

## **Background: the question of "distancing" from Israel**

The debate concerning the erosion of the feeling of closeness of young Jewish Americans and the question of whether the young Jewish generation is "distancing" from Israel has been going on for several years and has become even more intense after the publication of a study on this topic in 2007 (Cohen-Kelman), which turned the debate into an argument, yet to be resolved, between pollsters and sociologists. This argument is based on two competing theories that have been presented in various studies.

According to one theory, the young generation of American Jews (except for the Orthodox) are "less connected" to Israel as proven by many, diverse indicators including: evidence as to the gradual disengagement of young American Jews from any identity that has an ethnic component; the weakening of Jewish organizations – a major vehicle for conveying support and expressing closeness to Israel; a change in the way young people perceive their religious affiliation – a lowered emphasis on "tribal" and "national" affiliation, and a growing emphasis on religion as an essentially "personal" expression, and more.

According to the second approach, there is a fundamental error in reading the data of the researchers claiming that there is a "distancing," and "there is no consistent evidence of distancing in our data." This research (presented primarily in studies conducted by Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe), argues that the young generation has always been further away from Israel compared to older adults, and there is nothing new in this. The researchers championing this approach, who have also analyzed data from various surveys, especially those of the American Jewish Committee, believe that the gap between generations is related to life-cycle events. Young people are more distant from Israel, but they get closer to it as they mature. Furthermore, the researchers have found reasons to believe that the next generation of youngsters will be closer to Israel than their parents' generation due to the expansion of programs such as "Birthright" and "Masa" which constantly increase the number of young Jews who visit Israel and thus become connected to the country.

Without going into the professional argument between the various groups of researchers and the contribution made to it by many other researchers in the past year, it is clear that the issue of "distancing" has become, of late, an issue that is preoccupying the Jewish American leadership, due to, among other things, various developments in Israel-Diaspora relations, continuing political problems in the Middle East that undoubtedly project, for better and for worse, on the nature of the relationship, and due to changes related to the character of American society in general and its young generation – of which the young Jewish generation is an integral part, which cannot be studied separately from the developments in the rest of the United States. This year a new peak of interest in the "distancing" question was registered, following a controversial article by Prof. Peter Beinart in "The New York Review of Books." Beinart, a Jew, argued in his article that "primarily among the young generations, an increasingly smaller number of American liberal Jews are Zionists." Much (justified) criticism was heaped upon the evidence presented by Beinart in his article. However, the writer clearly managed to hit a nerve. His article was widely discussed in the Jewish community for many weeks, and even those disagreeing with his arguments – both those concerning young Jewish Americans and those concerning his unflattering depictions of Israel – were forced to admit that Beinart had managed to reignite an important debate concerning the attitude of American Jews toward Israel.

Beinart's main explanation for what he describes as the "distancing" of young Jewish Americans from Israel is essentially political. Young Jewish Americans are for the most part liberals, while Israel is seen as a conservative country, with some policies that are not acceptable to most of American Jewry. A similar perception is presented by the relatively new Jewish lobbying organization, J-Street that believes that the traditional organizations of American Jewry do not represent the basic conceptions of "the majority of the Jewish community," which gravitates toward "leftist" conceptions and opposes some policies of the Israeli government. Although many of those disseminating the distancing theory believe that the political arena is where the primary explanation for the change in young Jewish Americans' attitude towards Israel must be found. One must recall that all the researchers – those subscribing to distancing and those who do not accept the theory – have not found evidence linking political conceptions relating to Israeli policy with disengagement or distancing from Israel. And in the words of the researchers: "political tendencies relating

to possible uneasiness over the policy of Israel's government are not the fundamental reason for the disengagement of youngsters from Israel."

But despite all the aforementioned reservations and the lack of agreed upon data that can refute or confirm the distancing theory, the past year has been characterized by intensive preoccupation with this issue, which apparently will continue for those involved in the Israel-Diaspora relationship in the coming years. If there is indeed a distancing of any kind, it seems to derive from a combination of several components: some may perhaps be amenable to intervention through proper action by American Jewry's leadership, some justify Israeli thought and intervention, some may be generational characteristics that are beyond the sway of any intervention – such that will require the adjustments necessary for a new and unpreventable situation. factor, and they will justify preparing for the new situation.

