

American Jews and the Attitudes of Young Israelis

Bernard Avishai

For virtually any young American Jew, what would jump out from the data tracking attitudes of young Israelis is the divergence between Jews and Arabs regarding co-existence, acceptance of “the other”—call it “social integration.” Up to 80% of Israeli Arabs express positive attitudes toward integration (a willingness to have Jewish friend, and so forth), but just under 50% of Jews. This mirrors almost exactly the split Jews expect in America, except that over there, it is the Jews who exhibit the most positive ideas about integration (revealingly, about 80% voted for Obama in 2008), while the non-Jewish, white, Christian majority-in-decline tends to be about evenly split between liberals and people with more reactionary views. (The latter gains in clout during hard economic times.)

America is a much larger and more complex country, of course, but the data are intriguing nevertheless. For they imply what common sense suggests, that although the liberalism of American Jews regarding integration may have something to do with Jewish values, the protections that favor integration in America also happen to be in the *interest* of Jews, who have always been a minority seeking social advancement. As Philip Roth put it, this was a community growing up valorizing Roosevelt, LaGuardia and Justice Brandeis. The very high proportion of liberalism among educated Jews was, and is, very much like the high proportion of liberalism among educated Israeli Arabs, who have become something like America’s Jews in this ironic respect. It reminds one of John Maynard Keynes’s famous adage—or at least the negative version of it—that it is hard to get people not to believe in a principle when their living depends on their believing it.

A related point: Approximately 40% of young Israeli Jews believe (about a third, strongly) that the state should not offer civil marriage. One may infer that this very substantial group considers it natural, or at least defensible, that the state make intermarriage very difficult, or that halachic law governing personal status be the law of the land, or that rabbinic authority be a part of state authority, or all three; that this negative attitude toward civil marriage is a proxy for skepticism toward the rights of citizens in civil society more generally, and reflects the proportion of Israeli Jewish youth that one can characterize as religiously Orthodox to some significant degree. Not coincidentally, this 40% turns out to be roughly the proportion that has little or no faith in the Israeli judiciary, which is widely considered to be the country’s most consistent defender of secular rights.

Again, American Jewish youth, much like their parents, would tend to look at responses of this kind with suspicion and disdain, though many might moderate their criticism of Israel in public. Indeed, the theocratic tinge to certain Israeli laws, the prominence of political parties seeking to extend halachic privilege, the national Orthodox caste of the settlers, the fierce determination of Greater Israel supporters—all of these things—cannot be irrelevant to the growing alienation from Israel that American Jewish college students profess. And the fact that some “pro-Israel” activists on campuses overlook discrimination against Arabs in Israel, demand equality for Jews in America—and invoke the “war on terror,” or “the new anti-Semitism,” when caught in the contradiction—only deepens the alienation.

Consider the growing chasm. About half of American Jewish young people marry non-Jews; all Jews take civil marriage completely for granted. One searches in vain for any recent poll that bothers to ask whether young Jews favor the separation of religion and state in America. The response would be near 100%. Nor do Jews tend to feel comfortable with American counterparts of Israeli theocrats. According to a recent Gerstein Agne poll, American Jews oppose, by nearly 80-20%, forming even tactical alliances (to support Israel diplomatically, say) with evangelical Christian groups. I mean rightist American groups whose attitudes toward religion and state roughly mirror those of the 40% of young Israelis who oppose civil marriage. Yes, some young American Jews, like young evangelicals, for that matter, make allowances for Israel—the “Jewish state”—and overlook

violations of the very secular principles they rely on in America. But the steady rise of national and “ultra” orthodoxy in Israel, along with its association with settlements and occupation, almost certainly explain why more than half of American Jews under 35 said that they “would not view the destruction of Israel as a personal tragedy.” Only 54% profess to be “comfortable” with the idea of a Jewish state at all.

