solid. On some levels and issues, however, the ties are fraying. The recurrent friction and unresolved issues have strained and weakened the links over the last 10 to 20 years and created widening cracks.
- ❒ Israel remains an omnipresent theme in American Jewish life, but with the passage of the generation that remembers 1967 and before, Israel is increasingly losing its centrality in the minds of American Jews under the age of fifty.
- ❒ Before 1948, American Jews occupied a unique situation as the only ethnic and religious group in the United States that had no "homeland" no "old country" to idealize, wax romantic about, and yearn for, as other immigrant groups could. This fact, combined with the Holocaust, is of tremendous importance for understanding the evolution of American Jewish perceptions of and relations with Israel.
- ❒ The State of Israel is not central to Judaism (the opposite may be true), which existed and flourished as a civilization and religion in conditions of statelessness. That is valid and pertinent to the American Jewish experience prior to 1948 and to some extent even after that watershed.
- ❒ The self-image of American Jews, along with their self-perceptions, cosmopolitan approach, and value systems all developed before the birth of Israel. Their cultural development, socialization, and assimilation into American society and culture were their own and had nothing to do with Israel, whether as a place or an idea.
- ❒ Most American Jews were relative late-comers to Zionism and only reluctantly embraced and supported the idea and political movement. Well into the 1930s, most American Jews were outright hostile to the idea of Zionism, which they saw as a form of socialism alien to their attempt to assimilate in America. They saw no compelling reason to support the ideology before 1948.
- ❒ Zionism places Israel at the center of contemporary Jewish identity. This was rarely the case with American Jews. Naturally, then, the relationship between American Jews and Israel was somewhat ambivalent in its first two decades, 1948 to 1967.
- ❒ Descriptions of the relationship as one of close affinity, or an ongoing and ever-evolving love affair and close affinity, are a form of convenient amnesia in the best case, or selective rewriting of history in the worst.
- ❒ 1967 was a watershed year for the relationship and American Jews' view of Israel. Haunted by guilt for their failure to influence U.S. policy during the Second World War, American Jews now experienced another existential alarm: the weeks before the Six Day War, when Israel's survival was perceived as

hanging by a thread. The “miracle” of the resounding military victory, against the background of the Cold War and Soviet support for Egypt and Syria, drew American Jews much closer to Israel.

- ❒ Concurrently, American Jews’ increasingly deep involvement and integration into American politics turned Israel into a major rallying cry.
- ❒ The events of 1967 transformed Israel into what might be described as a "Secular religion" encompassing the entire mainstream Jewish establishment. It led to the emergence of a new slogan: “We Are One.” Used as a call for action and sales pitch to solicit contributions and commitment to organizations and projects, it also had a major substantive consequence—turning Israel into *the* unifying cause and almost the *raison d’être* of all the organizations and their activities.
- ❒ Today, however, as numerous surveys have shown, Israel is not among the top five issues that influence American Jewish voting patterns in U.S. elections. Israel-related and pro-Israel activities, organizations, projects, and rallies proliferate, but American Jews tend to cast their ballots on the basis of other considerations. Their concerns are specifically American; their lively involvement and participation in American politics is not usually motivated by Israel-driven causes.
- ❒ The emergence of the “unique,” “special,” “unshakable” relationship and strategic alliance between Israel and the United States, starting in the late-1960s, consolidated Israel’s centrality in organizational and intellectual American Jewish life, but also produced friction.
- ❒ The bilateral alliance plays a two-edged role. On the one hand, as long as Israel and the United States maintain their alliance and special relationship, Israel will *ipso facto* be central to Jewish organizations, groups, and individuals. In fact, the strength and political viability of the relationship tends to be taken for granted, even as the occasional divergence of interests and controversial Israeli policies are more freely scrutinized by segments in the American Jewish community.
- ❒ “Dual loyalty” is an antisemitic canard hurled at American Jews for their supposed preference of Israeli interests over American, stemming from a peculiar relationship that other ethnic groups do not have with their “other homeland.” The issue is generally kept under wraps but somehow always lurks, and certainly since the Pollard Affair of 1985. It is relevant here only insofar as it contributes to an understanding of how American Jewish views of Israel are in turn seen by some Americans (both true antisemites and others).
- ❒ There are four broad reasons for the growing divide between American Jews and Israel: historical (post-1967), cultural (diverging societal development), religious (the treatment of Reform and Conservative Jews), and political (“liberal” American Jews vs. “colonialist” Israel.)
- ❒ But there is also is a fifth and overriding explanation for the disconnect: normalization. This means normalization of the recognition that Israel is strong and powerful and not facing an existential threat; normalization of the relations between Israel and the United States; and the normalization, in the social, cultural, and political domains, of Jewish life in America.

Introduction

"We are one!" - But are we one?

Late one Saturday morning, at the end of Shabbat services, Marvin Cohen goes over to the rabbi of his Conservative synagogue in suburban Miami–Dade County.

“I need to talk to you on an urgent matter,” says Cohen.

“With pleasure,” replies the rabbi immediately. “Let’s go into my office.”

“You look really down and beat,” comments the rabbi.

“Yeah, well, here’s the thing,” Cohen begins. “You remember my beloved wife, my soul mate, my pride and joy, my dearest Barbara who passed away last year?”

“Of course.” The rabbi nods slowly. “A terrific lady. We all miss her terribly. People from the community come up to me all the time and sing her praises. She is terribly missed my friend, great loss.”

“Anyway,” Cohen continues, “shortly after she passed away I got a goldfish, Freddie.”

“Yes,” the Rabbi mumbles, “I remember your telling me.”

“So this goldfish, Freddie, became my best friend. I’d feed him, clean his bowl. He would be the last thing I saw before falling asleep and the first thing greeting me as I opened my eyes in the morning. Never complained, always seemed happy to see me.”

“That is moving, Mr. Cohen,” says the misty-eyed rabbi.

“Anyway, Rabbi, the fish died last night, and I want you to say *kaddish* for him.”

“Mr. Cohen,” the rabbi feels his way slowly. “With the utmost respect and friendship, this cannot be done. *Kaddish* is an important thing, a very meaningful prayer. I take it very seriously. Can you imagine the hell that would break loose if I start saying *kaddish* for every congregant’s pet?”

“I don’t think you get it, Rabbi,” Cohen retorted in irritation. “When you needed $50,000 for the new library, you came to me. When you needed $20,000 to fix the leaking roof, I never asked questions. I now understand you need $100,000 for a swimming pool at the JCC. Correct?”

“Yes, Mr. Cohen, you were always there for us. I’ll tell you what, I’ll do better than a *kaddish*: Next Shabbos I’ll say a few things about him in my weekly sermon. People tune in to that.”

The next week the rabbi delivers his sermon as promised.

After he finishes, he sees Cohen sobbing inconsolably in the front row. He approaches him.

“Mr. Cohen, what’s wrong? I did the best I could and said everything I can about the fish, may he rest in peace. I hope everything is okay?”

“Oh, Rabbi,” a tearful Cohen replies. “I know. It was beautiful. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. He was my closest friend and I loved him dearly.”

“So what’s the problem?” asks the perplexed rabbi.

“You see, you think you know someone well, Rabbi, but I was amazed. I had no idea Freddie did so much for Israel.”

* * *

Until 1948, American Jews were unique among all the groups of immigrants who arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries and took their place in the American mosaic. To begin with, Judaism is a peculiar combination of religion, ethnicity, and nationality, a threesome that for many centuries formed a civilization with many subcultures, streams, and political, intellectual, and geographical centers. But what made American Jews stand out was the fact that they were the only ethnic and religious group that had no homeland, no "old country" they could reminisce about, romanticize, and share collective memories about.

Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Polish-Americans, Cuban-Americans, or German-Americans all had their old country. Their emigration from their ancestral country to America was motivated by their hope of a better life. But Jews did not emigrate—they fled. They left behind Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Russia, or Germany and never looked back. Ironically, the one category of Americans who shared this distinction was one of the oldest groups in America: the African Americans who were brought their forcibly and sold as slaves.

Therefore, any discussion of American Jews' feelings towards, relations with, and perceptions of Israel must begin with this critical historical fact in mind: American Jews were in America and began their assimilation and acculturation into American society (far from complete or equal at the time) many years before Israel was established in 1948.

Zionism was there, as an idea, an ideology, and political strategy, as objective and action plan, but American Jews evinced little if any intellectual or political enthusiasm for it. Their state of mind was that of an immigrant group and individuals doing everything in their power to Americanize themselves. They had no appetite for the alien notion of certain Russian and Polish socialists who, based on central European liberal and nationalist writings about the advantages of the nation state. Zionism proposed to "normalize" Jewish life and redeem the downtrodden Jews. Those who had already reached the New World thought that America offered the same thing, and with much better prospects.

Those who inquired learned that Zionism was intent on returning the Jews to an undeveloped desert, without natural resources, no housing or transportation infrastructure and no jobs. To add to these "attractions," the biblical and ancestral homeland was inhabited by Arabs and controlled by the Ottomans and then the British. How could that be better than New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago? Why would a Polish Jew living in the tenements of the Lower East Side and focused on making a living be interested in "going back" to redeem and reclaim ownership of a land which the Jews had lost control of eighteen centuries before, in the first and second centuries AD.

American Jews wanted to become Americans. They dreamt of joining the greatest nation on earth, of being part of the American dream and living in the land of endless opportunity, where any native-born citizen can become president. Zionism was an inherently alien and unattractive concept. Then a historical horror, the worst genocide in history, changed everything and shook Jewish confidence to the core.

And along came Israel.

If American Jewish relations with Israel were plotted on a graph (which would do their complexity much injustice), the various phases along the timeline would look something like this:

Disinterest and mild jubilation (1947-1949) **>** *Indifference (1949-1967)* **>** *Transformative anxiety and adulation (1967)* **>** *A romantic crush (1967-1977)* **>** *Identification to the point of institutionalization of Israel as a major theme in organized Jewish life in America (1977-1984)* **>** *The appearance of real but still suppressed cracks: the 1982 Lebanon War, the 1985 Pollard affair and its aftermath, the "Who is a Jew" imbroglio in Israel (1982/3-1985)* **>** *Inertia: Routine support against the background of the consolidation of the US-Israel alliance (1986-1994)* **>** *Critical silence and occasional public disagreements (1995-2009)* **>** *Visible signs of mutual disassociation on several issues and among several demographics (2009-present).*

This of course is a very broad-brush picture, omitting numerous details, nuances, mini-crises, and ad-hoc issues. The time periods are event-driven rather than clear watersheds.

But the sequence is clear: from indifference to mild support, then love that turned to tender but strong criticism, and now partial disassociation—not a rift, not a conflict, far from a deep and dramatic crisis, but an ominous detachment nonetheless.

More importantly, there are three overarching items that such a timeline cannot capture: First, who (and what) are "American Jews"? When we talk of "support" or "disaffection," and when we analyze general tendencies, do we necessarily and conveniently mean only the establishment and organizations? Are "professional Jews" and active members of organizations representative of a community of some 5.3 million? Was the love affair with Israel a natural evolution that metamorphosed into a (legitimate) agenda that is now in the state of inertia, arguably causing a disconnect with the majority of uninvolved or less concerned American Jews? The establishment is concrete: federations, JCCs, offices, CEOs, boards, addresses, conferences, missions to Israel, fundraising events. It is vocal, public, and politically active, and its activities are amenable to quantification and research.

The second point is the evolution of the relationship between the United States and Israel, which developed almost exponentially after 1967 and became a central theme of American Jewish-Israeli relations. The existential threat to Israel in May-June 1967 was resolved by an astonishing and game-changing military victory in the Six Day War. Against the background of the Cold War, containment of Soviet expansionism, regional alliances, and the Vietnam War, the United States and Israel forged an almost unnatural - in terms of core US geopolitical interests - but deep and durable military relationship that quickly developed into a diplomatic alliance. The United States became Israel staunchest ally and a central pillar of Israel's national security.

Simultaneously, the moral foundations of the alliance were being built, primarily by American Jews intent on strengthening, deepening, and further consolidating the relationship. Naturally, this became a major theme of American Jewish commitment to and identification with Israel. Biblical values, Zionists in the Negev, Puritans in Massachusetts, two young democracies on a mission to set a lasting example for humanity. Almost every American or Israeli politician and diplomat for the last forty years has proclaimed that the relations between the two countries are "unshakeable." For many American Jews, "We are One" applied not only to their own relations with Israel but to US-Israeli ties as well.

But when this relationship began to exhibit strains, and in the last seven to eight years more frequently than before (for a multitude of causes and reasons to be elaborated below), so did the American Jewish relationship with Israel.

The third point is that a much broader phenomenon is at play here. American Jewish support for and perceptions of Israel are historically as much an internal identity issue, related to how American Jews see themselves and how they developed as a community, as they are about Israel and its relative importance in their lives, as individuals and as a community. Any serious discussion of "American Jews and Israel" must take this into account. As Steven Rosenthal put it: "Any attempt to understand this transformation must also examine the larger story upon which it is based—the evolution of Jewish identity in both America and Israel" (Rosenthal, 2001, p. XII).

In this respect, the American Jewish community and Israel have undergone significant societal changes that affect mutual perceptions and shape the relationship in fundamental ways. In short, American Jews and Israel are moving in different directions, and perhaps increasingly so; but these are different paths, not a collision course, as some critics and detractors would have it.

Yes, we are "one" but more and more not the same one.

Israel as Part of the American-Jewish Identity

American Jews were never Zionists. They were Jews who came to America to become American. It was in 1584, when the first Jew, a certain Joachim Gans who came to the Roanoke Island colony set foot in North America. The small community during revolutionary America was home to the 1700 Dutch-Sephardic Jews, and then the mid-nineteenth century when Charleston, South Carolina, was the largest Jewish community, to the big groups of 2 million Jews who arrived in the immigration waves from Europe between 1880-1914, passed through Ellis Island in pursuit of the American dream in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago.

It was all about being American, about defining what it means to be Jewish in America. Jews had no interest in Zionism. They were an ethnic and religious group, mainly poor immigrant-refugees, often persecuted in Europe, who came to the shores of the New World in search of a better life and a quest to become part of the American melting pot (a term, ironically, invented by the British Jewish Zionist author, Israel Zangwill).

By virtue of their own history, their collective and individual experience, Jews are by nature and almost by definition a "transnational" or "diasporic" people. From roughly 73 AD (CE) to 1948, that was the existential state of the Jewish people. The "State of the Jewish people" was, simply, statelessness. For them, America was a safe haven, the last refuge from the antisemitism, discrimination, and persecution in Europe.

Jews were a small minority among the many groups that together formed the American mosaic. In 1900, three years after the first Zionist Congress, which launched political Zionism, there were some 1.5 million Jews living in the United States, out of a total population of 76 million. By 1948, when Israel became an independent country, there were 4.4 million Jews among the 146 million Americans. Today there are 5.3 to 6 million Jews living in the United States, out of a total population of 325 million.[1] The percentage of Jews remains therefore between 2%-3% of the total US population in the last 100 years.

So if American Jews were indifferent or outright hostile to Zionism, what defined their "Jewishness" in a very Christian yet ostensibly and constitutionally secular country?

Michael Barnett provides a unique perspective in *The Star and the Stripes: Foreign Policies of American Jews*. He traces parts of the American Jewish identity to a deeper set of Judaism's qualities, characteristics, and theological attributes.

