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Two Jews, Three Opinions: An Exploration of Young American Jewish Perspectives on Israel

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An Exploration of Young American Jewish Perspectives on Israel

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The summer before I started high school, my family and I travelled to Israel with our synagogue. As we drove past open-air shops, I remember seeing a graphic t-shirt with a Google search for Israel. *Did you mean Palestine?* the shirt's return search result asked. I felt like I had seen something I should not have. This was something dangerous, and its message was surely untrue. Israel was a holy land, a safe haven. Jews, who had known for centuries what it meant to be oppressed, could not possibly be responsible for oppressing others. Surely the only people who opposed Israel's existence were extremists and anti-Semites. It was not for several years that I would engage meaningfully with what it means to be Jewish, and driven to call out all forms of oppression as an essential Jewish value, while contending with the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians in the land of milk and honey.

In recent decades, Jewish leadership has engaged in much speculation and general hand-wringing about young American Jews and their increasing apathy towards Israel. Jewish leaders, both at the individual and institutional level, worry that there seems to be a clear generational gap in concern for and engagement with Israel as a central feature of Jewish identity. This paper will begin by analyzing competing theories about where that disconnect comes from and the extent to which the concern that the decline in support for Israel correlates with a decline in meaningful Jewish identity is genuine or perceived. The literature review will compare existing research about the primary reasons younger generations are placing less emphasis on Israel and will conclude with a summary of gaps in the existing research and potential questions for further study. The paper, through an analysis of a series of in-depth interviews, will then attempt to offer insight on whether young American Jews find their perceptions of Israel and its role in Jewish identity changing upon entering college or university. Essentially, this paper aims to explore whether there are meaningful differences in how Jewish

students relate to and engage with Israel at the secondary and postsecondary levels. It would be easy to pinpoint liberal professors or the presence of pro-Palestinian movements on campus as the villains of this story who brainwash those who would otherwise be dutiful supporters of Israel; the truth is more complicated. This paper finds that some students are critical of the Israeli government because of Jews' history as an oppressed people.

Background

Israel remains an important political issue for American Jews, but not so much that its right-wing leadership's increasing alliance with conservative Evangelical leaders is swaying Jews to vote Republican. In 2019, President Trump told Jewish Americans that "in my opinion, if you vote for a Democrat, you're being very disloyal to Jewish people and you're being very disloyal to Israel. And only weak people would say anything other than that."[1] Similarly, a day earlier, the President said "I think any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty." By Trump's calculations, nearly three quarters of American Jews are disloyal and weak: in 2016, 71% of American Jews voted for Hillary Clinton, compared to just 23% for Trump.[2] Similarly, 65% of American Jews identify with or lean Democratic, compared to 30% identifying with or leaning Republican. Jews are the most liberal of any major religious group, with 44% identifying as liberal (compared to a national average of 25%).[3] This political affiliation has held constant for decades: according to the Jewish Virtual Library, from 1968 to 2020, on average 71% of Jewish voters favored Democratic presidential candidates.[4] However, it is worth noting that Republican support, and

[1] Frank Newport, "American Jews, Politics and Israel," Gallup, August 27, 2019, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/265898/american-jews-politics-israel.aspx.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

[4] "U.S. Presidential Elections: Jewish Voting Record: 1916 - Present," Jewish Virtual Library, 2020, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-voting-record-in-u-s-presidential-elections.

indeed support for Trump, is greater in Haredi and Modern Orthodox communities.[5] A survey published in the Orthodox magazine *Ami* found that four weeks before the 2020 presidential election, 83 percent of Orthodox Jews said they planned to vote for Trump, compared to 13 percent who said they would vote for Biden.[6]

That Jews – with some exceptions, as seen above – have favored Democratic presidential candidates since the New Deal is "puzzling" for three reasons, according to Kenneth Wald in his article "The Choosing People." First, Jews on average have an economic profile that for other groups indicates conservative voting. Additionally, Jews in other societies do not noticeably vote to the left of other citizens or groups. Lastly, Jews' voting patterns defy static Judaic theories: American Jews display dynamic and deeply contextual behavior.[7] Political science models dictate that traditionally, affluent and well-educated groups have economic interest in retaining wealth, and thus tend to favor conservative policy. Ward argues that if Jews' religious and moral values, minority consciousness, and historical heritage were the primary factors in their consistently voting for Democratic candidates, those voting patterns should be mirrored by Jews globally, but they are not. One possible answer according to Ward is citizenship: the liberal polity's disregard for religion as a basis for political citizenship allows for Jews to participate consistently in the system.

Wald's hypothesis, that Jews are more likely to vote for Democrats out of a never totally receded fear of religious discrimination, certainly makes sense. In this study, I also hope to examine whether American Jews see in Palestinians a reflection of themselves: does a

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[5] Nathaniel Deutsch, "Borough Park Was a Red State": Trump and the Haredi Vote," *Jewish Social Studies 22*, no. 3 (2017): 158-73, doi:10.2979/jewisocistud.22.3.08.
[6] Jacob Magid, "Orthodox Jews back Trump by massive margin, poll finds," *The Times of Israel,* Oct. 15, 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-jews-back-trump-by-massive-margin-poll-finds/.
[7] Kenneth D. Wald, 2015, "The Choosing People: Interpreting the Puzzling Politics of American Jewry," *Politics & Religion* 8 (1): 4–35, doi:10.1017/S1755048314000698.

recognition that citizenship and full government participation has not historically been a guarantee for the Jewish people contribute to American Jews' growing unease with the Israeli government and its treatment of Palestinians? Indeed, right wing parties in Europe, which have fanned the flames of anti-Semitism, have embraced elements of current Israeli president Benjamin Netanyahu's policies. Leaders of parties like the Austrian Freedom Party and European Parliament for Front National believe they share a common enemy with the Likud party in encroaching Islam.

Criticism of Israel

If it is true, as some Jewish leadership worries, that American Jews are becoming more critical of Israel, they certainly would not be alone. According to a 2019 Pew Research survey, Americans feel more favorably towards Israeli/Palestinian people than they do towards either government. Previously iterations of this survey asked "In the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians, which side do you sympathize with more, Israel or the Palestinians?", a flawed structure because it presented a choice of sympathies between a people and a country and did not allow participants to select both or neither.[8] The data showed that 64% of Americans support the Israeli people compared to 41% who supported the Israeli government. Likewise, 46% of Americans surveyed demonstrated support for the Palestinian people, compared to 19% showing support for the Palestinian government.[9] Similarly, in 2020 55% of Americans said they supported the establishment of an independent Palestine, the highest degree of support since 2003.[10] However, the same poll found that although Democrats are more likely to be critical of

[8] Carroll Doherty, "A new perspective on Americans' views of Israelis and Palestinians," Pew Research Center, April 24, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/24/a-new-perspective-on-americans-views-of-israelis-and-palestinians/

[9] Ibid.

[10] Lydia Saad, "Majority in U.S. Again Support Palestinian Statehood," Gallup News, April 22, 2020, https://news.gallup.com/poll/293114/majority-again-support-palestinian-statehood.aspx.

Israel than their Republican counterparts, a significant majority of both parties expressed a favorable view of Israel generally.

