

# ישראלים ISRAELIS

כתביעת לביכורי מחקר בלימודי ישראל  
A Multidisciplinary Bilingual Periodical

*Israelis* is an academic journal published by the Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism.

The journal is published once a year and serves as a bilingual publishing platform for early-career scholars (up to 5 years from the submission date of their dissertation) that research Israel Studies and Zionism.

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**Volume 10**



The Ben-Gurion Research Institute  
for the Study of Israel and Zionism  
The Ben-Gurion University of the Negev  
Sede Boker Campus

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ISSN 2225-7640

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Printed in Israel

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# Israelis are from Mars, American Jews Are from Venus? Cultural Differences and Rivalry in American Jewish Attitudes toward Israel<sup>1</sup>

Gil Ribak

Award-winning journalist Jeffrey Goldberg confessed in 2006 that, ‘I had a hard time getting along with Israelis. Many of us American Jews have a hard time with Israelis ...sometimes you’re not the easiest people to get on with.’ Goldberg, who lived in Israel, added that Israelis ‘are a completely alien species: rougher, more bombastic, more tribal ...comfortable with physical power ... frequently rude as hell, and, by the way, not very funny.’ Writing two years later, Conservative rabbi and author Daniel Gordis recalled that, during a meeting at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, he overheard a teenager with a thick New York accent mumbling to his sister, ‘Geez, a whole country without a Starbucks. Unbelievable.’<sup>2</sup>

- 1 The quip in the title was made by former senior diplomat and member of the White House National Security Council, Elliott Abrams, as quoted in Daniel Gordis, *We Stand Divided: The Rift between American Jews and Israel*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York 2019, p. 21. For a similar 2018 quote by journalist David Brinn, see ‘American Jews are from Venus; Israelis are from Mars’, *Jewish Journal*, 42, 24 (2018), p. 1, <http://jewishjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/JewishJournal-062118.pdf> (retrieved: 22.12.2019).
- 2 Jeffrey Goldberg’s quote is from ‘Israel Isn’t a Real Country for Most American Jews’, *Slate*, 5.10.2006, <https://tinyurl.com/y2m423pa> (retrieved: 18.1.2019). Daniel Gordis’s quote is from ‘Guest Column: Watching American Jews Drift Away’, *Daniel Gordis blog*, 1.8.2008, <https://danielgordis.org/2008/08/01/watching-american-jews-drift-away/> (retrieved: 18.1.2019).

The above quotes by Goldberg and Gordis are merely examples of the seldom-explored context of American Jewish feeling of cultural estrangement – and sometimes outright rivalry – toward the State of Israel and Israelis, which has little, if anything, to do with political or religious convictions. The ways in which American Jewish leaders, writers, filmmakers, commentators, and even American immigrants to Israel have portrayed Israelis and their behavior reflect those profound cultural gaps. After a brief overview of the scholarship about American Jewish-Israeli relations, the article examines the cultural disparities and alienation from a historical perspective, looking at American Jews' attitudes not only toward the Zionist movement, and later toward the young Jewish state, but also toward Israelis, as noted by American visitors. The discussion revisits the idea that 1967 served as a turning point and shows how cultural disdain and disaffection have sometimes masqueraded as political criticism. Apart from episodes of rivalry between American Jewry and Israel, I also discuss the representations of Israelis as pushy, noisy, and menacing by American Jewish writers and creators of popular culture.

### **The Conventional Wisdom about American Jewish-Israeli Relations**

Despite its prevalence and importance, cultural alienation rarely appears in the scholarship on American Jewish-Israeli relations. In recent years, these relations have been examined in a host of studies with increasingly alarmist titles, such as Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, *Two Worlds of Judaism* (1990); Jerold S. Auerbach, *Are We One?* (2001); Steven T. Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences? The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel* (2001); Ofira Seliktar, *Divided We Stand* (2002); Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel* (2007); Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* (2012); Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel* (2016); and Daniel



Gordis, *We Stand Divided: The Rift between American Jews and Israel* (2019).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, a series of reports that analyzed American Jewish public opinion toward Israel have claimed that American Jews have increasingly distanced themselves from the Jewish state. This long trail of literature has documented a weakened attachment to Israel among American Jews, and especially younger ones. A common explanation for the growing alienation from Israel looks at age-related factors and argues that it is essentially a generational phenomenon: for American Jews born from the 1970s onward, as the argument goes, enthusiasm for Israel has not necessarily been a dominant theme. Unlike Israel's previous wars, and especially during and after the Six-Day War (1967), when American Jewry's support for Israel peaked, Israel's two wars in Lebanon and its handling of two Palestinian Intifadas were less likely to cast the Jewish state in a heroic or even positive light. More recently, a global campaign to

- 3 Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1990 (this book was published earlier and is therefore less alarmist than the other studies); Jerold S. Auerbach, *Are We One? Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 2001, pp. 103-105; Steven T. Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences: The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel*, University Press of New England, Hanover, NH 2001; Ofira Seliktar, *Divided We Stand: American Jews, Israel, and the Peace Process*, Praeger, Westport, CT 2002, pp. 45-46, 75; Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*, Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, New York 2007, pp. 2-3; Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*, Henry Holt and Co., New York 2012, pp. 160-177; Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016, pp. 49-54; Gordis, *We Stand Divided*. See also Jonathan Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2015, pp. 144-145, 179-184; and Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*, Basic Books, New York 1993, pp. 193-194.

delegitimize and boycott Israel continued the process of tarnishing the country's image among young liberal American Jews.<sup>4</sup>

## Historical Background

Despite the distancing described by researchers, it is important to bear in mind that for prolonged periods, neither Zionism nor Israel was at the center of American Jewish life. Moreover, among some of the movements and ideologies that shaped American Jewish history – the Reform movement in its ‘classic’ phase, Jewish radicals on the Left (whether socialists, anarchists, communists, or latter-day progressives), and some ultra-Orthodox groups – one can locate a few sources of deep resistance to Zionism. In addition, expressions of antisemitism in the United States throughout its history were usually weaker than in Europe. The heterogeneity of American society meant that most of the hatred and violence were aimed at other racial, ethnic, and religious groups, thus rendering Zionism less compelling to American Jews.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, a common American Jewish creed viewed America as the new Zion, which superseded

- 4 Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, ‘Thinking about Distancing from Israel’, *Contemporary Jewry*, 30 (2010), pp. 287-296; Seliktar, *Divided We Stand*, pp. 65-86, 87-117. The generational analysis appears in most of the other studies mentioned in the previous footnote. For a different assessment, see Theodore Sasson, *The New American Zionism*, New York University Press, New York 2014. On the peak of American Jewish support for Israel after the 1967 war, see Melvin I. Urofsky, *We Are One! American Jewry and Israel*, Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, NY 1978, pp. 345-368; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Houghton Mifflin, New York 1999, pp. 148-151; Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America – Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*, 1989, reprinted Columbia University Press, New York 1997, pp. 360-361; and Marshall Sklare, *Observing America's Jews*, in: Jonathan D. Sarna (ed.), *University Press of New England*, Hanover, NH 1993, pp. 107-127.
- 5 Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994, pp. x-xi, 245; Melvin I. Urofsky, ‘Zionism: An American Experience’, *American Jewish Historical Society*, 63 (March 1974), pp. 216-219.