A persistent theme in Jewish theology, writes Barnett:

> ...is the tension between particularism and universalism, present throughout the Torah, in sayings, and religious debates. What kind of people are they? Are they a chosen people? Are they *Am Lavadad Yishkon*, a people that dwells alone? Or are they *Or LaGoyim*, a "light unto nations"?
>
> What is their purpose in the world—to maintain their covenant with God or to be a prophetic people and serve humanity? How does their identity relate to their duty to their fellow Jews and others? Should they follow the Talmudic expression *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim*, your city's poor comes first, which advises Jews to tend primarily to their own? Hillel's inspiring words, though, urge

1 The range is due to the fact that there is no single definition of who is an "American Jew." How do you define children of intermarriage? Do you count the 300,000 Israelis living in the United States? Etc.

> Jews to look beyond their own needs: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?" (Barnett, 2016, pp. 5-18)

This, contends Barnett, shaped how American Jews identify with the Jewish people and later with Israel. There is a tension between particularism and inward-looking ethnocentricity, on the one hand, and the universalism and the values underlying the idea of "America."

American Jews, according to Barnett, are living examples of F. Scott Fitzgerald's saying that the "test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function" (Barnett, 2016, p.6).

Fortunately, Fitzgerald was not familiar with David Ben-Gurion, who is supposed to have coined the phrase, "Two Jews, three opinions."

When American Jews talk about Israel they are talking, to a large extent, about their own Jewish identity. Conversations about Israel are rarely just about Israel. They are about "who we are" and what our Jewishness is. At the same time, they are proud Americans on both a communal and individual level. Even among second-, third-, and fourth-generation Americans, Jewish history, Jewish anxieties, and Jewish insecurities are so deeply ingrained that they remain thankful for America's generosity, tolerance, and opportunities. The American way is their way.

The American Jewish establishment initially feared that Jewish nationalism and Zionist activity and lobbying played into the hands of antisemites. Classical antisemitism singled out the Jews as a separate group (religiously and ethnically) who could never live harmoniously with others in their host countries. Zionism supposedly supplied antisemites with an excuse to claim that even in hospitable America Jews were not really blending in. Enter Israel, the ideological and political product of Zionism. Dov Waxman identifies five pillars of the American Jewish relationship with Israel: Familism, Fear, Functionality, Faith, and Fantasy. Steven Cohen, the noted scholar of American Jewish history and sociology, wrote that:

> American Jewish feelings about Israel are dominated by fear far more than hope, by nightmares more than dreams. …
> Harboring a deep sense of victimhood and an abiding fear of persecution, anti-Semitism, real or imagined—whether in Europe, the Middle East, the United States, or elsewhere—is a continual source of anxiety for American Jews, and a constant motivation behind their support for Israel. Since the establishment of the State, American Jews have regarded Israel as a safe haven for persecuted and endangered Jews, especially following the Holocaust. (Quoted by: Waxman, P.28)

Beyond the iconic "So, is it good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?" usually mumbled somewhat impatiently or indignantly after every news story, political event, or statement regarding Israel, there is a set of fundamental questions that American Jews have been asking themselves, collectively and individually, for many years.

- ❒ Yes, I/we care about Israel, but is Israel central to my/our Jewish identity?
- ❒ What kind of relationship should we, as American Jews, have with Israel?

- ❒ Should American Jews support Israel unconditionally? What happens when our inherently American liberal values collide with what we believe are self-defeating or morally problematic Israeli policies?
- ❒ Are there, should there be, and if so what exactly are the limits of public discourse and debate on Israel? What kinds of opinions and arguments can we have publicly without displaying our dirty laundry for everyone to see?
- ❒ Is "Israel, right or wrong" a valid position or some archaic notion irrelevant to the age of instant information readily available from every smartphone everywhere on the planet?

In short, as Waxman puts it, "what loyalty, if any, do Jews owe the Jewish state?" A complex set of beliefs, convictions, and emotions underlines American Jewish support for Israel. The consensus among most scholars highlights one element that is conspicuously missing from this set: Zionist ideology. The American Jewish connection with Israel is emotional, not ideological. "Hence, American Jewish support for Israel is more accurately described as 'pro-Israelism' rather than Zionism" (ibid). Although many and perhaps most American Jews today would describe themselves as Zionists, their "Zionism" is very much superficial, in that the idea of actually moving to Israel, which is a basic tenet of Zionism, is not something they have ever considered seriously. Ben-Gurion observed that: "Most of the people in the diaspora who now call themselves 'Zionists' do not mean in all respects exactly the same thing that was meant by those who coined the term Zionism and by the majority who used the word during the first fifty years of the Zionist movement" (Quoted by Waxman, 2016, p. 28).

Classical Zionism, the idea of "normalizing" Jewish diasporic life through an independent Jewish state, has never had much relevance for American Jews. As Jacob Blaustein, President of the American Jewish Committee, wrote in his famous "exchange of views" with Ben-Gurion in 1950: "American Jews vigorously repudiate any suggestion or implication that they are in exile. American Jews—young and old alike, Zionists and non-Zionists alike—are profoundly attached to America. … To American Jews, America is home." (For the exchange and subsequent "Blaustein-Ben Gurion Agreement" of 1951, See: www.ajcarchives.org). American Jews have evolved in their relations with Israel, but insofar as Israel's being even remotely a formative part of their identity— right before and after independence in 1948— Blaustein's words say it all.

Many Israelis—diplomats, politicians, academics, journalists—can be forgiven for thinking that Israel is *the* defining characteristic and number one issue on the mind of American Jews. Forgiven, because if your entire exposure to American Jewry comes from establishment organizations, AIPAC, local federations, and gala dinners you do get the impression that it is all about Israel and always was.

It was not, and it isn't.

> The American Jewish relationship with Israel has always been in flux. Contrary to the common belief that American Jews have always been strong supporters of Israel, in fact, the extent and intensity of American Jewish support for Israel has significantly fluctuated over time. Not only has American Jewish interest in Israel waxed and waned, but also American Jewish attitudes towards Israel have evolved, broadly speaking, from disinterest, to devotion. (Waxman, 2016, p. 33)

Waxman provides supporting data:

> American Jewish disinterest in Israel in the 1950s and early 1960s was evident in many ways. Only about 10,000 American Jews emigrated to Israel between 1948 and 1967, the amount of money American Jews gave to Israel through the North American Federations' United Jewish Appeal (UJA) steadily declined (from $150 million in 1948 to $60 million in 1955), and membership in American Zionist organizations shrank. Sociological studies of local Jewish communities at the time also revealed how surprisingly little Israel figured in American Jewish life. Thus, in 1957 sociologist Nathan Glazer commented that Israel's founding has "had remarkably slight effects on the inner life of American Jewry." Nor was supporting Israel the most important item on the political agenda of the American Jewish community during this period. (*ibid*, pp. 33-35)

However, as knowledge and news about Israel became more accessible, and Israel's security an increasing concern, the *idea* of Israel —not Israel per se—gradually began to figure more prominently in Jewish identity, at first in an almost philosophical way. The fundamental reason for this lack of interest in Israel, according to Charles Liebman, was that Israel was more of an abstract symbol to American Jews than an actual place. "Israel is the preeminent Jewish symbol," he wrote. "Israel, therefore, is recognized as important less for what it does than for what it is" (Liebman, 1977, p. 48).

With respect to Israel's place in American Jewish identity, it is important to note that since the 1970s Jews in the United States and Israel have developed a strong bond, which led to Israel's creeping into American Jewish minds and self-perceptions. By far the best and most comprehensive study of American Jewish attitudes is the landmark 2013 Pew Research Center survey of American Jews, "A Portrait of American Jews."

Here are some of its major findings:

- ❐ U.S. Jews say they are either very or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel.
- ❐ Being Jewish, according to a majority, is more about culture and ancestry than religion—a finding that should delight some Israelis.

