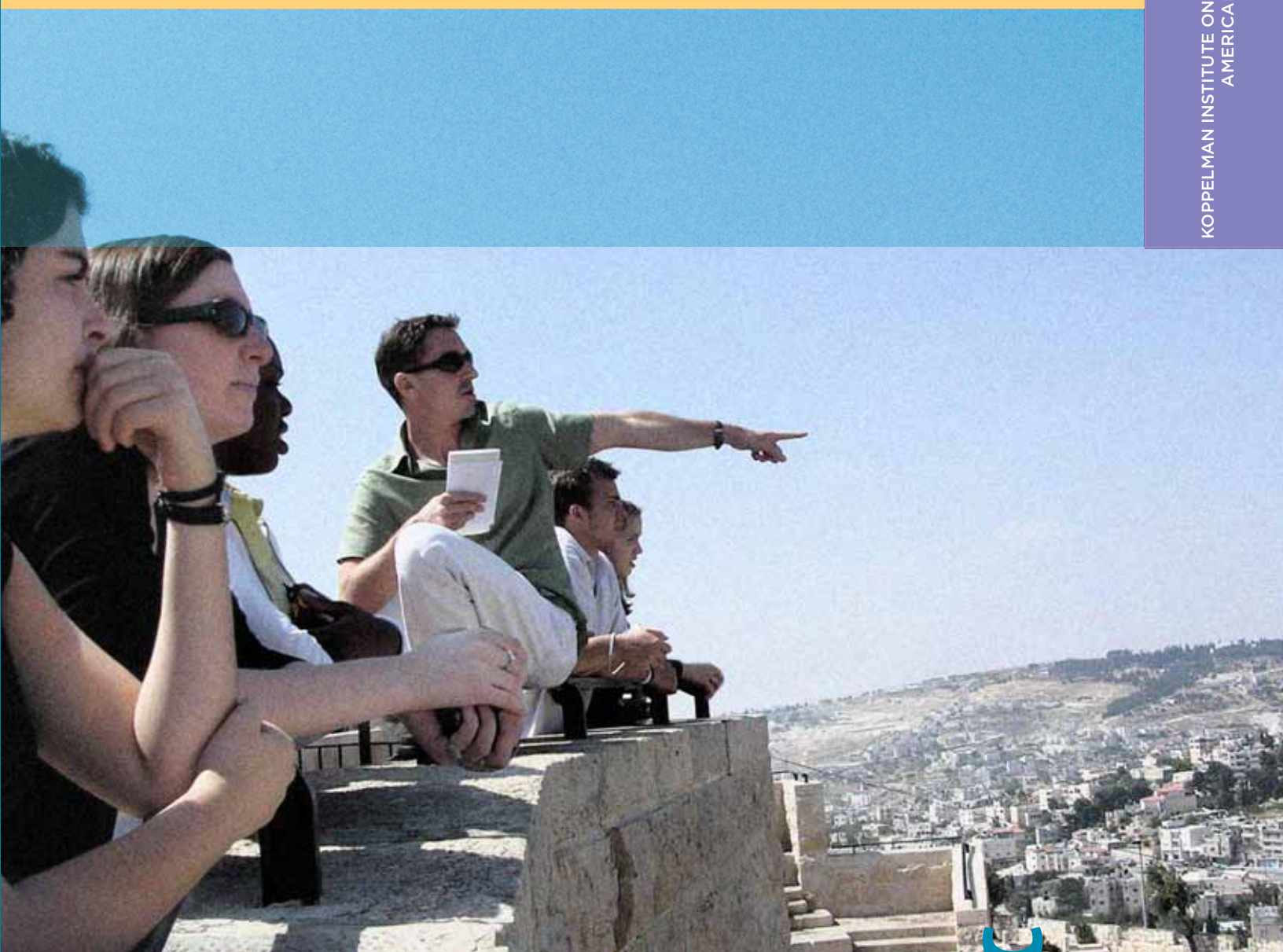


The New Realism: American Jews' Views about Israel

Theodore Sasson

KOPPELMAH INSTITUTE ON AMERICAN JEWISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE



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The New Realism: American Jews' Views about Israel

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Preface

Relations between American Jewry and Israeli society may be described as a pyramid structure. At the apex of both communities—Israeli governmental officials and American Jewish leaders—relations generally are quite close. The further one penetrates down to the grass roots of both societies, differences of culture, politics, identity, and sheer lack of knowledge and understanding about one another threaten to pull apart the world's two largest Jewish populations.

To be sure, surveys of American Jews have long posited that both ties and tensions coexist in the American Jewish-Israel relationship. Although useful, survey questionnaires invite simple affirmative or negative responses and therefore are far too blunt an instrument to provide the context and texture necessary to understand the relationship and the range of possible perspectives upon it. As a result, the American Jewish Committee's Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations commissioned a series of focus groups to study American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. The focus groups, conducted by Professor Ted Sasson of Brandeis University, were designed to probe whether Israeli-American Jewish ties and the longstanding pro-Israel consensus among American Jews remained salient or were experiencing some degree of attenuation.

Two primary issues were of dominant concern to American Jews when they considered Israel: the future of the peace process and Israel's future as a democracy. With respect to the peace process, a profound shift of thinking has taken place since the collapse of the Oslo process. American Jews have become more skeptical of Palestinian intentions and desires for sincere peace with Israel. However, the discussion has evolved from concerns of history/theology to concerns with Israeli security. Even among the Orthodox, one detects a shift away from religious conviction of a "holy land" to concern as to whether a peace will be secure and lasting.

More importantly, American Jews divide clearly over West Bank settlements and Israeli settlement policy. Orthodox Jews tend to be quite supportive of settlements—citing friends and family members who often populate them. By contrast, Conservative and Reform Jews favor dismantling at least some of the settlements as part of an overall peace process. This issue likely will divide American Jewry much as it divides Israeli society and augurs a possible widening of differences between American and Israeli governmental policies.

Yet perhaps more important in Israel-American Jewish relations than the role of the peace process is the perception of Israel's future as a democracy. Great resentment exists over the Orthodox monopoly within Israel over laws of personal status. Orthodox Jews defend this monopoly as necessary to ensure the Jewish character of the state and preserve the unity of the Jewish people by positing a *halakhic* standard of who is a Jew. Non-

Orthodox Jews, by contrast, fear a looming Jewish theocracy and desire greater separation of synagogue and state. The study indicates that these issues of religious pluralism and their place within Israeli society perhaps comprise the single factor most likely to weaken American Jewish attachments to Israel.

These legitimate concerns, however, need to be placed against the backdrop of both Jewish assimilation and renewal in American society. Frequently, those who are most outspokenly critical of one or another aspect of Israeli policy are those most committed and attached to Israel as a Jewish state. For example, a recent study of independent *minyanim*—hardly a venue where criticism of Israel is *verboden*—found that 96 percent of *minyan* participants had been to Israel at least once compared to only 35 percent for American Jews generally.

Rather, as Jack Wertheimer has written recently, the real divide in Jewish life is “between young Jews who have spent considerable time in Israel and those who have not.”¹ Put another way, those who are seeking to strengthen their relationship with Judaism and with the Jewish people naturally perceive Israel as a primary vehicle for doing so. Conversely, however, those who are disinterested in leading a creative Jewish life are distancing themselves from Israel as well. Indifference, in other words, constitutes a greater danger to American Jewish-Israeli relations than criticism of particular Israeli policies and practices. Issues of religious pluralism, for example, evoke far greater resonance among committed Conservative and Reform Jews, for many of whom Israel plays a large role in their Jewish identities, than they do among those whose attachments to Judaism and Jewish peoplehood are more tenuous.

The focus groups Dr. Sasson convened and studied help map out the range of concerns that engage American Jewry with respect to Israel. Policy planners need to ask how knowledge of, attachment to, and appreciation of Israel may be enhanced among the diverse circles of American Jewry.

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1. Jack Wertheimer, “The Truth about American Jews and Israel,” *Commentary*, June 2009, p. 44.

The New Realism: American Jews' Views about Israel

Introduction

Once an occasion for solidarity, consensus-building, and collective action, Israel advocacy as practiced by American Jewish organizations has become increasingly pluralistic, partisan, and contentious. Whereas in the not-so-distant past, American Jewish organizations generally lobbied on behalf of positions enunciated by the government of the State of Israel, today they increasingly pursue their own individually defined political visions.

Consider, for example, the role of Jewish advocacy organizations during the November 2007 Annapolis Peace Conference. Outside the meeting halls, Jewish peace organizations, including Brit Tzedek V'Shalom and Americans for Peace Now, rallied to show support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Almost simultaneously, the Orthodox Union (OU) held a press conference announcing formation of the Jerusalem Coalition (later renamed the Coordinating Council on Jerusalem) to lobby against any negotiated peace settlement that might divide Jerusalem. The group, which expanded to include a number of Orthodox and right-leaning organizations in the United States and Israel, insisted that Diaspora Jewry must be consulted regarding any future changes to Jerusalem's borders.¹

In January 2009, during the early days of the Gaza War, Israel advocacy organizations again faced off. Pro-peace organizations, led by the newly established J Street political action committee, lobbied Congress for an "immediate ceasefire," while centrist organizations, including AIPAC, pressed for a congressional resolution expressing unqualified support for Israel's position in the war.²

To be sure, much of Israel advocacy remains consensus-oriented, as was true during the 2006 Lebanon War. However, partisan activism has not been confined to issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In recent years, Reform and Conservative Jews have stepped up pressure on the Israeli government to recognize marriages and conversions performed by their rabbis in the State of Israel. They have also lobbied against legal initiatives that would limit recognition of conversions conducted abroad to those performed by Orthodox rabbis. The Reform movement, in particular, has made raising its profile and legal standing in Israel a major goal for the coming decade.³

American Jewish organizational elites have surely become more partisan in their advocacy in relation to Israel. But what of the Jewish grass roots? Have ordinary American Jews embraced the factionalism and polarizing positions characteristic of many Jewish organizations? Do the divergent viewpoints that increasingly separate Israel advocates also divide the rank-and-file?

In the context of stepped-up partisan political advocacy, the nature of American Jewish opinion on issues pertaining to Israel has become the subject of increasing contention. Advocacy groups typically emphasize survey findings that indicate support for their own positions. Independent research on Jewish attitudes toward Israel has focused on subpopulations, such as young adult Jews, or themes, such as the impact of Israel experience programs.⁴ Few studies have examined the views of American Jews on political issues pertaining to Israel and the relationship between these views and their broader feelings of connection to the Jewish state.⁵

The present study investigates the following questions:

- How do rank-and-file American Jews think about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Whom do they hold responsible for the ongoing conflict, and what policy options do they embrace?
- How do rank-and-file American Jews think about the role of religion in the Jewish state? What importance do they attach to Israel's policies regarding non-Orthodox Jewish denominations?
- What is the relationship between the policy-oriented views of American Jews and their general feelings of identification with Israel? More broadly, what does Israel signify for contemporary American Jews, and what does it mean to them personally?

Research Methodology

Surveys of American Jewish public opinion provide a useful starting point. In this study we will examine, in particular, the surveys conducted by the American Jewish Committee. Administered annually to comparable population samples, with many recurring questions, such surveys are the best guide to the distribution of opinions across subpopulations and to long-term trends.⁶

To produce reliable findings, surveys must necessarily pose questions in a simple and straightforward—even reductionist—fashion. The job of interpreting what respondents mean by their answers is left to survey analysts and consumers, and often we have little empirical evidence upon which to base our inferences. For this reason, the current study draws as well on a large qualitative component consisting of focus group discussions with diverse sets of Jews. The narrative data help clarify the meanings implicit in the survey findings and greatly deepen our grasp of the subject matter.

