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### AMERICAN JEWS AND ISRAEL: PRAGMATIC, CRITICAL, BUT STILL IN LOVE

Steven M. Cohen

*Jewish involvement with Israel. Americans for a safe Israel. Privately critical, publicly supportive. A loving relationship.*

In recent years, many American Jews, from all walks of communal life, have voiced not only private, but increasingly public disagreements with certain Israeli government actions or policies. As a result, it has become fashionable among American journalists to speak, as did *Newsweek*, of the "Anguish of American Jews," or, in other words, of some sort of growing alienation between American Jewry and Israel. According to this view former Prime Minister Begin's persona, the West Bank settlements, the war in Lebanon, and the ascendancy of Sephardic political leadership all have contributed to making American Jews less enamored of Israel. If true, then such a development would not bode well either for Israel's political clout in the United States or for American Jewish identity, which, since 1967, has become increasingly centered on Israel.

To examine these issues, I conducted three national surveys of American Jews for the American Jewish Committee. Conducted before, during, and after the height of hostilities in Lebanon (in Winter 1981-2, August 1982, and Summer 1983), the three studies provide the first in-depth reasonably comprehensive, and dynamic understanding of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel.

Three major themes emerge from these studies. First, American Jews, far more than most observers imagine, are incredibly involved with Israel and care for the Jewish state very deeply. Second, their orientations toward Israel's foreign policies are primarily pragmatic. American Jews want policies that work, policies which they think will maximize Israel's security and her defenses against military and diplomatic assault. Third, American Jews are reluctant--though in recent years less so--to openly express views at variance with official Israeli policies for fear of harming Israel in the potentially hostile public arena. The three points bear elaboration.

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## JEWISH INVOLVEMENT WITH ISRAEL

The extraordinary involvement of American Jews with Israel can be well illustrated with a few pertinent statistics:

- About 2 adult Jews in 5 (40%) have been to Israel; almost half of these (17%) have been there twice or more.
- Over a third of American Jews (34%) have family in Israel.
- Over a third (many of these same people) have "personal friends" in Israel.

For many observers, the high travel figures are quite surprising. For some reason some authoritative Israeli source has been bandying about the figure of 10%. In actuality the 1970-1 National Jewish Population Study found that at that time, as many as 16% of American Jews had been to Israel. Since then, the figure has gone up about 2-3% a year. In 1981, a national study conducted for the Israel Government Tourist Office found that 38% of American Jews had been to Israel. (The 1981 New York Jewish Population Study that Paul Ritterband and I are conducting found exactly the same figure for the New York region.)

The large number of Jews who have travelled to Israel does not, in itself, incontrovertibly demonstrate a commitment to Israel. The Ministry of Tourism study that found 38% had been to Israel also found that almost as many--35%--had been to Italy. Our New York survey found that Jews of Manhattan score very low on all measures of Jewishness, save one: by 1981, 44% of Manhattan Jews had travelled to Israel, more than any other country in the area. Clearly, travel to Israel is no guarantee of pro-Israel or Jewish commitment, but it is still a very strong indicator of such. Those who have been to Israel, especially those who have been there at least twice score much higher on ritual practice, communal affiliation and pro-Israel attitudes.

The substantial minority of Jews with friends and family in Israel implies that for them, if not for many others, their connection with Israel is very genuine, immediate, and personal. When they think of Israel and worry about her future, they think not merely of some abstract spiritual symbol (powerful as that may be), but of real places they have seen, and, more importantly, real people who are close and dear to them.

This large minority of American Jews intensely involved with Israel comprise but the inner circle of the vast majority of Jews who, while less involved, still care deeply about Israel. Over nine Jews in ten (somewhat less during the Lebanon war, somewhat more before and after) said that they are "pro-Israel." Over 3 in 4 said that "Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew" and an equal number claimed that "If Israel were destroyed, I would feel as if I had suffered one of the greatest personal tragedies in my life." Conversely, only 1 Jew in 10 reported that "I am sometimes uncomfortable about identifying as a supporter of Israel."

Even the least committed American Jews reported attending a Passover Seder (whatever that might mean to them; perhaps only a big family meal with matzah). Just like 9 in 10 say they are pro-Israel, the same percentage claim to attend a Seder. From the figures above on Israel involvement then, we may say that Israel, like the Seder, also defines an outer limit of Jewish commitment in America. Thus, if you are in any way positively "Jewish" in America you will probably do at least two things: go to a Passover Seder and express caring and concern for Israel.

## AMERICANS FOR A SAFE ISRAEL

While American Jews may love Israel, many do not agree with her all the time, especially when it comes to matters of security and international relations. American Jews are united in their anxieties over Israel's safety in a hostile international environment. But their approach is safety-conscious and pragmatic, rather than oriented toward historical or religious principles of territorial control. Thus, their views sometimes appear paradoxical.

In the 1983 survey a plurality (42% to 29% with the rest undecided) said "Israel should maintain permanent control over the West Bank." But control does not imply annexation. By a similar margin (42% to 34%), they also endorsed Israel offering the Arabs "territorial compromise ... in return for credible guarantees of peace." And they are willing for Israel to go to great lengths in her search for peace. By nearly a 2-to-1 majority (51% to 28%), they said "Israel should suspend the expansion of settlements ... to encourage peace negotiations."