Pew found that caring about Israel was an "essential part of being Jewish" for 53% of Jews 65 and older. By comparison, only 32% of Jews 18 to 29 expressed that same sentiment.

Attachment to Israel

Emotional Attachment to Israel

	Very attached	Some-what attached	Not very attached	Not at all attached	Don't know
	%	%	%	%	%
NET Jewish	30	39	22	9	1=100
Jews by religion	36	40	18	5	1=100
Jews of no religion	12	33	33	22	*=100
Men	33	39	20	8	1=100
Women	28	38	23	10	*=100
Ages 18-49	25	36	28	11	1=100
18-29	25	35	27	11	2=100
30-49	25	36	29	10	*=100
Ages 50+	35	42	16	7	*=100
50-64	32	42	18	7	0=100
65+	38	41	14	7	1=100
College grad+	31	38	23	8	*=100
Post-grad degree	32	37	23	8	*=100
BA/BS	31	38	22	8	*=100
Some college	28	41	22	8	1=100
HS or less	30	38	20	11	1=100
Republican	50	34	13	2	1=100
Democrat	25	40	25	10	*=100
Independent	30	38	21	10	*=100
Orthodox	61	30	4	5	1=100
Ultra-Orthodox	55	31	6	7	1=100
Modern Orthodox	77	22	1	*	1=100
Conservative	47	41	10	2	*=100
Reform	24	46	23	6	*=100
No denomination	16	33	33	18	1=100

Source: Pew Research Center 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews, Feb. 20-June 13, 2013. Q.G2. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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American Jews don't vote on Israel (See: Waxman, 2016; Troy, 2016). Israel was the "most important" voting issue for a mere 4% of respondents in the Public Religion Research Institute's 2012 Jewish Values survey. Israel was one of two top "voting issue priorities" for just 10% in a J Street poll conducted around the same time. More recently, "U.S.-Israel relations" was the most important issue for only 7.2% in the American Jewish Committee's 2015 study of Jewish American opinion, ranking fifth behind "the economy" (41.7%), "national security" (12.3%), "healthcare" (12%), and "income inequality" (11.6%). It was the second and the third-most important issue for only 7.6% and 11.1%, respectively.

So while Israel became a part of the American Jewish identity, so did American Jews' disagreements with Israel and their efforts to reconcile American liberalism with Israeli policies they oppose or are uncomfortable with. As Jews got closer to Israel, two diverging trends appeared: the relationship and affiliation grew stronger, but so did the criticism and disillusionment. Conventional wisdom is that the dividing issue affecting Israel's place in American Jewish identity is the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel's continued partial occupation of Palestinian lands. Without dismissing the Palestinian issue, many Jewish intellectuals beg to differ as to what has an enduring impact on American Jewish identity when it comes to Israel.

In a December 2016 interview with Israeli journalist Nahum Barnea, published in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Leon Wieseltier, one of America's leading intellectuals, said: "The primary reason for the widening chasm between the two communities is the behavior of the [Orthodox Chief] Rabbinate in Israel towards the Jews of America. I am referring to its relationship to Reform and Conservative Jews and to the Women of the Wall. The conduct of the Government of Israel on this subject is insulting and repellent. I can think of few subjects on which Israel has caused such disgust" (*Yediot Ahronot*, Dec. 2, 2012).

Rabbi Eric Yoffie argued along similar lines in an article published in *Ha'aretz* on December 7, 2016. If Israel is not the central component of modern American Jewish identity, what is?

This brings us back to the start of this chapter—the basic question of "what it means to be a Jew." In that broader context, Israel figures in, but not necessarily as a unifying factor. Perhaps the concept that applies most if all is the traditional Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam* ("repairing the world"), which in contemporary political language translates freely into "social justice."

When Pew asked, "What is essential to your Jewish identity?," "caring about Israel" (43%) was rather handily beat out by "leading an ethical/moral life" (69%) and "working for justice/equality" (56%). Mainstream American Jews are less concerned with the details of the latest U.S. military aid package to Israel than, for instance, candidates' positions on abortion and gay marriage.

If, as Ben-Gurion asserted, "Israel's only absolutely reliable ally is world Jewry," then American Jewry—by far, the largest, richest, and most powerful Diaspora Jewish community in the world, indeed in all history—is surely Israel's most important ally. After 1967, Israel evolved into source of security, pride, and faith for American Jews. Supporting Israel undoubtedly serves a psychological, emotional, and spiritual need. As Charles Liebman observed and eloquently wrote: "American Jewish support for Israel… is primarily driven by American Jewish needs and desires. Since Israel was primarily a symbol of Jewishness to American Jews, their support for Israel was fundamentally an expression of support for Jewishness and for the Jewish people" (Liebman, 1977, p. 200).

The identity of American Jews is more about who and what they are as Jews in America than it is about Israel. What makes this possible, as stated in the introduction, is the fact that Israel is an "imaginary homeland" for American Jews, but America is their home.

The Watershed Year 1967 and the Emergence of the "Special Relationship"

1967 was a watershed year in American-Jewish relations with, affinity for, and attitudes towards Israel. The evidence of just how critical and influential that year and the Six Day War were for the evolution of American Jewish relations with Israel is staggering, both at the time and in retrospect. "Israel has become instrumental to one's American Jewish identity. Israel, and concern for Israel, are preeminently a symbol of Jewish Identity," wrote Charles Liebman about the role of 1967 (Liebman, 1977, p.25).

Whereas the creation of Israel in 1948 was greeted by mild and reserved enthusiasm, 1967 was a turning point. Three events and trends converged in 1967: Israel was under a real and widely perceived existential threat from Egypt and Syria (and, to a lesser extent, the doomsday scenario of an Iraqi and Jordanian invasion from the east). Both countries were clients of the Soviet Union; the United States was sinking deeper into Vietnam as part of the Cold War and containment of Soviet Communism; and American Jews were in the throes of an accelerated process of socialization and assimilation.

As opposed to the Holocaust years, they now had both the political ability and (relative) proximity to power to express their concerns. After the threat of Israel's annihilation, the swift military victory was a quasi-religious epiphany with redemptive qualities. For many groups, in both Israel and the United States, that "quasi" could be dropped. After 1967, Israel became part of American Jews' "civil religion," the major theme, focus of activity, and philanthropic rallying cry of the Jewish establishment organizations. Israel became a term of endearment for many rank-and-file Jews across America, whose only form of Jewish identity was membership in a synagogue, where they showed up only on the High Holidays, or a token participation in occasional events of the local Jewish federation. Now they had an "Ersatz Religion."

For many years, American Jews shared a romantic consensus about Israel: A smiling but tough paratrooper, a Yemenite female soldier picking oranges while holding an Uzi submachine gun – both defending the Jewish homeland and while making the desert bloom. Leon Uris's novel, *Exodus*, and the Otto Preminger movie based on it, starring Paul Newman as Ari Ben Canaan, was a source of pride and identification. This new religion had its prophets, apostles, and priests.

In the decades after 1948, the prophet was "the charismatic and sensationally photogenic David Ben-Gurion, and the role of high priest was played by United Nations representative (and sometimes foreign minister) Abba Eban, loved by American Jews for his urbane sophistication, for his beautifully crafted speeches defending Israel, and for his British accent. The romantic warrior figure of General Moshe Dayan, who more than any Israeli captured the imagination of American Jewry as the exemplar of the 'new Jew,' provided an avenging angel" (Rosenthal, 2001, p. XVI).

Moshe Dayan, with his eye patch, was the hero, the liberator of Jerusalem with Yitzhak Rabin. They saved Israel from the abyss, they liberated Jerusalem, and indirectly vanquished the Soviet Union. They made American Jews proud of Israel, perhaps for the first time since 1948 and to a degree, rendered the traditional Reform anti-Zionism central theme no longer respectable. The *Life* magazine cover that featured a young Israeli soldier (Yossi Ben Hanan, later a major general) holding a Soviet made AK-47 while standing in the Suez Canal, symbolized the new Israel for American Jews.