The study examines thirty new focus group discussions among Jews from diverse segments of the community. Discussions were held in the Boston area, in a variety of denominational settings, as well as among specially targeted populations. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the focus groups. Most groups were homogeneous in terms of denomination and age (adult/young adult); a few were mixed and categorized in terms of their dominant subgroup. The significance of the sample's regional character is discussed below. The discussions were held during a period

that included several prominent developments, including Israel's withdrawal of settlements from the Gaza Strip (the Disengagement), the election of Hamas to a majority of seats in the Palestinian parliament, and the Second Lebanon War. The typical discussion group was comprised of four to seven individuals, but some were as large as fourteen or as few as three. In all, 156 individuals participated in the discussions. Figures A1-A3 (in the Methodological Appendix, page 43) provide additional information on the focus group sample.

Table 1
Focus Group Discussions

	Focus groups	Individuals
Modern Orthodox Groups	6	25
Conservative Groups	5	32
Reform Groups	8	47
Reconstructionist Groups	1	5
Post-Denominational Groups	3	15
Synagogue-Unaffiliated Groups	1	5
Young Adult Groups	4	17
Israel Advocacy (Right-Leaning) Groups	1	4
Peace-Advocacy (Left-Leaning) Groups	1	6
Total	30	156

Participants were recruited to the focus groups in a variety of ways. Most of the non-Orthodox synagogue groups were convened with the assistance of religious school principals and rabbis. We asked these local contact persons to suggest names of "typical congregants" and to include no more than one or two individuals from synagogue committees responsible for Israel programming. Many groups were held among parents of religious school students during school sessions. Additional groups were recruited with the assistance of local "friend of friend" contacts who were asked to invite their peers. The unaffiliated group was convened among parents of students enrolled in a university-based Sunday school (which substitutes for synagogue-based religious school for families who choose not to join a congregation). The young adult groups were organized through advertisements posted in the student union of a large university in the Boston area. Several Orthodox groups were convened with the assistance of rabbis; others were recruited directly by the principal investigator during visits to daily prayer services (*minyanim*). Finally, discussion groups with grassroots activists in an Israel advocacy organization (affiliated with the political center-right) and a Jewish peace organization (affiliated with the center-left) were convened with the assistance of the organizations' professional staff.

What biases might result from a sample composed of Boston-area Jews? National survey data suggest that modest regional differences in attitudes toward Israel derive from variations in the concentration of

Orthodox and unaffiliated Jews. By quota-sampling to ensure adequate representation of Jews from across the denominational, political, and age spectra, the current study provides a broadly representative sample of qualitative data. In addition, evidence from published survey research is cited throughout to validate the general patterns evident in and across the focus groups.

Participants in the discussions were asked their opinions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and struggles in Israel over the status of non-Orthodox Jewish movements. They were also asked to comment more generally on Israel's significance as a Jewish and democratic state and to discuss how their feelings toward Israel have developed over the course of their lives. The Methodological Appendix (pages 44-45) includes the full schedule of interview questions.

One feature of focus group discussions is that the group setting tends to constrain the expression of dissenting views. Individuals who disagree with the emerging group consensus tend to speak more cautiously. The group pressure to agree with others is both a limitation and a strength of the focus group methodology. On the one hand, we learn less about the opinions of different individuals and how those opinions relate to their experiences and world views. On the other hand, the method is excellent for determining the boundaries surrounding socially acceptable discourse in various group settings. The mainstreaming effect of the group discussion thus enables the analyst to see the relationship between discourse and context—in other words, what themes and ideas flourish or flounder in particular group settings.⁷ In this study, the key mainstreaming variables were denomination (including postdenominational and unaffiliated groups) and age (including adult and young adult groups).

Finally, Jews often derive pleasure from proving the validity of their reputation as an argumentative bunch. As one participant in a focus group discussion quipped, "With four Jews in a room, you always get five Jewpoints!" Jewish disputatiousness might be an admirable quality, but it surely creates challenges for the sociologist who tries to summarize opinions and relate them to their social contexts. Throughout this study, the most robust and often-repeated themes will be emphasized. By necessity, much interesting material must remain on the cutting room floor.

The Structure of the Report

This report is structured by the study's basic research questions, as listed above (page 8). The first two sections examine American Jewish views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the role of religion in the Jewish state. The study finds respondents to be committed to a centrist approach to the conflict with the Palestinians—one that balances the joint concerns of peace and security. It also finds respondents to be highly critical of Israel's religious status quo, which they view as unjustly favoring Ortho-

doxy over non-Orthodox expressions of Judaism. The third section examines the broader meanings American Jews attach to Israel, as well as the relationship between their specific political views and their general feelings of attachment and connection. The study finds most respondents committed to Israel as both a Jewish state and a democracy, notwithstanding the strains or contradictions they perceived as emanating from these two features of the Jewish state. Moreover, most study participants distinguished between their opinions on policy issues, which were sometimes critical of the Israeli government, and their abiding feelings of identification with and connection to Israel.

The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Jews have held conflicting views about how to relate to the Arab population of Palestine since the earliest days of the Zionist movement, and this diversity of opinion has continued into the present. During the prestate period, much of the Labor Zionist left envisioned coexistence with the indigenous Arab population of Palestine. However, in the wake of Arab attacks on the *yishuv* (the prestate Jewish community) during the 1930s, the Zionist left embraced plans to partition Palestine to create a state with the largest possible Jewish majority. In sharp contrast, the Revisionist right sought establishment of a Jewish state within “defensible boundaries,” which they defined as extending from the Litani River in the north to the Suez Canal in the south and including both banks of the Jordan River. Revisionists regarded the indigenous Arab population as an implacable enemy that would only come to terms with a Jewish state in Palestine in the distant future. Until such time, they argued, the Zionist strategy should entail building an “iron wall” against Arab efforts to curtail the Zionist enterprise.⁸

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, Religious Zionists increasingly related to Israel’s conquest of Jerusalem’s holy sites and the West Bank as evidence of a Divine plan to restore the Jewish people to their ancient homeland. In their view, Jews have a religious obligation to settle lands promised by God to the Jewish people, and any return of such lands, even as part of a peace agreement, would violate religious principles. (A minority among Religious Zionists supported land-for-peace initiatives.)

Initially slower to mobilize, the Israeli peace camp crystallized and became a potent force in the wake of the 1982 war in Lebanon. Drawing on earlier Labor Zionist visions, the peace camp argued that Israeli rule over millions of Palestinian Arabs undermined Israel’s democracy and threatened the Jewish character of the state. The peace camp advocated establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In contemporary Jewish public discourse, conducted largely in the Israeli and U.S. Jewish media, the various positions sketched out above continue to vie for legitimacy and prominence. In recent years, the right has opposed Israeli withdrawal from Jewish settlements in Gaza and the

West Bank. Essayists and public officials on the right have advanced a variety of arguments—including historical, security, and religious arguments associated with earlier Revisionist and Religious Zionist perspectives. Keeping territories conquered by Israel in 1967, they have argued, is necessary to buffer Israel's major population centers and deny terrorists a safe haven from which to attack the Jewish state. Similarly, the right describes the settlement enterprise as continuous with earlier Zionist settlement movements and necessary for the future security of Israel.

On the left, the central argument has focused on the need to preserve Israel's Jewish and democratic character by ending Israeli rule over millions of Palestinians. According to this view of the "demographic threat," the number of Palestinians, including those with Israeli citizenship inside the 1967 borders as well as those living in the West Bank without citizenship, will eventually surpass the number of Jews, creating a dynamic by which Israel could no longer claim to be both a democracy and a Jewish state. According to this perspective, only by establishing "two states for two peoples" could Israel end the conflict with the Palestinians, preserve the Jewish and democratic character of the country, and ensure its long-term survival in an increasingly hostile Middle East.

Contemporary public discourse also includes the perspective of the political center, which incorporates the views of the right regarding security and those of the left regarding the putative demographic threat and long-term need for a peace settlement. Such ambivalent rhetoric has come to the fore in recent years, with the formation of Kadima, an Israeli party of the political center. As we shall see, the themes that dominate media discourse are also reflected in the consciousness of rank-and-file American Jews, and shape their responses to surveys and interview questions.

Survey Research Evidence

Survey research provides a useful starting point for investigating how American Jews think about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. According to the American Jewish Committee's 2006 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion, 54 percent of American Jews favor and 38 percent oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state. In general, Orthodox Jews express more hawkish views, with most opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state and the dismantling of Jewish settlements on the West Bank. Reform, Conservative, and unaffiliated Jews tend to express more dovish views, with most favoring establishing a Palestinian state and dismantling some or all settlements in the West Bank.⁹ Regarding the future of Jerusalem, the dividing line is somewhat different, with Orthodox and Conservative Jews opposing and Reform and unaffiliated Jews supporting future compromises on the territorial unity of the capital city.¹⁰ Analysis of survey data shows that general political orientation (e.g., conservative or liberal) as well as political party affiliation are also strong predictors of views on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Age is not an important factor.¹¹

Focus Group Discussions

We asked discussion participants a number of questions pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All groups were asked to respond to one or both of the following questions:

- Why, in your view, have the recent peace initiatives, including the Oslo peace process and the Road Map for peace, apparently failed, and what should be done about the conflict?
- Some people say that the Palestinians have proven through their violence that they don't really want to make peace with Israel. Others say that Israel has proven through its settlements in the West Bank that *it* doesn't want peace with the Palestinians. What do you think: Is either side ready to make peace?

The Methodological Appendix (page 44) includes a number of additional questions asked in most discussion groups.

Participants in the focus group discussions expressed many of the themes that circulate in public discourse. Participants in the Orthodox groups favored themes of the political right, but also expressed centrist themes. Participants in the Reform, Conservative, and unaffiliated groups favored centrist themes, but also occasionally expressed the views of the right or left. Participants in the postdenominational and Reconstructionist groups expressed both centrist and leftist themes.

The following discussion illustrates these themes as they were expressed in the focus groups, without making any effort to evaluate the historical accuracy or validity of the various claims. Instead, the aim is to identify the central beliefs and values that organize the thinking of diverse discussion participants. Insofar as denomination proved to be a key factor in the discussions (as it was in the survey evidence), we will conclude the section with a brief examination of the relationship between denomination and opinion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Themes of the Right

In public discourse, the political right opposes a negotiated settlement leading to establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza for security, historical, and religious reasons. The security argument contends that holding territory is necessary because the Palestinians cannot be trusted to uphold their side of a peace bargain. The historical argument underscores the importance of the West Bank as the cradle of Jewish civilization. The religious perspective describes the Land of Israel as divinely ordained for the Jewish people. Such themes were evident in several discussions—mainly, but not exclusively, among the Orthodox.

Skepticism regarding the intentions of the Palestinians—and their reliability as partners to a peace deal—was widespread in most of the discussions. However, in most discussions, the motivations of the Palestinians were treated as an obstacle that might be surmounted. The hallmark of right-wing discourse in the focus groups was its utter rejection of the

possibility of reaching an enforceable, secure, and reliable settlement. In this discourse, the Palestinians are described as unwilling to accept Israel's existence under any terms. The following quotation, from a sixty-year-old lawyer in a Modern Orthodox group, illustrates the theme:

Ephraim¹²: You have to take into account the reality of the situation and at the moment [it is] a life-and-death struggle.... Their covenant [the Palestinian National Covenant] is for the destruction of Israel; it never repudiated that [goal] privately or publicly.... At the moment, I see very little difference between the Palestinians' attitude toward Jews and Israel and Hitler's attitude toward Jews and Israel.... That's the reality of the situation and you deal accordingly.

The conflict is thus depicted as a zero-sum situation in which either the Jews or the Palestinians will emerge victorious. In the extract that follows, Jonathan, a teacher in his forties and a participant in an Orthodox discussion group, insists that peace will be possible only when Israel vanquishes the Palestinian national movement.

Jonathan: I heard on the radio ... this scholar of Middle East politics who said.... "You don't make peace with somebody who is on an equal footing.... Either you've completely destroyed them and they're under your heel or the other way around." So I think peace will come when one side has enough strength and enough will to defeat the other, and I hope the people in this room want it to be the Jewish people [who will be] victorious.