the Land of Israel as the locus of the Jews' longing for a home. The Reform movement's opposition to a Jewish return to Zion preceded the Zionist movement, and would remain a central feature of the movement well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

In the wake of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, support for the Jewish state became widespread, to the point that an old truism labeled it '*the religion for American Jews.*' According to that received wisdom, American Jews reached a virtual consensus on two major topics: overwhelming support for the Democratic Party, which began prior to World War II, and a strong liberal agenda, which included opposition to racial discrimination; support for civil rights and social welfare programs; and enormous support for the State of Israel as a haven for Jews, particularly the hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees from the Arab World. Yet as historian Arthur Goren has pointed out, the massive support for Israel derived, at least in part, from a '*conjunction of circumstances,*' where a pressing need to find a solution for Jewish refugees coalesced with an increasing recognition that a Jewish state in the Land of Israel would be the only viable way to settle those refugees.<sup>7</sup>

- 6 Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (1988), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1995, pp. 225-295; Naomi W. Cohen, *The Americanization of Zionism, 1897-1948*, University Press of New England, Lebanon, NH 2003, pp. 39-63. See also Ofer Shiff, *Survival through Integration: American Reform Jewish Universalism and the Holocaust*, Brill, Leiden, the Netherlands 2005, pp. 42-43. On Jewish radicals' opposition not only to Zionism, but also to Jewish peoplehood, see Isaiah Trunk, 'The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement', *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, 16 (1976), pp. 342-343; Irving Howe, with the assistance of Kenneth Libo, *World of Our Fathers* (1976), reprinted by Schocken, New York 1989, pp. 290-292, 523.
- 7 Arthur A. Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1999, pp. 186-204 (both quotes are on p. 190, italics in the original in both). See also Sklare, *Observing America's Jews*, pp. 89-106. Stuart Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties*, Columbia University Press, New York 1997, pp. 24-25, 188. Deborah Dash Moore, *To the*

Pockets of resistance remained among some groups, which had little in common other than anti-Zionism: recently-settled ultra-Orthodox groups (such as Satmar Hasidim), the American Council for Judaism – which seceded from the Reform movement – and diehard Jewish communists and Bundists. Those detractors of Zionism and Israel were relegated to the margins within a population of American Jews that witnessed the ‘from ashes to rebirth’ story of the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel, and were still close to the immigration experience and their parents’/grandparents’ Old World experience. Moreover, Will Herberg, the radical-turned-conservative writer, observed in 1955 that Jews in Cold-War America were seen as a religious group rather than an ethnic minority, since that was the most legitimate way to mark group differences.<sup>8</sup>

Lingering Jewish concerns about losing such legitimacy resurfaced recently, when President Donald Trump signed an executive order (in December 2019) that defined Jews as a national/ethnic group. Jewish critics argued that such a definition challenges their loyalty to the US and their American national identity. Rabbi Hara Person, the chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, said, ‘I’ve heard people say this feels like the first step toward us wearing yellow stars.’ Nevertheless, as Herberg already noted in the 1950s, American Jews exhibited less attachment to religion than

*Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1994, pp. 227-261.

- 8 On Satmar’s anti-Zionism, see Zvi Jonathan Kaplan, ‘The Roots of Satmar Anti-Zionism: Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, Zionism, and Hungarian Ultra-Orthodoxy’, in: Simcha Fishbane and Eric Levine (eds.), *Contention, Controversy, and Change: Evolutions and Revolutions in the Jewish Experience*, Vols. I-II, Touro College Press, New York and Academic Studies Press, Brighton, MA 2016, pp. 21-36. On the ACJ, see Thomas A. Kolsky, *Jews against Zionism: The American Council for Judaism, 1942-1948*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1990. On Jewish radicals in postwar America, see David Slucki, *The International Jewish Labor Bund after 1945: Toward a Global History*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 2012, pp. 105-138. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Doubleday and Co., Garden City, NY 1955, pp. 238-240.

Catholics and Protestants, in terms of belief in God or attending synagogue services. Still, they continued to identify as Jews and remained deeply concerned about group survival, including a wish to avoid intermarriage. Hence, by the 1950s, as sociologist Charles S. Liebman astutely observed, ‘Although Jews may know in their hearts that their identity stems from peoplehood and ethnicity, they are reluctant to display this truth in public.’ In such a communal mindset, strong support for Israel was part and parcel of Jewish identity, and anti-Zionist groups remained fairly marginal.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the façade of the wall-to-wall backing of Israel, American Jews revealed some ambivalence toward the Jewish state prior to the Six-Day War. While 90% of American Jewish respondents to a 1958 survey said that they would feel ‘a sense of loss’ if Israel were destroyed, the Jewish state was hardly at the center of American Jewish life in those years. A survey taken in the late 1950s found that only 48 teachers in Jewish schools – out of more than a thousand – reported teaching anything about Israel. Few American Jews visited Israel, and the *American Jewish Year Book* devoted much more attention to Germany in the 1950s than to Israel. Nathan Glazer, a noted sociologist, asserted in a study published in 1957 that, ‘The establishment of Israel meant little for American Judaism specifically.’<sup>10</sup>

A scholar who has emphasized the centrality of Israel for pre-1967 American Jews is historian Emily Alice Katz. She has focused

9 On Jewish groups’ opposition to Trump’s executive order and Rabbi Person’s quote, see Bethania Palma, ‘Did President Trump Redefine Judaism as a Nationality?’, *Snopes*, 13.12.2019, <https://www.snopes.com/news/2019/12/13/trump-executive-order-judaism/> (retrieved: 22.12.2019); Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, pp. 238-240; Charles S. Liebman, ‘Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life’, *American Jewish Year Book*, 71 (1970), pp. 3-99 (the quote is on p. 96).

10 The surveys are quoted in Alexander M. Dushkin and Uriah Z. Engelman, *Jewish Education in the United States*, American Association for Jewish Education, New York 1959, p. 194; Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2004, pp. 334-336; and Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (1957), second edition by University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1972, pp. 115-116.

on American Jewish consumption of Israeli goods and culture (Israeli food, folk dance, literature, art, and music, among others) between 1948 and 1967 in order to argue that they provided the basis for American Jewish engagement and attachment to Israel in those years. Still, it is unclear to what extent such patterns of consumption marked a genuine dedication to Israel, or if they were simply the manifestation of participation in American postwar mass consumer culture. Katz also mentions Harry Essrig and Abraham Segal, the authors of the first textbook on contemporary Israel written for young Reform Jews (*Israel Today*, 1964), who argued that supporting Israel ‘was not an end in itself’ but rather a means to encourage participation in Jewish life in America.<sup>11</sup> American Jewish support for Israel did not peak in those years, a period when Israel was still in its pre-1967 borders, when there was no issue of occupied territories, and the Jewish state was still viewed as David rather than Goliath.

American Jews, who have long deemed America as their Zion, now had to contend with the existence of a sovereign Jewish state in Zion. On both the practical and ideological levels, the question of political allegiance emerged as a potential pitfall. Fears of accusations of dual loyalty surfaced when in 1949 the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, called for large-scale immigration to Israel of American Jewish youth. The president of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), Joseph Proskauer, was so angered by this that he suggested issuing an ultimatum to the Israeli government threatening dissociation from Israel.<sup>12</sup> Proskauer’s successor, Jacob Blaustein, managed in 1950 to reach an ‘exchange of views’ with Ben-Gurion,

11 Emily Alice Katz, *Bringing Zion Home: Israel in American Jewish Culture, 1948-1967*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2015, pp. 137-147. Essrig and Segal are mentioned in *ibid.*, p. 141. See also Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in an Open Society* (1967), second edition by University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1979, pp. 214-249.