Concurrently, American Jews (and the early politically active Christian Evangelicals) began drawing a moral and historical analogy between the United States and Israel. The latter was not merely an American ally helping to contain Soviet expansionism in the Middle East; it was a sister democracy, unlike any other US ally. Both are countries established in defiance of history, against prevailing currents, religious persecution, discrimination, and the old order. Both are immigrant societies. Both share biblical values about morality, the purpose of the good state, human being, and society. Most significantly, both have a vocation: to be a light unto the nations, the "shining city upon a hill."[2]

As they assimilated into American society and politics, American Jews felt increasingly free to express their attachment to Israel in ethnic as well as political terms. They finally had a homeland to be proud of and were intent on moving it closer to the United States, in a way that could merge their two identities (Rosenthal, 2001, ch. 2). The aftermath of the Six Day War was critical in another significant dimension: the emergence of the alliance between the two countries and the gradual forging of a unique special relationship.

What started with the Kennedy administration's decision to sell Israel Hawk anti-aircraft missiles in 1963 developed into a central pillar of Israel's national security and into a comprehensive narrative into which American Jews funneled their political, financial, and intellectual resources for several decades to come.

Naturally, the foundations, dynamics, characteristics, and expressions of this relationship warrant intensive study (some have been written; see for example: Bass, 2003). But a brief overview of the relations between the two countries is essential here, because of its inextricable link with the relations between American Jews and Israel. The bilateral relationship and eventual alliance is patently unnatural from the perspective of American interests after the Second World War. The way it evolved and matured into what it is today is equally unnatural, given its inherent asymmetry. Nevertheless, it has proven to be strong and durable even when the two countries' interests diverge.

The beginning was inauspicious. Yes, Truman recognized Israel against the advice of his secretary of state, George Marshall, and the vast majority of the Washington foreign policy and defense establishment. But from then on, through the 1950s, Cold War calculations and an attempt to lure the Arab states out of the Soviet orbit took precedence. Dwight Eisenhower was not only a Republican, a party which won less than 30% of the Jewish vote, but also a cautious military man who had to manage the Cold War. The primary and perhaps exclusive lens through which he saw the Middle East was the need to contain the Soviet Union and safeguard the free flow of oil. As the Cold War escalated, Eisenhower was Israel as a strategic nuisance.

At times he seemed "genuinely vexed by Israel's actions," especially what he perceived and interpreted to be the unholy alliance Israel forged with Britain and France in 1956 before and during the Suez Campaign, at the height of his reelection campaign (Allin and Simon, 2016, pp. 25-28). In 1953, Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, said the Truman administration had "gone overboard in favor of Israel." Later, in 1957, still livid over the 1956 Suez war, which had complicated America's position vis-à-vis the Arab world, Dulles told Henry Luce of *Time* magazine that "I am aware how almost impossible it is for this country to carry out foreign policy *not* approved by the Jews. [George] Marshall and [Defense Secretary James] Forrestal learned that. I am going to try and have one" (*ibid*, p. 26).

2 It was President Ronald Reagan who added "shining" to the original passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14).

In retrospect, this passage can be dismissed as frustration or even thinly veiled antisemitism, but it remains among the earliest textual evidence that some American Jews were lobbying for Israel, apparently with some success, a full decade before the relationship changed.

President Eisenhower himself told a friend: "I gave strict orders to the State Department that they should inform Israel that we would handle our affairs exactly as though we didn't have a Jew in America" (Bass, 2003, p. 33).

John F. Kennedy's decision to sell Hawk missiles to Israel in 1963 is widely regarded as a new departure in bilateral relations. The batteries, the first state-of-the-art system the United States sold to Israel, were a defensive system and, but the importance of the sale was political: it was provoked by Kennedy's unsuccessful attempt to get Nasser's Egypt to side with the United States. It was Nasser's insistence on remaining "nonaligned' and his grand dream of Egypt's as the leader of the Arab world, Africa, and the non-aligned nations that essentially launched the US-Israeli relationship.

During that year, Kennedy had met with the Israeli deputy defense minister, Shimon Peres in New York. The United States was worried about "activities" in the nuclear reactor near the town of Dimona in the Negev. It was then, for the first time, that Israel developed what is called the policy of nuclear opaqueness. Israel, Peres told Kennedy, would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East. Kennedy, while unenthusiastic, accepted that formulation. Later in the decade, when President Richard Nixon met with Israeli Premier Golda Meir in 1969, the policy was quasi-formalized in tacit understandings.

It would not be an exaggeration or a wild stretch of the imagination to conclude that Nasser played a formative role in US-Israel relations and by extension in American Jewish-Israel relations. It could all have been different if Nasser had responded to Kennedy's geopolitical courtship.

After Kennedy's assassination, his successor, Lyndon Johnson took the relationship to an altogether different level, agreeing to sell to Israel force-multiplying Skyhawk A-4s and later Phantom F-4 jets in 1966, sort of a quid pro quo for Israel's willingness to allow the Americans access to a Soviet-made MIG-21, flown to Israel in August 1966 by a defecting Iraqi pilot.

The Skyhawks and Phantoms were not delivered until after the 1967 Six Day War, but by then the United States had full military justification and cause to supply Israel with advanced military hardware to counter the Soviet-made systems used by Egypt and Syria. The tide in bilateral relations had turned at the same time that American Jews were falling madly in love with Israel. Johnson called himself a "Jewish non-Jew." American Jews were part and parcel of his transformative domestic agenda: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Great Society. But the years before 1967 were also a time of "the vanishing American Jew," with assimilation accelerating; Jews were at the forefront of Johnson's legislative agenda but also of the anti-Vietnam movement (Heilman, 1995, p. 58).

To some degree 1967 was, as Dana Allin and Steve Simon put it, "the apotheosis of liberal Zionism." Israel was deified in the American Jewish liberal mind, and any reservations and disillusionment were not evident in the immediate aftermath of the Six Day War. The West Bank and Gaza was not an issue and the term "occupation" was rarely used. The territories were temporarily held and administered by Israel; there were no Jewish settlements there until 1973, quasi-legalized only in 1974, seven years after the war.

In November 1967, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 242, reminding Israel of the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" and calling for the "establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East which should include the ... withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent

conflict" (UNSC Resolution 242, www.un.org). The United States supported the resolution, which passed 15:0, a stark reminder to the hysteria and erratic reaction in Israel in December 2016, when the United States abstained and allowed the passage of Resolution 2334, which calls for the cessation of all settlement activities.

For American Jews, post-1967 was an entirely different ballgame in regards to Israel, even when Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968 (75% of Jews voted for his opponent, Hubert Humphrey). Politically, American Jews disliked Nixon profoundly. He was almost openly antisemitic (as they suspected at the time and were vindicated later); he had served on the reviled House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947; and as president he was Vietnam, he was Laos and Cambodia, Kent State, the Pentagon Papers, Watergate. However, if anyone is the "founding father" of the modern special relationship between Israel and the United States, it was, without doubt, Richard Milhous Nixon.

