



Who cares about ISRAEL

Social scientists who study contemporary Jewry have been engaged in an ongoing and intense battle for the past 30 years over trends in American Jewish attachment to Israel. Most studies show declining connection, especially among young people. Along comes a new study that asserts that the trend — if it ever existed — is changing

BY *Binyamin Rose, Jerusalem*

A recent political satire published in an Israeli newspaper featured a mock interview with a journalist trying to coax an encouraging word out of a spokesman for the Israel Water Authority after this winter's record-setting rainfall. "Shhh," said the water spokesman. "We never want to leave the impression there is good news about the water supply."

Reports on Jewish demography often follow the same downbeat pattern. The doomsday scenario is well-known. Assimilation is rampant. Inter-marriage is pervasive. Core Jewish organizations are in decline. Young Jews throughout the world feel more distanced from Israel than ever before.

"The metaphor used is that there's an iceberg sitting on the table. It is 100 degrees in the room and the ice is melting rapidly," says Dr. Leonard Saxe, professor of contemporary Jewish history at Brandeis University. Dr. Saxe and Dr. Theodore Sasson, associate professor of international studies at Middlebury College in

Vermont, presented a far rosier picture from the findings in their recent study, "Understanding Young Adult Attachment to Israel," at the Knesset Subcommittee on Relations between Israel and Jewish Communities Abroad, which *Mishpacha* covered in its entirety.

They conclude that between the 1990s and mid-2000s, attachment to Israel among American Jews increased among all age groups. The percentage of respondents who said they felt no emotional attachment at all to Israel has shrunk by some 50 percent during this period.

"What we are saying is that there is no clear-cut evidence of distancing, and everything that exists suggests that the opposite is occurring," says Dr. Saxe.

Pointing specifically to the more than 200,000 young adults who have attended a Birthright trip to Israel since the program's inception in 2000, Dr. Saxe says these youths are changing the attitudes of their generation.

"They have a direct connection with Israelis," he says. "They know the history and have some deeper understanding of the culture and contemporary issues. It



PHOTO BY JOSEPH

will take us a little longer to document this, but I believe we have a generation that has a relationship to Israel that no previous adult generation has felt.”

Sharing the Pain This new study is one of a dozen undertaken in the last 20 years to try to prove whether US Jews care more — or less — about Israel.

The relationship between American Jews and Israel is vital on many planes. American Jewish support, both financial and moral, has enabled Israel to survive, thrive, and to develop into a world-class economic power in its own right. If American Jews are becoming distanced from Israel emotionally, that support is jeopardized.

At the same time, Israel is the only land that holds the ultimate promise for the reunification and spiritual perfection of the Jewish Nation after 2,000 years of exile. As long as Jews still feel even the slightest yearning for Israel, there is hope that even our most assimilated brothers and sisters will one day return.

Neither of the two narratives — of Jews becoming more distanced, or of Jews strengthening their connections — can be definitively confirmed or rejected by the data in this newest Saxe-Sasson study; however, their findings do fly in the face of two strong assumptions expounded by previous academic studies.

One is that Israel’s political climate and the hard-line stances taken by the Israeli government make it more difficult for Diaspora Jews to relate to Israel. The second is that a generation gap exists between an older generation, who remembers Israel’s pre-1967 “Auschwitz borders” and relates to Israel as David against an Arab Goliath, and a younger generation indoctrinated by hostile elements in academia and the media to view Israel as an oppressive Goliath.

“We hypothesize that political violence in Israel, rather than having the net effect of discouraging attachment (cf. Cohen and Kelman 2007), actually increased it,” write Drs. Saxe and Sasson. “The attachment begins increasing with the terror bombings of 1996–7 and increases through the violent years of the Second Intifada (2000–2004).”

Birthright students from USC pay a visit to Mayanot Yeshivah in Jerusalem

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— Dr. Theodore Sasson



Dr. Saxe says this hypothesis is based on surveys and not just anecdotal evidence.

“We did a large study a number of years ago after the Hizbullah attacks on the north. There was an outpouring of response from Birthright graduates trying to connect with their Israeli peers and understand what was going on,” said Dr. Saxe, who added that he has published other papers that show a spike in attachment following attacks on Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1991 Gulf War, and even after the Gaza flotilla in the summer of 2010.

Divisions, not Distance The survey drew on evidence from four sets of previous surveys administered to comparable demographic samples at ten-year intervals. The preponderance of evidence supports the view that emotional attachment to Israel increased over the course of a person’s life rather than declining across the generations. That having been said, the report notes that future trends may be influenced by new dynamics, including increased intermarriage, more widespread Israel travel, and a highly fluid political situation.