No doubt, all of this begs the question of whether Israeli Jews and American Jews mean the same thing when they speak about “Jews” in the first place. In fact, they do not. During WWII, of course, many grew to believe what classical political Zionism suggested, that Jews around the world constituted a single people, even an incipient nation, rooted in shared (if attenuated) religious practices or memories of the Eastern European hinterland. If this were still true, then the data regarding attitudes of young Israeli Jews might well be contrasted with attitudes of young Jews in the United States, something like the way those of New York Jews might be contrasted with Quebec Jews, or, indeed, attitudes of Israeli Jews might be contrasted with Israeli Arabs.

In fact, however, the ways young people in Israel experience Jewish identity diverge so fundamentally from the ways of American Jews do, it is hard to see what comparisons prove. For most secular (including traditional but non-Orthodox) Israelis, about 60% of young people, Jewishness is more or less coterminous with Israeliness, though Israeli nationality is not even recognized in the Registry of Populations. A young secular Israeli speaks the Hebrew language, which implicitly resonates with verses of Torah, or the poetics of traditional liturgy, or the lyrics of traditional music, or the precepts of Jewish law; one lives in the ancient land and considers oneself privileged to share in popular Hebrew culture, from television to the stage; one serves in the army, builds a business, or builds a home, which—given the terrible events of the 20th. century—feels the positive culmination of modern Jewish history. One celebrates in one’s family, and as public holidays, the traditional festivals of Judaism’s calendar. One lives, in short, in a modern, globalized national home, and being a Jew mostly means being a free citizen of the Jewish nation. (One is Jewish in the sense that one is home, with all the myths, frustrations, ambitions, and sentimental attachments this implies. Ordinary life gives “identity” the way trees give apples.)

In America, however, Jewish identity is quite different for young people with secular values and no particular connection to Orthodox Judaism. It may be any one, or combination, of responses to quite different perceptions, and its requires a positive act of, well, identification. There are young people who, because of a strong connection to a parent or grandparent, embrace the pathos of the immigrant Jewish experience; think of writers like, and readers of, Michael Chabon. There are young people who consider it a particular privilege to have “Americanized” by overturning American orthodoxies and taboos with Jewish iconoclasm; think of Philip Roth a generation ago, or Jon Stewart today. Again, there are young secular Jews who think of themselves as the quintessential American minority, the ontological victim of Western civilization, and take their Jewishness as a way of defying bigotry and valorizing constitutional liberties and civil rights. Correspondingly, there are young secular Jews whose organizing historical fact is the Holocaust.

In a famous poll published in 1999 by the American Jewish Committee, 98 per cent of American Jews said they consider the Holocaust to be an important or very important part of their identity. But only 15-20 per cent said that they observe Jewish religious obligations and traditions—the sands around which secular Israelis make their pearls.

Perhaps the most important shaper of Jewish identity in America today, for better and worse, is the high drama of Israel—the Jewish state in conflict, arguably a strategic partner for America. Since the 1967 War, Israel provided a kind vicarious international identity for many young

American Jews, a surprisingly large number so long as Israel's moral prestige seemed unchallenged. One could think of Israel as a kind of psychic comfort, the best *answer* to the Holocaust, or at least the place Jewish continuity was assured, even if (as has been the case) Jewish numbers in America declined. One could think of Israeli heroes like Moshe Dayan giving the lie to schlemiel images of comedians like Woody Allen. One could come to Jerusalem and enjoy a kind of Epcot Center of Jewish culture; or think of Israel as a big Jewish convention in which American Jews are super-delegates. One could practice one's identity by standing up for Israel, as AIPAC does, in the American ideas marketplace. One could depict America in a competition against world evil—first the Soviets, now “terror”—and depict Israel as America's power forward in the Middle East.