The Nixon White House, including national security adviser Dr. Henry Kissinger, began seeing Israel as a military and diplomatic asset in the broader context of containing Soviet power. This ran against the conventional wisdom at the State Department, which was still skeptical of closer ties with Israel, even as the 1969-1971 War of Attrition served as a valuable proving ground for American weapons systems and American diplomacy focused on extracting Egypt from the Soviet grip. But the US peace initiatives, primarily the Rogers Plan advanced by Secretary of State William P. Rogers, failed. The Egyptians, by 1972 already gradually extricating themselves from the Soviet orbit, began planning a new round of hostilities to break the stalemate, with Syria's cooperation.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War stretched Israel almost to the breaking point, but ended in military victory, albeit a limited one. During the war, the Nixon administration launched an airlift to replenish Israel's depleted stocks of equipment and ammunition. After the war, Nixon decided to give Israel a military and civilian assistance package of $3 billion—$1.8 for military needs (with 85% to be spent in the United States) and $1.2 in civilian aid. Nixon and the Congress turned the grant into an integral part of the Foreign Aid bill and institutionalized the aid package to Israel in a format that remains almost intact to this day.[3]

The American efforts to mediate between Israel and Egypt after the war did result in the famous "reassessment" of relations with Israel in 1975 by President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger. But despite the drama and crisis, the course and direction of the relationship had not changed. In 1979 Israel and Egypt signed a historic peace deal, brokered by President Jimmy Carter. Despite the bitter friction between Carter and Prime Minister Menachem Begin, the bilateral alliance was strengthened by the treaty. American Jews now viewed Israel as safer and increasingly supported by the United States.

By the late 1970s, but more so after the Reagan Administration's decision to sell AWACS surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia in 1981 and the pro-Israel lobby's inability to prevent the deal, the American Jewish community devoted much of its efforts to lobbying, particularly on Capitol Hill and on a grassroots level. One result of the failure was a the emergence of AIPAC as we know it today. The basic idea was that in order to advance pro-Israel policy, there needs to be a comprehensive, long-term, ongoing and ever-evolving grassroots lobby that would culminate in attaining real power and leverage on Capitol Hill, lobbying on behalf of Pro-Israeli issues, but ostensibly to promote US interests predicated on the assumption that these interests are best served by a strong and close alliance with Israel.

3 The new ten-year aid package, signed into law by President Obama in late 2016 and worth $38 billion, increases the annual amount, partly to compensate for the challenges posed by the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, but does not allow Israel to convert dollars into shekels and spend some of the money in Israel for local procurement.

It was a call to arms and action for many in the Jewish community, who helped turn AIPAC into an extraordinarily effective and eventually powerful lobbying group in the 1980s and on into the first decade of the twenty-first century. The lobbying enterprise was such a major success that by the 1980s support for Israel had become a fundamental element of American foreign policy. Furthermore, any debate or disagreement as to who the United States should support in the Middle East, of the kind that existed on the eve of Israel's independence in 1948, during the 1950s and the Suez Campaign, and on into the early 1960s, was overwhelmingly decided in Israel's favor. The default mode of any American politician, Democrat or Republican, at almost every level, was unequivocal support for Israel.

While politicians, academics, and the media often cite America's extensive military aid to Israel, and the qualitative advantage the latter enjoys through access to and acquisition of sophisticated weapons systems, the more valuable and essential assistance lies elsewhere.

Over the years, the United States has provided Israel with a diplomatic umbrella and deflected numerous anti-Israeli initiatives and decisions at the UN and other international forums.

Since 1972, the United States has vetoed 75 draft Security Council resolutions directly or indirectly regarding Israel or deemed anti-Israeli or biased against it.

The United States has never pledged to veto all resolutions condemning Israel. Hence the accusation by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ministers that the Obama administration's abstention on Security Council Resolution 2334 (December 23, 2016), declaring all Israeli settlement activities in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) illegal, was a breach of its promise, was untrue. That Israel, and many in the organized American Jewish community took a US veto for granted is understandable to a degree, but cannot justify the vulgar and rude language hurled at the United States since then. Had it not been for American's consistent protection of Israel, the result of aggressive and effective lobbying by American Jews, Israel's standing in the world might well conceivably be much worse today.

In 1987 the Nunn Amendment – named for Georgia senator Sam Nunn – designated Israel a "major non-NATO ally," (The 'Status' destination was added in 1989) along with Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Egypt. Its inclusion in this company came despite the series of events that had split the American Jewish community: the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Reagan administration's impending recognition of the PLO, and the beginning of the first *Intifada* in late 1987.

Another important year for the US-Israeli relationship and American Jewish relations with Israel was 1992. The Soviet Union was dissolved in late December 1991. Its spectacular disintegration, in a process that began in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, ended the Cold War and left the United States as the world's sole superpower for a decade to come, and arguably longer. Israel was no longer an ally in the anti-Soviet coalition. More than a million Jews immigrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel, which embarked on a comprehensive initiative to achieve peace with the Palestinians and Jordan. Nevertheless, the bilateral alliance matured into a permanent structural feature of the two countries' relations. When Israel was contemplating an agreement with Syria, in late 1999 and early 2000, and when a comprehensive deal with the Palestinians was negotiated at Camp David in July of 2000, Washington and Jerusalem established a high-level team to discuss expanding the strategic relationship. One of the ideas considered was a formal defense pact.[4]

4 I was a member of the Israeli team, for the Strategic Policy Planning Group, that President Clinton and Prime Minister Barak set up in 1999 to weigh the pros and cons of a formal defense pact. One of the issues that the Israeli team was considering was how this will affect American Jews in terms of their commitment to Israel. Almost needless to say, no conclusive recommendation was reached.

The trajectory of US-Israeli relations from 1967 was clear: from tentative and partial cooperation to a full-fledged alliance, albeit informal. Israel and American Jews tended to describe Israel of the 1980s and 1990s as a "strategic asset" for the United States. Yes, Israel had strategic value and was most definitely an ally. But the United States never defined Israel as a strategic asset. Military, intelligence, technological, and diplomatic cooperation was forged and increased. But after the dissolution of the Soviet Union Washington did not necessarily see Israel as an asset. It was a dependable ally, but one that increasingly conflicted with US interests in the region.

From an American Jewish perspective, the years after 1967 were formative, defining, and exhilarating in terms of their relationship with Israel. Their efforts, possible because of their newly acquired status in American politics, had facilitated the formation and consolidation of a bilateral alliance. In their minds, American Jews were enjoying the best of both worlds. Yet this unmitigated success—the evolution of the US-Israel special relationship—came at a price. Although relations with the United States are a pillar of Israel's national security, the normalization of the alliance politicized American support for Israel.

American Jews were now content, looking inwards into their own communities and identity and dissatisfaction with some of Israel's policies became evident. American Jews played and still play a pivotal role in the maintenance of this special relationship. This alliance is unparalleled in the history of international relations, particularly in view of America's strategic interests in the Middle East. American Jews took the ad-hoc military and diplomatic alliance of the late 1960s and redefined it as a matter of morality and a moral commitment. The strategy succeeded brilliantly. Today, however, it requires adjustment and revision. Now that the United States "has Israel's back" and Israel is powerful, rich, and successful, it is time perhaps to ask: what is this Israel that we are committed to? Is it really the defining characteristic of American Jewish identity? If so, should it remain such?

Are they really turning away?

The intuitive answer to this question would be "No, they are not." In this case, however, conveniently adhering to intuition is misguided and ignores the undercurrents and transformations the American Jewish community is undergoing. Clearly, the era of "Israel, Right or Wrong," in the scope and intensity that existed roughly from 1967 to the mid1980s or even the turn of the century, is over. Like Israelis, American Jews are living in what could be called "the seventh day of the Six Day War," The peace process and the political, security, and moral dimensions of relations with the Palestinians have become a key issue. Their impact on Israel's standing in the world and its relations with the United States is both the paramount cause of unity and the reason for division.

If American Jews fell in love with Israel during the 1960s and early 1970s, by the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s the romance was dwindling down somewhat. "The American Jewish love affair with Israel" was short-lived: about ten years, with a residual dedication to Israel in times of crisis. What followed was not so much disaffection, but disillusionment and dissent about policies and values.

Dov Waxman and Steven Rosenthal ask a similar question: Why have growing numbers of American Jews become disenchanted with Israel and critical of it since the late 1970s?

