

A Community Divided: The "Pro-Israel" Paradigm and American Jewry

By
Mairav Zonszein

Submitted to
Central European University
Nationalism Studies Program

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Advisor: Professor Michael L. Miller

Budapest, Hungary
2010

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One The Birth and Evolution of the “Pro-Israel” Paradigm	6
Chapter Two From Paralysis to Polarization	19
The Campus Wars	26
Chapter Three The Implications of the “Pro-Israel” Trope	34
Conclusion	50
Bibliography	53

Introduction

Judaism for me is a sensibility of collective self-questioning and uncomfortable truth-telling: the *dafka*-like quality of awkwardness and dissent for which we were once known. It is not enough to stand at a tangent to other peoples' conventions; we should also be the most unforgiving critics of our own. I feel a debt of responsibility to this past. It is why I am Jewish.¹

For me, the Jew that I am, Jerusalem is above politics.²

The organized American Jewish community today is arguably in its most dynamic and divisive period vis-à-vis Israel than any other time in the last sixty-two years. How Israel is portrayed, related to and discussed is increasingly the focus of debates and, at times, acrid confrontations between various American Jewish groups and individuals. "[T]here is hardly a Jewish dinner table left in this country--or indeed in Europe and much of Israel--in which there is not enormous disagreement about the status of the occupation, Israeli military aggression and the future of Zionism, binationalism and citizenship in the lands called Israel and Palestine."³ Although the community has never devoid of argument and discord on Israel, for decades the status quo has been that Israel is the center of world Jewry and as such, part of being a Jew in America is having an affinity or allegiance to Israel. "Central to an understanding of American Jewish identity is this idea of being pro-Israel."⁴ While scholars differs on how various events in the state's existence have affected the American Jewish community, most would agree that the very question of the relation – if and how concern for

¹ Tony Judt. "Toni." *The New York Review of Books*. April 19, 2010.

² Elie Wiesel. "For Jerusalem." Ad published in *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* on April 16, 2010 and in *The New York Times* on April 18, 2010. Available online: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/137057>

³ Judith Butler. "You Will Not Be Alone." *The Nation*. April 13, 2010.

⁴ Marla Brettschneider. *Cornerstones of Peace: Jewish Identity Politics and Democratic Theory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996, 1.

Israel's well-being is expressed – remains integral to the American Jewish communal agenda in its effort to define and maintain Jewish identity.

While it is not always clear exactly what it means, the term “pro-Israel” (and consequently its inverse, “anti-Israel”) has become an increasingly popular adjective in the United States for describing a group or individual's political orientation regarding Israel. It is further not clear who first coined the term or where it originated, however a cursory look at The New York Times archive shows that in the last decade the term has been used nearly as many times as the previous two decades combined.⁵ How do organizations define what it means to be “pro-Israel?” What are the boundaries and who defines them? How has this changed over the course of Israel's history? Who or what is outside the “pro-Israel” paradigm and why? Why has it become so difficult and contentious to discuss Israel in the community and why does whether or not one identifies or is recognized as “pro-Israel” seem so critical? Finally, how does the notion of being “pro-Israel” shape the way the community understands their identity as Jews? By examining the current American Jewish discourse on Israel, this paper explores how the concept of “pro-Israelism” is defined, used and manipulated by the community and what ramifications this has for how American Jews relate to Israel.⁶

This paper argues that for most of Israel's existence, and primarily since 1967, American Jewish organizations' positioning regarding the country has been in a state of paralysis. This paralysis should not be understood as a period with no movement, developments or conflicts in the community's dynamics vis-à-vis Israel. “Despite the

⁵ From 1981-2000 the term “pro-Israel” was mentioned in 336 different articles, compared with 323 from 2000 to the present.

⁶ Throughout this paper, use of the term “community” refers to formal expressions by organizations and public figures and does not purport to reflect an actual majority or representative public opinion in the American Jewish population, as it is clear there are always discrepancies between organizational stances, the press and the opinions of individuals. Furthermore, the term “establishment” is used interchangeably with community to connote those voices that are vocal in public circles and the press.

intensely entrenched and monolithic public definition of American Jewish pro-Israel identity, there has always been an internal loyal opposition.”⁷ Rather, paralysis is meant to characterize a *hegemonic* system (to adopt the Gramscian notion of hegemony), in which a dominant idea assumes a discursive position of power in society, but is inherently filled with contradictions and discord and thus never actually stagnant. A basic theoretical concept of how hegemonies are formed and function provide a framework for which to understand the “pro-Israel” paradigm.

The hegemonic subject, as the subject of any articulatory practice, must be partially exterior to what it articulates – otherwise, there would not be any articulation at all... Thus, the two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them. Only the presence of a vast area of floating elements and the possibility of their articulation to opposite camps – which implies a constant redefinition of the latter – is what constitutes the terrain permitting us to define a practice as hegemonic.⁸

The “pro-Israel” hegemony emerged as a result of numerous factors rooted in the history of America-Israel relations and the precedent set by a narrow section of leadership in the years following Israel’s establishment and especially in the aftermath of the Six-Day War. However, in recent years this paralysis has been challenged by political developments and a new generation of fragmented and critical approaches to Israel that constitute a shift to a state of polarization that is creating and revealing new divisions and subdivisions in the community’s relation to Israel.

There are divides not only among those groups that identify as “pro-Israel” but also between them and groups outside the “pro-Israel” paradigm. This is because after many years of growing independence, American Jewish groups across the spectrum now feel more at

⁷ Brettschneider (1996), 1.

⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso Books, 2001, 135-6.

ease than ever in deviating from the Israeli government party line. As Steven Rosenthal pointed out in 2003: “For even the most supportive American Jews, standing with the Israeli government no longer meant unquestioning acceptance of its policies.”⁹ As increasing amounts of diverse and nuanced stances emerge, it is no longer as easy to classify certain views or ideas as “pro-Israel.” The concept of “pro-Israelism” has expanded and changed to the point where the term itself is no longer adequate or clear for describing American Jewry’s changing relation to Israel. Its use by organizations and the media has become a highly discursive matter that demands further investigation.