12 The episode appears in Urofsky, *We Are One!*, pp. 192-194. See also Marianne R. Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong: The American Jewish Committee, 1945-2006*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, MA 2007, pp. 56-58.

concluding that American Jews have a political attachment only to the United States and ‘do not live “in exile”,’ and that ‘America is home for them.’ The fact that the Israeli government dealt directly with the non-Zionist AJC and bypassed the leadership of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) reflects the weakness of American Zionism in the 1950s. Apart from a leadership crisis that bedeviled the ZOA, Israel shifted the task of fundraising for the young country from the Zionists to non-Zionist communal leaders. Perhaps more importantly, the question of what role, if any, Diaspora Zionism had to play once Israel was established, had beset the movement. By the late 1950s, the president of the American Jewish Congress, Joachim Printz, wrote, ‘Zionism is – for all practical purposes – dead’.<sup>13</sup>

In the exchange with Ben-Gurion, Blaustein made a few comments that would become axiomatic in the relationship between the world’s two largest communities for years to come. He stated that, ‘While Israel has naturally placed some burdens on Jews elsewhere, particularly in America ... For hundreds of thousands [of Jews] in Europe, Africa and the Middle East ... [Israel] has provided a home.’ That is, Israel served as a haven for destitute and persecuted Jews from around the world (but not from America), and since Israel itself is struggling economically and socially, it is in dire need of assistance from American Jews. The latter, Blaustein promised, will offer ‘every possible support to Israel’ and ‘we shall do all we can to increase further our share in the great historic task of helping Israel to solve its problems.’ The strong, affluent and large community in the New Zion will assist the much smaller and less fortunate Jewish population of the Old Zion, making it perfectly clear which

13 The Ben-Gurion-Blaustein exchange is from ‘An Exchange of Views: American Jews and the State of Israel’, *American Jewish Year Book*, 53 (1952), pp. 565-568; and Irving M. Engel, ‘Report of the Executive Committee’, *ibid.*, p. 552 (‘exile’ is in quotes in this summary, written by AJC chairman of the executive committee, Irving M. Engel). On the AJC, ZOA, and for the quote by Printz, see Urofsky, *We Are One!*, pp. 193-194, 286-289. See also Zvi Ganin, *An Uneasy Relationship: American Jewish Leadership and Israel, 1948-1957*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2005, pp. 81-130.

community is the leader of the Jewish World. What is more, without the help of American Jews, ‘The very existence of an independent State of Israel would be problematic.’<sup>14</sup>

The independent state of Israel, nonetheless, was not just another poverty-stricken land in which Jews resided. It was the Holy Land, the birthplace of the Jewish people, and a place to which observant Jews pray daily to return. Israeli leaders continued to adhere to *shelilat ha-galut* (Negation of the Diaspora/Exile) and referred to American Jews as living in exile, a situation that, according to the classic Zionist formulation, would necessarily lead to either total assimilation or physical annihilation. When communal leader and rabbi Arthur Hertzberg visited Israel in 1949, he described Israeli Jews as people who ‘accept themselves as the chosen vanguard of the Jewish people, without any doubt whatever.’ Hertzberg criticized what he saw as Israeli overconfidence, where ‘every child in Israel knows for certain’ that any Jews living abroad ‘are physical or spiritual DP’s’ who must be saved. As Israeli critic Boaz Evron wrote in the 1960s, Israeli Jews felt superior to any Jews in the Diaspora, since only they could lead a fully Jewish life. Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua reiterated that conviction in 2006, arguing that the Jewishness of Israeli Jews ‘is immeasurably fuller and broader and more meaningful than the Jewishness of an American Jew.’<sup>15</sup>

14 Blaustein, ‘An Exchange of Views’, pp. 566-567. See also Naomi W. Cohen, *Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committee, 1906-1966*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1972, pp. 311-315; Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, pp. 58-66; and S. Ilan Troen, ‘Response: Beyond Zionist Theory – Coming to Terms with the American Jewish Experience’, in: Allon Gal and Alfred Gottschalk (eds.), *Beyond Survival and Philanthropy: American Jewry and Israel*, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati 2000, pp. 64-71.

15 Israeli leaders who criticized American Jews and Evron are quoted in Urofsky, *We Are One!*, pp. 259, 263; Arthur Hertzberg, ‘American Jews through Israeli Eyes’, *Commentary*, 10 (January 1950), p. 3; A. B. Yehoshua, ‘The Meaning of Homeland’, *The A. B. Yehoshua Controversy: An Israel-Diaspora Dialogue on Jewishness, Israeliness, and Identity*, American Jewish Committee, New York 2006, p. 9. On Negation of the Diaspora, see Yitzhak Conforti, ‘The “New Jew” in the Zionist Movement:



Few American Jews accepted such views. Not only did most of them reject the idea of moving to Israel, but they also eschewed any Israeli break with the Jewish past and criticized the character of Israeli Jewishness. Zionist intellectual Maurice Samuel, who resided in pre-independence Israel and visited the country numerous times, cautioned in 1953, 'Diaspora Jewry, American Jewry, must counteract Israel Jewry's growing illusion that it stands before the world as an unmediated self-resurrection of the bi-millennial past.' Samuel was also concerned that Israel 'is in danger of becoming Orientalized – 'Levantinized',' and mentioned the fear among Israeli Ashkenazi Jews of being overrun by *Mizrahi* Jews: 'The Eastern Jews will obliterate us in Israel.' While one of Samuel's Israeli interlocutors told him that American Jews 'can't teach us Judaism yet,' many American rabbis thought otherwise. A poll among more than 100 American rabbis published in 1955 found that more than 90% of them believed that religious life in Israel was 'unsatisfactory.' Most Reform rabbis believed that American Jewish interest in Israel was declining or remained unchanged since the country was founded. Reform rabbis were also the most pessimistic regarding future relations between American Jews and Israel. They devoted the fewest sermons to Israel, and a third of them believed that the needs of American Jews were 'neglected' as a result of activities on behalf of the Jewish state.<sup>16</sup>

Some American Jews, who did visit Israel and had a brush with Israelis, found the country and its inhabitants to be quite foreign and at times unpleasant. Literary critic Leslie Fiedler admitted that, 'I feel myself more hopelessly a foreigner in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and the Holy City of Safad than I do in Rome or Bologna or

Ideology and Historiography', *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, 25 (2011), pp. 87-118; and Yosef Gorni, 'Diaspora Negation and the Return to History', in: S. N. Eisenstadt and Moshe Lissak, *Zionism and the Return to History: New Evaluation*, Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 349-360 [Hebrew].

16 Maurice Samuel, *Level Sunlight*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1953, pp. 266, 268, 273; Eliezer Whartman, 'Attitudes of American Rabbis on Zionism and Israel', *Jewish Social Studies*, 17 (April 1955), pp. 122, 128, 130.