An obvious reason for this shift in attitudes is that Israel began disappointing American Jews on a multitude of issues: the Palestinian issue, democracy and civil rights, "synagogue and state." The liberal Zionist Israel they knew from brochures, guest speakers, and Israeli politicians and diplomats was no longer there. It had been replaced by something that Israelis tolerated but that American Jews found disturbing, irritating, and irreconcilable with their inherently liberal-democratic-cosmopolitan values. Israel has become something else and is no longer the secular, social-democratic, egalitarian, idealistic, and peace-seeking country that American Jews once perceived from afar (Waxman, 2016, p. 41).

Between 1948 and 1967, American Jews did not burden themselves with issues such as, what exactly is this Jewish state called Israel? Is it the state of the Jews? Where is it going? What precisely is the nature of our relationship with a country we've never been to, inhabited by Jews we've never met? As noted earlier, they were preoccupied by their integration into America and delineating the contours of what it means to be a Jew in America.

The love affair and unmitigated devotion after 1967 gave way, 15 or 20 years later, to a more critical approach, fed by the following logic: If Israel is indeed the state of the Jewish people, the embodiment of their political aspirations; and we, American Jews, are the largest (today they are second-largest, after Israel itself) Jewish community in the world; and we donate handsomely and lobby the US administration: then surely we, American Jews should have some say on how that place it is run and where it is going. And if there is an incompatibility of values, not of policy, then we need to speak up, or at least not be shushed when we do so.

In order to fully explain the timing of this change, we need to consider another series of changes in the United States, changes in Israel, changes in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and changes in the global balance of power. These changes affected American Jews' self-perception and their level of engagement and interaction with Israel. Herein lies a paradox: The more that American Jews visit Israel, read about Israel, develop an understanding of the complexities and nuances of Israeli politics, policies, and society, the more engaged they are. But the more engaged they are, the less content and willing to tag party lines they become. So the engagement breeds division, rather than unity, with the conspicuous exception of the Modern Orthodox American Jews who grow increasingly attached to Israel.

This is not necessarily a bad development. In fact, disagreement is far better than detachment and indifference, whether American Jewish and Israeli leaders care to admit it or not.

Knowledge and familiarity unavoidably generate a certain amount of disillusionment. The same logic of getting too close to the sun or to your sports hero applies: excessive intimacy can become a source of pain. As Steven Cohen wrote, as long ago as 1989, "Blind romance and unfounded idealization can last only so long" (Cohen, 1989).

There was never an inflection point after which American-Jews have been unequivocally "turning away from Israel." Inflection points are where the direction of curvature changes. In politics or sociology, such points exist but are difficult to detect. Rarely do contemporaries perceive the fissures that represent a tectonic shift—and this is the case with American Jewish attitudes to Israel. As argued before, 1948 was a key year and 1967 a transformative year. Along the trajectory of the relationship between American Jews and Israel, we can confidently define both as inflection points.

Israel remains a part of American Jewish identity, but nuances are important. In various polls and surveys, when the general, almost generic questions of "Is Israel important to you?" or "do you feel an attachment to Israel?" is asked, a majority of American Jews respond in the affirmative. Because it is true. At the same time, the generality is misleading, because it overlooks subtleties that expose a more complex picture.

The fault lines are unmistakable. The debates, friction, contentious issues, and cracks in the wall of solidarity cannot be traced back to a single date. Rather, it is a slow but nonetheless inexorable process of what Dov Waxman calls the "American Jewish conflict over Israel"; Steven Rosenthal, the "waning of the American Jewish love affair with Israel" (the subtitles of their respective books); and Rabbi Eric Yoffie, "the eroding support for Israel," to buttress his claim that Israelis are in "complete denial" about the threat that the Orthodox religious establishment in Israel pose to Israel's strategic interests in the United States (Yoffie, 2016).

The 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the 1985 Pollard spy case, the Rabin assassination in 1995, the Palestinian intifadas of 1987 and 2001-2004 and the lack of a peace process or silver lining in the decade since, along with the "Who is a Jew" controversy, the Orthodox religious monopoly, and frequent outburst related to prayer at the Western Wall have transformed the American Jewish relationship with Israel. These controversies have propelled American Jews' evolution from willing unity on Israel to a combination of diversity and critical scrutiny. To quote Steven Rosenthal again:

> But in the end the story is about more than the growth of American Jewish dissent. The end of American Jews' silence reflects the transformation of Israeli and American Jews. Over the past fifty years both have evolved in ways that have confounded the expectations of the other and rendered both Zionist and Diaspora stereo-types increasingly irrelevant. (Rosenthal, 2001, p.18)

Steven Cohen surveyed American Jewish attitudes for many years for the American Jewish Committee (AJC). The cumulative findings of his poll-based studies highlight Israel's diminishing role in the American Jewish consciousness. This "distancing," as he terms the phenomenon clearly evident in his data, is a topic for both academic discussion and public debate in the American Jewish community. The days when a vast majority of American Jews felt that "if Israel were to disappear it would be one of the greatest tragedies of my life" have been replaced by feelings much more diffuse and less intense, Cohen says. Recent studies report a smaller percentage of American Jews who "very strongly or strongly support Israel," even though the ties remain relatively strong.

Even more distressing is the generational aspect: the younger an American Jew, the less inclined he or she is to be supportive of Israel on every issue or as a package deal—or even interested in it. Indifference is most pronounced among the young: Cohen has found that for every ten-year drop in age there is a five percent decline in support for Israel. In the 1990 Council of Jewish Federation Population Study, 31 percent of American Jews between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four reported no emotional attachment to Israel at all, and this was 1990: before the fall of the Soviet Union, the Oslo peace process, the Rabin assassination, and the second intifada.

There is also the gulf of opinions and fundamental positions between American Jews and Israeli Jews. While a majority in both countries believe that the "two-state" solution is desirable (albeit perhaps impractical and unviable today), they differ on the impact of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. A plurality of Jews in Israel (42 percent) say that the continued construction of settlements promotes Israeli security. Only 17 percent of US Jews agree.

This division also exists (emphatically) along religious lines. Orthodox Jews in both countries are about equally likely to say the Israeli government is making a sincere effort to bring about a peace settlement. But non-Orthodox Jews in America are considerably less likely than their Jewish counterparts to say the Israeli government genuinely seeks a peace settlement (36% and 55%, respectively). A significant demographic finding that may portend greater friction between the United States and Israel in the future is generational: American Jews between the ages of 18 and 29 are more likely than their elders to take a leftwing stance on political issues involving Israel. They are more likely to say that a two-state solution is possible and that the United States is too supportive of Israel. They are also more inclined to join J Street and feel enthusiastic about it, to the dismay of establishment organizations.

Here is another example: In a 2007 survey, 40 percent of American Jews believed that "Israel occupies land belonging to someone else"; more than 30 percent reported sometimes feeling "ashamed" of Israel's actions. Young American Jews are also more inclined to see Israel as powerful, not weak and endangered, and thus less in need of their absolute support (Cohen and Kelman, 2007).

Recent years have been marked by acrimony and virulence. According to Rabbi Sheldon Lewis of Palo Alto in the Bay Area around San Francisco (home to about half a million Jews), "Our communities have really been torn apart surrounding Israel. People have attacked each other personally, friendships have ended, people have left synagogues because of it and have even disappeared entirely from the community" (Waxman, 2016, p. 116). The harsh incivility of much of the American-Jewish discourse on Israel-related issues was evident in its crudest form in 2015, during the debate over the Iran nuclear deal (the JCPOA) that the United States and five other world powers were negotiating with and eventually signed with Iran. Jews accused each other of being *Kapos* (Jewish collaborators with the Nazis during the Holocaust). A swastika was painted outside the apartment building of New York Democratic Congressman Jerry Nadler after he announced his support for the Iran deal. Prime Minister Netanyahu, in an unprecedented and controversial move, arranged to speak—or was invited by Congressional Republicans, depending on whose version you believe—to address Congress and oppose the deal; he asked US Jews to support him (they did not) on the grounds that the deal poses a security risk to Israel and that he is the prime minister of the Jewish people.