### **"The other foot" – gaps of religion and state**

As mentioned, many of those adhering to the distancing theory in various degrees of severity believe that political gaps make a real contribution to the feeling of young American Jews that Israel cannot constitute for them a core state, nationally or religiously. These young people, whom Beinart faithfully represented (though he did not present convincing evidence that his position indeed represents a significant portion of young Jews), see Israel as "occupier," Israel as "fighter," Israel that hasn't managed to make peace with her neighbors, a country whose values are very different from their own. There is a large group, whose exact size is difficult to estimate, that blames Israel, to varying degrees, of failing to achieve peace, especially with the Palestinians. This group views Israel through a prism that greatly emphasizes occupation and settlements, and in the past two years, the positions, statements and personality of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman.

However, the political explanation for the distancing of young Jews, or for their difficulty in identifying with Israel in its current form is not the only one possible. Parallel to it, and to a large extent complementing and strengthening it, is a "religious" explanation, the feeling of young Jews that the ways in which the relationship between religion and state in Israel is managed contradicts their fundamental values and make it difficult for them to identify with Israel. The gaps between Israeli and American Jews in this matter are hardly new, and throughout the years that have passed since the establishment of the State of Israel, they have surfaced and at times brought about "crises" in Israel-Diaspora relations.

One may say that the majority of American Jews are faithful to the idea of separation of state and religion as it is practiced in the United States, and actually they are one of the groups that strictly and stringently defends this separation, more than most of the other groups in America, for understandable reasons (such a separation is in the clear interest of religious minorities). Jewish organizations have joined and continue to join nearly every important petition concerning separation of state and religion, and they adamantly oppose any attempt to insert religious symbols and ceremonies into the American public sphere. In Israel, on the hand, the religious establishment is a part of the political establishment. There are "religious" parties that draw their power mainly from the religious public and invest political capital in improving its rights and status. There is a rabbinical establishment that holds essential legal authority (marriage, divorce, conversion, etc.). This gap between the American ethos and the Israeli one is, in and of itself, a source of tensions and alienation of some Jewish Americans from Israel. This gap is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of Jewish Americans belong to the religious streams that have little or no part in Israel's religious establishment. Israel, in the eyes of some young Jewish Americans, is a country whose religious life is ruled by the Orthodox establishment, which suppresses the other religious streams, namely the Reform and Conservative – at a time in which the majority of young Jewish Americans identify as Conservative, Reform, or unaffiliated.

As mentioned above none of this is new, but in the past year a renewed tension between Israel and American Jewry concerning the religious issues erupted, and this may have contributed to distancing arguments. In any case, it has not had a beneficial effect on relations between the two communities. The uneasiness of young Jewish Americans with the way religious life is negotiated in Israel contributes to the erosion of Israel's image as "the sole liberal democracy in the Middle East," and to the rise in currency and frequency of unflattering comparisons between Israel and fundamentalist regimes. Against this background one can mention many examples of incidences that have received varying degrees of exposure in American Jewish communities such as: the segregation of men and women in some Jerusalem buses; the rabbinical letter opposing renting apartments to Arabs; a ruling against allowing a woman to be a member of the management of a religious community in Samaria; various antagonistic statements made by important rabbis against the progressive denominations, sometimes in scathing terms, and so on.

The renewal of tensions between Israel and the Diaspora in recent years has several causes:

In Israel:

- The rise in the demographic strength of the ultra-Orthodox and their efforts to exercise this power in legislating religion.
- Religious radicalization of rabbinical edicts, both ultra-Orthodox and National-Religious, as part of an ongoing trend that highlights discrepancies between the rabbinical ideal and the customary practices of the general public.
- A relative calm in the security situation alongside a relative stagnation in the political process, which contributed to the reappearance of essentially civil matters on the agenda, such as the Rotem Bill.
- A strengthening of the progressive movements in Israel and their attempts to gather even more strength – which brought about a suppressing counter-reaction on the part of the Orthodox establishment.