In this context, peace talks are seen as dangerous for Israel, in that Palestinians build on their strategic gains to pursue their actual goal of Israel's destruction. In the following extract, Pam, a forty-two-year-old physician, describes the peace process as a "Trojan horse." The discussants are members of a Modern Orthodox group:

Jerry: To them, it's a matter of, look, we'll make an agreement now, but eventually, long-term, we will get Israel.

Pam: Arafat said it from the very beginning—it's a Trojan horse. We're going to enter into a pact with our enemy just like the Prophet Mohammed [did] ... so that we may eventually overthrow him.

Jennifer: The Koran has that in it. You make agreements for when you're on the bottom, and when you're on the top, you don't need to honor them.

Perhaps surprisingly, relatively few participants discussed the importance of Israel's keeping the West Bank for specifically historical or religious reasons. To be sure, speakers in all of the Orthodox and some of the Conservative discussions referred to the territories Israel occupied in 1967 by their Biblical names, Judea and Samaria. As well, a few speakers pointed out the historical significance of the West Bank territories. "That is where most of our history took place," one remarked. However, the historical themes were muted in comparison to security arguments. Even rarer were arguments that struck specifically religious themes. In only one

case did a speaker describe the Bible as a kind of property deed that established the Jewish people's right to the Land of Israel. The following, from an Orthodox discussion group, is the exception that proves the general rule. Note that a coparticipant redirects Dan's emphasis on a biblical right to the land to more familiar historical and security claims.

Dan (engineer, age 45): I think the mistake is giving them anything, because no matter how much you give them, they always want more. It was our land. It was promised to us biblically. I don't think referring to recent historical events to establish ownership is the right thing to do. Personally, I think it should be based on biblical promises rather than anything else.

Debbie (journalist, age 50): Regardless of biblical promises, the reason that Israel has a presence in that territory is a result of the war that was directed at them. I would want to know any other country—the United States is certainly not being asked to give back ... portions that it acquired in war.

By embracing security arguments or, secondarily, arguments from history, the Orthodox Jews in the discussion groups challenge a media-driven caricature that attributes their political viewpoints to religious fundamentalism.

Themes of the Center

The themes of the center were clearly dominant in the Reform, Conservative, and unaffiliated groups. A key theme in this discourse blames poor leadership, typically on the Palestinian side, as well as "extremists" on both sides, for the failure of previous peace deals. In the view of many discussion participants, ordinary Palestinians desire peace, but their leaders have failed to take the courageous steps necessary to confront the rejectionist groups in the Palestinian camp. Shelly, from a Reform synagogue, expresses the theme in this way:

Shelly (clinical instructor, age 51): I think ... there certainly must be Palestinians who want to make peace and want to live side by side in two states. Unfortunately, there's no leader of the Palestinian people that has come forward and who lived long enough to try to make that happen.... I'm sure that there is a faction of the populace that feels that way [but] there's no leadership able to guide them.

A similar theme, expressed in relation to the Israeli side, depicts Israelis as desiring peace, but realistic about the difficulty of achieving a reliable and secure deal with the Palestinians. David, a participant in a Conservative discussion group, put it this way:

David (investment banker, age 51): I think they operate on two totally different planes, and I think the number of Israelis who don't genuinely want peace is a truly, truly small minority.... But it has to be a legitimate peace, not just, "We'll give up land and then see if we get peace." Israel has given up land for peace before, and will do it again.... I think

there [are] more Palestinian people who want peace, but Palestinian leadership and the Arab leadership do not.

In a few instances, speakers in centrist groups also faulted Israeli leadership and/or the Israeli public for what they described as a half-hearted pursuit of a negotiated settlement. Consider, for example, the following statement by Miriam, a member of a Conservative synagogue who had previously lived in Israel and has visited the country on many occasions:

Miriam (age 57): I have a different view.... I also think the Israeli leadership was not always ready to go the whole way. It was not only the leadership, I think ... many Israelis had a hard time giving away land. Even though they want peace and they know they will have to, it is something that has huge emotional bearing. It's not easy for many of them.

As noted, skepticism regarding Palestinian intentions and capacity to honor a peace agreement was widespread in most of the discussions. In the discourse of the political center, however, Palestinian intransigence is not treated as inevitable or intractable. Rather, Palestinians are described as still unready for a peace deal. Consider the comments of the following three women, all members of a Conservative synagogue:

Bonnie (stay-at-home mother, 48): For me, it's a gut reaction that the Palestinians are simply not ready. I mean, they are raising their children to hate Jews and to kill Jews. They're raising their children like that. And we all know how Jews are raised to do *mitzvahs*. I mean it is two totally opposing things.

Marci (software engineer, 44): I agree with Bonnie. I think that's something I've been thinking that I haven't really found the words to express. There's a mindset ... that's so deeply ingrained that needs to be changed on the Palestinian side. I don't feel that they feel that Israel has the right to exist ... and so unless you believe that, you're not ready to negotiate.

Sheri (business manager, 44): I really think that there are three groups. I don't think that the Palestinians really want peace. I think they just want Israel out of there. I think Israel proper does want peace. And I think that the settlements behind the Green Line do not want peace—or what peace would involve, giving away their territory.

The claim that the Palestinian side is unready to make peace was often linked to the claim that Palestinians teach their children to hate Jews. In many discussions, participants reported having heard about Palestinian textbooks that depict Jews in anti-Semitic terms and school maps that do not show the Jewish state. Paul, a sixty-seven-year-old clinical psychologist, commented: “What I find most discouraging is what I've heard about what the Muslim youth are taught in the schools there. They're shown maps that don't even have Israel on the maps.”

Also common in this centrist discourse is the claim that the Palestinians were “offered everything” during the Camp David peace talks in 2000, but “walked away” from the deal. The following statement by David, a member of a Reform congregation, is typical of this kind of discourse:

David (lawyer, age 47): My instinct is not to lay all the blame on the Palestinians because it takes two to tango and to make peace. But I have a very difficult time laying any blame at the feet of the Israelis.... [Former Prime Minister Ehud] Barak came to the table [at Camp David], giving the Palestinians virtually everything that had been asked for, and even [Former Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon, who was the great warrior, the great conservative, was willing to give virtually everything.... There is a complete lack of leadership on the Palestinian side.

Nevertheless, the centrist groups shared a broad consensus that Israel should pursue a peace deal and be willing to make the necessary compromises—but only for a deal that promises to stick. In most conversations, the details regarding territorial concessions—whether Israel should agree to withdraw from all or some of the West Bank and the final status of Jerusalem—were of secondary importance. The main issue in these conversations was whether the Palestinian side was prepared to accept and honor a peace deal. In the comment that follows, Len, a participant in a Conservative discussion group, displays the ambivalence of the political center:

Len (writer, age 53): I think there should be a withdrawal to the '67 borders if that would buy peace.... But I don't know if even that would buy it, given so-called partners who take it as an item of faith that Israel ought to be annihilated. So it just depends if you feel that your partners are legitimate in wanting peace themselves and depending on what morning you wake up and ask a question, I guess you're going to answer it differently.

Themes of the Left

The themes of the political left were especially prevalent in discussions among members of postdenominational and Reconstructionist synagogues, college students, and members of a Jewish peace organization. They were also occasionally expressed in Reform discussion groups. Participants in these groups emphasized that to protect the state's Jewish majority and democratic character, Israel must immediately withdraw from the territories conquered in 1967. Several speakers contended that, as a consequence of the occupation, Israel does not presently qualify as a democratic country. Consider the following, from Janet, a member of a Jewish peace organization:

Janet: It puzzles me—demographically they know it is not going to work.... In a few years they will be outnumbered. And this whole issue of you know, a Jewish state—what is a Jewish state and how do you keep the character of a Jewish state? And that is connected, in so many ways, to the Holocaust and Jewish identity. How do you keep that and then at the same time really make a democratic state, which it is not? I mean it is for the Jews in the state more or less.

Also characteristic of the discourse of the left is the claim that Israeli and Palestinian officials are equally to blame for the lack of progress in

peace negotiations. Louise, a participant in a Reconstructionist group, put it this way:

Louise (clinical social worker, age 57): I think that many people like to point to Oslo and say it failed because of the Palestinian side, but my limited knowledge says, in fact, Oslo didn't really offer the Palestinians a true settlement that met their needs for a homeland.... I think all the efforts are failing because there isn't good leadership on either side.... There really has been a lack of leadership that truly wants peace and truly is willing to offer the security that one side wants and the freedom and independence the other side wants.

In these left-leaning conversations, Jewish West Bank settlers were often singled out for harsh criticism. The settlers were depicted as extremists and "crazies," and the broader settlement enterprise was described as a major obstacle to a peace agreement. The following statement, from a participant in a Reform discussion group, illustrates this line of argument:

Bruce (age 52): If you rely only on the Palestinians to do something, then it's probably not going to happen, so the Israelis have to keep moving forward.... They've already made a mess of it in the last ten years with the settlements [that have] exacerbated the situation to no end.... Had they pulled out of the settlements ten years ago and done what they should do in terms of keeping those crazy religious settlers out of those lands, then they would be in a much better situation now. They would be able to protect their people ... but they're not willing to make the step. The Israelis don't have the backbone to do what's right.... You can't rely on the Palestinians, but you can't rely on the Israelis either.

Denomination and Political Opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

As we have seen, Orthodox respondents in the discussions tended to express hawkish views, whereas members of non-Orthodox groups tended to divide between centrist and dovish positions. These patterns are broadly consistent with those reported in survey research on American Jewry. What, then, explains this relationship between denominational affiliation and opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

One reasonable hypothesis would be that emotional attachment to Israel is related to hawkish political views. At first glance, the survey evidence would seem to support such a hypothesis: Orthodox respondents report the highest levels of emotional attachment to Israel and also the most hawkish views. However, in multivariate analysis, the association between emotional attachment to Israel and particular political views turns out to be weak and inconsistent.¹³ In fact, denominational affiliation itself appears to be a much stronger predictor of political views regarding issues pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If not its association with emotional attachment, then what is it about denominational affiliation that establishes an affinity with specific political views?

Why do Reform Jews tend toward relatively more dovish positions and Orthodox Jews toward more hawkish views?

As many scholars have noted, Judaism provides ample intellectual support for political orientations that span the spectrum from right to left. In the United States, as in Israel, Orthodox Jews have tended to stress elements of Judaism that emphasize particularism rather than universalism. Orthodoxy places great emphasis on the special relationship between God and the Jewish people and on the responsibility of the Jewish people for one another. Such themes reflect the social interaction of Orthodox Jews who display varying degrees of communal self-segregation. Particularism, in turn, entails a greater emphasis on the Jewish historical narrative and the welfare of the Jewish people, and perhaps therefore a greater affinity for hawkish political positions.

The more universalistic side of Judaism emphasizing that all human beings are made in God's image has been more highly developed by liberal movements. Such movements stress the value of social integration of Jews into the broader society and the universal dimensions of Jewish values. The emphasis placed by the liberal movements on *tikkun olam* ("repair of the world") is one manifestation of this universalistic tendency; support among Jews for social change movements is another. In the discussion groups, when liberal Jews insist that Judaism requires democracy and equality (see pg. 26 ff.), they are expressing this liberal perspective. This universalistic tendency fosters a greater openness to multiple historical narratives and worldviews and therefore, perhaps, to more dovish political positions.