There is no question that a fundamental shift has occurred in the American Jewish relationship with Israel over the past two decades. An increasing number of American Jews have become less willing to embrace the "Israel, right or wrong" line. Israel is strong, powerful, rich, has a per capita GDP higher than many European

countries, is home to more than 100 companies that are traded on NASDAQ, and is under no existential threat of the kind that American Jews accurately perceived between 1948 and the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Consequently, American Jews have gone back to their liberal values and agenda and compare it to what Israel represents, or how they perceive it.

The result is that they are more willing to publicly criticize the Israeli government and openly disagree with Israeli policies.

Another important angle is the highly partisan, intolerant, and confrontational nature of politics in both countries. Israel may not be a classic wedge issue, but it certainly seems to be. Debate about Israel in Washington or New York, is influenced by the wider political climate in the United States. Partisanship, hyperbole, rancorous political debate, and incivility are now the norm in both American and Israeli politics. This in turn creates the impression that any discussion is by nature divisive.

As a result, the organized Jewish community, in a genuinely well-intentioned yet futile attempt to exhibit unity, is inadvertently provoking more anger. This, as was demonstrated with the Iran nuclear deal; and whether or not "Is it good for Israel" leads to significant changes in American Jewish politics. Major organizations, the so-called Jewish establishment—are accused of trying to suppress the debate about Israel among Jews. In turn, they are accused for being "unrepresentative" or out of touch.

Going back to the paradox of American Jewish engagement with Israel, there is no doubt that support for Israel has become a defining element of American Jewish identity, especially since the 1967 war (as mentioned previously). Charles Liebman, a preeminent and prolific scholar of American Jewry, observed that "Israel has become instrumental to one's American Jewish identity. Israel, and concern for Israel, are preeminently a symbol of Jewish identity" (Liebman, 1977, p. 199). That has not changed.

The trend of "distancing" needs to be kept in perspective. Much of the criticism falls under the definition of "tough love" or the biblical adage that "faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Proverbs 27:6). The vast majority of American Jews still care deeply about Israel, whether they agree or disagree with its character, behavior, or policies. Yes, there is ambivalence in that caring and substantial criticism of Israel policies in different areas: but they care.

So, is Israel a "Unifying" force or a "Dividing" Issue for American Jews?

Israel is both. This was this paper's premise from the outset, and also its conclusion. However, the equilibrium between "unifying" and "divisive" is showing signs of trending towards a more divisive role for Israel. The divisiveness is just as much about American Jews, their development, identity, and place in American society as it is about their changing and sobering attitudes regarding Israel.

If we look at the historical trend since 1948, the unifying and the divisive have always coexisted in the American Jewish public (and personal) sphere. "Divisive" wasn't always tense and venomous, or even passionate for that matter. It evolved from indifference, but for a short period between 1967 and, roughly, the mid 1990s unbridled support reigned supreme.

Dov Waxman is unequivocal: "The internecine battle over Israel among American Jews, a battle that is growing ever more intense as Israel faces mounting international condemnation, its domestic politics shifts further to the right, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process remains in deep freeze, and the two-state solution appears increasingly remote, if not altogether unlikely" (Waxman, 2016, pp. 3-4). Rosenthal and Steven Cohen also stress that:

> Historic change has been taking place in the American Jewish relationship with Israel. The age of unquestioning and unstinting support for Israel is over. The pro-Israel consensus that once united American Jews is eroding, and Israel is fast becoming a source of division rather than unity for American Jewry. As the consensus concerning Israel within the American Jewish community is slowly coming apart, a new era of American Jewish conflict over Israel is replacing the old era of solidarity. In short, Israel used to bring American Jews together. Now it is driving them apart. (*ibid*)

Historically, going back to 1948, the pro-Israel consensus that reigned supreme in the American Jewish community after 1967 and into the 1980s is the aberration. Criticism, vociferous debate, and division on Israel is the historical norm, as noted before. Therefore, both American and Israeli Jews who keep on preaching "We are one" are walling themselves up in a comfort zone that does not extend beyond large-scale conferences or conference calls of the major establishment Jewish organizations.

Explaining the rationale for his research (and this paper), Waxman observes that American Jewish support for Israel is neither universal nor automatic. "The fact that not all American Jews really care about Israel requires us to explain what motivates those Jews who do. This analysis is seldom done. All too often, American Jewish support for Israel is simply assumed, rather than explained, as if supporting Israel was somehow intrinsic or essential to being Jewish" (*ibid*, pp. 22-23).

Put simply, American Jewish politics directly affects American politics, administration policies, and public attitudes when it comes to Israel. For Israel itself, American Jewish politics is of even greater significance. Indeed, it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that Israel's future depends in part on whether and how American Jews support it. In a classic text on the American Jewish community, first published in 1976, the late Daniel Elazar described American Jews as "the world's most powerful Jewry in the world's most powerful nation." This remains true today.

There is a case or argument to be made that you cannot really be a secular Jew outside Israel. So when Israel became the civil religion of American Jews, after 1967, it constituted a unifying source of identity for the majority of American Jews who are not very religious. Attachment to Israel was the missing link between secular liberal American Jews and Judaism as a civilization, rather than exclusively a religion. In recent years, however, the data show a different trend: Israel's role in strengthening American Jewish identity is of greater significance to the observant. There is a strong correlation between religious belief and attachment to Israel; surveys over the years consistently show that attachment to Israel correlates with a person's denominational affiliation: Orthodox Jews are the most attached to Israel. This, in turn, reinforces the already existing divisions in American between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox.

In the AJC surveys conducted between 1986 and 2010, between 60 and 75 percent of American Jews consistently reported feeling "close to Israel." American Jewish attachment to Israel has fluctuated slightly from year to year, as a function of recent events, but has been remarkably stable over all. The current American Jewish debate about Israel is more public, contentious, and polarized than ever before. Engagement, as emphasized earlier, also produces dissent and gradual detachment. To return to Waxman:

> It is no longer an elite preoccupation, but a debate in which growing numbers of American Jews are now engaged on an almost daily basis. While this has allowed many more people to freely voice their different opinions about Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians, it has also often led to angry arguments, personal attacks, and ruined relationships. Indeed, the debate about Israel has become so ugly in many Jewish communities that communal groups have had to respond by promoting civility initiatives and dialogue groups, and even hiring people to facilitate discussions about Israel. But even if the American Jewish argument about Israel could be more civil, it will remain divisive. (Waxman, 2016, p. 120)

The American and Israeli Jewish societies are growing apart for a variety of intrinsic and natural reasons. Respective societal changes, Jewish identity is different, the definition of "Jewishness" is different, and perceptions of individual and communal life differ, as a function of the socio-political environments in the two countries. The disconnection grows wider because Israelis and American Jews ultimately fail—or are unwilling— to conduct a genuine and ongoing dialogue. Israelis fail to understand and appreciate the American Jewish religious diversity, while American Jews do not really understand the Israelis' insecurity and sense of vulnerability, regardless of how strong they are. While internal American Jewish dissent about Israel is likely to intensify rather than mellow, as long as Israel's conflict with the Palestinians remains unresolved and seems to be intractable, the attachment to Israel remains strong but is arguably both unifying and divisive.

On the historical continuum of the last 2000 years, America and Israel are the two most successful, secure, prosperous, and thriving Jewish communities. Jerusalem/Tel Aviv and New York/Miami are essentially modern-day versions of Babylonia and Jerusalem, a tale of two Jewish cities. With all the differences, debates, and rancor, Israel remains the best hope for the survival of a collective American Jewish identity.

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