In the Diaspora:

- A change in the attitude towards Israel and broadening acceptance of a more critical discourse as opposed to unequivocal support for Israel, including presenting expectations and even demands in return for this support.
- A growing trend of philanthropists routing their money not only through large organizations but also through smaller ones that direct the funds toward specific targets, including strengthening progressive elements in Israel, political as well as religious.
- A rise in the number of visits of young Jewish Americans to Israel, which expose them directly to the manner in which religious issues are handled in Israel.

These factors as well as others were expressed this year in two "crises" that exposed the depth of the chasm between Israel and American Jewry around religious issues and heightened the feeling among young American Jews that Israel, as it has been shaped in the past few generations, is remote from them, both ideologically and practically. Naturally, this leads young adults to one of two possible conclusions. In the best case it stimulates them to action and involvement in the hope that such increased engagement will bring about change (and from their point of view, improvement). In a less sanguine case it undermines the

young Jewish desire for connection with Israel – a country that does not live up to his accepted standards.

### **The Rotem Law crisis and the Women of the Wall**

Two prominent issues were at the center of the relationship this year between Israel and American Jewry concerning the issue of the state-religion relationship. The first was an attempt to change the Israeli conversion law (the bill is called "the Rotem Bill"), and the second is the ongoing clash related to the desire of a group called "the Women of the Wall" to conduct religious ceremonies by and for women at the Western Wall. These two issues received much attention from the American Jewish establishment, from the communities, rabbis, and activists from all over the United States. In nearly all cases the attention was negative and included severe criticism of Israel to the degree that threats were made, in certain instances, to "re-evaluate the relationship." One common argument suggested that Israel was "endangering its security" by pushing away American Jewry from supporting it. These two issues received somewhat similar reactions in the United States, but there are several essential differences between them. The Rotem Bill is a specific event, a crisis that resulted from one MK's initiative aiming to simplify and expedite conversion procedures in Israel, in order to solve the internal Israeli problem of growing difficulty in converting new immigrants, especially from the FSU. In contrast, the "Women of the Wall" crisis is an ongoing affair of several years, that gains increased attention every time one of the sides – the group of women, the police, the Rabbi of the Kotel, decide, for their own reasons, to take action that pours gasoline on the fires of the crisis. Americans, time and again, find it hard to believe that such routine custom – women reading from the Torah – is still reason for such controversy and acrimony. This year, the Women of the Wall's struggle for recognition of their right to pray, according to their custom, in the women's section of the Western Wall received significant exposure due to the police decision to detain and question several of the group's leaders, claiming that the women had breached the status quo as decreed by the Supreme Court - a claim based in fact.

The Rotem Bill touched upon an essential issue that causes a crisis in Israel-Diaspora relations each time it is raised. We refer to the attempt made by MK David Rotem from the Yisrael Beiteinu party to solve an internal Israeli problem of dealing with converting people,

especially FSU immigrants, due to the refusal of rabbis in various places to accept their conversions as "kosher." MK Rotem tried to change the law so that the system would become "friendlier" towards those going through conversion by "privatizing" the conversion system and adding dozens and perhaps hundreds of conversion rabbis, in the hope that such an increase would make it easier for those interested in conversion to find a rabbi that would enable them to do so. As part of the package deal (that included other elements) concocted by Rotem and the ultra-Orthodox MKs, a deal that was necessary to ensure Haredi support. Under this agreement the authority and responsibility for all matters of conversion were placed in the hands of the Chief Rabbinate. It was this item in the law that raised the most objections, due to opponents' fear that it had the potential to dramatically alter the status quo and create a situation that would allow the Rabbinate to determine in practice how conversions would be conducted in Israel, without the Supreme Court being able to interfere, as it had done more than once in the past.