Declining engagement with Judaism

Daniel Gordis, who has been called by the Jewish magazine *Forward* "one of the most respected Israel analysts around," defines loyalty to Israel as "expressed awareness that the welfare of the Jewish state has enormous bearing on the future of the Jewish people as a whole." He also says that loyalty should be demonstrated through "a commitment to expressing whatever critiques one wishes of the state in a way that both Israel and the international community understand that one's most central commitment is to the survival and flourishing of Israel as a secure, Jewish, and democratic state."[11] According to Gordis, the primary challenge for Israel and for Jewish leadership in fostering loyalty to Israel lies primarily with "non-hardcore" Jews – those who have mostly assimilated within American society.

Gordis attributes increased criticism of Israel to what he says is a general decline in the quality of American Jewish practice. He argues that American Jews are becoming like American Protestants in that they are keen to embrace universalism and view Judaism as a religion rather than a people. "Diminished support for Israel is a natural and virtually inevitable result of the Protestant that many American Jews have now internalized," Gordis wrote.[12] Because Zionism only makes sense when peoplehood defines Jews, Gordis sees this shift in perception of Judaism as fundamentally detrimental to the state of Israel. He boils Jewish identity down to three essential elements: endogamy, circumcision, and speaking of the Hebrew language. (Many Jews, including my family, believe that none of these are important values, to us or to our practice of

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[11] Daniel Gordis, "From a Jewish People to a Jewish Religion: A Shifting American Jewish Weltanschauung and its Implications for Israel," Summer 2012, *Israel Studies* 17 (2): 102-110, doi: 10.2979/israelstudies.17.2.102.
[12] Ibid.

Judaism). He states that the rise in interfaith marriage is an indication that American Jews no longer think of themselves as being a people, as is San Francisco Jews' willingness to ban circumcision and the decline of Hebrew language, which he deems essential to peoplehood. He cites as evidence that the grandchildren of European immigrants do not speak the languages of their forefathers, and that they "certainly do not speak in terms of *obligation* to that homeland."[13] Gordis describes the evolution into Judaism as religion (or at best, an ethnicity) instead of Judaism as peoplehood as "one of the most dangerous developments that American Judaism has had to face."[14]

Gordis notes that a prominent 2007 study conducted by Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman entitled "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel" found that "a broad-based distancing from Israel is well under way and has been under way for decades." Cohen and Kelman cited declining engagement that encompassed a wider variety of indicators than had previously been surveyed.[15] Particularly worrying to Gordis, who cites "Beyond Distancing" in his argument, the statement "Israel's destruction would be a personal tragedy" found agreement among 80% of those 65 and older, while only 50% of participants ages 35 and younger agreed. The study came to the following conclusions: "Young Jews are less attached to Israel"; "Young Jews express less caring for Israel"; "Young Jews are less engaged with Israel"; and "Young Jews are less supportive of Israel."[16]

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Gordis neglects to mention the rise of anti-semitism and systematic discrimination against Jews until comparatively very recently as perhaps more dangerous factors.
[15] Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman, "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel," 2007, Jewish Identity Project of Reboot, Berman Jewish Policy Archive, https://www.bjpa.org/search-results/publication/326.
[16] Ibid.

That is certainly a newsworthy narrative, but there are reasons to doubt its accuracy. Attachment to Israel, for instance, was measured in terms of, among other survey factors, being "always proud of Israel" and "never ashamed of Israel." Likewise, engaging with Israel, according to the survey, requires one to "talk about Israel to Jewish and non-Jewish friends," while supporting Israel demands that one "self-identify as a Zionist" and "disagree that Israel occupies land belonging to someone else."[17] While it is true that young American Jews voiced less agreement with these statements than older Jews, it seems entirely reasonable that someone – in fact many Jews the author knows, herself included – could care for, engage with, and support Israel without being blindly nationalistic and uncritical of its politics. This paper will expand on "Beyond Distancing" by offering more nuanced questions that will hopefully address the overarching question: Is it because of a love for Israel that young Jews want to see it be better?

"Beyond Distancing" also attributes this phenomenon to an increasing number of interfaith marriages. Though many Jews – the author included – would reject the claim that interfaith marriage is detrimental to Jewish identity, it is certainly on the rise. The Pew Research Center 2013 Portrait of Jewish Americans (which is conducted every ten years) found that 44% of currently married Jews have a non-Jewish spouse, and that 58% of Jews married since 2005 are married to a non-Jewish spouse.[18]

Generational memory

In direct contrast to Gordis, who attributes a decline in Israeli support to a decline in meaningful Judaism, Dov Waxman engages with the ideas of generational memory and social

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[17] Ibid.
[18] "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," October 1, 2013, Pew Research Center, https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.

justice as a key component of Jewish identity – Waxman more adequately addresses how some Jews feel that the Israeli government has failed to be responsive to the needs of Palestinians. In his article "Young American Jews and Israel: Beyond Birthright and BDS," Waxman found that there are significant gaps in generational memory between older and younger Jewish Americans. Young Jews feel less insecure and vulnerable than their predecessors, in part because they have grown up largely assimilated in American culture: the "otherness" felt by their parents and grandparents as strangers in a new land does not exist to the same extent it once did.[19] Likewise, young Jews have often grown up in affluent homes – 44% of American Jews live in households with an income of at least $100,000[20] – and are thus more likely to identify with white privilege than Jewish victimhood. Although antisemitism has certainly not been eradicated, because it is no longer a codified, institutionalized, and pervasive part of American culture, there is less of a need, in the eyes of young Jews, for the "safe haven" Israel was supposed to provide.[21]

In addition to just being farther removed from the Holocaust and its impacts, many young Jews have very different generational memories of Israel itself. Young Jews have only experienced Israel through the context of the conflict: they do not have fond memories of its founding, nor do they remember a time when Israel faced very real existential threats from all over the region. Their lived experience encompasses decades of violent conflict, and they have no recollection of a center-left Israeli government trying to govern peacefully. Instead, young Jews remember Israel as a strong military power, governed by Trump-ally Benjamin Netanyahu

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[19] Dov Waxman, "Young American Jews and Israel: Beyond Birthright and BDS," 2017, *Israel Studies* 22 (3): 177–99, doi:10.2979/israelstudies.22.3.08.
[20] David Masci, "How income varies among US religious groups," October 11, 2016, Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/11/how-income-varies-among-u-s-religious-groups/.
[21] Waxman.

for most or all of their lives: the David and Goliath metaphor that older Jews might remember when Israel was an underdog has effectively been switched.[22]

Social justice as key to identity

Waxman also argues that younger American Jews are actually more engaged with Israel than previous generations, but that engagement comes in the form of criticism of Israeli policy and sympathy towards Palestinian people. Waxman says that this is in part due to young American Jews' orientation towards universalism and their view of social justice as being key to their identity. He says that the tendency to criticize Israel by young Jews is indicative that lots of Jews are engaging more critically with Israel rather than disengaging: they criticize *because they care.*[23] Waxman makes the point that young American Jews are still very much emotionally attached to Israel – they are not especially likely to be as vocally of or knowledgeable about other authoritarian regimes – but they remain critical of government policies. Similarly, they are less likely to self-identify as pro-Israel or Zionist, and they are less skeptical of Palestinian people and more likely to be hopeful about a peaceful coexistence.