Florence.’ Scholar Jacob Neusner, who visited Israel several times in the 1950s and 1960s, complained about Israelis’ ‘xenophobia’ and ‘disdain for American Jewry.’ Neusner detected Israeli ‘ridicule of the pronounced American accent in speaking Hebrew, of American ways of dress, of Americans’ insistence even on clean kitchens and sanitary facilities.’ Jay Shapiro, an American Jew who immigrated to Israel with his family in 1969, was astonished to see a man ‘standing in full view and urinating into the street’ on the corner of a main intersection. Shapiro advised other Americans who come to Israel not to be surprised at anything, as ‘you are now in the Levant.’<sup>17</sup>

### The 1967 Turning Point Revisited

With all that criticism of Israel, by the 1960s Jewish observance in America was rapidly declining and intermarriage was increasing at an unprecedented rate. The watershed of 1967 occurred against that backdrop. The three-week standoff period in May 1967, amid Arab threats to wipe Israel off the map, deeply shook American Jews. Theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, ‘Will God permit our people to perish? Will there be another Auschwitz, another Dachau, another Treblinka?’ In the euphoria that spread after the Israeli victory, support for the Jewish state became the common denominator of American Jewish life. This was especially true for young activists who brought their counter-culture sensibilities and tactics to beef up their pro-Israel activities. Such attitudes were combined with the ethnic wave of identity politics during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>18</sup>

17 Fiedler is quoted in Andrew Furman, *Israel through the Jewish-American Imagination: A Survey of Jewish-American Literature on Israel, 1928-1995*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1997, p. 2; Jacob Neusner, ‘A Stranger at Home: An American Jew Visits in Israel’, *Judaism*, 11 (Winter 1962), p. 29. Shapiro is quoted in Chaim I. Waxman, *American Aliya: Portrait of an Innovative Migration Movement*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1989, p. 140.

18 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (1967), reprinted by Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York 1987, pp. 196-197; Michael E. Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*, Columbia University Press, New York 2002, pp. 128-132; Samuel C.

Moreover, support for Israel became, at least outwardly, the common denominator of American Jewish life. Religious life, education, philanthropy, political activity, and culture all became 'Israel-centered' in the years following the Six-Day War.<sup>19</sup> The change extended to language, where Israeli (Sephardi) pronunciation replaced the Ashkenazi one: kippa replaced yarmulke, Shabbat replaced Shabbes, and many parents began giving their children modern Israeli Hebrew names (Shira, Ari). More than 25,000 American Jews made *Aliyah* (immigrated to Israel) in the decade after 1967. As one former member of the anti-Zionist American Council for Judaism said, 'the Israelis have made me feel ten feet tall.'<sup>20</sup>

While Israelis won nearly every accolade possible for their heroism and military prowess, they still constituted the smaller, embattled, and poorer community; American Jews remained the wealthy donors, benefactors, and lobbyists, members of the largest Jewish community in the world. That is, the dominant pattern in the relationship between American Jews and Israel had not changed, and the fragile situation of the Jewish state was brought much closer to home after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Despite its decisive military victory, the war exposed Israel's strategic weaknesses and reawakened the fear of destruction. While most American Jews 'voted with their wallets,' with philanthropic fundraising in 1973 exceeding that of 1967, many young Jews also voted with their feet: over 30,000 American Jews volunteered to replace drafted reserve soldiers in the workplace in Israel in 1973, up from less than 8,000 in 1967.<sup>21</sup>

Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1995, pp. 88-90, 97.

19 Wertheimer, *A People Divided*, pp. 16, 28-32.

20 Urofsky, *We Are One!*, pp. 345-368 (the quote is on p. 357); Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 148-151; Hertzberg, *Jews in America*, pp. 360-361; Sklare, *Observing America's Jews*, pp. 107-127.

21 On American Jews and the Yom Kippur War, see Daniel J. Elazar, 'United States of America: Overview', in: Moshe Davis (ed.), *The Yom Kippur War: Israel and the Jewish People*, Arno, New York 1974, pp. 1-35; Meir Moshe, 'The Yom Kippur War in Middle America', *Midstream*, 20 (June-July 1974), pp. 74-79. The quote and volunteer numbers are from Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II*, Johns

Several scholars believe that it was not just Israel's vulnerability which shaped its image in the United States. According to them, a younger American Jewish generation, which came of age during the first Lebanon War and the first Intifada of the 1980s, might have felt increasingly alienated from a Jewish state that seemed to be more of a Goliath than a David. Observers argued that Israel was transformed 'from a symbol of communal unity' to 'a topic of deep division and much bitterness.'<sup>22</sup> Amid the continuation of the Israeli-Arab conflict, self-proclaimed progressive and radical Jews challenged the policy of full commitment to Israel and avoidance of public criticism of Israel among the major Jewish organizations. And it was not just radical Jews who attacked Israel: already in 1972, the president of the American Jewish Congress, Arthur Hertzberg, warned that, 'American Jewry will not become a 'colony' of Israel. We insist on the right to criticize Israel when criticism is needed, even if that criticism is likely to be exploited by Israel's enemies.' Decades later, columnist Peter Beinart would echo that view, asserting in a much-quoted 2010 article that, 'For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead.'<sup>23</sup>

Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1992, pp. 206, 208-209. On American Jewish suspicions toward the Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and his policy in the Middle East, see Gil Ribak, 'A Jew for All Seasons: Henry Kissinger, Jewish Expectations, and the Yom Kippur War', *Israel Studies Forum*, 25 (Fall 2010), pp. 1-25. The wars of 1967 and 1973 were not the first events that motivated young American Jews to travel to and volunteer in Israel – see Shaul Kelner, 'Historical Perspectives on Diaspora Homeland Tourism: "Israel Experience" Education in the 1950s and 1960s', *Diaspora, Indigenous and Minority Education*, 7 (2013), pp. 99-113.

22 On American Jews' attitudes toward Israel during the Lebanon War and the first Intifada, see Seliktar, *Divided We Stand*, pp. 65-117 (the quote is in p. 207); and Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences*, pp. 61-75, 93-115.

23 Herzberg is quoted in Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, p. 297; Peter Beinart, 'The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment', *The New York Review of Books*, 10.6.2010. See also Naomi Sokoloff, 'Israel in the Jewish American Imagination', in: Hana Wirth-Nesher (ed.), *The Cambridge History of*

Whereas numerous commentators have maintained that the Israeli-Arab conflict and/or the domination of Israeli religious life by the Chief Rabbinate and Orthodox Judaism are the main cause of Israeli-American Jewish friction, there are many other reasons for that tension and alienation. In their study of American Jews and Israelis in the late 1980s, sociologists Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen concluded that even among pro-Israel Jews, '[in spite of] the massive philanthropic and political lobbying apparatus [Israel] had relatively little impact' on the private lives of most American Jews, and Israel remained external even to American Judaism. Similarly, sociologist Chaim I. Waxman has maintained that since 'Jewishness and Jewish identity are limited to infrequent intervals' for 'the majority of American Jews,' 'Israel does not play a central role in their lives.' In their 2007 study of alienation from Israel among young American Jews, entitled *Beyond Distancing*, Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman found that 'contrary to widely held beliefs, left-liberal political identity is *not* primarily responsible for driving down the Israel-attachment scores among the non-Orthodox.' Furthermore, their findings showed 'no clear impact of political leaning on Israel attachment.' Not the tribulations of the peace process, nor the future of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, nor Israeli willingness (or lack thereof) to offer territorial concessions to the Palestinians were at the heart of detachment from Israel; according to Cohen and Kelman, intermarriage is a far more meaningful correlative of lessened identification.<sup>24</sup>

## Episodes of Rivalry

Many of the above quotes expressing antagonism toward the Jewish state reveal a usually-untapped context of such attitudes, which has little to do with Israeli policies, the Israeli-Arab conflict, or

*Jewish American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 371-372.

