
Variations in Age and Life Experiences in Relationship to Israel Affiliation: Examining a Generational Divide

Sam Finkelstein

"Yerushaliyum Shel Zahav." Translated to "Jerusalem of Gold," this song by Naomi Shemer is symbolic of Jewish rejoicement in Israel. It was sung in 1967 upon the recapturing of the Old City of Jerusalem from Jordanian rule,¹ but its message has been heard for generations. As Shemer writes about the Shofar's calls from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, she is not only talking about the liberation of Jerusalem after 19 years of Israeli Independence, but rather the true expression of joy, and the exult in the return to Zion (Israel). The 2,000 years of exile and longing for Jerusalem had ended, and, although this feeling of rejoice had spread upon Israel's establishment in 1948, it was now that many felt truly returned. These life experiences shape perspectives on Israel, both in Israel and in the diaspora (Jewish communities outside of Israel). Today, rather than relating with Israel's struggle for independence, its cause, and its vulnerability as older generations do, members of younger generations regard Israel as a strong military power, and feel less emotionally attached. Age and life experiences greatly shape American Jews' connection to Israel in terms of their affinity, their support, and their belief in a need for a Jewish State.

As a whole, younger Americans have a varied interest in Israel and its conflicts compared to older Americans. One hypothesis is presented to explain this generational difference – the simple fact that younger Americans feel less attached to Israel. This distancing hypothesis is supported by extensive research dating back almost 30 years. As an article from 1996 states,

"journalists, social scientists, Jewish communal leaders, and Israeli officials, among others, have surmised that American Jews have grown less enamored of Israelis, less interested in Israel, and less active in supporting Israel."¹ This brings forth the claim that American Jews today are less invested in Israel, as a whole. In a study from 1997 on American Jews, it was found that "when asked about their emotional attachment to Israel, just % answered 'extremely attached' (as opposed to 13% in a similar survey in 1988), and only another 18% said 'very attached' (versus 24% in 1988)."² This statistic does vary by age; Dov Waxman, author of *Young American Jews and Israel: Beyond Birthright and BDS*, makes the claim that the difference in relationships to Israel is based upon age cohorts, not the population at large. The national survey of American Jewry conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013 found that "79% of American Jews aged 65 and older said they felt somewhat attached to Israel, as did 75% of those aged 50–64, compared with 60% of those aged 18–29."³ Even though American Jews as a whole are losing a connection with Israel, Waxman sheds light on the strong generational differences in this overall statistic. Another significant statistic highlighted in the Pew 2007 national survey shows that "less than half of those surveyed who were under the age of 35 felt that Israel's destruction would be a personal tragedy, compared to more than three-quarters of those over the age of 65."⁴ This staggering fact shows that the distancing hypothesis is truly occurring, and there are clear explanations as to why.

First, as claimed in *Loyalty and Criticism in the Relations between World Jewry and Israel* by Gabriel Sheffer, "Many Jews in the Diaspora live in the big cities; most of them are high-school and university graduates and have academic, technical and economic occupations. Many surveys clearly show that members of the young generation and a large portion of Jews with academic degrees and high salaries are less interested in Israel."⁵ Sheffer focuses on the diasporic Jewish communities in America, where for years they have been affluent and less connected to modern Israel. Young American Jews are involved in their own Jewish communities in the diaspora, and not

exposed to ones involving Israel. Therefore, he further argues there is "some Jewish awareness and historical link to the Jewish people and the land of Israel, however not necessarily to the state of Israel and its institutions."⁶

Next, theorists explain this as the variation in life experiences between generations. Taglit-Birthright Israel has a mission to send as many young Jews to Israel as possible, which by "2010 had sent nearly 200,000 Jewish young adults from the United States to Israel since its inception in 1999."⁷ The experience of traveling to Israel as a young adult can have a profound effect on one's affinity towards the state. In one study there were significant differences in one's connection to Israel before and after a Birthright trip. "The estimated probability of participants feeling 'very much' connected to Israel is nearly triple (62% versus 21%) that of the nonparticipants."⁸ During the trip, as a study from Brandeis University found, "Taglit participants were far more likely than nonparticipants to use Israeli news media... Sixty-two percent of participants used Israeli news media, compared to 51 percent of nonparticipants."⁹ Therefore, life experiences can change one's affinity towards Israel, as shown through the experiences had by participants in the Taglit-Birthright experience, which helps to explain why older generations are more attached.

Older generations in the United States and worldwide have lived through, and formed, different generational memories than younger generations. Those who were born in the early 20th century have significant, distinct, vicarious memories of the anti-Semitism felt during WWII, the Holocaust, and the founding of Israel, and those born in the middle of the century recall the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars with all their trials and tribulations. It is these generational experiences that have led older generations to be more connected to Israel today and led younger generations to slowly lose their affinity for the state.

The existing difference in connection to Israel between generations continues in terms of political support. Younger American Jews are more likely to criticize Israel in political matters, specifically with the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. American Jews, as explained above, have less of a connection to Israel and a stronger connection with their American Jewish communities. The national survey of American Jewry conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013 showed an age divide in the importance of caring about Israel and its politics, as "among Jews aged 50 and older, about half said that caring about Israel was essential to what being Jewish meant to them. By contrast, only around a third of Jews under the age of thirty felt this way."¹⁰ The existing generational divide holds true to politics, too. However, their lack of connection to Israel brings some younger generations closer to the Palestinian side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A 2016 Pew Research Center survey found that:

Although millennials (those born after 1980) still tended to sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinians (43% of millennials, as opposed to 61% of baby boomers, expressed greater sympathy for Israel), about a quarter of millennials sympathized more with the Palestinians, the highest proportion of any generation. Millennials were in fact about twice as likely as baby-boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) to express more sympathy for the Palestinians than for Israel (27% to 14%).¹¹