By examining the contours of dialogue on Israel within the organized American Jewish community, this paper hopes to provide an analytical framework with which to understand the identity politics inherent in the American Jewish encounter with Israel. While many studies have focused on various aspects of the community’s relation to Israel, (i.e. institutional structure, religious definitions, philanthropy, alienation from Israel, Israel tourism, etc.) this study focuses on the politically divisive impact Israel has on American Jewish discourse. “Few studies have explored the circumstances under which diaspora political activity becomes partisan and plural – in which diaspora become sites for waging homeland political struggles.”¹⁰ Over the last decade, American Jewish community, through its organizations, media and blogs, has become a battle ground for highly charged polemics on Israeli politics and policies that has not been sufficiently researched in academia. Although this study obviously touches on the Israeli perspective as well as the contours of America-Israel relations and American foreign policy in the Middle East, it is largely limited to American Jewish responses to Israel and its internal debate.

⁹ Steven Rosenthal. *Irreconcilable Differences: The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001, 208.

¹⁰ Theodore Sasson. “Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement: American Jews’ Changing Relationship to Israel,” *Israel Studies* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 2.

The first chapter will outline the historical impact of Israel's establishment on the American Jewish community and the subsequent evolution of the "pro-Israel" paradigm. Chapter two describes how discussion of Israel has changed, radicalized and polarized in recent years. The final chapter will analyze how the concept of "pro-Israel" has framed the debate and what it indicates about the divisions within the Jewish community regarding the formulation and assertion of Jewish identity.¹¹

¹¹ The term "identity" is used in this paper to connote a basic understanding of the self-identification of American Jews as Jewish and American, as it is expressed in the sources, and does not delve into the complexities of the concept. For a broader discussion of "identity," see: Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond Identity," in *Ethnicity Without Groups*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004, ch. 2.

Chapter One | The Birth and Evolution of the “Pro-Israel” Paradigm

Classical Zionism asserted that it understood and could tame anti-Semitism; that it could either sustain or make an end of the Diaspora; and that at the very least, it would create in Israel a normal nation among the nations. As a matter of fact, all of these propositions have been disproved by history. Since it is impolitic to say such things out loud, Zionist discussion has been sterile in recent years.¹²

The advent of Zionism and its manifestation in the State of Israel changed the trajectory of Jewish history forever. Although the Zionist movement intended to unite world Jewry, the birth of Israel in fact carved out a rigid divide between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry. American Jewry, constituting the largest Jewish community in the world in the aftermath of the Holocaust, was instantly forced to define its relations to the self-proclaimed Jewish nation-state. How would Israel and its policies affect American Jews and how would American Jewish organizations relate to Israel? Zionism introduced a secular form of Jewish nationalist identity that took root in Palestine in the late nineteenth century. Zionist ideology, as most commonly associated with Theodor Herzl, was to provide Jews with a secure nation-state that could combat the long history of discrimination against them and dispel the notion that Jews are abnormal and cannot integrate anywhere. Zionism thus called for the ingathering of world Jewry in Palestine, the historic Land of Israel, based on the assertion that Jews were nowhere safe in the world if not in their own sovereign state, created for and by them. It was paradoxically both an assertion of the normalcy of Jews and at the same time, an admittance that Jews must carve out their own place in the world since they could not be accepted anywhere else.

When David Ben-Gurion declared Israel the singular homeland of the Jewish people in

¹² Arthur Hertzberg. *Being Jewish in America: The Modern Experience*. New York: Schocken Books, 1979, 268.

Tel Aviv on May 14, 1948, a new reality instantly imposed itself on Jews all over the world. Regardless of one's personal identification as a Jew or stance on Zionism, the State of Israel had assumed a role of authority as the self-proclaimed homeland of the Jewish people. Jews from around the world were encouraged to contemplate their identity in a new manner and leave their native lands to fulfill the Zionist mission of the ingathering of exiles. At this time, American Jews constituted the largest Jewish community in the world and were quickly integrating into American society and climbing the socioeconomic ladder. "For in a community that was giddy with its unprecedented level of respectability within American society, the drive for integration took precedence over uncomfortable discussions about the nature and content of Jewish identity."¹³

In the United States, American Jews had been acting on behalf of Jews around the world for decades irrespective of Zionism. For example, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) – formed in 1906 to address the threat posed to Jews by Russian pogroms – was the most prestigious communal organization before Israel was founded. It was non-Zionist institution. Its founders saw their Jewishness in narrowly religious terms, and sought to organize nationally in a concerted effort to secure the "civil and religious rights of the Jews in all countries where such rights are denied or endangered."¹⁴ Even Zionist-identified organizations such as Hadassah, founded in 1912 to promote health and social services for Jews in Palestine, did not have an organizational goal of *aliyah* (Zionist immigration). Rather, it saw its Zionism fulfilled by helping European Jews settle in Palestine and by promoting Jewish cultural education in America.¹⁵

¹³ Jack Wertheimer. "Jewish Organizational Life in the United States Since 1945," *American Jewish Year Book* 95 (1995): 22.

¹⁴ Naomi Cohen. *Not Free to Desist*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972, 13.

¹⁵ For more on American Jewish organizational life during the Holocaust, see: Henry Feingold. *Bearing Witness: How America and its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*. New

During the 1940's, despite increasing knowledge of the horrors of Nazism, the AJC openly expressed reservations about the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine due to its concerns about the charge of dual loyalty in the US and the implications of establishing a Jewish state in an Arab-dominated region. Joseph M. Proskauer – elected president of the AJC in 1943 and known for his assimilationist anti-Zionist position – viewed the idea of Israel as a “Jewish catastrophe.”¹⁶ Even among prominent American Zionists such Judah Magnes, Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, there were divergent and conflicting notions of what a future Jewish state should look like and what role American Jews should play in it. “The history of American Jewry is replete with attempts to bring organizational unity out of the chaos, with struggles for power between contending organizations, and with some remarkable, even heroic, examples of concerted action to support and protect Jews at home and abroad.”¹⁷

However, the practical and humanitarian need to provide a haven for European Jewry led the majority of American Jewish organizations to ultimately adopt the tenets of the Biltmore Program in May of 1942 calling for unrestricted Jewish immigration to Palestine. “After decades of resistance, American Jewry seemed ready to follow Zionist leadership during the Holocaust.”¹⁸ This was not, however, indicative of a general espousal of Zionism, but rather an organized response to the threat posed to European Jewry. “In America, Zionism begun as a tiny fringe group. Its main appeal, as a solution to the crisis for antisemitism, meant little to American Jews; they had solved their problems by coming

York: Syracuse University Press, 1995; Aaron Berman. *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990.