- 24 Liebman and Cohen, *Two Worlds*, pp. 86-87; Waxman, *American Aliya*, p. 118; Cohen and Kelman, *Beyond Distancing*, pp. 20-21 (emphasis in the original). See also, idem, 'Thinking about Distancing from Israel', pp. 287-296; Sasson, *New American Zionism*, pp. 138-143.

even the role of the Israeli Orthodox establishment. While both American and Israeli Jews belong to diverse populations in and of themselves, different languages, cultures (including political cultures), mentalities, and challenges still separate the world's two largest Jewish populations. At times, American Jews and Israelis are outright rivals. A case in point was the struggle over Soviet Jewry from the late 1970s onward: while initially most Jewish leaders and Israel agreed that Soviet Jews should be allowed to immigrate only to Israel, by the early 1980s it was clear that most Soviet Jews preferred to immigrate to the West, and especially to the US. Jewish organizations welcomed the immigrants and assisted them with housing, jobs, and medical care. That provoked irate responses from the Israeli government, which demanded that major American Jewish organizations stop 'stealing' Soviet Jews by helping them to settle in the United States. Officially, Israel argued that those leaving the Soviet Union with exit visas to Israel should be obliged to come to the Jewish state. More practically, Israeli officials pointed out that the Soviets might close their gates if they see that most emigres have no intention of going to the country for which their exit visas were issued. Finally, Israelis also argued that Soviet Jews had a much better chance of remaining Jews than those who migrated to America or other Western countries. Yet major American Jewish organizations claimed that the immigrants should have freedom of choice and accused the Israeli government of leading an unsuccessful and disorganized absorption policy.<sup>25</sup>

The pattern of rivalry and competition between the world's two largest Jewish centers has manifested itself in the thornier issue of demography. In the past decade, the question of how many Jews live in the United States and how many in Israel has provoked heated arguments, in which barbs flew, cutting papers were published

25 Fred A. Lazin, *The Struggle over Soviet Jewry in American Politics: Israel versus the American Jewish Establishment*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD 2005, pp. 2-3, 91-92, 108-109. See also Steven F. Windmueller, 'The "Noshrim" War: Dropping Out', in: Murray Friedman and Albert D. Chernin (eds.), *A Second Exodus: The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews*, University Press of New England, Hanover, NH 1999, pp. 161-172.

and editorials abounded on the question of whether the number of Jews in Israel has exceeded the number of American Jews. Israeli demographer Sergio Dellapergola has argued that more Jews live in Israel than in the United States and Canada combined (in 2014, his estimate was a little over 6.1 million vs. nearly 6.1 million, respectively), while American demographers Ira Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky estimated the number of American Jews at almost 6.77 million in 2014. Sheskin argued that the Israeli demographer ‘wants to be able to say that more Jews live in Israel than in America.’ Apparently, in the relationship between American Jews and Israel, size does matter: the demographic boom in Israel, coupled with a stagnating, if not declining, Jewish population in America, has a symbolic and political significance for both sides’ claim to the leadership of the Jewish people.<sup>26</sup>

Cultural differences and estrangement between American and Israeli Jews continue to run deep, even when they live in the other community’s country. As Jacob Neusner observed, ‘In Israel, one is mostly an ‘American’ or an ‘Anglo-Saxon’.’ All those who speak English are often termed ‘Anglo-Saxons’ by Israelis, and American, British, South African, Canadians and other English-speaking Jews have formed their own communities in cities such as Jerusalem, Ra’anana, and Rehovot. In these communities, many of the Americans interact as much as possible with other English speakers. Concomitantly, the attitude of American Jews toward Israelis who immigrated to America, as characterized by two sociologists, was ‘a mixture of suspicion, coolness, and even condemnation.’ Alongside

26 Sheskin is quoted in J. J. Goldberg, ‘How Many American Jews Are There?’, *Forward*, 18.2.2013, <http://forward.com/opinion/171204/how-many-american-jews-are-there/> (retrieved: 19.3.2018). For an overview of the debate, see Sergio Dellapergola, ‘World Jewish Population, 2014’, in: Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin (eds.), *American Jewish Year Book 2014: The Annual Record of the North American Jewish Communities*, pp. 301-393. See also, Ira Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, ‘Jewish Population in the United States, 2014’, *ibid.*, pp. 215-283. Similar conclusions appear in Leonard Saxe and Elizabeth Tighe, ‘Estimating and Understanding the Jewish Population in the United States: A Program of Research’, *Contemporary Jewry*, 33 (2013), pp. 43-62.

the Zionist stigma of calling anyone who leaves Israel a ‘yored’ (a ‘descender’), American Jews often considered Israelis to be ‘boorish, arrogant, and overly aggressive.’ As late as the 1990s, historian Peter Novick referred to Israeli emigrants as ‘an embarrassment.’ Israelis in America, on the other hand, viewed the local Jews as ‘less friendly and sincere’ and as inhospitable toward Israeli emigrants. Such feelings led to the creation of separate Israeli associations in the United States, such as the Israel-American Council (IAC), which caters to the needs and preferences of Israeli Americans. One of the leaders of the IAC, Shawn Evenhaim, said in 2013 that American Jews used to view Israelis in America ‘as criminals, or people who are out to con them.’<sup>27</sup>

### Imagery of Israelis in Popular Culture

To be sure, post-1967 American Jewish popular culture and literature exhibited an admiration for Israelis, abounding with imagery of tough, tanned, and muscular *sabras* (mostly men, but also women) who could fight and handle well both weaponry and antisemites. Journalist and activist Paul Breines termed the host of pulp fiction books that came out mostly after 1967 with such portrayals of Israelis as ‘Rambowitz’ novels. Phantasies about Israeli power and invincibility echo with the eponymous character in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). Portnoy goes to Israel, where he meets Naomi, a nearly six-foot-tall ‘hunk of a girl,’ who delivers him a swift headbutt when he tries to touch her breast. Not only does Naomi berate Portnoy for his ‘ghetto humor’ and Diaspora

27 Waxman, *American Aliya*, pp. 139-149; Neusner, ‘A Stranger at Home’, p. 27. Most quotes are from Steven J. Gold and Bruce A. Phillips, ‘Israelis in the United States’, *American Jewish Year Book*, 96 (1996), pp. 51-52, 92, 94; Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 185-186. Evenhaim is quoted in Zvika Klein, ‘The Tragedy of Expatriate Jews’, *Makor Rishon*, 4.9.2013, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/11/ART2/504/483.html> (retrieved: 30.12.2019) [Hebrew]. See also ‘Israeli-American Council Aims to United Israeli Community in U.S.’, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 12.9.2013, <https://www.jta.org/2013/09/12/united-states/israeli-american-council-aims-to-unite-diaspora-israeli-community-in-the-united-states> (retrieved: 18.1.2019).