The tendency across the denominations to emphasize either particularism or universalism is magnified by the growing prevalence of transnational political alliances. Increasingly, pro-settler and right-leaning public officials and organizations in Israel have formed alliances with their Orthodox counterparts in the U.S. The same pattern is in evidence, although not as well-developed, on the political left, with organizations such as Peace Now and the political party Meretz establishing ties with the U.S.-based Reform movement and peace organizations such as Brit Tzedek v'Shalom. Such transnational alliances help to reinforce the broader connections between denomination and political opinion on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Finally, as survey analysis has demonstrated, political opinion on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict tends to be an expression of more general political views. Thus, for example, those who identify as conservative will tend to oppose, and those who identify as liberal will tend to support, the establishment of a Palestinian state. In the present study, Orthodox focus group participants were more likely than their non-Orthodox counterparts to identify as conservative and to indicate previous preference for Republican presidential candidates.¹⁴ The underlying source of this preference structure is likely related to religious ideas, as discussed, as well as patterns of social segregation and integration.

Religion and State

American Jewish organizations and their leaders have frequently clashed with Israeli officials over the role of the Orthodox rabbinate in Israeli law and society. The conflict has roots in Israeli legal and political history. The first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, assigned authority over marriage, divorce, conversion, and burial to the Orthodox rabbinate. His decision reflected both the weakness of the liberal Jewish movements in the new state, as well as the tendency of both secular and religious Jews to regard Orthodox rabbis as the authentic representatives of Judaism. Ben-Gurion's decision to consolidate authority over religious and personal status issues in the hands of the Orthodox rabbinate effectively preserved the legal framework of the British Mandate and the previous Ottoman government. However, in practice (and eventually in law), the new state recognized weddings and conversions performed by non-Orthodox rabbis outside of Israel, in the Jewish Diaspora.

In subsequent years, Israel's religious parties and its indigenous Reform and Conservative (Masorti) movements have each sought to alter the so-called "status-quo agreements." In 1988 and 1996, religious parties made their participation in coalition governments conditional upon legislation that would expand Orthodox rabbinic authority to include conversions conducted in the Diaspora as well as in Israel. On both occasions, strong protests by U.S. Jewish leaders and organizations, including threats to withhold donations and political support, prevented changes to the status quo. In contrast to the political strategy employed by the religious parties, Israel's Reform and Conservative movements have pursued mainly a legal strategy, seeking recognition for their rabbis primarily in the Israeli courts. On the whole, their efforts have been somewhat more successful, resulting in Supreme Court decisions that recognized non-Orthodox conversions conducted outside of Israel (1989) and extended recognition to non-Orthodox conversions of residents of Israel who traveled abroad expressly to undergo the religious ceremony (2005).¹⁵

In the American Jewish press, struggles over recognition of non-Orthodox rabbis are treated as stand-alone stories or linked to a broader discussion of the relationship of Israel to the Jewish Diaspora. In the Israeli press, such struggles are often linked to the broader conflict over the role of religion in Israeli law and politics. In this discourse, secularists charge that Orthodox political leaders employ their swing votes to gain unjustifiable benefits for the religious sector of society and to impose religious regulations—especially regarding commerce and transportation on the Sabbath—upon society as a whole. Opposition to "religious coercion" is their battle cry, and such opposition also entails the demand for civil wedding ceremonies and recognition of non-Orthodox Jewish movements. The Orthodox, for their part, view Orthodox rabbinic supervision of conversion and divorce as the minimum necessary framework for ensuring the Jewish character of the state and the future unity of

the Jewish people. In the late 1990s, the clash between the religious and secular sectors of Israeli society came to the fore in the political arena, and parties representing the secular element (Shinui) and the Sephardic-Orthodox (Shas) sharply increased their representation in the Knesset. In recent years, as conflicts with the Palestinians, Hezbollah, and Iran have escalated, religious conflicts between Jews have generally receded.

Survey Research Evidence

Survey data provides less guidance with respect to American Jewish opinion on issues of religion and state than with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Relevant questions have not been consistently asked in surveys of American Jewish opinion. The most recent instance of such a question appeared in AJC's 1998 Annual Survey. Eighty-nine percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "Conversions performed in Israel by Reform and Conservative rabbis should be recognized as much as Orthodox conversions." Nine percent disagreed. In the same survey, 92 percent agreed with the statement, "Conservative and Reform representatives should be permitted to serve on community religious councils in Israel alongside Orthodox representatives." Just 7 percent disagreed. More recently, in the 2000 AJC survey, respondents were asked to comment on increasing tensions in Israel over the role of religion in the Jewish state. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: "Tension between secular and ultra-Orthodox in Israel is becoming sharper. In your view, who is principally responsible for this increase in tension?" Seven percent of respondents held secular Israelis to be mainly responsible for the conflict. Seventy-two percent blamed the ultra-Orthodox.

Focus Group Discussions

Across the thirty focus group discussions, alongside our standard question regarding recognition of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism, we experimented with a number of additional questions regarding the broader issue of religion and state in Israel. The appendix includes the various questions and related prompts. The following, our standard question, was asked of all discussion groups:

Leaders in the Israeli Conservative and Reform movements complain that Israel's recognition of only Orthodox weddings, conversions, and divorces amounts to religious discrimination against non-Orthodox Jews. The country's Orthodox authorities counter that recognizing non-Orthodox weddings, conversions, and divorces will lead to a split in the Jewish people. In your view, how serious a problem is this, and what if anything should be done about it?

The major line of division in the discussions was between the Orthodox groups and the non-Orthodox groups, and we will review the discussions accordingly.

Orthodox Groups

The Orthodox respondents typically described the imposition of Orthodox standards for weddings, conversions, and divorces as necessary to ensure the unity of the Jewish people. In their discourse, Orthodox standards of religious law, or *halakha*, were embraced for pragmatic reasons, as the lowest common denominator that would satisfy the needs of Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews alike. In this view, it makes sense to impose the standards required by the most stringent segment of the population because only these standards achieve universal recognition. Consider the following brief extract from the conversation of an Orthodox group.

Alan: But the issue is: Is there room for [the] Conservative and Reform movements in Israel?

Shimi: There is. That doesn't mean they have to become state-recognized.

Alan: Right. I mean clearly the Orthodox have a higher level of observance, which they can't compromise and still remain Orthodox, so the fact is that the government has to accept a higher standard and use that as the norm.

Or consider the following, from Dan, a 45-year-old engineer who participated in a different Orthodox group.

Dan: I think both religious and nonreligious have to develop more of a tolerance for each other on an individual level, but your question was more on a leadership level, a rabbinical level. In that regard, I think that [authority] should be kept in the reins of the Orthodox, simply because they are the most stringent of the three opinions so ... no one would have the complaint as far as their legitimacy or what it is that they're doing.

Notwithstanding their insistence on preserving Orthodox authority, the Orthodox discussion participants often claimed that the Reform and Conservative movements serve useful purposes, such as providing opportunities for Jewish living for those who would not adopt Orthodox lifestyles. In several discussions, participants stressed the need for Israel to support the non-Orthodox movements, albeit in ways short of full recognition. In their general openness to the non-Orthodox movements, the Orthodox Jews in our study sample distinguished themselves from their Israeli counterparts, who rarely expressed comparable sentiments.¹⁶

Non-Orthodox Groups

The non-Orthodox Jews—who comprised the vast majority of the present study—were fairly uniform in their opposition to Israel's religious status quo, in particular to the institutional control exercised by the state's official (Orthodox) rabbinate over personal status issues including marriage, conversion, divorce, and burial. Many denounced the Orthodox monopoly; some analogized it to the religious fundamentalism evi-

dent in Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia. Consider the following extract of a discussion of a Reform group.

Bob (retired, age 70): It's a very serious problem for Israel because if the state doesn't recognize other branches of Judaism, it's becoming a religious theocracy controlled by the Orthodox, and you already see the effects—a lot of the secular Jews are beginning to leave Jerusalem because of the Orthodox. So, in many ways they will become the Jewish Saudi Arabia, unless they can open their religious establishment to all of the branches.

Jonathan (publisher, age 67): It's a huge issue for me personally because I do not want Israel to turn into the country—a fundamentalist nation that I'm forced to support in the Diaspora out of a feeling of duty without any kind of feeling of affection.

Discussion participants also criticized the political power and influence of the ultra-Orthodox political parties. Many warned that the power of the religious parties threatened Israeli democracy and called for a U.S.-style separation of church and state. The following lengthy discussion extract is from the discussion of a mostly Conservative discussion group:

Susan (art historian, Reconstructionist): If Israel is going to try to be a democracy and Jewish—you know, you can be both, but you can't limit—if you're going to be a democracy, you can't limit how people practice certain things. I just think it's awful. It's a terrible precedent....

Bill (business consultant, Conservative): It's a secular country. I think that's what we'd all prefer for it. A secular democracy where Jews are safe to go there regardless of whether they wear "black hats" or don't.

Jeff (lawyer, Conservative): And it's for that reason I think it is a serious problem.... To the extent that the Orthodox within the community do not accept the idea of a pluralistic democracy, it ... runs counter to the interests of observant American Jews.... That's a foreign issue to us! I mean [you would never hear that] in the United States.... It's a threat to democracy, because if the Orthodox view prevails, then you have a country in which the state is driven by religious Scriptures. And that's not good.

Alex (self-employed with MBA, Conservative): Taking the comment one step further, I'll go ahead and assert that if Israel devolves to the point of maybe not being a theocratic body, but nevertheless behaving as one, then the conversation about "what to do about the Palestinians" is moot. Israel will cease to exist as a modern state. And the assertion comes from the recognition that if we've accomplished anything in the last three hundred years of history, it is the separation of the religious push for dominance of a particular religion from the governance of a people, such that people can govern themselves and they can resolve their conflicts without resorting to jihad, without resorting to extremism, without resorting to crusades, and if the religious Orthodoxy within Israel surmounts the state, and the ability of the state to run itself and resolve its own conflicts, then surely we will drive ourselves into the ocean.

Members of Susan and Alex's discussion group strike themes that are common to most of the non-Orthodox groups: The State of Israel was meant to be a "modern, secular democracy" rather than a theocracy. The essence of a modern state is the "separation of ... a particular religion from the governance of a people, such that the people can govern themselves." The Jewish character of the state derives from its demographic (rather than theocratic) character. The majority status of the Jewish people makes the democratic state of Israel a Jewish state. As a democracy, moreover, Israel ought to guarantee the religious freedoms of all of its citizens, including its non-Orthodox Jewish citizens.

Several discussion participants also described the dominant role of Orthodoxy in Israeli society as alienating for secular Israelis. As Barbara argues in the following statement, were liberal alternatives more visible and accessible in Israel, secular Israelis would be more likely to participate in Jewish life.

Barbara (epidemiologist, age 49): I think that it's harmful to the long-term future of Israel for the Orthodox to sort of control Judaism in Israel. I think that it alienates Israelis from Judaism, and most Israelis are secular because they're alienated from Orthodox Judaism. But if they had other options, they might be able to embrace Judaism as part of their life through Reform or Conservative Judaism and new forms that make sense for them there.

Others who had visited or lived in Israel commented that Israel's binary religious/secular framework left them feeling out of place as liberal Jews. In the following quotation, Becca, a 28-year-old graduate student, explains that her recent visit to Israel made her feel closer to the country, but not to its people.

Becca: Being in Israel last summer for a significant period of time ... I didn't necessarily feel closer to Israeli people. I actually got more distant.... I feel like there's no place for someone whose Jewish identity is like mine, or like a lot of American Jews that I know, because Israelis don't really have this ... Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist idea; it's just all or nothing, and I feel like I met a lot of people who said, "Yeah, I'm Israeli, but big deal that I'm Jewish, I'm Israeli," and that made me uncomfortable.

Finally, respondents in several groups described the problematic legal standing of non-Orthodox movements in Israel as a cause for serious personal alienation. In the following quotation, Liz describes the religious-secular divide in Israel and explains that, as a liberal Jew who cares deeply about her religion, she has no place in Israel religiously. Several of her conversation partners then pick up the general theme, charging that their very identities as Jews would be questioned in Israel:

Liz (professor of law, 44): I think it's the biggest threat to American support of Israel. I think my cousins in Israel are all extremely Orthodox and have left America to be in Israel, and they are the kind of people

who believe in the literal interpretation of everything in the Bible and all the rules of Judaism, and it makes me have this vision of Israel as either completely nonreligious or my cousins.... I don't know where I would go there, where I would fit in, because I feel very connected to my religion and feel very much a part of it, but feel I would be devalued completely in Israel in terms of the way I practice my religion and am involved in Judaism. It is alienating.

