


and, “I’ve spent 36 weeks building a baby.”

Counting up allows us to be present in the moment, appreciate what we’ve been through, and anticipate with wonder what is yet to come. When pregnant, what is yet to come is a period of intimate connection with a little person who has no concept of time, for whom a minute is an eternity. A new parent can lose track of time, counting down the hours until a

break is possible. And yet the days and weeks pass “like a sigh.”

Counting our children’s first days, weeks, months, and years can help us to treasure the opportunity to be with them as they are right now, to guide them to the next milestone, and to celebrate their development into independence, our development as parents, and the ever changing parent-child relationship. 



by the numbers

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A Parting of Ways?

TED SASSON

In a survey of American Jews conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies last summer, 28 percent of respondents ages 18 to 29 — compared to 42 percent of those over 60 — reported feeling very connected to Israel. Does this statistic mean that younger Jews are becoming estranged from Israel, as Peter Beinart argued in his much discussed *New York Review of Books* essay (June 10, 2010)?

Beinart’s essay galvanized interest, I believe, because it corroborated a growing sense that Israel has become a polarizing force in American Jewish life. In this view, expressed by journalists and social scientists alike, older American Jews idealize and romanticize Israel, which they believe can do no wrong, whereas younger American Jews either express indifference or view the Jewish state as anachronistic and politically retrograde. Like many similar efforts to summarize complex sociopolitical developments (think red state/blue state), this one, too, includes elements of truth alongside a good deal of distortion.

Most studies of American Jewish opinion about Israel report that older Jews express higher levels of emotional attachment to the Jewish state. But why this is so — and therefore what it means for the future — is not at all clear. The relatively greater level of attachment expressed by older Jews today may be due, as Beinart believes, to their experience of coming of age in an era when Israel faced existential threats, or even to stronger memories of the Holocaust and the founding of the state. In contrast, the relative disengagement of younger Jews may reflect their experience of coming of age in a context of greater moral ambiguity regarding Israel. If this interpretation is correct, then attachment to Israel may be declining across the generations, and the Jewish communities of Israel and the United States may be growing apart.

However, there is strong evidence that contradicts this generational interpretation. On the one hand, the tendency of younger Jews to feel less attached to Israel is not new. Younger Jews were less attached in surveys conducted at regular intervals over the past quarter-century, including the National Jewish Population Surveys of 2000 and 1990, and the annual surveys of the American Jewish Committee dating back to the mid-1980s. On the other hand, the level of attachment among Jews as a whole has remained remarkably stable over time — there is no evidence of decline. If the younger Jews of a generation ago had maintained their youthful level of Israel attachment throughout their lives, then the overall level of attachment would have trended downward. But it has not.

In the Cohen Center survey, 14 percent of respondents who grew up in intermarried households — compared to 36 percent who grew up in in-married households — felt very connected to Israel.

Taken together, these observations favor an alternative interpretation: Rather than declining across the generations, emotional attachment to Israel increases over the life course; that is, it is a life-cycle phenomenon. As they grow older, Jews become more comfortable with Jewish identity, more embedded in Jewish community, and more attached to Israel. If this is true, then today’s young adults should become more attached to Israel as they age.

But what of the apparently growing political divide between American Jews and Israel? The vast majority of American Jews — 78 percent — voted enthusiastically for President Barack Obama, who has demanded a West Bank settlement freeze, a halt to new construction in East Jerusalem, and rapid progress toward a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian

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conflict. A majority of Israeli Jews, in contrast, voted for right-wing parties that openly oppose the Obama administration's approach to negotiations and settlement of the conflict. Do these developments signal a parting of the ways?

Among American voters as a whole, these developments appear to be having an effect. According to Gallup surveys, pro-Israel sentiment is higher among Republicans (85 percent) and independents (60 percent) than among Democrats (48 percent). Thus far, however, this pattern of diverging sympathy for Israel has not spread to the Jews. Although Jewish liberals and conservatives disagree over Israeli policies (for example, the future of West Bank settlements and Jerusalem) they do not express differing levels of emotional attachment. For American Jews, Israel, as such, remains a nonpolitical issue.

It is possible that these dynamics could change in the future. Today's political tensions may intensify and lead to the kind of alienation Beinart describes. And other forces, such as intermarriage, are at work that may yet drive down American Jewish attachment to Israel. (In the Cohen Center survey, 14 percent of respondents who grew up in intermarried households — compared to 36 percent who grew up in in-married households — felt very connected to

Israel). The fact that the previous generations of American Jews became more attached to Israel as they aged does not guarantee that today's young adults will follow in their footsteps.

But new forces — such as travel initiatives like Taglit-Birthright Israel — are pushing in that direction. Since its launch a decade ago, Birthright Israel has brought more than 250,000 Diaspora Jewish young adults to Israel. In recent surveys, for the first time, the proportion of young adults who have been to Israel is greater than the proportion of middle-aged adults. And going to Israel is a key factor in becoming emotionally attached (the Cohen Center survey reports that 57 percent of those who have been to Israel — compared to 17 percent of those who had not — felt very connected).

We cannot know with any certainty whether increased travel will counterbalance opposing tendencies — such as intermarriage and political alienation — but there is good reason to believe it will. In the future, discussions about Israel may become increasingly contentious. But such is sometimes the price paid for intimacy. At the moment, there is simply no good evidence in the survey numbers to support the view that the world's two largest Jewish communities are parting ways. 

Counting American Jewry

LEONARD SAXE

In a translation that makes the complex seem simple, Anglo Jews call the fourth book of the Torah “Numbers.” Although counting and numbers play a role in the biblical account of our people's story, the Hebrew name of this book — *B'midbar*, or “In the Wilderness” — is a more apt descriptor of our physical and spiritual wandering in the desert. Nevertheless, the English translation captures what has become an obsession, carried through to the modern era, in counting our numbers.

Over the last several decades, the American Jewish community has invested more funds in sociodemographic studies of the Jewish population than it has in any other form of systematic social research. In recent decades, major national studies of the size and characteristics of the American Jewish community have been conducted in parallel with the 1990 and 2000 U.S. censuses. As well, it has become common for local Jewish federations to sponsor decennial

studies of their populations.

Although I have benefited from communal support to conduct some of these studies, I am a reluctant contributor to this knowledge base. Knowing the number of Jews in the United States and in local communities is far less interesting and important than understanding their character. Unfortunately, conducting demographic research has drained attention and resources from the task of better understanding the dynamics of communal engagement and the effectiveness of our efforts to engage and educate new generations.

Key to my pessimism with our counting obsession is that we have not been able to conduct very good studies. Modern demographic studies are often treated as if they are censuses that yield actual counts. But they are surveys of a “rare” population and are strongly affected by coverage and nonresponse errors that can provide misleading results. “Who is a Jew?” questions

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