mentality, but his attempts to conquer her end with his inability to have an erection. Then, 'That healthy, monumental Sabra' stands over him and 'look[s] down' at him, making him fear she would 'proceed to kick the shit out of me' with her 'powerful leg.'<sup>28</sup>

A more recent and comedic treatment of Israeli military prowess is Adam Sandler's caricaturist depiction of Israelis in the 2008 movie, *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*. The movie spoofs Israeli toughness and combines various genres such as superhero, kung-fu, and espionage. The main character, the tanned and muscular Dvir Zohan, is equally skilled in martial arts, weaponry, eating (and brushing his teeth with) hummus, and sexually pleasuring elderly women. Yet that super-macho's dream is to become a hairdresser, or as one of his Israeli expats terms it, 'A hair homo.' In the movie, Israelis and Arabs seem quite similar, enjoy the same types of food and drink, and even agree that 'we do look alike.' As Zohan's love affair with his Palestinian boss emerges, America turns out to be the only place in which not only will the Middle-Eastern conflict be solved, but also as the only place where a macho Israeli can pursue his real passion.<sup>29</sup>

If Israeli toughness, macho manliness, and directness are still quite flattering in *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*, other portrayals of Israelis are less positive. Israeli characters who are rude, pushy,

28 Paul Breines, *Tough Jews: Political Fantasies and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry*, Basic Books, New York 1990, pp. 171-230 (women such as Naomi are depicted on pp. 201-206); Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, Random House, New York 1969, pp. 258, 264-270; Menachem Feuer, 'The Schlemiel and the Sabra or Portnoy's Final Complaint', *Schlemiel Theory*, 16.4.2013, <https://schlemieltheory.com/2013/04/16/the-schlemiel-and-the-sabra-or-portnoys-final-complaint/> (retrieved: 18.3.2018); Emily Miller Budick, 'Roth and Israel', in: Timothy Parrish (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 68-81.

29 Vincent Brook, 'Boy-Man Schlemiels and Super-Nebishes: Adam Sandler and Ben Stiller', in: Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (eds.), *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2013, pp. 176-180, 189; Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 2012, pp. 73, 87, 113-114.

loudmouthed, male chauvinists, and overall unpleasant have made their appearance in American Jewish literature and culture in recent years. One example is the pushy Israeli tour guide, Jakob, whose voice was provided by Sacha Baron Cohen, and who appeared in *The Simpsons* in a 2010 episode with his ‘shut your face!’ commands to the astonished tourists. Somewhat more offensive Israeli characters were created by one of the *Zohan*’s cowriters and coproducers, comedian and writer Robert Smigel, who is mostly known for numerous recurring sketches and characters on several television shows such as *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*. In 1992, *SNL* aired one of Smigel’s skits entitled, ‘Sabra Price Is Right,’ featuring an Israeli, Uri Shulemson (played by Tom Hanks), who sports a shirt whose upper buttons are left undone, exposing a huge Star-of-David necklace. Sputtering what, in America, passes for an Israeli-accented English, with shouts of ‘ok, ok, ok’ and numerous adjectives of ‘iz good,’ Shulemson invents his own version of ‘The Price Is Right,’ where he tries to sell to the contestants a variety of items at exorbitant prices rather than give them away. Apart from the shouts, pushiness, and dishonesty of Shulemson and his Israeli underlings (played by Sandler and Rob Schneider), there is also racism: upon seeing a Black contestant, Shulemson orders Sandler’s character to ‘watch him!’ Later, Shulemson and his associates try to convince a female contestant to ‘go disco’ with him. Despite his Ashkenazi name, Shulemson and company come across as stereotypical ‘*arsim*, a derogatory slang term in contemporary Hebrew (originally meaning ‘pimps’ in Arabic) which usually describes low-class, *Mizrahi* young men, who are prone to violence, menacing behavior, noise, tacky clothing, and flashy jewelry. The American equivalent would probably be the Italian American Guido.<sup>30</sup>

30 The episode with Jakob appeared in *The Simpsons*, season 21, episode 16, ‘The Greatest Story Ever D’ohed’, directed by Michael Polcino, written by Kevin Curran, aired: 28.3.2010, Fox Network. There are many studies on the representation of *Mizrahim* and ‘*arsim*’ in Israeli popular culture – see Limor Shifman, ‘Humor and Ethnicity on Israeli Television: A Historical Perspective’, in: Eli Lederhendler (ed.), *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World*, Oxford University Press, New

While the *Zohan* and *SNL* skits are lighthearted caricatures of Israelis, other descriptions are damning, and not necessarily due to politics. In a recent novel by American Jewish author Joshua Cohen entitled *Moving Kings* (2017), nearly all of the characters are indeed ‘loathsome,’ as one reviewer aptly pointed out. The Israelis, however, come across as particularly offensive, and most tellingly – they are mostly *Mizrahi*. At one point, Cohen describes a group of fresh IDF draftees as ‘rowdy arsim [sic] – swaggering *Mizrahim*,’ whose families came from, or were ‘tossed out’ of, various Arab countries. Those ‘*arsim* hated the Arabs, but in that special covetous way only a brother hates a brother,’ as they actually ‘fought over who was the most Arab.’ Those soldiers ‘weren’t Jewish, or weren’t exclusively Jewish,’ but rather ‘primarily, Israeli.’ Israelis are Levantine, aggressive, militaristic, and rude, they resemble the Arabs in numerous ways, and they are just ‘not Jewish.’ The character of Uri Dugri (*dugri* is an Arab term for ‘straightforward’) can be seen as just another ‘*ars*, with his violent outbursts and ‘aviator sunglasses tangling with his unibrow’, and when he works out, his ‘compact apeface was drenched to the neckbeard.’<sup>31</sup>

Another portrayal of Israeli aggression and violence, masquerading as political commentary, is Steven Spielberg’s movie, *Munich* (2005). Written by two celebrated American Jewish playwrights and screenwriters, Tony Kushner and Eric Roth, the movie is a moralizing account of the Mossad agents who assassinated those responsible for the massacre of the Israeli team at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

York 2016, pp. 171-188; Ella Shohat, ‘Postscript to Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation’, in: Raz Yosef and Boaz Hagin (eds.), *Deeper than Oblivion: Trauma and Memory in Israeli Cinema*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2013, pp. 21-50. On the stereotype of the Guido, see Donald Tricarico, ‘Guido: Fashioning an Italian American Youth Identity’, *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 19 (1991), pp. 41-66.

- 31 Joshua Cohen, *Moving Kings*, Random House, New York 2017, pp. 45-46, 50-52, 81, 86, 97, 100, 108, 188. See also the raving of King’s daughter, Tammy, against Israel, *ibid.*, pp. 60-61. The reviewer is Zachary Lazar, ‘A Novel of Desperate New Yorkers and Those Who Evict Them’, *The New York Times*, 11.8.2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yacmah5j> (retrieved: 19.2.2019).