One of Waxman's young American Jewish sources expressed this idea well: "For many Jews my age, who love Israel and strive to nourish her efforts to thrive in a hostile region, defending her actions in Gaza has too often become an immense moral struggle that requires the suspension of our values as human beings and, notably, the suspension of our values as Jews... We see [older Jews'] aggressive stance as zealotry and paranoia; they see our discomfort as abandonment and naiveté."[24]

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

Waxman concedes that there is some evidence to support fear of disengagement: 79% of American Jews 65 and over said they feel attached to Israel, compared to 60% aged 18-29.[25] However, he argues (contrary to Cohen and Kelman) that the data indicates that young Jews today are not less attached to Israel than young Jews in any other generation, and that Jews grow more attached to Israel as they get older. He concludes that a solid majority (60%) of young Jews still feel attached to Israel, and in fact are much more likely to visit Israel than previous generations. Evidence supports that these trips to Israel boost engagement with the country. Additionally, many Jewish students opt to take courses on the Arab-Israeli conflict, demonstrating that the decline in engagement may be more of a myth than religious leaders assert.[26]

Social justice as a key reason for American Jews' decline in support of Israel seems to be reflected in a growing movement of individuals walking off of Birthright trips in public displays of protest. Of the nearly 50,000 Birthright participants each year, some have become uneasy about seeing a romanticized version of Israel, with no real deep or meaningful conversation about the impact of the Israeli occupation, which displaced 700,000 Palestinians.[27]
In response to criticism about lack of engagement with the conflict, Birthright made it clear that the program was not designed to deal with political issues. Participants, according to a statement from the organization, are "required to engage in programming which addresses complex issues of the Middle East and which does not endorse any specific agendas, opinions, or beliefs."[28]

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[25] Note: These statistics are different than the ones cited in the "Beyond Distancing" survey – different surveys use different metrics of engagement, and different researchers have drawn different conclusions based on existing evidence.

[26] Waxman.
[27] Lornet Turnbull, "Why Young Jews Are Detouring from Israel to Palestine," Yes!, May 28, 2019, https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/travel/2019/05/28/israel-palestine-young-jewish-activists-birthright/.
[28] Ibid.

Birthright participants who walked off the trip, beginning in 2016, described Jews supporting Trump as a turning point for their activism. Birthright participants turned protesters have increasingly been in contact with groups like IfNotNow, a progressive anti-occupation group created to protest bombing of Gaza. Its goal is to address American Jewish support for the occupation and balance the message young Americans receive. They sell shirts reading "Occupation is not our Judaism," highlighting the social justice and advocacy component of the religion. When the *Yes!* magazine article "Why Young Jews Are Detouring from Israel to Palestine" was published in 2019, fifteen people had publicly walked off the trip, and three had been ejected for violation of a new Birthright clause against "hijacking" discussions on trips. As an alternative to Birthright trips, progressive organization J Street is also proposing a free 10 day trip to Israel and the West Bank for college students interested in engaging with Palestinians directly.

Lack of diversity

Some evidence suggests that lack of diversity within influential Jewish institutions is one reason behind real or perceived disengagement with Israel by American Jews, but there is much less research done on this particular line of reasoning. In his article "Why Young American Jews Don't Care about Israel," Jay Ruderman cites a comparative disinterest in important Israeli elections among American Jews in recent years. He describes how in recent decades, there were a few umbrella organizations leading the communal aspects of American Jewry and how those organizational leaders were ultra-wealthy donors, who were generally older Ashkenazi men.[29]

[29]Jay Ruderman, "Why Young American Jews Don't Care about Israel," Haaretz, April 8, 2019, https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-why-young-american-jews-don-t-care-about-israel-1.7619231?v=1602457553116.

This lack of diversity and representation at an organizational level leads to younger Jews disengaging from Jewish institutions and traditional communal life.[30]

According to Ruderman, American Jews' ties with Israel come first through institutions (like Federations and educational groups), and disillusionment with those groups can cause younger Jews – who are gender and ethnically diverse – to step away from Israel. Although there has been progress in including more women in Jewish leadership, these institutions still lack Jews from the USSR and Israel, as well as disabled and LGBTQ Jews.[31] This disillusionment with traditional communal organizations is reflected in the "Beyond Distancing" survey, which found that 29% of participants agreed that Jewish organizations are "largely remote and irrelevant."[32]

The campus Jewish experience

Studies suggest that anti-Semitism is on the rise recently in America (anti-Semitic inspired incidents are up 12% from 2018 to 2019). This is a factor that may well play into changing (or lack thereof) of perceptions of Israel – that is, if Jewish students feel unsafe on college campuses and feel that antisemitism is on the rise, Israel may seem to be the safe haven it was for previous generations.[33] Part of what makes the campus experience difficult to gauge is the conflation of the terms anti-Zionism and antisemitism. For instance, The Algemeiner puts out a list of "40 worst colleges for Jewish students." The list refers to plenty of legitimate cases of horrifying far-right antisemitism (swastikas drawn on Hillel buildings, etc), but there are also plenty of cases of petitions to divest from Israel and popular "boycott, divest, and sanction"

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[30] Perhaps because interfaith marriage is on the rise, the Jewish population could be more diverse, creating a need for diverse leadership that wasn't there a generation ago.

[31] Ruderman.
[32] Cohen and Kelman.
[33] "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2019," May, 2020, ADL, https://www.adl.org/audit2019.

(BDS) movements. J Street does not define BDS as anti-Semitic, but they do not support the global movement, largely because it does not support a two-state solution.[34] This paper will further examine whether Jewish students feel criticism of Israel makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe on campus.

In 2017, Jewish publications like *The Times of Israel* and *The Jerusalem Post* published findings from a study conducted by Brand Israel Group, which found that support for Israel among US Jewish college students was on the decline, so much so that there was significant cause for alarm by Israel advocates. The study found that only 57% of Jewish college students in the US leaned toward the Israeli side of the conflict, down from 84% in 2010. The study – which does not itself seem to be publicly available – said that support for Palestinians among Jewish college students is on the rise, but it does not specify if criticism of Israel (as a result of dissatisfaction with Israel's "human rights, tolerance, and diversity") equates to declining support for Israel generally.[35] In response to the study, the Brand Israel Group proposed unanimous messaging about Israel that pushes back against the charges of its immorality and to consider targeting Jewish students with pro-Israel messaging at earlier ages, potentially through Birthright trips available to high schoolers and exploring ways to connect b'nai mitzvot to Israel.[36] This research aims to explore whether students critical of Israel's policies believe these steps are important or if what they actually want is a more open dialogue with Jewish leadership about the conflict.

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[34] "J Street policy principles on the Global BDS Movement and boycotts, divestment and sanctions efforts," accessed November 28.

[35] Danielle Ziri, "'Massive drop in US Jewish college students' support for Israel,'" June 22, 2017, *The Jerusalem Post,* https://www.jpost.com/american-politics/israel-dramatically-losing-support-among-jewish-college-students-in-us-497605.

[36] Ibid.