Furthermore, every attempt to change the conversion laws also means a change in the Israeli approach to the larger question of "Who is a Jew?" and therefore is also perceived as having a direct effect upon Diaspora Jewry. Although in this case it was unclear whether there would be any practical implications for the Jewish Diaspora (supporters of the Rotem Bill claim that the law will have no effect whatsoever – thus they claim it is not the business of Diaspora Jewry to intervene in this matter), the very attempt to change the definition of who is a Jew or, in this case, the identity of those responsible for the definition (the Rotem Bill, if passed, would have broadened the authority of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate), raised immediate objections on the part of the Jewish Diaspora, led by American Jewry. However, it must be noted that objections to the bill were raised not only over the change directly concerning conversion, but also over the feeling of Jewish American leaders that broadening the authority of the Israeli Orthodox establishment continues a trend of erosion in religious pluralism in Israel and exemplifies the ultra-Orthodox belief in the inherent inferiority of the progressive denominations trying to establish themselves in Israel. The proposed law was seen as possibly stunting the growth and influence of the Israeli branches of progressive denominations.

The Women of the Wall's struggle also concerns a Jewish symbol "shared" by Israel and the Jewish Diaspora – the Kotel plaza. This struggle has been going on for many years and it is

founded in the demand of a group of women to conduct a women's prayer service in the Kotel plaza, while wrapped in talitot and reading from the Torah. This demand and the ban imposed by the authorities on their desired form of prayer have already reached the High Court of Justice several times, and finally a compromise was reached, according to which the women would pray at the "Robinson Arch" – a section of the Wall that is separate and remote from the main prayer plaza of the "real" Kotel. However, Women of the Wall continues to insist on prayer at the central plaza. In the past year a new height was reached in the continuing struggle as the police detained for questioning several of the group's leaders after they had participated in a prayer gathering that contradicted the verdict of the High Court of Justice. The detention was met with sharp reactions in many Jewish communities in the United States.

Young Jewish Americans are not fond of the fact that the Kotel plaza has a strict separation policy between men and women, and that the responsibility for enforcing it is in the hands of an Orthodox rabbi who applies to all visitors the rules of behavior that agree with his conception of Judaism. In the past few years the rules governing behavior at the Kotel have seemed to some to become even stricter. For instance, in the establishment of separate entrances for men and women, not only to the prayer sections as before. This too has contributed to the growing feeling among American Jews that Israel is "radicalizing" in terms of religion and is on a path leading to fundamentalism.

The two crises, the immediate and the ongoing, have received the attention of American Jewry, although not equally. The immediate crisis – the Rotem Bill – was met with a sharp reaction on the part of the leaders of American Jewry, primarily because there was a clear legislative schedule in this case. The threat of an uncontrollable crisis actually caused a suspension, and recently an extension the suspension, of the legislation and perhaps even its cancellation leading to two possible outcomes:

- First: American Jewry was more intensively preoccupied with the growing gap between Israel and the Diaspora as related to the management of religious life and with the increasing difficulty of Diaspora Jewry to silently acquiesce. In this respect, and despite the "victory" of the legislation's suspension, many critics of the bill were left with feelings of bitterness and suspicion.



- Second: the specific "victory" gave the leaders of American Jewry the feeling that they have the power to influence Israel not only in political contexts but also, and perhaps even primarily, on issues relating to the Jewish character of the state. In this sense it is possible that the Rotem Bill will be a catalyst for other crises in which American Jewry will attempt to influence the reshaping of religious life in Israel by seeking to tip the balance of power away from the rabbinical-Orthodox establishment.