As critic Hannah Brown noted, the screenplay keeps a ‘simplistic moral bookkeeping,’ which conveys the message, ‘Killing is wrong, no matter what the motivation, since we’re all human beings,’ and can be easily regarded as ‘an apology for Arab terror groups.’ Apart from the movie’s heavy-handed political point of moral equivalence, however, Israelis come across not just as killers (the Mossad team), but as cold manipulators: the team’s handler, Ephraim (played by Geoffrey Rush), and other higher-ups lie to the men and do not hesitate to threaten them. Toward the end of the movie, there is a scene in which the team’s leader, Avner (played by Eric Bana), is having sex with his wife. The scene is interwoven with another scene, the last stage of the hostage crisis in 1972, when Palestinian terrorists open fire on the Israeli Olympic team. The scenes merge Avner’s sexual climax with the athletes being shot to death. The essence of Israel and Israelis – even as they procreate – is militarism, violence, and death. Israelis are ruthless and have no compunctions about hurting anyone who stands in their way, including fellow Israelis.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar vein, the web-based television series, *Transparent*, created by director and writer Jill Soloway, features strong criticism of Israel’s rule over the Palestinians. In its fourth season (2017), the show romanticizes Palestinian activists and their international supporters who reside in an embarrassingly idyllic and bucolic West Bank retreat. But underneath the political rhetoric, there is a whole level of cultural criticism of Israeli rudeness and macho behavior. When Maura and Ali Pfefferman arrive in Israel and kiss the ground, they are immediately shoved aside by two passing Haredi men who offer no apology. When the American Pfeffermans meet their Israeli family members, the latter speak in Hebrew among themselves

32 Abrams, *New Jew in Film*, pp. 110-112. The critic is Hannah Brown, ‘Munich: Portentous and Preachy’, <https://tinyurl.com/y4a2g7uv> (retrieved: 19.2.2019). Tony Kushner was aware of such criticism – see his article, ‘Defending “Munich” to My Mishpocheh’, *Los Angeles Times*, 22.1.2006. Kushner has been very critical of Israel, and in a 2016 interview he defined himself as a non-Zionist, but added, ‘I’m not an anti-Zionist, I’m a diasporan [sic] Jew’.

about their non-comprehending and puzzled American relatives (in their presence) and take their time translating what they said into English. When the Pfeffermans are on a tour of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, they are accompanied by Nitzan, a security guard hired to protect the family. The gun-toting macho Nitzan offers to let one of the American characters, Josh Pfefferman, hold his loaded gun. Later, Nitzan takes Josh to the desert to teach him how to shoot. When Josh recoils at the sound of the gun Nitzan is firing, Nitzan responds, ‘Dude, you have too much estrogen around you.’<sup>33</sup>

### **Israel as an American Jewish Problem**

While these shows/films are cultural representations rather than an accurate gauge of American Jewish public opinion, such descriptions of Israelis and the abovementioned bouts of rivalry between Israel and American Jewry are not necessarily due to opposing political or ideological views. Both American Jews and Israel see themselves as leaders of the Jewish world, and both populations live in a country that they think of as the Promised Land. In a sense, the Zionist idea, and later the State of Israel, created a problem for many American Jews, who thought of themselves as living in the new Zion rather than in exile. In its early years, Israel was indeed a small, poor, and embattled country, a haven for persecuted Jews from around the

33 The Haredi men are in *Transparent*, Season 4, episode 3, ‘Pinkwashing Machine’, directed by Allison Liddi-Brown, written by Jill Soloway and Our Lady J, aired: 22.9.2017, Amazon. The Israeli and American Pfeffermans meet in *Transparent*, Season 4, episode 6, ‘I Never Promised You a Promised Land’, directed by Jim Frohna, written by Jill Soloway and Bridget Bedard, aired: 22.9.2017, Amazon. Nitzan and Josh’s gun lesson is from *Transparent*, Season 4, episode 8, ‘Desert Eagle’, directed by Andrea Arnold, written by Jill Soloway and Ethan Kuperberg, aired: 22.9.2017, Amazon. Interview with Mark Ivanir, who plays Nitzan, is from Jessica Steinberg, “‘Transparent’s” rollicking Israel ride is spot on, even if largely filmed in LA”, *The Times of Israel*, 30.9.2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y4uv5zgs> (retrieved: 29.12.2019). For another review of the show, see Spencer Kornhaber, ‘*Transparent* Tackles Israel-Palestine, and Other Boundary Issues’, *The Atlantic*, 22.9.2017.

world. As the largest and strongest Jewish community in the world, American Jews took it upon themselves to assist their less fortunate brethren in Israel, believing they were a guarantee of Israel's very existence. Israeli military competence and victories were welcomed with awe and joy, especially after 1967, but the basic dynamic between American Jews and Israel did not change: American Jews remained the benefactors, the senior Jewish community, and the leaders of world Jewry. Unquestionably, the assistance of American Jewry helped Israel immensely, both economically and politically, yet it was also accompanied by a certain degree of paternalism. Furthermore, as Israeli politician and journalist Eliezer Livne observed as early as 1967, for many American Jews, charity for 'the Jewish needy' of Israel is a relatively convenient way of maintaining their Jewishness, as it requires them to change nothing about their personal life. In addition, since Israel is 'chronically in need,' aiding it reaffirmed the superiority and seniority of American Jewry.<sup>34</sup>

Things began to change as Israel's economic and demographic growth accelerated. In contrast to 1948, when there were about 650,000 Jews in Israel and more than 4.5 million in the United States, by 2000, there were about 5 million Jews in Israel and about 6.1 million in the United States. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is quite possible that the Jewish population of Israel exceeded that of the United States. No less important were the huge waves of Jewish migration from the Former Soviet Union to Israel in the 1990s, and Israel's rapid economic growth in that and the following decades, coupled with the country's booming high-tech sector. While the Israeli Jewish population has been expanding rapidly, American Jewry has been shrinking as the rate of intermarriage soars. An

34 Eliezer Livne, *American Jewry: A Challenge for Israel*, Massada, Ramat Gan 1967, pp. 56, 65-66 [Hebrew]. See also, Caroline Glick, 'Israel Has Become the Leader of the Jewish World, and It Is Difficult for American Jews to Accept It', *Ma'ariv*, 1.12.2017, <http://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/Article-612114> (retrieved: 11.3.2018) [Hebrew]. Whereas Daniel Gordis correctly identifies many of the reasons for the friction and tension between American Jews and Israel, he still focuses on political and religious reasons, rather than cultural – *We Stand Divided*, pp. 7-8, 35-36, 86-87.

often-quoted 2013 study by the Pew Research Center concluded that among Jews who got married since 2000, nearly six-in-ten have a non-Jewish spouse, compared to only four-in-ten in the 1980s and just 17% in the 1970s.<sup>35</sup>

To use Beinart's metaphor, it seems that young American Jews check not only their Zionism at the door, but their Jewishness as well, something that he acknowledged. American Jews believe that being Jewish means 'leading an ethical/moral life' (69%), or 'working for justice/equality' (56%), more so than 'caring about Israel' (43%) or 'being part of a Jewish community' (28%). Indeed, the bulk of American Jews have conveniently reinterpreted Judaism in universalist terms, and as Liebman and Cohen demonstrated three decades ago, they left 'too little of what is especially Jewish.'<sup>36</sup> These are internal developments within American Jewry that have little to do with Israeli policies or the Israeli-Arab conflict. American Jewish support for Israel did not peak when Israel was still within

35 Israeli and American Jewish population estimates are from Central Bureau of Statistics (retrieved: 20.3.2018); 'Jewish Population in the United States', *American Jewish Year Book*, 102 (2002), p. 255; and 'World Jewish Population', *ibid.*, p. 615. Data on Israeli economic growth is from Paul Rivlin, *The Israeli Economy from the Foundation of the State through the 21st Century*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2011, pp. 69-72. Glick, 'Israel Has Become'. The Pew study's data is from *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Overview*, Pew Research Center, Washington DC. 1.10.2013, p. 9.