Deb (college admissions director, 43): As a Jew by choice, I certainly know that I'm not welcome. You know that the policies just don't—

John (real estate developer, 51): As a husband of a non-Jewish wife, with two children raised in a Jewish household, you could imagine how we feel.

Deb: Right.

David (teacher, Reform day school, 46): Right, as the son of a woman who went through Reform conversion ... I would need to convert were I to want to return to Israel under the Law of Return ... so that's personal.

These comments were not exceptional. In several additional discussion groups participants similarly claimed that their status as Jews (or their marriages, conversions, etc.) would not be recognized as valid in Israel. Consider the following additional example, also from a Reform discussion group:

Jon (engineer, age 53): First and foremost, as a ... converted Reform Jew, I'm very much aware that my conversion is not recognized in Israel among the Orthodox. So that weighs a bit heavily on me.

Audry (occupational therapist, age 40): I'm sure my marriage isn't valid there, and that bugs me. You know, I'm married to a non-Jewish guy, and I'm sure that doesn't fly very well. There's been all this kind of personal baggage, but if I just look at where the country is going, I worry about that.

Notably, some claims advanced by Reform and other discussion participants regarding recognition of their Jewish status in Israel appear predicated on misinformation. Given the complexity of Israeli law—which recognizes weddings and conversions conducted by non-Orthodox rabbis outside of Israel, but only those conducted by Orthodox rabbis inside of Israel—the confusion is certainly understandable. Nevertheless, it seems noteworthy that many of the discussion participants characterized the rejection of their religious movements and Jewish identities in more sweeping terms than might be justified by (an arguably complex) reality.

American Values and Opinions on Religion and State

Commonly held American values regarding the role of religion in a democratic state appear particularly influential in the discourse of the focus group participants. American Jews, with the possible exception of the Orthodox, are deeply committed to the notion that religion is a volun-

tary activity, and church and state should be kept at arm's length. According to this profoundly American cultural orientation, insulating political institutions from religion is necessary to ensure equality before the law, and insulating religious institutions from political influence is necessary to preserve their moral integrity. As a religious minority in the United States, Jews view separation of church and state as a core value, perceived as intrinsically correct and a prerequisite for Jewish advancement in a majority Christian society. In Israel, where Jews are the majority and the tradition of separation of church and state is not constitutionally enshrined, the view is quite different.

In the focus group discussions, participants frequently contrasted the Israeli approach regarding religion and state with the American. Such discourse is evident above, in Jeff's comment. To be sure, participants occasionally noted that Israel has a special historical role to play as the homeland of the Jewish people and therefore need not embrace U.S. forms of democratic universalism. Still, many non-Orthodox participants described the Israeli status quo as a violation of the citizenship rights of non-Orthodox Israeli Jews and harmful to the development of religion in Israel. In their view, the involvement of religious parties in Israeli political life leads to favoritism toward particular religious communities and corruption of religious values. The dominant role of the Orthodox rabbinic in Israeli life is viewed as discouraging forms of Jewish expression that might prove meaningful for secular Israelis.

These themes are consistent with the limited survey data on American Jewish opinion regarding the role of religion in Israeli law and society. Moreover, such themes reflect and express core American values regarding the proper relationship between religion and state.

Israel's Contemporary Meaning

During the 1970s and 1980s, social scientists stressed the symbolic significance of Israel for American Jews. According to these accounts, Israel represented the revival of the Jewish people following the Holocaust, and its existence meant that Jews would never again find themselves defenseless and bereft of a sanctuary from anti-Semitism. As a young democracy with a strong welfare state, moreover, Israel represented the Jewish commitment to social justice and progressive values. And as a regional military power whose prowess was evidenced most dramatically in the Six-Day War, Israel represented the emergence of a new kind of Jew, tough and resourceful—the antithesis of Diaspora bookishness. American Jews viewed Israelis as “young, tough, hardworking, idealistic pioneers, struggling in the midst of a backward and hostile world, balancing a reverence for Jewish tradition with a socially progressive commitment to build a modern, democratic society and make the desert bloom.”¹⁷ In this context, Israel became a source of personal pride for Jews the world over.

However, to some observers, many of the key factors contributing to Israel's symbolic significance have long since dimmed or dissipated. The Holocaust and the founding of the state have receded into history, while American Jews have achieved ever higher levels of security and integration into U.S. society. Israel's image as a progressive, democratic country has been challenged by news reports of corruption, mounting social inequality, and discrimination against the Arab minority. Israel's vulnerability to terror and, in recent years, bombardment from Lebanon and Gaza, not to mention the menace of a potentially nuclear-armed Iran, increasingly cast doubt on its capacity to serve as a refuge. In this changing context, it is no wonder that many observers have questioned the ongoing relevance of Israel to American Jews and speculated about the quality of their attachment to the Jewish state.¹⁸

Notwithstanding such prognostication, several studies of trends in attachment to Israel since the mid-1980s reveal a relatively stable pattern. American Jews express disparate levels of attachment to Israel, with Orthodox Jews reporting the highest levels of attachment, followed by Conservative, Reform, and unaffiliated Jews. Within each denominational category, attachment to Israel has been largely stable during the past two decades, notwithstanding modest increases during the first half of the 2000s, followed by modest decreases in recent years. More generally, respondents who are married to other Jews and those who have visited Israel report higher levels of Israel attachment, as do older Jews. These basic patterns in attachment to Israel have remained generally stable since the beginning of national survey research on U.S. Jewish opinion about Israel, in the mid 1980s.¹⁹

Some contemporary observers interpret the lower level of Israel attachment expressed by younger Jews as a generational phenomenon, suggesting the likelihood of long-term decline. Others, including the present author, have argued that, insofar as age differences were evident in surveys conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as in more recent surveys, such differences are more likely related to lifecycle and aging rather than the unique experiences of any particular generation.²⁰ To the extent that the latter interpretation proves accurate, today's younger Jews will likely become more Israel-attached as they grow older.

Much less is known about Israel's meaning to contemporary Jewish adults, or what factors influence their sense of connection to the country. How do contemporary American Jews regard Israel's significance? As conflicts mount over how best to handle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the relationship of religion to state, what does Israel represent to American Jews and what role does it play in their lives? How do American Jews reconcile their emotional attachment to Israel with their views—sometimes critical—regarding the conflict with the Palestinians, the peace process, and struggles over legitimacy of the liberal Jewish movements?

We asked focus group participants two questions related to Israel's

contemporary significance and personal meaning. All groups were asked whether Israel can be both democratic and Jewish, and how these values can be reconciled or balanced. This question elicited a great deal of discourse on Israel's meaning as both a Jewish state and a democracy and on the relative importance of each of these characteristics of the state. Several groups were also asked to discuss Israel's personal meaning and how it has developed and changed over the course of their lives. Their responses are analyzed in the sections that follow.

Jewish and Democratic?

In Israeli political discourse, conflicts over a wide range of issues, including minority rights and the role of religion in the public sphere, are discussed under the rubric of Israel's dual identity as a Jewish and a democratic state. In recent years, members of Israel's Arab minority, together with a number of Israeli academics, have challenged this formulation, arguing that Israel cannot be both a Jewish state and a democratic state.²¹ To become a democracy, these critics argue, Israel must cease de facto discrimination against its Arab minority, eliminate legal preferences for Jews in land rights and immigration, and alter the symbols of the state (including the flag and national anthem) to make them more inclusive. Other scholars have defended the prevailing institutional arrangements by comparing Israel to European nation-states that privilege the language, culture, and immigration of their founding groups.²²

The debate over Israel's identity as both Jewish and democratic is potentially quite challenging for American Jews. As members of a small minority in a large, multicultural democracy, American Jews have become strong proponents of minority rights and church-state separation. In the case of Israel, however, the priorities of American Jews might be different. After all, it is only as a Jewish state that Israel holds special meaning to American Jews. By asking the focus groups to discuss Israel as both Jewish and democratic, we thought we might discover how participants think about the contemporary meaning and significance of Israel. We asked the following question:

Today, Arab citizens of Israel comprise roughly one-fifth of Israel's citizenry. Advocates for equal rights for the Arab minority say that as a democracy Israel must treat all of its citizens exactly the same. Others, disagree, arguing that Israel is first and foremost a state of the Jewish people and that too much emphasis on equality will undermine the Jewish character of the state. What do you think? Can Israel be both a democratic state of "all of its citizens" and at the same time a "Jewish state?"

Participants in several groups (especially the right-leaning and left-leaning groups) dismissed the question as too obvious to warrant deliberation. Members of the right-leaning groups (mostly but not exclusively the Orthodox groups) stressed the primacy of Israel's Jewish character. Many also denied the existence of any contradiction between democracy

and the Jewishness of the state. In the following quote, Janet, a 42-year-old dermatologist, stresses the primacy of the Jewish character of the state:

Janet: It's a Jewish state and that's it. The Arabs ... enjoy lots of freedom. You know, you can be here if you want to or if you want to try and sabotage and kill us, you can leave. I think we have to have laws that limit their amount, their ability to become a majority in Parliament. And I think we have to have laws to protect ourselves, because there's one Jewish state [and] there are twenty-two Arab states. That's it. We're the little David; they're the Goliath. And if you pan out and you look at the whole region, that's it. We have to protect ourselves.

For Janet, equality is not as important a value as the Jewishness of the state. Other speakers on the right describe Arab Israelis as enjoying greater freedom and opportunity than Arabs elsewhere in the world and characterize discrimination as trivial or nonexistent.

The question regarding the compatibility of Israel's democratic and Jewish aspects also proved easy for a small number of speakers in the left-leaning groups. Such speakers regard Israel's Jewish character as anachronistic. In the contemporary world, they contend, states should not declare an affiliation with a particular religious or national community. The following exchange, between members of a Jewish peace advocacy organization, illustrates this theme.

Karen (pediatrician, age 53): As an American I always find it so hard to understand how American Jews so staunchly are into American democracy and the principles of the Constitution, and yet for the State of Israel are so very willing to suspend those principles and say there I want to have a state that is Jewish, that is religiously Jewish, that is ethnically Jewish, whatever it is, and that I am willing to sort of forego some of these basic constitutional principles because we need it to survive.

Naomi (retired, age 69): I don't like to use the term brainwash, but they have this sentimental concept of Israel which does not take into account the fact that it is a theocracy and the fact that the Arabs are second-class citizens and so on. There is kind of this veil that comes over our heads, which is why you get this kind of havoc with, you know, we want democracy here, but we don't want to hear about what is going on there.

For Karen, a state that is religiously or ethnically Jewish contradicts basic "constitutional principles" and therefore is without justification. She and her conversation partner express mystification that their fellow American Jews fail to appreciate the contradiction between their embrace of democratic principles in the United States, but not in Israel.

In sum, for discussion participants highly committed to partisan positions on the right and left, reconciling Israel's Jewish and democratic aspects would appear to be relatively simple: For those on the political right, the number-one priority is the state's Jewish character; for those on the left, democracy takes precedence. However, in the political center, where most discussion participants reside, matters are far less clear. For most of the discussants, especially those in centrist Reform and Conser-

vative groups, the question proved quite difficult to answer. In their discourse, Israel must strive to be both democratic and Jewish. Moreover, for many liberal Jews, the twin features of the state are deeply intertwined in that the state's Jewishness implies a strong commitment to democracy and human rights. Consider the following two examples:

Robert (ceramics engineer, postdenominational, age 67): If Israel doesn't treat its Arab citizens equally under the law it cannot be a Jewish state. Because our law, the Torah, says that you have to treat the stranger who is resident among you [equally]—there's one law in the country. So as tough as that might be, as emotionally upsetting as that might be, there really has to be equality under law.