In their article "Between Tikkun Olam and Self-Defense: Young Jewish Americans Debate the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Ella Ben Hagai and Eileen Zurbriggen contend that the 1967 Six Day War marked a turning point in the American Jewish relationship with Israel. The war, they suggest, successfully promoted an underlying narrative still echoed today: Israel, as a country, wants to live in peace, but it has to defend itself from Arab attacks. That narrative unified two aspects of Jewish identity, one understood through the social justice elements of Judaism like *tikkun olam* (healing the world), and one understood primarily through a long and painful history of continuous persecution of the Jewish people.[37]

At the same time, the Six Day War also further cemented the dispossession of Palestinians through the Israeli conquest of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza strip. The Palestinian narrative of the conflict reflects the history of other colonized groups and brings together activists from across racial and ethnic groups. The understanding of the conflict through the lens that Palestine is fighting against settler colonialism, Ben Hagai and Zurbriggen is particularly common on US campuses.[38]

To Waxman's point, referenced earlier in this paper, it seems that the Israeli narrative of balancing a pursuit of social justice and peace with protecting a vulnerable Jewish population from those who would do them harm, is crumbling for some young American Jews under the weight of Israel's military prowess. For critics of Israel, the conflict looks less like a tiny country standing up for justice and peace and more like a powerful oppressive regime that has directly caused the undue suffering of an entire population of people. That sentiment is not universal,

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[37] Ella Ben Hagai and Eileen L. Zurbriggen, 2017, "Between Tikkun Olam and Self-Defense: Young Jewish Americans Debate the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5 (1), 173-99, https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v5i1.629.
[38] Ibid.

however, and according to Ben Hagai and Zurbriggen's study, the schism between American Jews nationally on how to feel about Israel is mirrored at a smaller level on college campuses.[39]

The study, which drew data from twenty-seven interviews with Jewish students at a large university in California that was considering divestment from Israeli organizations, found that those who had split with a mainstream Jewish in-group that found Israel to be progressive, modern, and just, rooted their criticism of Israel in Jewish values of *tikkun olam* and social justice. Critics of Israel were actually more likely to have been actively involved in Jewish life before entering college; participants said that those values which motivated them to be open to the Palestinian narrative were instilled in them at Jewish camps, travel, and schools.[40] On the other hand, students who were more likely to advocate for Israel were more likely to have participated in educational events that focused on Jewish vulnerability in college. In both cases, there was a trend of young American Jews becoming more educated, or educated generally, about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on entering college, showing that there is evidence to suggest college and university may have significant effect on how students perceive Israel.[41]

Further research

While the factors listed above – generational memory gaps, an increased reliance on social justice in comprehending Jewish identity, lack of diversity, etc. – provide valid explanations for changes in how American Jews view Israel, they seem to paint an incomplete picture. It is not clear the degree to which any or all of these factors are at play. This paper will build on Ben Hagai and Zurbriggen's research by developing on the idea that college may be a significant factor in determining perceptions of Israel: the research will also include interviews

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

with high schoolers to see if there is a measurable difference between views on the conflict at secondary and tertiary levels of education. Likewise, I also hope to clarify some of the ideas presented in Ben Hagai and Zurbriggen's study. For instance, their study makes the distinction between those who advocate for and are critical of Israel, but their claim that the two are mutually exclusive is questionable. Critique of Israeli occupation and current policy does not necessarily equate to not wanting to see Israel succeed as a Jewish state, and this paper will further explore those ideas through interviews.

What seems apparent in the research gathered so far is that there are significant gaps in understanding the role of college and universities in changing attitudes toward Israel. Waxman briefly discusses how young Jews can be influenced by left-wing pro-Palestinian organizations on campus, but he does not include qualitative or quantitative data that leads to that conclusion. Analyzing whether the attitudes of young Jews towards Israel change within higher education (or simply as a result of hearing perspectives other than their parents/childhood religious leaders) will help researchers better understand what is driving young people away from Israel, since the existing evidence remains inconclusive.

Methodology

The primary form of data collection consisted of interviews with mostly college-aged university students about their perceptions of Israel. Participants were asked to what extent they follow news surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whether they broadly support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state (and whether they would identify themselves as Zionists), whether they broadly support the actions of the current Israeli government, and whether they have visited or intend to visit Israel.[42] Students were also asked to describe their experience as Jews on campus and to discuss whether they think their views on Israel are substantially different

[42] See Appendices A and B.

from those of their high school selves. Due to difficulties – worsened by the pandemic – in contacting specific universities, the convenience method was primarily used in gathering participants. Of the thirty-seven people interviewed in this study, ten were fellow students at the University of Mary Washington, and nineteen grew up in my hometown of Richmond, Virginia, though most of those students now attend universities in other areas. The vast majority of those local to Richmond attend or attended my synagogue, Congregation Beth Ahabah. Five of the participants were high schoolers: three go to school in the Richmond area, one lives in Illinois, and one lives in Maryland.

(1) My overall hypothesis is that American Jewish college students will be more critical of Israel than American Jewish high schoolers as a result of greater exposure to the conflict, pro-Palestinian movements on campus, greater participation in educational events and classes surrounding the conflict, or increased distance from Jewish education that declines to engage with the conflict (or a combination of these factors). (2) I also predict that American Jewish college students at NYU will be less critical of Israel than at UMW or UMD. I think that the presence of strong pro-Palestinian groups and a larger Jewish population may push Jewish students to defend Israel from perceived attacks by their peers. (3) Lastly, I predict that American Jewish college students who identify as Orthodox will have more comparable views on Israel to their high school counterparts than to their college peers because of a more insulated exposure to the conflict and because of likely continued involvement with mainstream Jewish leadership that may promote strong Israeli advocacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Because University of Mary Washington and Richmond Jews are significantly overrepresented in this study, it is worth noting the demographics of both places. UMW is a

small, predominantly white, liberal arts college in Fredericksburg, Virginia, with a small Jewish population. Hillel International estimates that, based on national population percentages, UMW has a Jewish population of around 150 to 200 students; however, UMW's Hillel Rabbi, Menachem Sherman, speculates that the actual number is significantly lower.[43] Likewise, UMW does not have an official pro-Palestinian movement, though at least one leftist campus club lists Free Palestine as a general policy belief. All of the UMW students interviewed described the Jewish community on campus as small, but growing – the school officially opened a new Hillel house in the past year, a factor which students say has contributed to them feeling more a part of a community.

As of 2011, there were just under 10,000 Jews – around five percent of Richmond's population – living in the Richmond area.[44] Two of the respondents attended a Jewish day school, Rudlin Torah Academy, from kindergarten to eighth grade, but the remaining participants from Richmond received a secular education at local public or private schools. Beth Ahabah, the synagogue most Richmond-based participants attended at least growing up, has a history of assimilating with the surrounding Christian community: the building itself was designed to look like a church, and for decades, the congregation referred to its religious leaders as reverends. It is worth noting the size and history of assimilation as they pertain to Richmond's Jewish population, as the experience of most of the participants is of being one of very few Jews in daily settings.

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[43] "College Guide: University of Mary Washington," Hillel International, 2021, https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/university-of-mary-washington.

[44] Ira Sheskin, "The 2011 Jewish Community Federation of Richmond Update Study of the 1994 Jewish Community Study of Richmond," 2011, Jewish Databank, https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/bjdb/583/C-VA-Richmond-2011%20DJN%20Update-Executive_Summary%20BJDB.pdf.

Of the thirty-two college students interviewed, ten attended the University of Mary Washington, six were from the University of Virginia, two were from Virginia Commonwealth University, and two were from California State University Long Beach. Emerson College, Christopher Newport University, the University of Maryland College Park, James Madison University, Longwood University, Tufts University, Fordham University, the College of Charleston, Southern Illinois University, University of Washington, Randolph Macon College, and Germany's Akademie Mode and Design each had one student represented. Additionally, five upperclassman high school students participated, with three attending school in the Richmond area, one in Maryland, and one in Illinois.