Even people who reject the Manichean political ideas promoted by the Israel lobby take a certain psychic comfort from the drama of Israel. Many current supporters of J Street, for example, seem more interested in Israel's moral performance than they are in Israel's cultural contradictions. They consider themselves Jews, they say, by holding Israel's occupation up to the implicit criticism of Israel's “prophetic tradition,” though most seem to restrict themselves to a few verses from the late Isaiah. In the same sense that Israel under siege, or misunderstood by a hypocritical world, seems a pillar of identity for AIPAC supporters—the necessary *foil* for AIPAC supporters—some J Street supporters seem unlikely to know what to make of Jewish identity were the occupation to end. They may quote a Leonard Cohen poem against Netanyahu, but would be hard pressed to make a *practice* of secular Jewish life any more than Cohen could.

Which brings me to the last archetype among young American Jews, and the most likely to find a like-minded community in Israel. I mean, of course, Orthodox Jews, or Conservative but Halachic Jews, for whom synagogue attendance is a weekly (or biweekly) routine. Polls show that this is about 20% of American Jews, though the number is somewhat higher among young Jews. By all measures, this group tends to be most activist in parochial Jewish institutions, the most uncritically supportive of Israel, the most rightist in American political terms, that is, the most Republican. This group is also most sympathetic with evangelical Christians, ironically, and the most competent in the ways of traditional Judaism, from knowledge of Hebrew, to mastery of Jewish texts. This is the only American Jewish sub-group that lives in a cultural and religious mental atmosphere much like an Israeli sub-group, that of the national and modern Orthodox, especially in greater Jerusalem. For this group, Israel, or at least a significant part of Israel, is not just an abstraction; and the Jewish state means something quite like the extension of synagogue life to politics.

Peter Beinart recently made the point,¹ eloquently, which polls and elections support, that unlike these Orthodox Jews, the majority of American Jews tend to be progressive and liberal in most things, and that the reactionary cast of leaders of American Jewish institutions could not possibly appeal to them—that AIPAC, ADL, and so forth were positively turning off young people on their campuses. Specifically, he argued that the Israeli leadership's brand of “Zionism,” insofar as it had turned on tribalism and religious orthodoxy, do not engender a sense of identification with Israel among the very people it most wished to attract.

Beinart seemed to conclude from this that a progressive Jewish leadership in America was therefore a kind of answer; that if such a leadership adopted a Zionism more in step with peace and civil rights movements in Israel, it would have more success in bringing young American Jews around. It would, correspondingly, help cultivate appreciation for what was special about Israel, support secular Jewish culture, defend Israeli self-defense, and so forth. For my part, I strongly

¹ *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010.

sympathize with notion that there is a misfit between the American Jewish majority and their leadership. Indeed, I welcome the advent of J Street, for all the obvious reasons.

But is it really true that, if a reactionary leadership is turning young Jews off Israel, a progressive leadership is likely to turn them on? If Israel were a social democratic paradise, like Denmark, or Degania before 1948, would *this* bring young Jewish liberals back to support Zionism? Actually, this seems unlikely. If we buy into Beinart's argument it will be hard to understand, first, why liberal American Jews would naturally have drifted away even from a Israel and, second, why the American Jews who feel most passionate about Israel are not only *bound* to be Orthodox, but why they potentially connect to Israeli secularists in ways American liberals cannot—connect to secular Israeli artists, writers, musicians, etc., by drawing from common cultural roots, even as they threaten Israeli secularism by making common cause with the Israeli orthodox right.

For the real *Kulturkampf* among Jews over the past century, even in America, was always between, on the one hand, people who thought of Jews in terms of victimization and rescue and, on the other, Jews who thought in terms of cultural revolution. The former, who usually gravitated toward “political Zionism,” tended to focus on the psychology of powerlessness, depicted the militant state as a kind of therapy, counted on Antisemitism to define Jewish identity. For them, all Jews (including Diaspora Jews) were nationals, because their efforts at assimilation would lead to disaster. Think of Max Nordau once, or Martin Peretz today.