Jody (education coordinator, Reconstructionist, age 22): Like all of the Jewish teachings, like *ve'avavta le'reakha kamokha* (You should love your neighbor as yourself), *b'tselem elohim* (We're all [created] in the image of God). And it was just Passover: "You were once a stranger in Egypt, so don't be mean to people [laughter]." To me, the Jewish thing is to extend rights and that will maintain the Jewish character of the state.

For Robert, Jody, and many of the other discussion participants (especially in the Reform and postdenominational groups), Judaism entails a commitment to human rights. Therefore, the democratic character of the State of Israel derives in part from its Jewishness.

Many of the liberal Jewish participants also shared the admiration expressed by Karen, the pediatrician, (see page 29) for U.S. constitutional principles that separate religion and state and enshrine the rights of minorities. However, among many self-described liberal Jews, democracy is less a matter of absolutes than degree, and no one size fits every type of society. Only in a small number of groups did a few participants indicate that the Jewishness of the state must ultimately accommodate its democratic character. Much more common was the claim that Israel should seek ways to balance its democratic and Jewish characteristics. The speaker in the following extract is Joel, a marketing executive in a high-tech company, age 45:

Joel: If my kids went to social studies class in school and learned that the United States was a Christian country and people who were not Christian were not allowed to vote, and they were encouraged to leave, that would just be wrong. And so I think it would violate Jewish values, I think it would violate human values. I recognize that there's a dichotomy between being a Jewish state and being a pure democracy, and I don't know what the balance would be, but there's got to be some way that you can have a balance and a country that protects the Jewish population.

Moreover, to the extent either aspect of the state must accommodate the other, many argued that it was the state's Jewish character that must be given priority. In this view, the Jewish character of the state does

not imply that the state should embrace *halakha* (Jewish religious law), but rather that it should embrace policies that seek to ensure the continued existence of a Jewish majority population. Thus, Israel must balance the democratic value of equal treatment for all its citizens against the need to ensure the country's Jewish majority by encouraging Jewish immigration and preserving the Law of Return that grants immediate citizenship to Jews and their relatives. Such views are evident in the following comment by Bill, a participant in a mixed Reform and Conservative discussion group:

Bill (financial consultant, age 51): I think it is a tough issue. To me, Israel can look like a democracy in most regards, but it can't offer all the same rights to non-Jewish citizens as it does to Jewish citizens. In order for it to be a "Jewish state," it has to do at least one thing: It has to offer the "right of return" to Jews and *not* offer it to non-Jews. Because if it offers it to non-Jews, then it soon loses its character as a Jewish state. And if it *stops* offering it to Jews, then it loses its capacity to protect Jewish communities that are in danger around the world, which is, I think, why Diaspora Jews need Israel in order to survive in the long run. So, let's admit: It can't really be a true democracy, because a true democracy offers the *same* rights to *all* of its citizens, regardless of their religion. Israel can't do that.

The importance participants attach to maintaining Israel's Jewish majority and special role as a safe haven and refuge is also evident in the following exchange between Daniel, a law professor, and Dick, a patent attorney. The discussion participants, both members of a Reform synagogue, are discussing whether Israel can be both democratic and Jewish.

Daniel: In order to be a democracy, all citizens—all the individuals living within that democracy—have to have a feeling of equality.... If there's a group that is in power and a group that's not in power, and that out-of-power [situation] is perpetual and implemented now as law, then it's not a democracy.

Dick: I think it's a difficult question to answer. If it weren't for the fact that the state was organized by the Zionists as a Zionist and Jewish state, then I would be in favor of democracy, because I happen to think that the U.S. [system is the] best form of government, and I would like to see that in Israel. However, I agree that I don't see it happening. It is a Jewish state. There's a lot of emotion involved, both with the formation of the Jewish state, what happened during the Second World War, ultimately with that immigration that occurred into Israel.... Thus, I can't see it as being democratic in that sense.

Daniel: The question was whether Israel is a democracy. You're asking me whether it should be a democracy, [and that's a different question] because I think there is something important about having a Jewish state. And I want to recognize that, by accepting that definition, I'm also accepting that you have a nondemocratic Jewish state or not-fully-democratic Jewish state.

Daniel's qualification, at the end of his statement, implies that embracing the state's Jewish character does not entail rejecting democracy. Rather, in discourse of this type, democracy is construed as existing on a continuum, with secular, democratic universalism of the sort practiced in the United States described as "full democracy," and European nation states with their established churches and strong national cultures viewed as democratic, but less so. The centrist discussion participants are less willing to set aside their commitments to democracy than to indicate that Israel can embrace a model of democracy that falls short of their democratic ideal. According to such a model, notwithstanding equal rights for all citizens of the state, Israel would continue to extend priority to Jewish immigration and absorption and embrace symbols (including the flag and national anthem) that represent the Jewish majority. Israel can adopt such policies in the interest of embracing its Jewish character, which they also value highly.

Participants advanced conventional American Zionist arguments to explain their overarching commitment to the survival of a state of the Jewish people. They described Israel as a refuge for persecuted Jews and as a safe haven in the event of future anti-Semitism. Consider the following exchange between members of a Reform congregation:

Michael (attorney, age 38): You ever see how they kill baby seals in Scandinavia with the sticks? This is how they killed Jewish children in the Holocaust. And I have two little boys, and I can imagine.... And so it becomes a reality of what stakes are involved. And I consider myself a liberal person; however, sometimes you lose your liberalism when your back is against the wall, and you're under threat. And I think that people think the Holocaust is a long time ago, and the problem of anti-Semitism has faded away, but they really haven't.... I also just learned in the recent past that some of my relatives survived the Holocaust and are living in Israel. So ... it becomes a physical, emotional, personal reality that you have a stake in it.

Steven (physician, age 55): I think the only other thing I'm going to add is that I'm the child of a Holocaust survivor, so Israel has been important, an emotional sanctuary for me, growing up, and I think a ... watershed moment for everybody is when you have children, and though we haven't yet made it to Israel, I'd like our children to think of Israel as a home for them also. And that makes ... me feel more motivated to visit there ... to help them feel as though that's a place they belong.

In several discussion groups, participants described Israel as a source of self-assurance and pride for contemporary Jews worldwide. Consider the following comment by Steve, age 52, a mental health counselor and member of a traditional, postdenominational synagogue:

Steve: I've been to Israel once and I didn't particularly enjoy the experience. I found the Israelis to be obnoxious and generally rude and in your face.... Israel has become much more important to me as a conse-

quence of studying Jewish history and that will remain so, regardless of my personal level of comfort in visiting Israel, being there or having a direct connection with the actual place. And it is because, as I say, of this certainty that we should never again have to live at someone else's pleasure. And I feel I've made just a commitment for myself to do what I can from this end to make sure that it remains the case.

For Steve, Israel's existence means that Jews everywhere can feel more secure in the knowledge that there exists a place in the world where Jews will always be protected against the possibility of persecution. For Ralph, as we read in the following extract, the existence of Israel provides emotional as well as physical sustenance:

Ralph (law professor, 51): My bar mitzvah year was 1967. You know, there's always sort of this history of hiding underneath the bed, and if you don't rock the boat, you won't get into trouble, which at least in '67, as far as I was concerned, was a dead issue. That all of a sudden, you don't have to hide underneath the bed, and yes, you can rock the boat. And there's something extraordinarily valuable as a people in doing that.... But in terms of my feelings for Israel, first of all, I haven't been there, so I have not yet had the conversion, and I'm sure if I go, I will have the conversion everybody else has had. But I think [that] the impact is in terms of how you can act as a Jew outside of Israel.

Such conventional rationales for support of the Jewish state might seem anachronistic to observers who doubt Israel's role as a safe haven and moral exemplar, but not to most American Jews in the discussion groups. Indeed, their support for conventional Zionist positions explains, in large measure, why they seek to reconcile their sometimes critical orientations toward policies of the Israeli government with their ongoing strong feelings of attachment to and support of the Jewish state.

In sum, for most discussion participants, Israel's democratic aspect (rooted, in their view, in their understanding of Jewish values) precludes religious hegemony by the Orthodox and discrimination against non-Jewish Israelis. For the centrist majority in the discussion groups, a Jewish state is not a state of *halakha* (Jewish law), but rather a state with a majority Jewish population. Ensuring the future of such a majority must be a primary public policy goal for Israel, to be pursued, if necessary, at the expense of pure democratic universalism.

Israel's Personal Meaning

We also asked the participants in roughly half of the focus groups a question regarding Israel's personal meaning:

Would you say that Israel has become more or less personally meaningful in recent years, and why?

We begin our review with those who expressed strong alienation or disconnection from Israel. In surveys, roughly one-quarter of respondents consistently deny any feelings of connection to the Jewish state.²³

Comparatively few discussion participants expressed strong feelings of disconnection or alienation from Israel. However, a handful of speakers, mostly in the left-leaning groups, described such feelings, and their words help to clarify the significance of survey research findings. Consider the following exchange, between two professors, both members of a humanist congregation.

Ellen (age 71): I really don't understand what American Jews mean by feeling this sense of comfort or connection to Israel.... In terms of Israel representing that sense of comfort and home, I really don't understand how people of my generation and the younger generation have that sense of connection. I don't get it. I understand history. I understand the horrific [nature] of the Holocaust.

Bill (age 68): I feel very much the way you do. It's not a homeland for me. I understand that historically it was exceedingly important after the Second World War to create a place for Jews, but I don't feel it as a home. My connection [is that] I have relatives there and feel a connection to those relatives, but I'm not the kind of person who gets off the plane and kisses the ground. I feel more comfort in some European countries than I felt in Israel.

However, most participants described Israel's personal significance in more positive terms. For many, the classical Zionist arguments described in the previous section capture Israel's personal significance. For others, Israel also evokes feelings as well as intellectual arguments. This is especially true among those who have visited the country. Consider the following comments that describe how, for many individuals, family ties and personal visits have made Israel "feel like home."

Bonnie (mother, 48): I grew up with a dad who had what I would term a fierce love for Israel. And my sister lived on a kibbutz for many years, so for me, it's simply emotional. I love Israel—it's a very strong emotion.

Paul (clinical psychologist, 57): I am married to an Iranian Jew, and when her family had to leave Iran, they only had two choices really, which was America or Israel. And so for her, Israel is a real thing; it exists as the safety net. She has a lot of family there. So that made it real to me.

David (investment manager, 51): I've probably been back eight or ten times since then. I certainly know the country much better today than I did then, pluses and minuses. But, I'll tell you, as aware as I am of Israel's flaws, I still feel like I'm coming home every time I go. And I think I have at least an average to above-average sense of the flaws and challenges, as well as the other side of the coin. But it's a very special place to me and I think [that] held up against any reasonable lens, [that] modern Israel exists is just an unbelievable miracle.

Martha (graduate student, 27): It's like Disney World! [Laughter] I love being there ... because when you grow up with no Jews, to think that

there is a country that celebrates Purim is like a dream! And it definitely has gotten more significant to me as I've gotten older and traveled there and learned more about it.... It's definitely a love relationship; it's very serious. [Laughter]

The question regarding Israel's changing meaning over the life course also sheds light on how the discussion participants reconcile ambivalence or opposition to Israel's policies with ongoing intellectual and emotional attachment. Many participants expressed a "coming of age" narrative—of moving beyond starry-eyed idealism to embrace realism about the Jewish state. Consider the following three extracts, all examples of this narrative of transition from what we might term "youthful idealism" to "mature realism."