36 Beinart, *Crisis of Zionism*, p. 169. The response data are from *Portrait of Jewish Americans*, p. 14. For a comment on that data, see Jonathan Bronitsky, 'Jewish Americans Don't Vote with Israel in Mind, They Vote as Liberals', *Los Angeles Times*, 28.10.2016; Liebman and Cohen, *Two Worlds*, pp. 174-175; Gordis, *We Stand Divided*, chapter 3. On American Jewish liberalism, see Michael Walzer, 'Liberalism and the Jews: Historical Affinities, Contemporary Necessities', in: Peter Y. Medding (ed.), *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 11 (1995), pp. 3-10; William Spinrad, 'Explaining American-Jewish Liberalism: Another Attempt', *Contemporary Jewry*, 11 (1990), pp. 107-119; Irving Kristol, 'The Liberal Tradition of American Jews', in: Seymour Martin Lipset (ed.), *American Pluralism and the Jewish Community*, Transaction, New Brunswick, NJ 1990, pp. 109-116.

its pre-1967 borders. Israel could withdraw to the June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1967 borders (or even better, to the UN 1947 partition plan borders), yet that would have nothing to do with the intermarriage rate among young American Jews or their lack of interest in identifying as Jews.

The parallel processes of Israel's demographic growth and American Jewry's shrinking numbers (apart from Orthodox Jews) might establish the Jewish state as the leader of the Jewish world. That would be a novel situation, which many American Jews would find hard to accept. The scenario clashes with their concept of American Jewry as the senior partner, thriving in the new Promised Land. Such cognitive dissonance might be at the root of some of the recent attacks against Israel in the name of (mostly imagined and a-historical) Jewish values. Jesse Alexander Myerson, a young Jewish supporter of Senator Bernie Sanders's presidential bid, asserted in 2016 that, 'My generation is already primed to abandon Zionism ... The number of anti-occupation, non-Zionist, and anti-Zionist Jewish youth initiatives gives a glimpse of what Jews without Israel might look like.' A more mainstream critique of Israel was voiced in 2012 by the president of the Union of Reform Judaism, Rick Jacobs, who said, 'North American Jews don't see an Israel that reflects their core values.' The question then arises as to when most American Jews did actually identify with Israel's core values and why it is that Israel needs to reform in order to align with the values of people who are not its citizens. As one journalist noted in 2013, when American Jewish groups describe what Israel is 'expected' to do, they sound 'like a father talking to his son.'<sup>37</sup> Such paternalism or attempts to forge Jewish identity based on anti-Zionism or hostility to Israel are hardly new; rather than ascribe them purely to political disagreement, it is important to see how

37 Jesse Alexander Myerson, 'The Heresy and Evangelism of Bernie Sanders', *Village Voice*, 29.3.2016. Jacobs is quoted in Chemi Shalev, 'Reform Rabbi Rick Jacobs: American Jews Are "Afraid" to Talk About Israel', *Haaretz*, 13.11.2012, <https://tinyurl.com/y26radwa> (retrieved: 21.3.2018). See also Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe*, p. 176. The journalist is Seth J. Frantzman, 'Terra Incognita: American-Jewish-Israeli Disconnect', *Jerusalem Post*, 27.8.2013.



older patterns of rivalry and cultural differences have existed for decades prior to the recent disharmony.

In a historical 1987 novel titled *Gone to Soldiers*, the author, Marge Piercy, juxtaposes Israeli and American Jewish perspectives: an Israeli character sees danger as a given, 'Like the air,' while her American cousin thinks, 'Reality was America, college, a good job.' Those incongruent points of view echo in a seminal study by historian Arthur A. Goren, of the failed attempt to create a *Kehillah* [Jewish community] in early-20<sup>th</sup> century New York City. Goren argued that most American Jews 'remained interested in the minimum of separation from the larger society necessary to maintain their Jewish identity.' The integrationist/assimilationist drive that Goren identified is relevant to the attitude of most American Jews towards Israel and Israelis (with some notable exceptions). Whereas Israel's effect on American Jewry has been far-reaching, and the political and economic assistance of American Jews to the Jewish state has been immensely important, one cannot overlook the patterns of rivalry, disagreement, and deep differences that are also at play. Their own internal diversity notwithstanding, the world's two largest Jewish populations are separated by language, culture, mentality, and the challenges they face. The representations of Israelis as aggressive, rude, Levantine, and as some kind of Jewish Guidos are merely one facet of the disparity between American Jews and Israelis.<sup>38</sup>

The different languages and cultures, together with the portrayal of Israelis as noisy, rude, and pushy machos, are an indication that for many American Jews, if not most, Israelis serve as a Jewish ethnic 'Other.' In addition to their obnoxious masculinity, Israelis are the somewhat darker-skinned, Arab-like, Middle Eastern cousins, who, in turn, underline not only American Jews' liberal/progressive character, but also their Ashkenazi, and hence European, origin. When in 2018 historian David Biale hailed the advantages

38 Piercy's novel is quoted in Sokoloff, 'Israel in the Jewish American Imagination', p. 370; Arthur A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908-1922*, Columbia University Press, New York 1970, p. 252. Critics who argued that the centrality of Israel weakens American Judaism are quoted in Shapiro, *Time for Healing*, pp. 217-218.

of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews in America, he wrote about the ‘transformation of the Jewish ‘gene pool’ into something more diverse than its Ashkenazi roots.’ This effacement of non-Ashkenazi Jews from the main narrative of American Jewry is neither novel nor coincidental. Biale, as well as the abovementioned examples of Maurice Samuel, *SNL* skits, and Cohen’s *Moving Kings*, demonstrate how American Jews view themselves, and how Israel’s ethnic demography, in which *Mizrahi* Jews today constitute a slim majority, sets it apart as something different.<sup>39</sup>

Combining the opening quote by Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘Many of us American Jews have a hard time with Israelis’ with a quote by a scholar of American Jewish literature, Andrew Furman, that ‘Israel, after all, has emerged as the American Jew’s favorite preoccupation,’ makes it possible to encapsulate the complexity of American Jewish-Israeli relations.<sup>40</sup> The gap between the image of Israel as something abstract and that of actual Israelis, and the conflation of the political and the cultural are still quite prevalent in the ways that American Jews think about and represent Israel and Israelis. Moreover, that gap leads to the broader question of whether the ongoing discussions about Israel enabled American Jews – both Israel’s staunchest supporters and its harshest critics in both mainstream organizations and more marginal groups – to sidestep other real questions that are at the center of Jewish life in America, such as the challenges of building viable communities, intermarriage, and dwindling numbers.

39 Biale is quoted in Gordis, *We Stand Divided*, p. 97 (quotes in the original). On the marginalization of non-Ashkenazi Jews in most American Jewish narratives, see Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*, New York University Press, New York 2009, pp. 188-192. Data on Israeli demography as of 2014 is from ‘Demographics of Israel’, <https://tinyurl.com/y6ohnfb4> (retrieved: 29.12.2019).

40 Furman, *Israel through the Jewish-American Imagination*, p. 18.