¹⁶ Zvi Ganin. *An Uneasy Relationship: American Jewish Leadership and Israel, 1948-1957*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005, 4.

¹⁷ Wertheimer (1995), 6.

¹⁸ Feingold (1995), 220.

here.”¹⁹ During this period, American Jews were torn between their vulnerable status in America and their allegiance to fellow Jews abroad.

Once the war ended and Israel became a de facto state, American Jewry had no choice but to galvanize a position on Israel. Although American Jews were not making *aliyah* and there was lack of consensus regarding how to interact with the nascent state, there did emerge what Jack Wertheimer calls a “functional consensus” regarding Israel. In the aftermath of WWII and the advent of the Cold War, American Jews saw their country’s role as a guardian of democracy in the world and a representative of liberalism and equality. As such, support of Israel was seen as consonant with American values and policies, reminiscent of Louis Brandeis equation of American and Zionist values a few decades back.²⁰

Jewish needs both at home and abroad were therefore explained in universal terms: Israel deserved support because it embodied what was best in America, rather than because it was a separate country with special needs; anti-Semitism was fought not as an attack upon Jews but as a symptom of other prejudices that were a blight on America. Couched in these terms, the defense of Jewish interests facilitated integration in America, rather than highlighting Jewish particularism.”²¹

Throughout the 1950’s the American Jewish establishment found ways to reconcile its parallel goals of strengthening its status in America, maintaining a distinct Jewish identity and supporting Israel. The community was building channels of philanthropic and political support as it concomitantly asserted its rightful place in American society. The Ben-Gurion-Blaustein agreement of 1950 – in which AJC director Jacob Blaustein rejected the Zionist claim that Diaspora Jewry was in exile and rejected Ben-Gurion’s campaign for mass immigration – delineated some clear boundaries between what American Jews were willing

¹⁹ J.J. Goldberg. *Jewish Power*. New York: Basic Books, 1996, 151.

²⁰ For Brandeis, the progressive and democratic ideals of America were mirrored in Zionist ideology. See: Rosenthal (2001), 13-15.

²¹ Wertheimer (1995), 11-12.

to do and what Israel could expect.²² However, it also solidified a space in which a strong transnational partnership could be forged, as Israeli leaders realized that they could benefit from American Jewish support even if they were not Zionists. “What Ben-Gurion envisaged as a precondition for permanent partnership was a new universal Jewish ideology of pro-Israelism, which would replace traditional Zionism.”²³ This was thus the period in which the concept of “pro-Israelism” came about as a central communal agenda.

Most American Jews eschewed the tenets of classical Zionism in favor of a more emotional identification with the existence of Israel, both as a symbol of the survival and victory of Jews and as a center of Jewish identity and authority...The phenomenon of American Jewry’s emotional identification with and support for Israel is now commonly referred to as pro-Israelism, as distinct from Zionism.²⁴

It in turn became clear that there was a need to create overarching bodies that could convey American Jewish interests in a uniform way, not just to Israel, but also to the US government and its Middle East policymakers. This was the backdrop for the establishment of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the America Israel Public Affairs Committee in the 1950’s. The Conference’s founding mission was “to express American Jewry’s consensus of support for Israel,” while AIPAC emerged out of a need to petition the US government on behalf of Israeli military, political and financial needs.²⁵ Isaiah L. (Si) Kenan, at the request of then Israel ambassador to the UN Abba Eban, left his post as Eban’s press secretary and founded the American Zionist Council of Public Affairs in 1954 whose name was changed five years later to the America Israel Public Affairs

²² See Ganin (2005), 81-104.

²³ Ibid, 73.

²⁴ Lee O’Brien. *American Jewish Organizations & Israel*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1986, 9.

²⁵ Goldberg (1996), 153.

Committee, reflecting the fact that the American Jewish establishment was promoting Israel, not Zionism.²⁶

At the time, Israel was a fledgling country with serious financial hardships due to massive waves of immigration and a still developing economy. Furthermore, the US government was not providing Israel with aid, as it was not yet seen as a strategic ally. Israel was considered a quasi-socialist state and American foreign policy was more interested in building allies with Arab countries against the Soviet Union. AIPAC and the Conference thus saw as their mission to mobilize the US behind Israel on behalf of the community.

This need became a reality following Israel's surprising victory in the Six-Day War, which had a powerful and complex effect on American Jewry. On the one hand, it was a proud and ecstatic moment celebrating Israel's military prowess and endurance against all odds. On the other hand it caused a huge scare in the community, which had mobilized frantically in the weeks leading up to the war out of a fear that Israel's existence was in jeopardy. "Amid their exhilaration, Jewish leaders and activists were left with an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability and isolation."²⁷ Leading American Jewish organizations that had been developing over nearly two decades on behalf of Israel were catapulted into a new role with an invigorated mission of protecting and defending Israel.

The world after 1967 was regarded as a hostile place, divided between the Jews' friends and their enemies. The values that for so long had characterized American Jewry – equality, tolerance and social justice – became suspect in New Jewish leadership circles. A new set of basic values came to replace them: loyalty to the Jewish people, commitment to its survival and hostility towards its enemies.²⁸

²⁶ For more on establishment of AIPAC, see: O'Brien (1986), 158.

²⁷ Goldberg (1996), 137.

²⁸ Ibid, 162.