The college sample included three freshmen, eight sophomores, eight juniors, ten seniors, and three graduate students. The total sample included thirty-one Reform Jews, four Conservative Jews, and two students who said they were somewhere in between. All but six students were active in at least one Jewish institution, with Hillel being the most common, though organizations like Chabad and J Street were also mentioned. Below is a quantitative breakdown of the questions asked to everyone (though some students were asked follow-up questions and additional questions specific to their individual situation):

Sixteen college students said they definitively felt a part of a Jewish community on campus, and twelve said definitively there was a strong Jewish community on campus. Fourteen college students said they would identify as zionists, ten said they would not, and the rest said they were somewhere in between, unsure, or said yes based on a very specific definition of Zionism. Most students – nineteen – said they did not support actions of the current Israeli government. Only two students said they were actively in support of its actions; the remaining students said they were not familiar enough with the subject matter to weigh in, or they said they

supported some policies but not others. Eighteen students, including fifteen college students, said they had been to Israel. All who had not said they would like to visit, and all who had been said they would go back.

Finally, eighteen college students said their perceptions of Israel changed since entering college. Most were more critical of Israel, but some said their support for the country strengthened. Those results will be discussed more in-depth below.

The research below will focus on the thirty-two respondents in college; there will be a section devoted solely to the five high school students at the end. Most of the quotes included here come from students who have spent time thinking about and engaging with Israel and how it relates to their personal identity.[45] However, this experience was not universal: several students said that they had not given Israel much thought since attending college and distancing themselves from institutionalized Jewish life. There was a general desire and sense of obligation to know more about the country and the conflict, but for many, Israel is not a topic that comes up regularly in their lives.

Relationship with Judaism

A recurring theme in the interviews was meaning making in Judaism outside of relationships to and with Israel. Several students spoke about how Israel felt like a distant concept, one they had learned about through Jewish education, but not one that felt particularly important in their day-to-day lives. Sixteen students reported that support of Israel was an important part of their Jewish identity, twelve said that it was not, and four were unsure.[46]

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[45] All names are used with the express permission of those interviewed. Most requested use of first name only.

[46] Note: the question asked students to identify if support of Israel was an important part of their personal Jewish identity. It did not ask if support of Israel was the most important aspect of their relationship with Judaism; several students voiced that thought it was important, it was not the most central part of their Jewish identity.

Students in all of the above categories, especially those who identified as more culturally than religiously Jewish, highlighted familial and communal traditions, as well as a drive for social justice, as central to their identity more so than they did support for Israel.

"I guess growing up, Judaism, for me, has been more about the activities that surround it and the community and the traditions and the family aspect," said Ellie, a senior at Fordham University. "[Israel] has never been taught to me to be the most important aspect, I just want to learn more about it."

Sam, a sophomore at Tufts University, said that while Israel is not a particularly significant component of her Jewish identity, she understood why it could be important for those without communal ties to Judaism.

"I feel pretty lucky that I have other traditions and cultural practices, and my family's involved in Jewish life, so I have everything I need here," she said. "But I think that for a lot of people, having an Israeli flag in their room or planning their birthright trips and eating falafel is like a very vague connector for them to their Judaism."

Israel as a safe haven from anti-Semitism

This research makes clear that young American Jews are not so far removed from events like the Holocaust that they do not understand the significance of and need for a Jewish state. The phrase "safe haven" routinely came up in interviews. It was apparent that there remains an underlying sense of fear of anti-Semitism, even if some students said they feel distant from effects of Holocaust. For Reform Jews interviewed in particular, the Jewish connection to Israel represents more of a practical desire for safety and an escape from persecution than a particular religious affinity.

Mike, a junior at the University of Mary Washington, voiced his concerns about the rise in anti-Semitism in the US and advocated the need for a place where Jews could feel safe from persecution.

“The Jewish people deserve a homeland – Israel is that place,” he said.”There are people in the world who have nothing but hate for Jewish people and wish them nothing but ill will, and so it's extremely important that there is a place in the world that Jewish people can call their home.”

Sarah, a sophomore and fellow student at UMW who was otherwise critical of the Israeli state, said she felt the need to defend Israel because of its significance as an escape from European persecution.

“I didn't mean to become a Zionist, like I didn't know that this would happen, but I feel like I have to defend Israel in some ways, because I don't like how people talk about it, I guess,” she said. “And I told someone recently that if people paid more attention to the anti-Semitism here at home and actively fought against it, a lot of American Jews wouldn't feel like Israel even needs to exist necessarily. Israel is born out of people running away, from Europe and Russia specifically. So, if [they] would just not hate us, we wouldn't have to go somewhere else.”

For other students, like UMW junior Aliza, having relatives who escaped persecution and death by fleeing to Israel makes the topic more sensitive – though Aliza is critical of Israeli policy towards Palestinians, she said she strongly feels a need for a Jewish state.

“My grandparents both escaped from persecution and the Holocaust from Romania and Poland, they both escaped to Israel,” she said. “And then they I guess made roots there and then eventually came over to Ellis Island and started over here. So for me, it used to be really trendy... to just hate Israel with no basis, and the double standard of not criticizing any other nation that's treated Palestinians in the same way. [It’s trendy] to just say ‘oh Israel is the worst place on earth,’ but at the same time they needed that place to go. If they didn't have that place, then I wouldn't exist. I do believe that Jews need a place to be in a place to go to. But I don't support the real life execution of it.”

Israel as a place of belonging

The word “homeland,” as well as sentiments of Jewish people being deserving of a homeland, cropped up several times throughout the interviews. Several students compared having a Jewish state to other religion-based states globally.

“It's super nice to go and to have a place where you feel safe, like [you] belong as well, because there's a lot of Catholic states, there's a bunch of Arab states, but there's only the one Jewish state,” said Adam, a grad student at UMW. “I think it's super important to have that place to be.”

Julia, a sophomore at VCU who was critical of Israel throughout her interview, talked about how meaningful it was for her to go to Israel and for the first time be surrounded by people like her.

“I don't want to like come off like I'm putting down other Jews for supporting Israel, because I know that Israel has a place and a reason, and if you go there, it feels really good for everybody around you, for the first time ever, to also be Jewish and also understand and also talk with their hands,” she said. “There's things that you, when you're there, you're like ‘I get why this is a place where people feel safe and comfortable.’”

That experience was universal for those who had visited Israel, even those who were otherwise critical of Israeli policy. This was particularly noteworthy for people from Richmond, like Julia, who outside of a niche set of Jewish settings, overwhelmingly engaged in a Christian or secular society.

Right to self determination

The phrase “self-determination” came up in seven different interviews, most often in defining Zionism. Israel being representative of the idea of a global peoplehood with common interests and goals – and the right to articulate and enact those desires on their own behalf – was a significant theme in understanding how young people comprehend Zionism.

“It's not that I believe in Jewish supremacy or anything, it's just like self determination in its most basic form,” said Rebecca, a sophomore at California State University Long Beach. “For me it's like we were kicked out of that land. We still have religious and historical ties that land, and it's not a matter of ‘at the expense of others,’ it's having access to our history, our roots, and our culture and being able to have a say in what happens to the Jewish people.”

Israel as housing the oppressed, functioning as the oppressor

Nineteen students said that, in general, they did not support the actions of the current Israeli government. Several spoke about the idea of the state betraying Jewish values and imposing upon Palestinians the very sorts of oppression Jews were fleeing eighty years ago.