Their willingness to endorse conciliatory policies, presumes that Israel will not be endangered, but rather that her security will be enhanced. For threat and vulnerability are pivotal concepts in American Jews' mind-set about Israel and her search for peace. In 1981 and 1982, overwhelming majorities flatly rejected either US or Israeli talks with the PLO as presently constituted. However, in 1983, similar majorities endorsed talks with a hypothetical PLO not committed to Israel's destruction. By 70% to 17% they said "Israel should talk with the PLO if the PLO recognizes Israel and renounces terrorism." (The wording approximates the Yariv-Shemtov formula incorporated in the 1981 Labor Party platform.) By almost 2-to-1 (48% to 26%), they also agreed that "Palestinians have a right to a homeland on the West Bank and Gaza, so long as it does not threaten Israel." The centrality of threat and vulnerability is further demonstrated by another telling piece of evidence: the fluctuations in opinions on Israel's policies before, during, and after the height of hostilities in Lebanon. In 1981, American Jews could be evenly divide--on the basis of several questionnaire items--between "hawks" and "doves." During the summer of 1982, the hawks grew in number to hold a 10% edge. A year later, in the summer of 1983, doves gained the edge outnumbering hawks by about 10 percentage points (roughly 45% to 35% with 20% ambivalent). Moreover, although in all three surveys American Jews endorsed their option to criticize Israel's policies publicly, the margin of such support was smallest in the Summer 1982 survey (during the height of the war) and largest a year later. (By 57% to 31% as they rejected the view that "Jews should not criticize the policies of Israel's government publicly.")

In numerous other questions--such as those testing the popularity of Labor and Likud personalities--the 1983 sample clearly displayed a tilt toward more conciliatory policies and toward Labor Party over Likud leaders. Despite their dovish tendencies, though, American Jews are reluctant to openly voice their differences with Israel's elected leaders for a variety of interrelated reasons.

## PRIVATELY CRITICAL, PUBLICLY SUPPORTIVE

Although American Jews tend to prefer dovish Israeli policies and leaders, and although they largely support the right (in theory) to openly express differences with Israeli government policies, they generally resist airing their discordant views in public. One important reason for this stance is that they are plainly worried about American support for Israel. Most American Jews believe that US support is far from solid; most believe that "When it comes to the crunch, few non-Jews will come to Israel's side in its struggle to survive;" and most believe that anti-semitism in the United States is still "a serious problem." Many are plainly worried that having Jews voice differences with Israel could contribute to a diminishing American diplomatic, military and economic support for Israel.

Aside from this political calculation, American Jews feel morally inhibited from criticizing policies formulated by a democratic society of fellow Jews who are actually under the gun. Even if they feel Israel would be better off if it pursued more conciliatory policies, many closet doves believe it is not their place as American Jews--even well-informed and communally active Jews--to advise Israel on its foreign policy.

The results from a parallel 1983 survey of national executive board members of five prominent Jewish organizations (American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, B'nai B'rith International, and the United Jewish Appeal) pointedly illustrate this phenomenon. More than the public, the leaders endorsed dovish policies. By 74% to 16% they supported "territorial compromise;" by 3-to-1 (59% to 21%) they rejected the notion that Israel should permanently control the West Bank; and by narrower margins they agreed that continued occupation of the territories will erode Israel's democratic, humanitarian and Jewish character. Like the public, most leaders endorsed the right of individual Jews to publicly criticize Israeli policies. However, as opposed to the public, the leaders split down the middle (42% to 37%) on whether "American Jewish organizations should feel free to publicly criticize the Israeli government and its policies" (the public endorsed this view by 2-to-1: 60% to 27%).

Jewish communal leaders, then, are even more privately critical of Israel's policies and its current directions than is the general American Jewish public. But, as official leaders, they take their roles quite seriously; hence, they are reluctant to appear to lend support to Israel's opponents by publicly criticizing her elected government.

#### A LOVING RELATIONSHIP

The emergence of disagreements among Jews over the best ways to achieve the shared goals of peace and security for Israel should not obscure the loving nature of American Jews' relationship with Israel. Loving partners may disagree; and when they do, they sometimes are compelled to let others learn of their disputes. Generally, though, they prefer to keep their differences to themselves. Signs of American Jewish unhappiness with certain Israeli policies, then, cannot be understood as signifying any diminution in their caring and concern for Israel (at least not at this stage). Similarly, the paucity of overt expression of those disagreements does not imply solid wall-to-wall American Jewish support for all of Israel's foreign policies. Fervent attachment to Israel, selected policy differences with her, and restraint of public criticism are distinctive, somewhat conflicting features of American Jews' relationship with Israel.

Against this background, Israel's adversaries have little hope of driving a wedge between American Jews and Israel. Almost all outspoken American Jewish critics of Israel's current policies ardently support such matters of consensus as the indivisibility of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the essentiality of maximal US economic aid. Thus, when these critics voice their views, neither Israel's opponents nor her dearest friends should infer that they are witnessing anything other than a public airing of differences between loving, loyal, and mutually dependent partners for whom a divorce is as improbable as it is unthinkable.

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