Goldberg argues that the most substantial impact of the Six-Day War was that three marginal sectors had taken the lead on speaking for the entire community in the name of antisemitism, disaffection with liberalism and support for Israel. “A small minority of Jews had been allowed to take over the Jewish organizational infrastructure and turn it into an instrument of defensive nationalism.”²⁹ These were the Orthodox, the secular nationalist Zionists and the neoconservatives.³⁰

American Jews were much more comfortable with expressing their Jewish identity in the 1960’s, as they had become highly affluent, were moving to the suburbs and were increasingly getting high-level jobs in government, academia and the press. Furthermore, the Six-Day War ushered in a messianic component to the Jewish connection to Israel, as Israel’s victory was seen as miraculous and reflective of God’s will that Jews preside over “Greater Israel.” Furthermore, now that Israel proved itself as a regional power, AIPAC had more credibility and material with which to convince the US government that Israel is as a strategic asset. Lastly, Holocaust education and awareness emerged during this period for the first time in America, after years in which American Jews avoided the topic. “Perceptions and uses of the Holocaust changed in the 1960’s...By 1981, the Holocaust was routinely used to engender feelings of guilt, sympathy and support of Israel, to raise money and to deflect criticism of Israel and of Jews.”³¹ All these factors contributed to the ease and ability with which American Jewish organizations were able to mobilize the community behind a staunchly “pro-Israel” approach.

²⁹ Ibid, 149.

³⁰ The Neoconservative movement, which was catapulted into the limelight during the presidency of George W. Bush, is attributed with equating America’s war on terror with Israel’s war with the Palestinians. See Michael Thomas. *American Policy Toward Israel*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 178-80.

³¹ Ibid, 32-33.

Over the years of Israel's statehood, beginning in the early Labor-dominated period and particularly since 1967, an unstated yet very specific understanding of being pro-Israel emerged in the United States. As an aspect of communal responsibility, the American Jewish community has been expected to be pro-Israel by acting as defender of the Zionist idea by uncritically supporting, promoting, and defending the Israeli government."³²

Since Israel was seen as a vulnerable haven for beleaguered Jews and an upholder of democracy and liberalism in the face of tremendous hardship, many American Jews found that showing support for Israel was the most natural way of expressing their Jewish identity.

The situation changed in 1977, when, after 29 years of Labor dominance, Menachem Begin and his Likud party were elected to power and introduced a militant and conservative approach that was counterintuitive to the American Jewish vision of Israel as a besieged, defensive country. During Begin's rule, Israel bombed the nuclear reactor in Iraq, entered a bloody war in Lebanon (where the deadliest attack on American soldiers overseas since WWII took place, as well as the Sabra and Shatila massacre, which was the primary catalyst for the founding of Peace Now in Israel and later the US) and annexed the Golan Heights. All these events led many American Jews to question the equation of American and Israeli interests and the dominant role that unequivocal support for Israel had been playing in their life

By the 1980s, American Jews had an identity crisis. It had long been accepted in the Jewish community that an open, compassionate and tolerant society, one that protected freedom of expression and religion and welcomed diversity, would be the best guarantee of safety for American Jews. Jewish leaders fought for civil rights as an expression of that conviction. The subsidence of feelings of oppression or exclusion combined with secularization and intermarriage to generate anxiety among

³² Brettschneider (1996), 1.

Jewish leaders about the loss of a separate Jewish identity. Jewish identity and leadership were increasingly measured by support for Israel. Most American Jews had felt they could take pride in the Jewish state, and contribute to its security through financial and political support, without compromising their beliefs. So long as the founding myths of Israel were undisturbed, governments of Israel were led by social democrats, and Israelis were seen as cultural siblings and allies against the West's enemies, no cognitive dissonance was generated by defining oneself as an American Jew, a liberal and a strong supporter of the government of Israel.³³

This public questioning of Israeli policies and limits of dissent were already becoming evident a few years earlier, following the establishment of Breira (alternative, and choice, in Hebrew). Breira emerged with the specific mission of openly criticizing Israeli policies in the territories occupied in the Six-Day War. Its founding in 1973– and subsequent demise only four years later – is evidence of the fact that a powerful and widely accepted “pro-Israel” paradigm had taken hold in the American Jewish establishment that was intolerant of critical voices. “Breira raised the hackles of organized American Jewry because it directly challenged the legitimacy of established organizations and leaders within the American Jewish community, charging them with muzzling honest debate.”³⁴ In its effort to mobilize the community behind a common purpose and to fulfill the goal of providing assistance to Israel, the establishment's characteristically voluntary, decentralized and liberal character was compromised by a dominant agenda that did not leave space for alternatives.

The right of Jews to dissent from Israeli policy is the most sordidly painful issue to arise in Jewish community life in the last generation. Paradoxically, for a group that prides itself on feisty independence, the Jewish community came down solidly against its own members' freedom of expression. The full weight of community wrath was brought down firmly on a few who tried to speak their own minds.³⁵

³³ Thomas (2007), 106-7.

³⁴ Wertheimer (1995), 40.

³⁵ Goldberg (1996), 206.

It was during this period that splits within the community became evident and the very concept of the discourse on Israel became a focal point for organizations. “Indeed, it was in the late 1980’s that the pattern of automatic Diasporic support for Israel began to erode.”³⁶

Breira forced the American Jewish establishment to confront the question of how to deal with voices that are openly critical of Israel and that therefore challenge the notion that there is American Jewish consensus on Israel.

This was the first time that the concept of being “pro-Israel” came to the fore and spawned the creation of organizations that sparred over competing notions of what it meant. Organizations such as Americans for a Safe Israel and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs considered open critics of Israel to be enemies and traitors, while rival organizations such as Tikkun, Israel Policy Forum and Americans for Peace Now tried to present alternative understandings of how to ensure Israeli security that promoted the peace process. “Rounding out the pro-Israel advocacy groups are a relatively new breed of organizations created since the early 1980s with the avowed aim of offering American Jews ‘alternative voices to the large, mainstream organizations,’ voices that specifically speak for Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation.”³⁷ AIPAC’s decision to unconditionally back Israel under Begin was monumental in American Jewish life because it set the precedent for the lobby’s reluctance to ever go against Israeli governmental policy, which meant limiting its ability to have a critical voice. “By backing Begin, AIPAC was forced to count itself out of the most important issues concerning Israel for Diaspora Jews – whether Israel would annex the West Bank and Gaza and risk the democratic and Jewish character of the state.”³⁸

³⁶ Yossi Shain. “American Jews and the Construction of Israel’s Jewish Identity,” *Diaspora* 9, no. 2 (2000): 186.