Jeanne (pediatrician, 40): I think when you're very young ... you see things in very simplistic terms. I think when I was young, there was this land flowing with milk and honey to protect everyone from further Holocausts, and there was dancing and singing and the planting of trees.... I mean, to a certain extent, some of those [images] are still engraved in your psyche. But as you get older, of course, you come to understand history a bit better.... And you have a more balanced view of the world, and you know other people suffered because of these glorious victories, and that there were these really messy political and geographical developments. Not that I don't still have very strong, very positive feelings toward Israel, but they're somewhat down by the current political situation. I definitely do not agree [that] everything Israel does makes sense. I guess one of the big things that changed is [that] there is Israel the image and Israel the reality. [I] still consider myself possibly a strong supporter of Israel the entity. I have to say that I do not always agree politically with what is going on, but I could say the same thing about ... America.

David (investment manager, 51): I similarly grew up with sort of the general impression [of what] Israel could have been.... It's the homeland of the Jewish people, but it was also an abstraction. And I haven't been there, so it's not quite as concrete to me as probably [to] some of you. But I've been kind of disillusioned with some of the realizations that there's a lot of wrongdoing on both sides of the conflict. It's not just suicide bombers on one side and the righteous response on the other. There's killing of civilians on both sides; there's conflicting ideologies, and preaching of hatred on both sides occasionally. And sometimes I'm disappointed in what I see from Israel. You know, it's hard to ignore, for example, in the recent Lebanon war, the fact that such a huge percentage of the victims were civilians on both sides. And that doesn't seem right to me. And I know that the circumstances [were] hard to control; with the aerial bombardments, you can't tell who's the enemy and who isn't, but there are aspects of the occupation and the war that make me disappointed in the Israeli response. And I still support Israel. I just wish they could do it with a more moral high ground and moral competence.

Marci (software engineer, 44): I think Israel's as important to me now as I've grown up, but I have a very different perspective. As a child, you know, it was played up as a homeland and a beautiful place, and ours, and now I see it through less rose-colored glasses, but as equally important—the importance of it existing hasn't diminished. But just I see the struggles, I think, a little more clearly, and it's not just this fantasyland, it's not Disneyland that you know [is] always going to be there, like I think I thought when I was little.

Realism as a worldview entails viewing Israel as a fallible nation, much like any other, including the United States. The ascendance of this view reflects, perhaps, a maturation of American Jewry beyond a mythic relationship to Israel to one more reflective of the complex realities of contemporary political choices and compromises. Today, many American Jews view Israel as a real country, confronting difficult policy choices, and divided politically and socially. Indeed, American Jewry increasingly reflects such divisions in its own ranks, and it is unsurprising that so many express disillusionment alongside ongoing feelings of connection, caring, and commitment.

The Paradox of Belonging

The dominant narrative developed above, of American Jews identifying with Israel, notwithstanding their disagreements over particular policies, requires one qualification. Many discussion participants were willing to support Israel, regardless of their personal disagreements, because they embrace the basic vision of a state of the Jewish people and recognize the Jewish state as a normal country whose policies they might or might not support. The only point where significant numbers indicated alienation from Israel occurred in discussions of the country's policies toward liberal Jewish movements. In their exchanges, the discussion participants implied that, if in the future the State of Israel were to refuse recognition of non-Orthodox Jews, they in turn might feel less allegiance to the Jewish state. Such discourse was especially prevalent in Reform groups and clearly reflects the familiarity of these particular Reform Jews with the struggles of their movement for legal recognition in Israel. Still, the possibility that a segment of American Jewry might feel disconnected from the Jewish state because they believe they are not recognized as Jews, and hence not wanted by the state, is certainly a striking qualification to evidence of an otherwise rather stable relationship.

Conclusion

The context in which American Jews develop their political opinions regarding Israel's core policy dilemmas is rapidly changing. Whereas in the not-so-distant past, most Israel advocacy advanced the consensus positions of the large American Jewish organizations and the government

of Israel, increasingly such advocacy develops in plural directions. Today a growing number of political and religious organizations representing diverse sectors of American Jewry advocate partisan viewpoints regarding Israel's core policy dilemmas. In this new landscape, it is increasingly important to understand the policy orientations of rank-and-file American Jews and the relationship between their political views and their core feelings of connection with the Jewish state.

The introduction (page 7) set out a series of questions regarding the views and sentiments of American Jews. This conclusion develops answers to those questions in light of the evidence described in the preceding sections.

*How Do Respondents Think about the
Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?*

Participants in the discussions expressed the full array of viewpoints that appear in the media discourse on this issue. However, the views expressed by focus group participants were largely distributed according to their religious-denominational affiliations, and proponents of the polarizing views of the right and left were in the minority. Most respondents expressed centrist views emphasizing the twin goals of peace and security. Speakers expressing centrist views were the vast majority in the Reform, Conservative, and unaffiliated groups and were present, albeit not necessarily in the majority, in all other groups as well. Speakers expressing right-wing views were mostly from the Orthodox groups and the right-leaning Israel advocacy organization. Speakers expressing left-wing themes were mostly from the postdenominational and humanistic congregations and from the peace advocacy organization.

Although home to the majority, the political center is a difficult terrain characterized by considerable ambivalence. Commentators who describe the U.S. Jewish mainstream as either hawkish or dovish fail to appreciate this ambivalence. For example, consider a recent survey administered by J Street, a left-leaning political action committee. The survey asked respondents to indicate whether hypothetical statements from an imaginary "candidate for Congress" would make them more or less supportive of that person's candidacy. On the one hand, 68 percent of respondents indicated that the following statement would make them more supportive of the speaker's hypothetical candidacy (19 percent indicated that it would make them less supportive):

The ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict endangers Israel's security and its future as a Jewish and democratic state, and America needs to use our international influence to help lead the parties to peace. This requires a fundamental change from President Bush's policy of disengaging from the issue and not using American leverage to get the parties to make the compromises necessary to achieve peace. I will always support Israel, and that support means America working as hard as it can to advance Palestinian-Israeli peace.

J Street depicts support for this kind of statement as indicative of the dovish inclinations of American Jewry. However, the same survey also included a hypothetical statement meant to capture the opposite political tendency. The alternative statement read as follows:

Israel is America's greatest ally and we must be very clear in letting the whole world know that Israel has our steadfast support. With Israel facing dangerous threats on a daily basis, it is not our job to second-guess how Israel responds. America acts in its own best interest and does best by Israel when our support is unquestioning, standing up for Israel when the international community condemns an Israeli policy and never publicly expressing our disagreements with Israel.

Asked whether such a statement would make them more or less supportive of the candidate uttering it, fully 60 percent indicated "more supportive" (and 28 percent "less supportive"). Given the large confidence intervals, the different levels of support for the two statements appear remarkably small.

How do we reconcile the high level of approval expressed by respondents for each of these apparently contradictory statements? The focus group discussions suggest that American Jews indeed do express a great deal of ambivalence in relation to the issues raised in these statements. Their ambivalence is related, however, less to ignorance and indecision than to their assessment of the reality of the conflict. Most American Jews would like to see Israel reach an accord with the Palestinians and believe that the United States can be helpful in achieving that goal. Most, however, remain skeptical that such a deal is possible, or that it would be honored by the other side. Caught between a realist's desire for security and an idealistic commitment to peace, they would like to see the United States engaged in mediating the conflict, but would also like the United States to be supportive of Israel against her enemies. The difficulty with the above statements is that they conflate positions that elicit widespread support (e.g., U.S. engagement to promote peace, U.S. defense of Israel against her enemies) with positions that are less popular (U.S. pressure on Israel to make compromises, knee-jerk support for every Israeli policy).

Understanding the overarching commitment of the vast majority of American Jews to the twin goals of peace and security also helps to clarify the significance of long-term trends in attitudes regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such long-term trends are best discerned through analysis of survey data. Survey items that require respondents to choose a side, say, for or against establishment of a Palestinian state, show a moderate change over time, generally in the direction of greater support for compromise.²⁴ However, relatively few focus group participants demanded an immediate end to the occupation or expressed a strong ideological commitment to permanent Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank. Rather, most indicated support for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and establishment of a Palestinian state, if such moves would translate into an enduring and stable peace deal.

In all likelihood, such values-based commitments to peace and security have remained stable in recent years, whereas the background against which strategic choices must be made has changed. During the 1990s and 2000s, Israeli officials increasingly described establishing a Palestinian state as a long-term goal. Since 2000, the security situation created by the status quo has increasingly appeared untenable to a wide range of observers. In light of such changes—in the position of the Israeli government and the realities on the ground—American Jews have moved in a somewhat conciliatory direction regarding establishment of a Palestinian state. Such shifts reflect changing assessments of the efficacy of specific means for achieving the goals of peace and security, rather than a change in underlying values.

The ambivalent character of American Jewish opinion regarding negotiation with the Palestinians surfaces most readily in survey questions that provide a middle option. Asked whether they favor dismantling all, some, or none of the West Bank settlements, a strong plurality of American Jews choose the centrist position “some.” Unfortunately, few survey questions are structured to capture such centrist or ambivalent opinions. As a consequence, it is easy to underestimate the flexible and contingent nature of American Jewish opinion on policy issues pertaining to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, it is fair to say that advocacy organizations of the left and right, which characterize American Jews as either critics of the Israeli government eager for an immediate peace settlement or as opponents of trading land for peace, misrepresent the centrist Jewish majority.

*How Do Respondents Think about the
Role of Religion in the Jewish State?*

With the exception of the Orthodox respondents, the focus group participants were far less ambivalent regarding conflicts over the relationship between religion and state. Many non-Orthodox focus group participants strongly opposed the role of Orthodox Judaism in Israeli law and religious parties in Israeli politics. Their criticisms echoed sentiments often expressed by many secular Israelis, particularly with respect to the influence of religious political parties. They also insisted that Israel fully and equally recognize the life-cycle rituals performed by rabbis representing all of the major Jewish streams.

The focus group participants’ critique of the Israeli religious status quo was informed, in large measure, by their experience of separation of church and state in the United States. In their view, however, the role of Orthodoxy in Israel today violates not only American principles of church-state separation, but also classic Zionist formulations. Such formulations, as they were understood by participants, envision Israel as a secular democracy with a Jewish majority, one in which freedom of religion is a basic democratic principle. Thus, focus group participants criticized the religious status quo in Israel as a failure on Israel’s part to

achieve its founding vision, much as civil rights activists (including many Jews) criticized the racial status quo in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s as a failure of the United States to live up to its deepest aspirations.

Do Policy Disagreements Engender Alienation?

Focus group participants expressed a wide range of viewpoints relative to Israel's core political dilemmas. From the political right, some criticized Israel's decision to evacuate settlers from the Gaza Strip and warned against future territorial concessions. From the left, some criticized Israel's treatment of Palestinians and its positions in peace negotiations. Across a range of focus groups, many participants criticized discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel and the role of Orthodoxy in Israeli law and politics.

However, for the most part, the respondents do not believe that their political disagreements have resulted in their alienation from Israel. They describe themselves as "realists" for whom the rose-tinted glasses have been set aside. They no more expect to always support the policies of the Israeli government than they would those of their own U.S. government. They therefore claim to distinguish between feelings of attachment, which are related to their commitment to Israel as a Jewish state, and their views on particular policy issues.²⁵

There are exceptions to this overall pattern. In several groups—especially postdenominational and humanist groups, as well as a group comprised of members of a peace-advocacy organization—individual participants expressed feelings of alienation from Israel related to their specific policy views regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. More conspicuously, many participants in Reform discussion groups, as well as some of the other non-Orthodox groups, expressed significant feelings of alienation related to Israel's failure to grant full recognition to the liberal (i.e., non-Orthodox) Jewish movements. Notably, participants expressing such sentiments often misconstrued the character of Israeli law and policy, suggesting, often erroneously, that Israel would not recognize their marriages or their own personal identities as Jews.

