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.

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. Intermarriage 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 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.
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 Habibullah 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 the papers if interested to a spike in attachment following attacks on Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1991 Gulf War, and even after the Gaza Bottlina 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 in last decade that 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 religion.”

However, Dr. Saxe 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 general public and private 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. Saxe. “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. Theodore Sasson

“While the larger number of youth coming to Israel should answer that question, said 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. Sasson conceded that there may be some truth to what he referred to as Mr. Ben-Shmuel’s “Can-cun 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 Erez 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. An independent interviewer — and I am making my reputa- tion as a social scientist on the data that point to the positive side that we presented," he added. ©