³⁷ Wertheimer (1995), 57.

³⁸ Edward Tivnan. *The Lobby*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, 176.

It also began publishing pamphlets defining what it considered to be “anti-Israel” rhetoric and tried to dictate the debate on Israel.³⁹

Despite the growing discomfort and confusion within American Jewry over how to relate to certain Israeli policies, no organization or group was powerful enough to take on AIPAC, which by then had honed the ability to dictate the mechanisms of support for Israel in both American Jewish life and the US government. “The reality of Jewish politics in the 1980’s is that on all issues relating to Israel, what AIPAC says goes.”⁴⁰ This was due to a combination of factors, most famously the 1981 sale of AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) by the US government to Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that AIPAC failed to thwart the sale, it is often marked as the event that proved AIPAC’s power to confront the US government in the name of Israel and on behalf of the community. What started out as a one-man show became, by the 1980’s, a strong independent organization taking on the US government, with no effective opposition in the Jewish community or in congress. “In the mid 1950’s the pro-Israel lobby had been created to insure the goal of continued U.S support of Israel; three decades later, the game of lobbying itself, initially a means to an end, seemed to have become the end.”⁴¹ AIPAC’s increasing ability to articulate support for Israel in Washington gave American Jews something successful and concrete to rally around. It allowed them to reconcile their assimilation in America with their allegiance to Israel.

In America, Zionism has contributed not to the discomfort of Jews in the Diaspora, but rather to the acceptance of themselves and their acceptance by others. It has provided the Jews of America with a set of mitzvot, the labors for Israel. The only offense for which Jews can be “excommunicated” in the US today is not to participate in those efforts. Inter-marriage, ignorance in the Jewish heritage, or lack of faith do not

³⁹ See: Steven J. Rosen and Amy Kaufman Goott. *The Campaign to Discredit Israel*. Washington, DC: AIPAC, 1983.

⁴⁰ Tivnan (1987), 162.

⁴¹ Ibid, 148.

keep anyone from leadership in the American Jewish community today. Being against Israel or apathetic in its support does.⁴²

The centrality of Israel in the communal agenda became even more apparent following the publication of a 1990 survey by the National Jewish Population Survey, which found that intermarriage rates among Jews were more than 50%.⁴³ The American Jewish establishment panicked that Jews were slowly disappearing as a distinct ethnic group in America, and thus began to invest in greater efforts to address Jewish survival and continuity. One of the most salient outcomes of this period was the creation of the *Taglit*-Birthright Israel program in 2000. Originally conceived in the 1990's by Israeli politician Yossi Beilin as a way to bring Israeli and Diaspora Jewry closer together, the program sponsors free 10-day trips to Israel for Americans aged 18-26 who have at least one Jewish grandparent. Birthright is funded by a combination of private American Jewish philanthropists, the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government, thereby constituting a genuine transnational partnership. Studies have shown that the trips are effective in strengthening American Jews' connection to Israel and thus subsequently encouraging participants to have a stronger sense of Jewish peoplehood and identity, which includes increased communal involvement and a higher likelihood of marrying a Jew.⁴⁴

The survivalist component of American Jewry's pro-Israelism creates a paradox which protects and perpetuates the pro-Israel status quo, diminishing or even negating the impact of apparently divisive developments...The paradoxical effect is clearest when Israel commits a controversial act: though some Jewish organizations may feel critical, their reaction to the expression of non-Jewish criticism is to view Israel as

⁴² Hertzberg (1979), 271.

⁴³ Wertheimer (1995), 65.

⁴⁴ Leonard Saxe, et al. "Generation Birthright Israel: The Impact of an Israel Experience on Jewish Identity and Choices. *Brandeis University Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies*, 2009, 2. See also: Shaul Kelner. *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage and Israeli Birthright Tourism*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

vulnerable and thus in need of support, despite misgivings.⁴⁵

This brief historical overview has demonstrated that although American Jews have never had a singular voice on Zionism or Israel, the country has become central to American Jewish life as a symbol and a mobilizing force, especially since 1967. Those organizations, such as AIPAC, the Conference and the Anti-Defamation League, that have taken a lead on Israel advocacy, have managed to solidify their place as representatives of Israel to the community and the US government without much interference. They have most aggressively defined and enforced what it means to be loyal to Israel, and few Jews who want to remain engaged and feel a connection to Israel are able or willing to disrupt that. Those that have tried have largely been marginalized and silenced.

⁴⁵ O'Brien (1986), 268.

Chapter Two | From Paralysis to Polarization

The year 2000 ushered in a new phase in American Jewish orientation towards Israel due to various factors in both Israel and the US. The hopeful decade of the 1990's attributed to the Oslo Accords came to an end with the failure of the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000 and the subsequent outbreak of the Second Intifada in September of that year. Because Israel Prime Minister Ehud Barak had offered the Palestinian Authority over 90 percent of the West Bank and autonomy in East Jerusalem, many Israeli and American Jews saw Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's rejection of the offer as clear evidence of the absence of a partner in the peace process. This was also the perspective adopted by much of the mainstream media on this issue in both regions.⁴⁶ The October 2000 killing of 13 Palestinian citizens of Israel by Israeli police and the lynching of two Israeli soldiers by Palestinians in Ramallah in the same month, marked a renewed period of violence that had significant reverberations in the American Jewish community. "The unexpectedness and severity of the crisis stunned American Jews, who rallied to Israel's support with a new unity of purpose."⁴⁷

As Steven Rosenthal has argued, though the American Jewish community is increasingly fragmentary and organizations no longer simply toe the Israeli party-line, the beginning of this decade was a time of cohesive support and concern for Israel akin to that of the post-1967 era, when American Jews felt Israel's existence under grave threat and rallied behind it financially and politically. In times of crisis and greater Israeli casualties, the pattern in the American Jewish community has been to default to defending Israel, despite serious consternation with its policies. "Whether from a rational evaluation of Israel's situation or

⁴⁶ See: Jerome Slater. "Muting the Alarm Over the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The New York Times vs. Haaretz 2000-06," *International Security*, 32, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 84-120.