Having been so oppressed in other people's lands, we wanted a land that was ours in which we didn't feel like we were being controlled or oppressed by other people, but in doing so, we have become the oppressor. – Jess, Emerson

Perhaps because many of my interviews were conducted around Passover, the holiday came up several times as a reason for having complicated feelings towards Israel. Passover is meant to be a celebration of liberation – according to some students, that idea juxtaposed with how the modern state exerts control over Palestinians, made them question their understanding of Israel.

How could people that were enslaved be doing things that are so evil? I think that I still have a hard time with realizing that. – Stella, UMW

Likewise, the famous end of Seder toast, "next year in Jerusalem," in some cases, forced students to acknowledge the connections between the Jewish diaspora and a state that is not their own.

Because it was like 'listen, Europe is not safe for us' and I understand that, and I understand wanting to go somewhere where you feel safer, but I think Zionism now calls for – in my brain at least – the total colonization of a place that not necessarily was [ours]. There are people there that were already there and we're pushing them out and trying to accumulate all of the land that is Israel and settle further and further into the West Bank and stuff like that. I think that's what Zionism feels like for me, is patriotism for a country that you don't live in. – Julia, VCU

It is important to acknowledge that the criticism of the Israeli government put forth by interviewees in most cases does not feel like it is coming from an outsider objectively measuring the conflict. There is a very real sense of personal anger and betrayal towards the Israeli state: for many students, Jewish people have an obligation towards social justice and to call out oppression

because of our unique experiences with persecution for centuries. Mads, a grad student from Richmond studying at Akademie Mode and Design in Berlin, spoke about the Balfour Declaration and the governance that followed in terms of colonization and continued persecution.

“It was giving land that wasn't someone's to give to a group of people who have had a diaspora for 5000 years...” they said. “The current Israeli government is so hypocritical to what a Jewish state should be it hurts. How are you going to actively do an apartheid when you as a people have been prosecuted, since the beginning of time?”

Sarah, who described herself as a Zionist earlier in this paper, said that she learned in a History of the Modern Middle East class at UMW that Israel had a long history of oppressive behavior. That class changed her outlook on the conflict and on Israel.

“Almost everything the modern state has ever done has been kind of bad, according to what we learned in class.” she said. “People like to talk about Netanyahu as being this terrible kind of corrupt leader who likes to build settlements wherever he pleases, but it kind of has been like that for a while, so what he's doing isn't really anything new.”

Conditional support

The response to the question “do you support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state,” was met several times with “not in its current form.” Though students were conceptually in favor of the idea of a Jewish state – an overwhelming majority of students answered affirmatively – many were deeply opposed to the reality of Israel’s execution. Students were asked to define what Zionism meant to them and were provided with the following definition if they were unfamiliar with the term: “a person who believes in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel.” Sarah, mentioned above, embraced the first half of the definition but rejected the second.

“I guess I would consider myself a Zionist in the sense that, like, I think the Jewish people should have a state, but I don't necessarily feel like it needed to be in Palestine, because I don't have any particular religious connection to the physical place,” she said.

Mike, also previously quoted in this paper, was very much in support of Israel continuing to exist as a Jewish state, but spoke on the need to call out its government when appropriate.

“When it comes to support it's like yeah, [I support] Israel, but just in the same way when you say you support the United States,” he said. “I am a proud American, but that does not mean I agree with every single thing that goes on, and I also definitely proudly support Israel, but there will be things that you take issue with, and rightfully so. you should always call things out and speak out for what you believe in.”

Other students, like Leah, a junior at VCU, were uncomfortable with choosing “Zionist” as an identity for themselves, even if they supported a Jewish state. They felt that the word had in some ways taken on unwelcome meanings that were odds with personal values.

“Because of the connotations of the word zionist is why I wouldn’t choose it,” they said. “My qualms lie with the treatment of the Palestinians and the idea of displacing people. It’s just like colonialism. I’m not necessarily against the idea of having a Jewish homeland, I just take issue with the idea of displacement of people who live there.”

Support for Israel as zealotry

In his interviews, one of Waxman’s sources describes the feeling of older American Jews towards Israel as “zealotry,” and those feelings seem to be reflected in some of the people in this study as well. Many participants described their early Jewish education as blind and unhealthy patriotism for Israel. For some, what could be described as advocacy tools for Israel felt instead like propaganda. Julia, the VCU student mentioned prior, attended a Jewish day school, where students celebrated “Israeli Soldier Day,” which included dressing up as Jewish soldiers. She said at no point in her early education was the conflict mentioned, and has in some ways distanced herself from those ideals – though she speaks Hebrew almost fluently and continues to teach it at Beth Ahabah.

“I don't like when people like American Jews are like ‘since I'm Jewish, I have to feel this patriotism,’” she said. “Like we say, friggin Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem, every day in Sunday school... I don't know why we need to say the national anthem for a country that we don't live in and we've never lived in, and I think that that's what irks me.”

Michael, a sophomore from Richmond attending the College of Charleston in South Carolina, was not the only student interviewed who used the word “brainwashing” in reference to how Israel was taught to him growing up.

“I want to love this country, and I do love the country, because it feels like a home ground to me,” he said of Israel, where he travelled as part of the youth group program March of the Living. “I've only ever had eye opening experiences there with some of my best friends, who were very influential in my life. But it feels irresponsible to me to not educate myself on everything else they're doing. The trip I was on was documenting genocide and how important it is that we've survived and that nothing else like that should ever happen again. We are the sole gatekeepers, the young Jews who have listened to the stories, to make sure it doesn't happen again, but yet we're almost brainwashed in a sense, to wholeheartedly follow the Israeli Government and not question it.”

Molly, a senior at UVA, said she attended an American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference in high school, an event she said was emblematic of a pro-Israel education that lacked nuance she now possesses.

“I think AIPAC was a pretty big part of it,” she said. “We literally sat in seminars for hours and hours listening about how great Israel was.”

Many students interviewed expressed frustration with what felt like a one-sided dialogue about the conflict over the course of their religious upbringing.

Support of Israel’s policies and military

A small number of respondents said they were in support of the Israeli government and military. Benny and Michael, mentioned below, are both Conservative Jewish and have both spent time in Israel. Benny, a senior at UMW, plans on serving in the Israeli Defense Force in a paratrooper combat unit after graduation.

“I would say I have a very strong connection to Israel,” he said. “I believe Israel should exist. I believe that's the indigenous land of Jews. And I think Zionism movement as a whole is done, probably the greatest job in probably all of history to provide a civilization and returning it to indigenous people to the land of Judea, which is obviously Israel so that's why I would identify myself as a Zionist.”

Michael, a senior at the University of Maryland College Park, described an experience he had while visiting Israel with his family. While in the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem, he took a selfie with two women in the IDF. Shortly after they walked away, two Arab men entered the Jewish quarter, prompting the soldiers to shout and point their guns at the men’s temples, who were on their knees with their hands above their heads.

“The Israeli soldiers that had just smiled and taken selfies with me, straightened their hair, had their guns pointed like right here, right at the temple of these Muslim guys...” he said. “I mean. I didn't feel bad for them, necessarily, because I know that in the US it's very different, but in Israel racial discrimination is a topic that works, or is a tool that works very well for the soldiers. And that's that's just the way it is it's like you know, there had been terrorist attacks in that same area that we were like the week before perpetrated by Muslim guys.”