Because young American Jews are less politically active with Israel, they are more often taking the side of Palestinians. Many young Jewish Americans believe that the Israeli government their generation has lived with has not been pursuing peace with Palestinians as actively as previous governments. Younger Jews have no memory of governments in Israel pursuing peace energetically; when the Rabin government signed the Oslo Accords (designed to curb violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) in the early 1990s, most were not even alive yet. The Likud party with Benjamin Netanyahu as its Prime Minister, has been in power for most of the younger generations' lives, and has "clashed repeatedly with US President Barack Obama (particularly over the nuclear deal with Iran), and became unpopular

among Democrats."¹² In the 2020 election according to the Tisch College at Tufts University, 61% of those aged 18-29 years old voted for Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate. This young Democrat support is an extension of the trend in past years and can help to explain the lack of political support for Israel among youth, as Dov Waxman proclaims younger generations "enthusiastically supported Obama and mostly voted for the Democratic Party."¹³ Younger generations have grown up with what they perceive as a more hostile Israeli government in power, one that has had less success in their efforts to make peace with Palestinians, and has routinely clashed with a popular United States President among younger age cohorts. Therefore, they have less support for the endeavors of the Israeli government, and are more likely to criticize it. This statement is supported by research from the 2013 national survey of American Jewry conducted by the Pew Research Center, where they found "only a quarter of Jews aged 18 to 29 believed that the Israeli government was 'making a sincere effort to bring about a peace settlement with the Palestinians' (compared to 43% of those aged over 50)."¹⁴ This generational divide can be explained through examination of the youth Jewish community in the United States. This group is "more liberal than their older counterparts"¹⁵, and, in addition to that, "they are more oriented toward universalism and more concerned with social justice as central to their Jewish identities and Judaism."¹⁶ The generational gap in support for Israeli politics can be explained by the fact that younger American Jews are more liberal, social justice oriented, and less involved with Israel overall than older generations.

Today, in addition to both a decreasing affinity and political support for the state of Israel, many younger American Jews feel less of a "need" for a Jewish state. As Israel continues to develop into an established country, younger generations identify more with their diasporic Jewish community than the acknowledged Jewish state. This is a true generational gap, and can be explained by a change, or lack thereof, of extreme anti-Semitic

events and unendurable Israeli wars. For young Jews in the diaspora, the state of Israel is not a staple of Jewish-hood, nor is it necessary for them to consider themselves Jewish. The state of Israel is not the main way that Jews in the diaspora express their Jewish values or cultural traditions, but rather the diasporic community they live in takes precedent. As Gabriel Sheffer commentates, "Jews in the diaspora do not consider themselves living in exile today. They are adamant in their belief that they live in these countries that willingly host them or that they live there out of their own sheer habit."¹⁷ As Jews in the diaspora, in exile, once yearned for a return to Jerusalem, Sheffer argues that modern American Jews do not have that same yearning. In particular, for younger age cohorts the state of Israel is not looked at as a spiritual place to return to, but rather a country to visit. In addition, generational experiences since Israel's founding also shape perspectives on the state. Young American Jews are less likely to view Israel as a vulnerable state:

Young American Jews, born decades after Israel's founding, have no nostalgic memory of Israel's early years and no experience of the emotional highs and lows of the Six-Day War. Nor do they even recall the hopes that accompanied the Oslo peace process in the 1990s. Instead, they have grown up during the Second Intifada and Israel's wars against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, wars that have inflicted heavy casualties among Palestinians and generated fierce criticism of Israel around the world.¹⁸

This conception of Israel by younger generations is driven by the experiences they have lived through. They were not haunted by memories of the Holocaust, and did not feel the subsequent need for a Jewish state. This group did not experience the chaos and strength of the 1967 and 1973 wars against Israel's neighbors, but rather view Israel today as a militaristic power in the Middle East, seemingly with little threat. They think of the state as less in need of their absolute support, and unlike older generations, do not associate themselves with Israel's previous vulnerability. As Dov Waxman once again writes, "American Jews are more assimilated, more affluent, and more

influential (culturally and politically) than ever before. As such, many younger American Jews are more likely to identify with the notion of 'white privilege' than with the notion of Jewish victimhood."¹⁹ It is this conclusion that draws in the differences by age for all the points presented in this paper. Younger Jews are more assimilated in American culture, are wealthier, more liberal, and more inclined to take action in matters of social justice. They do not feel as connected to the state of Israel as their predecessors, nor do they see a strong need for a Jewish state.

The state of Israel is undoubtedly a foundation for the security of Judaism, and its existence will continue to provide comfort for Jews around the world for years to come. However, the belief in the necessity for a Jewish state is no longer shared with the entirety of the younger generations of American Jews. In addition, many young American Jews take part in a distancing phenomenon to Israeli politics and an overall support and liking for the state. Young American Jews, contrary to older generations, show a greater sense of disconnect to the state because many are more liberal, social justice oriented, and have had less defining life experiences with the state and its affairs. Today, young generations now find their own "Jerusalem of Gold" in their Jewish communities in America, rather than in the land of Zion.

Sam Finkelstein is a first-year student in the College of Arts and Sciences, hoping to major in History. When he isn't thinking historically, he is locked in the present, fighting off bugs in his dorm room with his snazzy new 3 pack Fly Swatter.

Endnotes

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14. Waxman, "Young American Jews and Israel," 178.

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16. Ibid.

17. Sheffer, "Loyalty and criticism in the Relations," 80.

18. Waxman, "Young American Jews and Israel," 189.

19. Waxman, "Young American Jews and Israel," 188.