In a separate survey of attitudes of youth who returned from Birthright, Dr. Sasson showed the Knesset subcommittee a variety of statistics, including one that showed 38 percent said their most lasting impression of Israel was that of a high-tech powerhouse, while only 7 percent strongly agreed with a statement that Israel is a “fundamentalist religious society.”

However, Dr. Sasson said a closer examination of the survey in its entirety does show some evidence of increased divisiveness and acrimony when the topic turns to what the nature of Israeli society ought to be like. Despite this, he says it shows little evidence that differences of opinion ultimately lead to the distancing found in other studies — an observation that he not only disagrees with, but also finds harmful.

“It increases the feeling that Israel is isolated, and it injects the issue of loyalty to Israel into what should be a political debate,” said Dr. Sasson. “We ought to set this aside, in my view, and instead say that the divisions in the Diaspora mirror divisions in Israeli society. We ought to confront these head on, and consider how to foster civil discourse in a community that is divided.”

Dr. Sasson also presented evidence that contradicts a widely held view that charitable giving to Israel dropped as a result of the detachment that American Jews were reportedly feeling. Although donations to the federations’ United Jewish Appeal have fallen by about 20 percent over the last decade, American philanthropy to Israel has actually skyrocketed. Donors’ preferences have changed, and

many prefer to give their money to the various “American Friends of ...” nonprofits that have sprouted in recent decades.

According to IRS records, before 1970, only about a dozen “American Friends” organizations had been formed. Dr. Sasson says there are now more than 250, and that’s just the tip of an iceberg that is growing, not melting. “We have scoured IRS records for other organizations that support Israel and don’t have ‘American Friends’ in their title, and we have identified more than 750 of them.”

In 2007, these organizations contributed some \$1.9 billion in aid to Israel. Most were sent to Israeli universities, social welfare institutions, and hospitals. Adding the approximate \$200 million given to the UJA, American Jews are sending over \$2.1 billion to Israel per year.

The Cancun Hypothesis Knesset member Einat Wilf, who chaired the hearing, showed keen interest in a statistic showing that groups that could be considered extreme-left and extreme-right appear to receive an equal amount of funding from US supporters.

The Knesset itself has both a budgetary and political interest in the survey.

“The issue for the Knesset is whether to invest more money in Jewish education overseas, and how to shift some of the criticism leveled against us into positive engagement,” said Mrs. Wilf.

The survey results were met with skepticism in some quarters.

“What I’m still missing is what percentage of young Jews would relate the same positive feelings about their travel to Mexico, or Canada or the Bahamas?” said Shmuel Ben-Shmuel, who heads the World Jewish and Interreligious Affairs Bureau at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Also, how activist are they? How many of them would take to the streets on behalf of Israel?”

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“The larger number of youth coming to Israel should answer that question,” says Dr. Sasson, who noted that Birthright is largely responsible for a 400 percent leap in educational tourism to Israel since 2000. For the summer of 2012, some 44,000 young people applied to participate for Birthright’s 18,000 available slots. “If this rate of growth continues, more than half of the [Jewish] kids in the US will have some sort of educational experience in Israel,” says Dr. Sasson.

Dr. Saxe conceded that there may be some truth to what he referred to as Mr. Ben-Shmuel’s “Cancun hypothesis.”

“If you were to take them to Mexico to meet Mexican Jews, or to Russia to meet Russian Jews, I think we could replicate some of our findings,” admits Dr. Saxe. “It’s not Eretz Yisrael, it’s Am Yisrael they’re connecting with.”

Another area of concern is the two professors’ close association with the Taglit-Birthright program. Dr. Saxe is also director of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute at Brandeis University, endowed by investor Michael Steinhardt, who also founded Birthright. Dr. Sasson serves as coprincipal investigator of evaluation research for Birthright’s educational program. A study showing higher levels of Jewish attachment following a Birthright tour would certainly not hurt the program, or its ability to raise funds.

Dr. Saxe rejects the notion that he has a vested interest in positive results. Taking pride in his reputation as a tough social scientist and rigorous researcher during a 40-year career, he contends that the head of Birthright, Michael Steinhardt, is not looking for yes-men.

“Steinhardt thrives on negative stuff and critical things,” says Dr. Saxe. “There is no pressure on us to produce particular results.”

“We are very confident — and I am staking my reputation as a social scientist on the data that point to the positive side that we presented,” he added. ●

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