Some students, like Michael, were generally opposed to the violence in the region, but understood Israel’s violence as 1) responsive to Palestinian violence, and 2) necessary for the country’s survival.

Visiting Israel

Generally, students who had visited Israel spoke very highly of their experiences. Many said they felt more connected to Israel after visiting – the trips often solidified a very nebulous idea of what Israel is. Elena, a senior at James Madison University, spoke about how impactful her March of the Living trip was. For her, it was a chance to see Jews thriving after witnessing monuments to the horrors of the Holocaust.

“We had just come from Poland for a week where we were observing Holocaust Remembrance Day, and we went to the different death and concentration camps and learned more about them

and got to witness them, which was hard," she said. "But then the week following that we got to go to Israel and celebrate our Judaism, it was really great to be surrounded by so many people like me, because I have never been around that many Jews before."

Gabby, a senior at UVA, said she too felt much more connected to Israel after going on her Birthright trip.

"The trip made me understand why it's so important that the Jews have a place, and even if it's not, perfect, I think it's really special to have a country, even if it's small," she said.

Other students who visited Israel spoke about how the trip leaders very intentionally limited exposure to Palestinian presence to little to none. Jillian, a senior at UMW, described how when the group drove through Palestinian territory, they had to close the curtains on the bus and were on edge the whole time.

"That was the most uncomfortable part of the trip and the part I disagreed with most," she said. "We drove through a Palestinian area, and the trip leaders shut the windows and acted like it was an extreme occurrence. Like, 'you must not look at them.'"

Some students were wary of going on a trip like Birthright because they were uncomfortable with only being presented a pro-Israeli understanding of the conflict, but everyone who had yet to visit said they would like to at some point, even if it meant wrestling with what that would mean for them as Jews and as critics of Israel.

Influence from Jewish organizations

Different Jewish organizations have put out different messaging about Israel. According to some, like UMW student Adam, his youth group, B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) was not particularly focused on Israel.

"We didn't talk about it too often in BBYO I'd say," he said. "I think we focused more on building connections with each other, and you know maturing the brotherhood that we had and making sure that people could find their own Jewish identity and things like that."

Molly, a UVA student mentioned above, was also involved in BBYO, but in a different region. She said that the organization was staunchly pro-Israel.

"When I went to my youth group, BBYO which – I don't think of them as being a radical organization – but we had a BDS program about like, 'this is what you should do they try to come to your campus, and like you should combat them,' she said. "It was always presented as an anti-Semite thing, but now looking back on it, I know that's not what it is."

NFTY, a national reform Jewish youth movement, has a group devoted to talking about Israel. Linnie, a high school senior from Maryland, joined the group in part because it is not always politically in support of Israel.

"The group is basically just having difficult discussions about Israel together," she said. "I joined it because I feel like politically I'm frustrated with Israel, but also because I'm jewish and I want to have that cultural connection."

A few students had gotten involved with J Street since attending college. Tufts sophomore Sam is president of the J Street branch on her campus.

"It was a lot of talking about definitely current events, but also as American Jews like what we can do and how the conflict involves us. There were talks about anti semitism and, like the weaponization of anti-Semitism in the US and how as American Jews, through our Jewish organizations, we contribute to and like control aspects of the conflict."

When anti-Zionism slips into anti-Semitism

Though many of the students interviewed were critical of the Israeli government, there were times when it felt like progressives were so staunchly opposed to Israel that the rhetoric bordered on anti-Semitism.

"I feel like sometimes in progressive politics, I see people say things that they think they're supposed to be saying," said Mike, a junior at UMW. "We speak about Trump, but it's not just on the right, it's also like there is also anti semitism on the left, it's everywhere."

Alice, a junior at UMW, noticed that anti-Semitism particularly on social media. She said that in some circles, it feels like Jews are not allowed to weigh in on the conflict.

“Probably the biggest example of the like anti Semitic aspect of it is non Jewish people, on social media specifically, bullying Jewish people who voice their opinion on the Israeli Palestinian conflict,” she said.

Talia, a freshman at UVA, said that although she was comfortable voicing her own opinions on the conflict – and specifically, the ideals of racism that are upheld within the state – but at some points it was uncomfortable when goyim were overly critical.

“It's the kind of thing where you can make fun of your siblings, and then like when other people do, you're like ‘you can't say that.’ That's kind of what it feels like my relationship is with Israel,” she said.

Julia, the VCU student mentioned above, described how Jewish people are expected to weigh in on Israel, in a way that, for instance, Catholic people are not immediately expected to weigh in on the problems with the Vatican. She said that forcing Jewish students into a conversation they have not necessarily expressed comfort entering can feel anti-Semitic at times.

“When people find out you're Jewish, they immediately assume that you have an opinion on Israel, and they immediately assume that you support Israel mostly. Especially in high school and even in the beginning of college, I was working so hard to tear down that mindset with people I knew,” she said. “I was so aggressively anti-Israel, because I was so exhausted of people assuming that I was like some obsessive Israeli fanatic. I have family in Israel, I speak Hebrew almost fluently, I found myself doing that so many times. Other people force that to have to be a part of your identity. Especially on a college campus where everyone must be incredibly progressive and woke all the time, it feels a little anti Semitic sometimes.”

Reasons for change in perceptions

` Some students attributed their increased criticism of Israel since entering college not to a specific moment or series of moments, but to better researching skills in general.

“My own ability to do research and accurately research has definitely grown since coming to Mary Wash, and just my understanding of geopolitics just from the fact that I was 17, and 17 year olds don't really understand geopolitics, has grown,” said Alice, a junior UMW student mentioned above.

Others point to a specific moment or exposure to new perspectives that inspired them to read more about the conflict to better educate themselves. Thomas, a junior at UVA, was one such student who can pinpoint when she started reconsidering previously held opinions on Israel.

“I was talking to some of my friends, some non-Jewish peers, and they said they would never go [to Israel], because they would immediately be shot by Jews there,” she said. “I was just so struck that they both thought, just like two different people had that idea... Supporting Israel is a big part of my identity, and they had just thought this and I never knew. [It made me feel] even more of a sense of identity to it and more of a responsibility to learn more about it and also be able to explain it if somebody wants to learn more.”

Other reasons for heightened criticism of Israel, according to students interviewed, included distance from Jewish institutions.

“In high school, I might have been like, ‘oh, i'm a Zionist.’ I might have been more comfortable with that honestly,” said Molly, a senior at UVA. “With all my youth group stuff that was so pro Israel, it was definitely more integrated I think into my life, and now I don't know if it's because I don't participate in as many Jewish things in general so I just don't think about it as much. I don't know if I participate Jewish things in general, if I participate in less like Israeli-geared things in general.”

Lastly, some students described a transition in how they thought about Israel that correlated with doing what college students do: figuring out who they are. As they explored their own identity, they also explored what it meant to be Jewish in relationship with Israel.

“I felt like there was a point coming into college, where I had removed myself from the system, and I was still calling myself Jewish, but I was like ‘yeah, but I’m Jew*ish*,” said Jess, who graduated from Emerson in December. “I think it came from a place of personal intrigue and wanting to define for myself what kind of Jew I wanted to be and how my relationship with my Judaism was allowed to change as I changed as a person, as my politics changed. As I started to think about even things like my own gender and coming out as nonbinary, and looking at gendered words and Hebrew as an entirely gendered language and my relationship with being

gendered in Jewish spaces, that kind of analysis led to obviously, politics, because it has to end there, somehow."