⁴⁷ Rosenthal (2001), 196.

from emotionalism or tribalism, most American Jews, even if they did not agree with other aspects of Sharon's program, supported Israel with a unity that harkened back to their conduct three decades earlier."⁴⁸

Increasingly violent news and images of suicide bombings in Israel such as the 2001 nightclub bombing and the 2002 Passover bombing, along with the shock of the September 11, 2001 attacks all contributed to the evisceration of hope for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a strengthening of the notion among the most powerful organizations in the American Jewish establishment that they must continue to defend Israel against its enemies in what was now a globalized war.

The trouble is, AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents never fully embraced the Oslo thaw, and once peace talks failed in 2000, they snapped back to their hard-line stance. The combination of Palestinian suicide bombings, the election of Sharon, the ultimate hawk, as prime minister and Bush's with-us-or-against-us 'war on terror' allowed the AIPAC consensus to harden throughout the Jewish establishment.⁴⁹

It is also important to point out the power of the American media in shaping such discourse, as is demonstrated by the argument made by Jerome Slater that US media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general and the New York Times in particular, is largely uncritical of Israel, especially when compared to Israel's own media. "In his memoirs, Max Frankel, the head of the New York Times editorial page in the 1970's and 1980's, admits that his editorials on the Middle East were written 'from a pro-Israel perspective.'"⁵⁰

However, despite the longstanding dominance of veteran groups to garner consensus in Israel's defense regardless of the issue (especially in dramatic times), a closer look demonstrates that in fact the Second Intifada's effect on the American Jewish community was

⁴⁸ Ibid, 211.

⁴⁹ Esther Kaplan. "The Jewish Divide Over Israel." *The Nation*. July 12, 2004.

⁵⁰ Slater (2007), 119.

not unifying or reductive, but rather complex, dialectical and polarizing, marking the start of visible holes in the pro-Israel hegemony that had culminated over two decades. “Despite most American Jews’ act of uniting around the lowest common denominator of fighting terrorism, the community is still divided about what should be done if and when Israel finds a peace partner. When that comes about, the American Jewish community will revert to its now customary mode of fragmentation and public dispute.”⁵¹

By 2003, as the numbers of casualties and mortalities were making headlines, the gap between Palestinian and Israeli tolls and the obvious asymmetry in power began provoking difficult questions about how to get the two sides talking again. This was also the period when the US was embroiled in the aftermath of 9/11 and started a war in Iraq on pretenses that were highly debated. It was in this tense climate that the Middle East became an intense focal point in the media and questions were being raised about how America should deal with terrorism and unconventional forms of conflict. In this context and within the framework of Israel being considered a long-time ally of the US and a “Western” outpost in the Middle East, Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians was catapulted more than ever before into the mainstream debate on American foreign policy and geopolitical matters.

True to form, AIPAC, the ADL and the Conference of Presidents used this time of crisis to emphasize the strategic and ideological symmetry between American and Israel in its war on terror and evade any discussion of continued negotiations with the Palestinians. Despite efforts to convey a united American Jewish voice on the matter, there were clearly dissenters from this view. The Israel Policy Forum, Americans for Peace Now and Brit Tzedek Ve’shalom, among others, were concomitantly working to stress that Israeli responses to Palestinian terror were extreme and that Israel is responsible for continued building of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza that present an obstacle to peace. Within

⁵¹ Rosenthal (2001), 216.

the Jewish community there have thus emerged opposing camps fighting not only over specific policies, but worldviews.

The divide is not only political but existential. AIPAC, the ADL and the Conference of Presidents see Palestinian suicide bombs as part of a global attack on Jews that includes everything from the murder of Daniel Pearl to the spike in anti-Jewish attacks in France; in their view, Palestinian attacks on Israelis are fueled by hatred of Jews. The peace groups believe that Israel, with one of the world's most powerful militaries, can't claim its existence is at risk, and they see in Israel's occupation, separation wall and collective punishment a moral challenge to the Jewish soul. News and commentary circulated by the two camps, even regarding the same events, bear almost no relation to each other.⁵²

Beyond the organizational level, a growing intellectual confrontation with the issue began to surface. In response to an ad placed in the New York Times by numerous prominent American Jews stating unequivocal support for Israel during Operation Defensive Shield in 2002,⁵³ playwright Tony Kushner and journalist Alisa Solomon wrote a letter to a group of American Jewish writers, culminating in a collection of essays.⁵⁴ The book itself is an important polemical collection of writings that provides an intellectual space for American Jews to grapple with varying understandings of Zionism and Israel, something that was discussed profusely upon establishment of the State of Israel but then faded. A portion of the Kushner-Solomon letter is worthy of quoting since it plainly demonstrates the dilemma faced by American Jews who feel their voice is not being heard.

⁵² Esther Kaplan. "The Jewish Divide Over Israel." *The Nation*. July 12, 2004.

⁵³ Operation Defensive Shield is the name of the Israel Defense Forces operation conducted between March 29-April 21, 2002, in response to increased terrorist attacks committed against Israeli citizens. It was the largest Israeli military operation in the West Bank since 1967.

⁵⁴ *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon. New York: Grove Press, 2003.

We believe that there's an urgent need for a book of this kind. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalates, and casualties and violence on both sides mount, a dangerous illusion persists that the Jewish-American community speaks with a single voice, expressing universal, uncritical support for the policies of the Sharon government. A widespread but relatively recent conflation of Judaism and Jewish identity with Israel and Israeli nationalist identity has done a grave disservice to the heterogeneity of Jewish thought, to the centuries-old Jewish traditions of lively dispute and rigorous, unapologetic skeptical inquiry. As a consequence of this artificial flattening and deadening of discourse, enforced by rage and even violence, the vital connection between Jewish culture and the struggle for social and economic justice is coming apart.⁵⁵

As has been demonstrated, the insistence that the American Jewish community does not speak with one voice is not a new notion. Neither is the disputing of Israeli governmental policies. However, if we compare the rhetoric of this letter to the famous "Letter of Forty-One" written by American Jewish leaders in 1989 addressed to then Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir, there are some obvious similarities but also significant differences:

Please do not mistake courtesy for consensus, or applause for endorsement of all the policies you pursue. Mr. Prime Minister, we understand the limits of our role. Neither American Jewry, nor the U.S. government can impose a solution or a process on you and the Israeli people. Only the Israeli people and their democratically-elected government can make final judgments on these matters. But we owe you more than courtesy and expressions of respect. We owe you honesty and clarity as well and it is in this spirit that we write this letter.⁵⁶

While this letter also stresses the fact that there is a multiplicity of voices in the American Jewish community, it highlights the separation between American and Israeli Jewry along civic and ethnic lines. It implicitly accepts that while American Jewry is deeply

⁵⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁶ Brettschneider (1996), 4.

affected by Israeli actions, it is limited in how it can respond.⁵⁷ The Kushner-Solomon letter, on the other hand, expresses a much greater willingness and resolve to actively take part in influencing Israel's character and policies. It reflects a divide, not along Israeli-American citizenship lines, but along Jewish ones. It seeks to lay claim to certain Jewish values such as "social justice" and "skeptical inquiry" as part of an understanding that what Israel does is not limited to its citizens but functions as part of one large unit that encompasses Israel-America-Jewish relations. This has to do not only with increased acceptance of transnational loyalties and less concern over dual loyalty allegations, but also with a shifting focus of Jewish identity, which will be dealt with in the following chapter.

Criticism of Israel from both outside and inside the American Jewish community exposed the fact that the conflict could not simply be addressed by invoking the common "Israel right or wrong" stance associated with AIPAC.

When groups like AIPAC and the Presidents' Conference avoid virtually all public criticism of Israeli actions—directing their outrage solely at Israel's neighbors—they leave themselves in a poor position to charge bias. Moreover, while American Jewish groups claim that they are simply defending Israel from its foes, they are actually taking sides in a struggle within Israel between radically different Zionist visions.⁵⁸

Edward Tivnan already warned about this trend two decades ago: "How successful and powerful can a lobby be before the backlash strikes? More to the point: How powerful can a Jewish lobby be before the anti-Semites come out of the woodwork?"⁵⁹ By monopolizing Israel's image and placing its reputation at the center of American Jewish identity, AIPAC – and the extensive machinery of the pro-Israel paradigm –fortified a limited

⁵⁷ For a detailed account of the political dimension of the Israel-Diaspora relationship and the limits of America Jewish influence on Israel, see: Charles Liebman. *Pressure Without Sanctions*. Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977.

⁵⁸ Peter Beinart. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment." *The New York Review of Books*. June 10, 2010.

⁵⁹ Tivnan (1987), 255.

image of Israel that no longer appeared sufficient to garner consensus or silence from the community. “AIPAC has been instrumental in recent years in breeding ignorance about political and social trends in Israel. The lobby has worked so hard at focusing American Jews – and politicians – on supporting Israel that few in either camp are paying attention to what is actually going on there.”⁶⁰

In recent years, the lobby has come under increasing scrutiny for a variety of reasons, including a federal indictment against Steven Rosen, a top AIPAC official, and most saliently following the publication of *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, by professors Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer. The lobby’s reputation for being too powerful and influential – something it has happily boasted for many years – has been backfiring.

For many years, however, this argument [the nefarious influence of the pro-Israel lobby] remained on the margins of American political debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To express it was to identify oneself as “anti-Israel” and position oneself on the far-left or far-right of the political spectrum. Today, that is no longer the case. This view has migrated into mainstream opinion. Indeed, it has almost become the conventional wisdom in liberal society in the United States, and certainly in Western Europe ⁶¹

With criticism of AIPAC and other powerful institutions associated with the “pro-Israel” lobby increasingly voiced and acceptable, the schisms within the American Jewish community started to become even more apparent in the discourse on Israel. “In short, the change in the liberal-left discourse has been remarkable. Illinois writer Emily Hauser says she sees it in her synagogue. People once turned their backs on her after she published op-eds assailing Israel over its actions during the second intifada. Today many thank her for voicing

⁶⁰ Ibid, 251. See also: Paul Findley. *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel’s Lobby*. Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1985.

⁶¹ Dov Waxman. “The Israel Lobbies: A Survey of the Pro-Israel Community in the United States.” *Israel Studies Forum* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 2.

their concerns.”⁶² This has been most dramatically visible on university and college campuses throughout North America, where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken center stage.

The Campus Wars

The campus has been the scene of fierce controversy and debate regarding Israel in recent years for a variety of reasons. Firstly, since, as noted above, the violent events of the Second Intifada have highlighted Palestinian suffering and victimhood. “For many young American Jews, the only association they have with Israel is the conflict with the Palestinians. Israel is the country that oppresses Palestinians, and nothing more. No longer is Israel the country that managed to forge a future for the Jewish people when it was left in tatters after the Holocaust.”⁶³ The generation of students in college as of 2000 has little to no familiarity with the period in which Israel was consistently on the defensive and facing military threats to its very existence.

‘Younger people don't have the baggage of 1967,’ says Hannah Schwarzschild, a founding member of the new organization American Jews for a Just Peace. ‘They are applying what they've been taught about human rights, equality, democracy and liberal American Jewish values to Israel,’ she adds, ‘and Israel-Palestine is moving to the center of their political world.’ This shift is most pronounced on campuses, where being pro-Palestinian has become a litmus test for progressive engagement.⁶⁴

Not only has the Palestinian plight come to be lumped together with a general trend of liberal anti-occupation and anti-imperial ideology, but it has also become popular to identify with the Palestinians, as reflected by the trend of many college students (including Jews) sporting

⁶² Phillip Weiss and Adam Horowitz. “American Jews Rethink Israel.” *The Nation*. October 14, 2009.

⁶³ David Gordis. “If This is Our Future.” *The Jerusalem Post*. May 7, 2010.

⁶⁴ Phillip Weiss and Adam Horowitz. “American Jews Rethink Israel.” *The Nation*. November 2, 2009.

a *keffiyeh* (traditional Arab headdress, as Yasser Arafat was famous for donning) as a fashion statement and symbol of Palestinian solidarity.