These findings suggest that policy disagreements are largely compatible with strong feelings of support for Israel. Most participants can and do contextualize whatever objections they have to particular Israeli policies within an overall framework of identification and support. However, for a substantial number, such support is partly contingent upon a sense of reciprocal identification by Israel of their personal Jewish identities. To the extent that the conflict over recognition of liberal Jewish movements has damaged the expectation of reciprocal identification, it is the factor most likely to weaken connections to Israel among those strongly identified with such movements.

*What Does Israel Mean
for Contemporary American Jews?*

In November 2007, on the eve of the Annapolis Peace Conference, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert gave an interview to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, in which he warned of the grave consequences of failure of the talks: "If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses and we face a South African-style struggle for equal voting rights, then, as soon as that happens, the State of Israel is finished." In a struggle over voting rights, "the Jewish organizations, which were our power base in America, will be the first to come out against us because they will say they cannot support a state that does not support democracy and equal voting rights for all its residents."²⁶

As we have seen, Olmert's comments do indeed capture the deep commitment felt by many American Jews to the concept of civil rights, as well as to Israel's character as a democratic country. Many participants in the focus groups envisioned Israel as a democratic state that respects civil rights and religious freedom. To the extent that they believed Israel has fallen short of these ideals, they admonished the Israeli political leadership to do better.

However, the focus group participants also expressed strong commitment to Israel as a Jewish state. In the discussions, they stressed a number of conventional American Zionist themes, specifically, that Israel should forever remain a refuge for persecuted Jews and a guarantee against the possibility of future anti-Semitism. Many also described Israel as a source of pride and self-assurance for Jews living in the Diaspora.

As a result of their complex and strongly held sentiments, American Jews will avoid as best they can the stark choice Olmert presented: acceptance of Israel as an undemocratic regime or public opposition to the state. Instead, they will continue to favor a peace accord with the Palestinians and full civil rights for Arab Israelis. But they will not insist on an accord that they feel jeopardizes the security of Israel. Moreover, their understanding of democratic rights includes significant protections for the institutions, cultural practices, and symbols of the Jewish majority; to be democratic, Israel need not embrace the civic universalism of the United States. Like Israelis, most American Jews regard Israel as both Jewish and democratic and would like to continue seeing it as such in the future.

In sum, notwithstanding diverse judgments regarding policies adopted by the State of Israel, most focus group participants expressed intellectual commitment to the cause of a Jewish and democratic state, and many stressed their feelings of emotional connection as well. Such findings suggest that the visible conflicts among American Jewish elites over Israel have their echoes in the rank-and-file. However, such disagreements might arguably be construed as evidence of engagement and commitment rather than alienation. We can expect more conflict in the

future over contending visions of Israel. Such conflict, however, can be viewed in positive terms, as evidence of continuing American Jewish interest in and attachment to the Jewish state.

Methodological Appendix

Individual Characteristics of the Focus Group Sample

Figure A1: Age

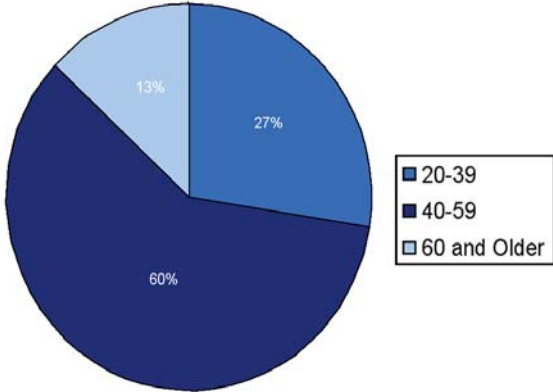


Figure A2: Gender

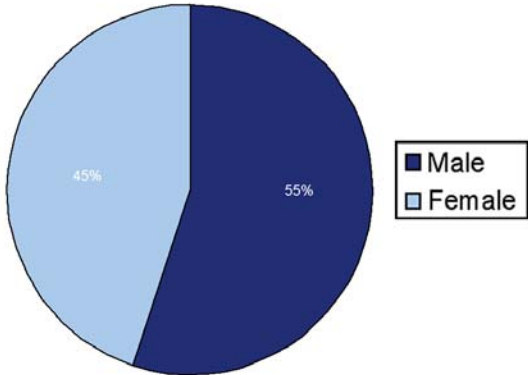
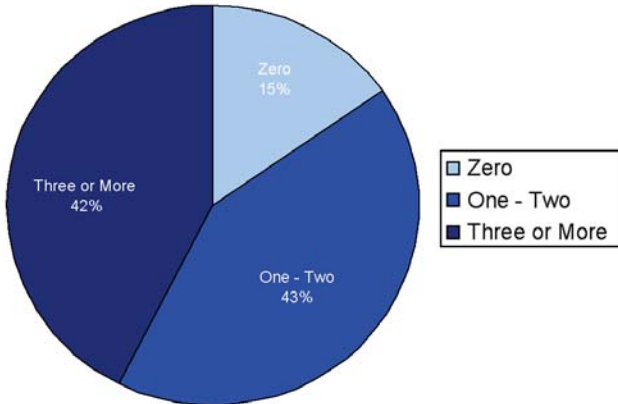


Figure A3: Visits to Israel



Methodological Appendix

Interview Questions for Focus Groups

Discussion questions were slightly modified at various junctures during the interview process. The following list of questions was employed, with minor variations, in most of the focus groups.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

1a. Why, in your view, have the recent peace initiatives, including the Oslo peace process and the Road Map for peace, apparently failed, and what should be done about the conflict?

or

1b. In future negotiations with the Palestinians, should Israel be willing to withdraw from the territories it has occupied since 1967 (i.e., the West Bank and East Jerusalem)? Why or why not?

2. Some people say that Palestinians have proven through their violence that they don't really want to make peace with Israel. Others say that Israel has proven through its settlements in the West Bank that it doesn't want peace with the Palestinians. What do you think? Are both sides equally ready to make peace?

Religious Conflicts among Jews

3. Turning now to a new topic, what have you heard about religious conflicts among Jews in Israel, for example, between secular and religious Jews? Are you aware of such conflicts? How serious do they seem to be?

4. On another topic related to religion in Israel: Leaders in the Reform and Conservative movements often complain about Israel's refusal to recognize the weddings, conversions, and divorces performed by Reform or Conservative rabbis, which they say amounts to religious discrimination. The country's Orthodox rabbinic authorities counter that recognition of non-Orthodox weddings and conversions will lead to a split in the Jewish people. In your view, how serious a problem is this, and what if anything should be done about it?

Israel's Personal Meaning

5. About the Jewish character of the State of Israel: Today, Arab citizens of Israel comprise roughly one-fifth of Israel's population within the 1967 borders. Advocates for equal rights for the Arab minority contend that, as a democracy, Israel must become a "state of all of its citizens." Others respond that Israel is first and foremost a state of the Jewish people, and that too much emphasis on equality will undermine the Jewish character of the state. What do you think? Can Israel be both a democratic state of all of its citizens and at the same time a state of the Jewish people?

6. OK. We're now done with the policy questions. Next we want to ask about Israel's meaning for you personally. How would you describe Israel's personal meaning for you? Would you say that Israel has become more or less personally meaningful for you over the years? Why?

7. OK. The last question is about visits to Israel. Would you consider a trip in the next several years? Why or why not?

Endnotes

1. Gregory Levey, "The Right Wing's Jerusalem Gambit," Salon.com, December 13, 2007.

2. Nathan Guttman, "In Resolution, Congress Backs Israel's Actions in Gaza," Forward.com, January 9, 2009.

3. "If There's No Reform Movement in Israel, There's No Reform Movement," *Ha'aretz*, December 16, 2007.

4. Regarding the opinions of young adult Jews, see Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman, "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and their Alienation from Israel" (New York: Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007). Regarding the impact of Israel experience programs, see, for example, Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, Benjamin Phillips, Shahar Hecht, and Graham Wright, "Taglit-Birthright Israel Evaluation: 2007 North American Cohorts" (Waltham, MA: Steinhardt Institute for Social Research, 2007).

5. The notable exception is Joel Perlmann, "American Jewish Opinion about the Future of the West Bank," Working Paper 526 (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, 2007).

6. For a careful discussion of the strengths and limitations of AJC surveys, see Joel Perlmann, "The American Jewish Committee's Annual Opinion Surveys: An Assessment of Sample Quality," Working Paper 508 (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, 2007).

7. Sasson, Theodore, "Focus Groups," in *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*, edited by Vincent Parrillo (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008).

8. Regarding the various prestate Zionist orientations toward the Arab-Palestinian population, see Colin Shindler, *A History of Modern Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

9. Sixty-nine percent of Orthodox respondents oppose establishment of a Palestinian state versus 38 percent Conservative, 39 percent Reform, and 34 percent unaffiliated. Similarly, 65 percent of Orthodox respondents oppose dismantling any West Bank settlements in a peace deal versus 36 percent Conservative, 31 percent Reform, and 32 percent unaffiliated (AJC Annual Survey, 2005).

10. Eighty-four percent of Orthodox and 70 percent of Conservative respondents oppose dividing Jerusalem in a peace deal versus 50 percent of Reform and 51 percent of unaffiliated (AJC Annual Survey, 2005).

11. Perlmann, "American Jewish Opinion about the Future of the West Bank," 2007; Theodore Sasson, Charles Kadushin, and Leonard Saxe, "American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the 'Distancing' Hypothesis" (Waltham, MA: Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2008).

12. The names in this report are pseudonyms.

13. See Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe, "American Jewish Attachment to Israel," 2008. For respondents as a whole, emotional attachment to Israel is unrelated to

views regarding dismantling settlements, in models that take into account religious denomination, age, prior visits to Israel, and other factors. Views regarding establishment of a Palestinian state are weakly related. For a similar analysis, see Perlmann, "American Jewish Opinion about the Future of the West Bank," 2007, p. 31.

14. Participants in the focus group discussions completed background questionnaires that included a question regarding presidential preferences in recent U.S. national elections.

15. For a discussion of the conversion conflicts, see Steven Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2000).

16. For a comparison of the views of Israeli and American Jews, see Theodore Sasson and Ephraim Tabory, "Converging Political Cultures: How Globalization Is Shaping the Discourses of Israeli and American Jews," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 16 (forthcoming, 2010).

17. Steven M. Cohen, "Ties and Tensions: The 1986 Survey of American Jewish Attitudes Toward Israel and Israelis" (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1986). See also Charles Liebman, "The Religious Life of American Jewry," in Marshall Sklare, editor, *Understanding American Jewry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982).

18. See, for example, Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman, "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and their Alienation from Israel"; Frank Luntz, "Israel and American Jews in the Age of Eminence" (New York: Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2003); Ofira Seliktar, *Divided We Stand: American Jews, Israel and the Peace Process* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

19. See, for example, Steven M. Cohen, "Did American Jews Really Grow More Distant from Israel, 1983-1993?—A Reconsideration" in Alon Gal, ed., *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, 1996); Benjamin Phillips, Eszter Lengyel, and Leonard Saxe, "American Attitudes Toward Israel" (Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2002); Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe, "American Jewish Attachment to Israel," 2008.

20. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe, *ibid.*

21. For example, see Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Asad Ganim, Nadim Rouhana, and Oren Yiftachel, "Questioning 'Ethnic Democracy: A Response to Sammy Smooha,'" *Israel Studies* 3:2 (1998).

22. For example, see Alexander Yakobson, "Jewish Peoplehood and the Jewish State, How Unique?—A Comparative Study," *Israel Studies* 13 (2008): 1-27.

23. Perlmann, "American Jewish Opinion about the Future of the West Bank," 2007.

24. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe, "American Jewish Attachment to Israel," 2008, p. 20.

25. This finding is consistent with survey analysis that finds weak and inconsistent associations between political views (both general and with respect to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict) and feelings of emotional connection with Israel. See Cohen and Kelman, "Beyond Distancing," 2007; Perlmann, "American Jewish Opinion about the Future of the West Bank," 2007; Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe, "American Jewish Attachment to Israel," 2008.

26. *Ha'aretz*, November 27, 2007.

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