The latter, “cultural Zionists,” have tended to focus on modernizing a failing Hebrew religious vernacular, which they considered their patrimony, and loved and hated in equal measure. They thought assimilation of Western Jews into liberal society was perfectly possible—and *that* would be the disaster. They saw the state as custodian of a unique cultural opportunity, which could be inclusive of anyone coming to the land and participating in the revolutionary national life. Again—and anyone who was once serious about cultural Zionist ideas would know this—Israel and America are not parallel universes for Jews, where the only important political question is, Are you progressive or are you reactionary? For there is also the question of cultural affinity. For most American Jews, to be “liberal” means to wade in, as a sovereign individual, to the cultural currents of Anglo-American life.

All of which leave us with a conundrum. For most young American Jews, the obvious alternative to being caught up in the web of Jewish congregational life, Halachic orthodoxy, and a kind of tribalist loyalty to Israel, is *not* becoming a fellow traveler of Israeli liberals, or reading *Haaretz* in translation, or going to the J Street Conference. The alternative to all of this is simply becoming indifferent to Israel, and losing, almost utterly, the cultural threads—Hebrew, liturgy, Torah—out of which secular Jewish life comes into the world, kicking and screaming against Orthodox rabbinic smugness.

Ironically, then, it is from among the Orthodox group in American Jewish life that one is likely to find not only people to connect with Israeli theocrats, but also some subset of young people who, for whatever reason find themselves in revolt against the Halacha of their families. It is *they* who will connect with Israeli liberals. What makes Israel unique—the cultural adventure that it was and is—is not simply Jewish military power, but the evolution of a modern national home, the development of a secular Jewish life, the fusing of Jewish civilization with liberal values—the “Jewish and democratic” thing.

You see, the people who made this modern Israeli culture first had to know the liturgy, Torah—that is, a whole world evoked by the Hebrew language. The poet Yehuda Amichai had to know the prayer for the dead, God full of mercy, *El Maleh Rahamim*, before he could give us the ironic poem, “God full of mercy / Were God not so full of mercy / Then there would be mercy in the world / And not just in Him.” For emancipation to be poignant, there has to be an *ancien regime*. Otherwise, there is nothing *but* abstraction. What comes out feels false. The secular world of Tel-Aviv is justly famous for its cosmopolitanism, but it is hard to think of young Israeli artists, from the

painter Eli Shamir to the writer and satirist Edgat Keret, who is not in some kind of dialogue with Jewish tradition. Secular Israelis who reject the tradition entirely, or who try to live on some combination of imported drama and exported technology, often report a sense of ennui; and they should not be shocked when their children join West Bank settlements or linger on the banks of the Ganges.

Young American Jews, then, at least those who seriously bother with being Jewish at all, are working through a problem. They are instinctively, well, moderns, but those who are really equipping themselves to be “modern Jews” will start their journey in the closed circles of synagogue orthodoxy, much as Achad Haam did. They will seem, at first, relatively easy prey for rightist ideas; they may *seem* the last people to identify with the progressive spirit and peacenik politics of many secular Israeli writers, artists and scholars.

And yet they are the first people—or at least the only young Americans—who have a real shot at appreciating what modern Hebrew writers, artists and scholars are up to. No matter the politics, they are going to *care* about what becomes of Israel because that is where their cultural action will be. They will love Israel, not because of what it does, but because of what it is. Given its Hebrew culture, Israel is the only place on earth where the struggle to be an emancipated individual can still be Jewish in this best sense. (Jon Stewart might get Amichai’s poem, but will he get the joke?)

Clearly—or is this clear enough?—there is no moral advantage to being a modern Jew in Israel or a modern American with a vaguely Jewish pedigree. My point, however, is that if we really hope to understand what makes progressive Israelis tick—the 55-60% who *do* stand for coexistence— young American Jews will need more than admiration for their progressive “values.” They will need to speak their language. And if they want to look for progressive leaders of an American Jewish community, as opposed to an American Jewish “demographic,” they might consider the searchers, however reduced their numbers. People like Beinart himself, perhaps, who marinated in halachic life and punched his way out. They will be odd birds with a love, not only of what seemed ethically universal in Jewish civilization, but what seemed specifically beautiful.