For students who said that their support of Israel had grown stronger in their time at college, they described encounters with anti-Semitism, visits to Israel, and exposure to anti-Israel sentiment.

CONCLUSION

Because of unexpected problems in gathering data, it is difficult to conclude definitively on the validity of my hypotheses. The hope was to use three universities as case studies for comparison purposes, ideally with a wide sampling of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jewish students. I also hoped to interview significantly more high school students, but COVID made advertising this study and contacting different Jewish organizations on college campuses more difficult than it otherwise would have been. This paper was unsuccessful in that regard. Hypotheses 2), that American Jewish college students at New York University will be less critical of Israel than at University of Mary Washington or University of Maryland, and 3), that American Jewish college students who identify as Orthodox will have more comparable views on Israel to their high school counterparts than to their college peers, were untestable. I was only able to interview four Conservative students (and two students who identified as being somewhere between Conservative and Reform), and no Orthodox students at all. Some schools did have a vocal pro-Palestinian presence, and students at schools were there were anti-Israel protests did have students voice discomfort or an obligation to defend Israel. The four Conservative students in general had very consistently positive views towards Israel and were less critical than some of their Reform counterparts – two of the Conservative students said they intended to move to Israel and serve in the IDF after college, while none of the Reform students

mentioned such plans. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that Hypotheses 2 and 3 may hold up with more research, though they cannot be adequately addressed in this study.

Hypothesis 1, that American Jewish college students will be more critical of Israel than American Jewish high schoolers, was partially true. Though only five high schoolers were interviewed for this study, four out of five identified as Zionists. All but one of the high schoolers interviewed, who spent a semester earlier this year attending school in Israel, reported not having engaged very much with Israel (and the interviews were notably shorter than with their college counterparts). Likewise, all but the high schooler who had spent time in Israel said they wanted to know more about the conflict but felt they did not necessarily have enough information to make an informed opinion. More importantly, though, is how many students self-reported that their opinions on Israel had changed since college: eighteen students said that their perspectives on Israel differed at least some compared to their high school selves.[47] Of those eighteen, thirteen students said they were more critical of Israel since spending time on college campuses. Reasons for the shift included better researching abilities, distance from family and Jewish institutions, exposure to other perspectives, and more time spent exploring adult Jewish identity. On the other hand, five students said that their support for Israel had strengthened since entering college. Reasons for that perspective shift included exposure to anti-Semitism (online or in-person), exposure to anti-Israel sentiments, and trips to Israel.

In some ways, this paper functions as a case study of "Richmond Jewish diaspora." The small geographic sample – and overrepresentation of UMW students – is both a limitation and an advantage. While future research absolutely should explore how young American Jewish opinion of Israel is impacted by regional differences in the American Jewry, it is valuable to have a broad

[47] Other students reported a significant shift in their beliefs about Israel that occurred late in their high school careers.

sample of individuals with comparable religious upbringing (including Sunday School curricula). Those students were able to corroborate an overwhelmingly positive outlook on Israel growing up, so changes in their perspective were often drastic and came with physically moving away from that influence. Having a variety of students with similar starting points come away with different outcomes makes it easier to narrow down the causes for any changes in opinion. The demographics of Richmond specifically also provided for an interesting perspective of necessary assimilation and for a drastic dynamic change in a place like Israel – most Richmond Jews have not had the experience of being the religious majority outside of Jewish organizations.

Further research would also benefit from a longitudinal study of American Jews beginning in high school and ending post-college graduation. Such a study was impossible for this project, so most of the data gathered relies on people's memories and subjective experiences. However, asking people to make those judgements for themselves and outwardly explore whether they *think* they have a different worldview than they did before college matters too, for this sort of qualitative analysis perhaps even more so than more objective measures.

A factor that truly was a limitation in this study is race: all but one of the respondents were white.[48] The experiences of Jews in this country are not universal, and future studies should take into account these differences when exploring what it means to be young and Jewish in America. This study was also limited by a narrow sampling of religious sects. Conservative, Orthodox, and Ultra-Orthodox Jews are also an important part of the story of how American Jews perceive Israel, and future research should explore those differences.

Moving forward

Because less than half of the participants said their opinions of Israel had negatively changed since entering college, it cannot be concluded that the fears of Jewish leadership – that

[48] All but one of the participants appeared as white; respondents were not asked to self-identify race.

college students are being brainwashed by anti-Israel universities – have and will come to fruition. However, it is safe to conclude that at least some students are feeling unheard by Jewish leadership; at least some American Jews feel blindsided by Israel's policies and by its treatment of Palestinians. None of the respondents who were critical of Israel could be described as apathetic. Indeed, they cared deeply about the country and felt personally invested in its behavior. If Jewish leadership and organizations want to avoid alienating young people and to keep college students engaged with Israel, they should not lie to them. What can be concluded from this study is that young American Jews want to talk honestly about Israel – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Painting Israel as the hero in a complex territorial dispute, or declining to talk about it altogether, only means that people will grow to resent the institutions they trusted to tell the truth.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions: College students

What year are you in school?

Do you identify as reform, conservative, or orthodox Jewish?

What, if any, Jewish institutions are you involved in?

Do you feel a part of a Jewish community on campus? (ex: high holidays, Hillel events, shabbat dinners)
Do you believe your campus has a strong Jewish community?

How frequently to you consume news surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Weekly, monthly, more than weekly
Where do you get your news about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Have you taken any classes or participated in any educational events about the conflict?
If so, why?

Broadly speaking, do you support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state?

Are you familiar with the term Zionist?
No: a person who believes in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel
Yes: What does the term Zionist mean for you?
Would you identify yourself as a Zionist?
Why or why not?

Do you generally support the actions of the current Israeli government?

Have you visited or do you intend to visit Israel?
How long was your stay? Did you travel with an organization? What parts of the country did you visit? What exposure did you have to Palestinian presence – e.g., drive through occupied territories, checkpoints, past settlements, etc.

Do you consider support of Israel to be an important part of your Jewish identity?
What about American Jewish identity more broadly?

Do you find yourself agreeing with your parents on issues surrounding Israel?

Do you think your perceptions of Israel have changed since entering college?

APPENDIX B

Interview questions: high school

What year are you in school?

Do you identify as reform, conservative, or orthodox Jewish?

What, if any, Jewish institutions are you involved in?

How frequently to you consume news surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Weekly, monthly, more than weekly
Where do you get your news about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Have you talked about Israel in school?
    Have your teachers or classmates said anything notable about Israel?

Have you talked about Israel at synagogue?

Broadly speaking, do you support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state?

Are you familiar with the term Zionist?

No: a person who believes in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel
Yes: What does the term Zionist mean for you?
Would you identify yourself as a Zionist?
    Why or why not?

Do you generally support the actions of the current Israeli government?

Have you visited or do you intend to visit Israel?

How long was your stay? Did you travel with an organization? What parts of the country did you visit? What exposure did you have to Palestinian presence – e.g., drive through occupied territories, checkpoints, past settlements, etc.

Do you consider support of Israel to be an important part of your Jewish identity?
What about American Jewish identity more broadly?

Do you find yourself agreeing with your parents on issues surrounding Israel?