

Comments on Beinart

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May 21, 2010

In reading Peter Beinart's, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment," I am reminded of Sam Norich's quip: "You exaggerate, but not enough!" Indeed, American Jews' disillusionment with Israel is more far-reaching than Beinart portrays; the causes for distancing extend beyond dissonance with liberal values; and distancing operates differently for the Jewish public and the most Jewishly engaged.

Beinart is right to locate detachment among the non-Orthodox. Over the years, Orthodox Jews have grown increasingly attached to Israel, as gap year study in Israel has become de rigueur, and 2,000+ Orthodox Jews make aliya (migrate to Israel) annually.

In contrast, the 90% (and shrinking) number of American Jews who are not Orthodox have been moving toward less engagement with Israel, a move tempered only by Birthright Israel and Masa, programs bringing thousands of young American Jews to Israel annually.

Detachment from Israel among the American Jewish public differs critically from disillusionment among the more Jewishly active and engaged. For the public, distancing is not much driven by political considerations. If Israeli policies were largely responsible for distancing, then liberal Jews should be more distant from Israel than centrist or politically conservative Jews. In fact, as Ari Kelman and I find in, "Beyond Distancing," <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=326> attachment to Israel is unrelated to political identity; but, support for Israeli hard-line policies does reflect overall political views. In other words, politically conservative and liberal Jews are equally attached to Israel, but the politically conservative express far more support for current Israeli government policy positions.

If Israeli policies aren't undermining Israel attachment, then what is? As Ari and I found, the primary driver is intermarriage. Younger Jews are far more likely to marry non-Jews, and the intermarried are far less Israel-attached than are the in-married -- and even the non-married. Intermarriage reflects and promotes departure from all manner of Jewish ethnic "groupiness," of which Israel attachment is part.

Where Israeli policies do come into play is with a critical segment: Jewishly engaged younger adults. Younger active Jews are just as "engaged" with Israel as their older counterparts, but they are far less likely to see themselves "pro-Israel." Significantly, despite the efflorescence of new Jewish initiatives in such domains as independent minyanim, Jewish culture, social justice, learning, and new media, hardly any new initiatives by young people relate to Israel. More

pointedly, when asked to engage the Israel question on any side of the agenda, younger leaders resist doing so, in part out of fear of controversy in their own communities, or fear of repercussions from donors who fund their initiatives. Younger Jews believe they have only two acceptable choices if they are to remain welcome in conventional Jewish precincts: public advocacy or private ambivalence.

If Israel is to retain the engagement of the coming (and present) generation of American Jews, organized American Jewry will need to provide for a third alternative, one that combines love of Israel with a rich and open discourse on its policies and politics (see, for example, www.ForTheSakeOfZion.org).