The Women of the Wall crisis is yet to be resolved, and it continues to erode Israel's image among some American Jews. To a certain extent this crisis is more dangerous to Israel-Diaspora relations than the Rotem Bill crisis, since it does not have any clear final decision date and can continue to foment friction and damage for many more years. Among the American Jewish leadership and in the communities there arises, from time to time, a demand to alter the status quo in the relations between the progressive denominations and the state and its institutions in general, and at the Western Wall specifically. This demand can also lead to several outcomes:

- An increasing feeling of alienation and distancing.
- A catalyst for "leadership" action for the purpose of fundamentally changing the relationship between state and religion in Israel, while creating a crisis with the Israeli political leadership.
- A catalyst for action "on the ground," meaning an attempt by American Jewry to wield influence by granting priority to strengthening the progressive organizations in Israel in the hope that they will bring about a gradual change in the legal situation "from the inside."

### **Lessons learned and policy proposals**

Apparently, a gap will continue to exist concerning issues of religion and state between the Jewish Diaspora, with American Jewry at its center, and Israeli Jews. This gap stems, first of all, from the fact that Jewish life in Israel is engrained in the political system and from the fact that Israel is a country in which national-religious status has legal implications. Nevertheless, the ongoing process of bolstering the rabbinical-Orthodox establishment in Israel in the face of growing Diaspora criticism will necessarily lead to

the erosion of Israel's image as the country of "all the Jews," to the erosion of its image as a liberal and pluralist country, and to growing feelings of alienation for those who do not identify with Judaism in its Orthodox form, i.e. most of the Jewish people.

Therefore both Israel and the leadership of the Jewish Diaspora have a clear interest in defusing the tensions related to issues of religion and to reach compromises that will circumvent potential damage. In outlining such solutions it is appropriate to consider several issues:

- On issues clearly concerning the "Jewishness" of Israel and its Jewish symbols, formal and informal consultations should be considered before taking steps that may change the status quo. Official and permanent consultations on such issues will prevent a feeling of attempted political opportunism (as the Rotem Bill was perceived) and will contribute to relieving tension and suspicion.
- In the specific context of the Kotel plaza it would be proper for Israel to reconsider the existing arrangement and attempt to strive for a new situation that would enable Jews from the Diaspora to conduct prayers and ceremonies according to their custom. Such arrangements can be in the form of a compromise that would use the part of the "expanded Kotel" that was allocated to "Progressive prayer" – the part that includes Robinson's Arch – but under conditions and arrangements that would not situate the progressive plaza as secondary and inferior to the Orthodox one.
- The relations between the Jewish streams in the United States are much better than in Israel. Clearly Israel is fundamentally different from the United States, as religion has political significance in the state's business, which leads to more aggressive power struggles. However, it is possible that in this matter Israel must try and learn from the American community and try to improve relations with it wherever possible. The American Orthodox community may take on an important role if it tries to influence the Orthodox community in Israel. Interestingly, the struggle over the Rotem Bill showed that at least among the Modern Orthodox in the United States, a small amount of support was registered in favor of the law, alongside a certain amount of support (even if silent) for the decision of American Jewry's leadership to prevent the bill from becoming law.

- Even before discussing legislative action to improve the status of the progressive denominations – moves that are politically complicated – the Israeli leadership
- could contribute greatly to relieving tensions if it would do a better job of keeping up an appearance of equality in matters that do not relate to specific legislation or government procedures. The refusal of the former president, Moshe Katzav, to use the term "rabbi" when addressing Reform rabbis is remembered unfavorably by American Jewry. Accordingly, a feeling that the leaders of the country respect and appreciate the progressive denominations will contribute greatly to an improved atmosphere.
- It is recommended that the leadership of the Jewish Diaspora channel the feeling of frustration among progressive Jewish young adults in a way that will lead them to action and not to indifference. In other words, they have the power to influence the Jewish character of Israel, if they act to strengthen those elements open to compromise and peaceful coexistence. They can do this by properly routing their monetary contributions, by volunteering, and by visiting. In this context it is worth noting that American Jewry currently has at its disposal a powerful tool in the form of the various "Israel experience" programs through which it can also influence Israeli leaders to better tune policies on various topics to the needs and expectations of the Jewish Diaspora.

In our estimation, if compromises and arrangements in the spirit proposed here are not promoted, it can be assumed that the erosion of Israel's status among American Jewry over religious issues will continue and might even worsen.