Furthermore, discussion of the Second Intifada necessarily conjures up the divisive politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is often couched in superficial slogans and sound bites that place blame on one side or another. Increasingly, any program brought to campus related to Israel or the conflict is seen as, or inevitably promotes, a specific narrative in the conflict that is either “pro-Israel” or “pro-Palestinian.” “The self-justifying advocacy that emphasizes the justice of the Israeli cause against the corrupt nature of the Palestinian effort has, understandably, created a zero-sum game in which to be pro-Israel translates into being anti-Palestinian.”⁶⁵

These dichotomous labels have become accepted signifiers to delineate two seemingly intractable stances, whereby a positive association with Israel is necessarily an affront to Palestinian rights, and vice versa: a program on campus that covers Palestinian suffering is considered “anti-Israel.” Suddenly any portrayal of a narrative related to the conflict is biased because it does not account for all other narratives at all times. Issues like how Israel is studied in the classroom, represented in programs and advocated for on campus have been questioned in terms of the line between legitimate criticism of Israel and Israel bashing. There have been some highly publicized episodes on campuses in recent years that received widespread attention in the media. For example, at Montreal’s Concordia University (a school known for its large Palestinian student population and the strength of a campus group called the Palestine Solidarity Movement), riots broke out in 2002 over an invitation to have

⁶⁵ Chaim Seidler-Feller. “Advocacy and Education as Divergent Strategies in the Effort to Support Israel on Campus,” in *American Jewry and the College Campus: Best of Times or Worst of Times?* American Jewish Committee, 2005, 35. Available online: <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=846567&ct=17185>

Benjamin Netanyahu speak at the school.⁶⁶ At Columbia University's Middle East and Asian Language and Cultures Department, a huge controversy erupted in 2005 when Jewish students claimed they felt intimidated by a professor for expressing "pro-Israel" sentiments in the classroom.⁶⁷ This prompted a campus group called the David Project to document the students' testimonials, culminating in the production of the documentary called "Columbia Unbecoming," which was then used to pressure the university's ombudsman to pursue further investigation.⁶⁸ One of the most recent examples of this tense and polarized atmosphere is the controversy surrounding the selection of Israeli Ambassador to the US Michael Oren to give the keynote address at Brandeis University. Those who are critical of the choice argue that it "risks turning the graduation ceremony into a politically polarizing event."⁶⁹

Although much of the most extreme, bitter battles over Israel have been waged between Jewish and Muslim students groups vying for a specific narrative, the situation has flared up debates and schisms within the Jewish community itself regarding how Israel should be discussed and related to. The American Jewish establishment has demonstrated grave concern over how Israel is being portrayed on campuses in recent years and how Jewish students should respond. The AJC commissioned a report in 2005 on "American Jewry and the College Campus" which addresses how Israel is being portrayed and how to improve its image. "Beginning in 2002, there was a serious escalation of overt hostility toward Israel and its defenders on some campuses."⁷⁰ Although the AJC paper largely dispels

⁶⁶ Bram Eisenthal. "Protest Cancels Netanyahu Speech." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. September 9, 2002.

⁶⁷ See: Jennifer, Senior. "Columbia's Own Middle East War." *New York Magazine*. June 10, 2005.

⁶⁸ Kim Kirschenbaum and Alix Pianin. "Administration Quiet about Massad." *Columbia Spectator*. September 8, 2009.

⁶⁹ Josh Nathan-Kazis. "Oren Speaking at Brandeis Creates a Commencement Controversy." *The Forward*. April 28, 2010.

⁷⁰ Deborah E. Lipstadt. "Strategic Responses to Anti-Israelism and Anti-Semitism on the North American Campus." *American Jewry and the College Campus: Best of Times or Worst*

the notion expressed by Natan Sharansky that American colleges are “islands of antisemitism,” it does work off the assumption that better strategies need to be employed to bolster Israel’s image on campus and function as antidotes to anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.⁷¹

The Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC) – an umbrella group of thirty-three member organizations founded by the Schusterman Foundation and Hillel: the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life – was established in 2002 with the mission of amassing and guiding organizations engaging in Israel advocacy that promotes a positive image of Israel and combats what it deems to be “worrisome anti-Israel activities.”⁷² In fact, since the Second Intifada began, a burgeoning number of organizations have been established which are devoted to providing education on Israel to college students in an effort to ensure there are strong voices advocating for Israel on every campus. For example, the David Project, the Israel Project, CampusWatch and StandWithUs, all founded between 2001-2002, with the expressed goal of encouraging “pro-Israel” voices on campuses and the mission of making their presence known at every event that they deem to be somehow hostile to Israel or to Jews. “Pro-Israel” advocacy has become such a hot commodity that there is even an organization called BlueStar Public Relations that provides a wide array of promotional materials for what it calls Israel “rebranding” services.⁷³ These groups were born out of an alarm that increasing numbers of young American Jews are ambivalent towards or outright disdainful of Israel.

of Times? American Jewish Committee, 2005, 10. Available online:
<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=846567&ct=1718577>

⁷¹ Nathaniel Popper. “Sharansky Quits Cabinet Over Gaza Plan, Naming Conditions for Return.” *The Forward*. May 6, 2005.

⁷² See www.israelcc.org

⁷³ See www.bluestarpr.com

In 2003, several prominent Jewish philanthropists hired Republican pollster Frank Luntz to explain why American Jewish college students were not more vigorously rebutting campus criticism of Israel...The only kind of Zionism they found attractive was a Zionism that recognized Palestinians as deserving of dignity and capable of peace, and they were quite willing to condemn an Israeli government that did not share those beliefs. Luntz did not grasp the irony. The only kind of Zionism they found attractive was the kind that the American Jewish establishment has been working against for most of their lives.⁷⁴

The realization that a more effective strategy is needed to replace the old “cheerleader” approach prompted the establishment to revamp Israel advocacy. This is from an article written by AIPAC and Hillel employees reporting on the condition of “pro-Israel” activism in recent years as a result of these renewed efforts:

Pro-Israel student activists are smart, focused and intensely results-oriented. They realize that "standing up" to Israel's detractors through zero-sum confrontations on the quad is more likely to alienate potential allies than engage them, more effective at securing short-term publicity than long-term impact, and subsequently constitutes a poor use of time and talent. The sharpest pro-Israel activists prefer to identify key sources of power and influence that will determine the strength of the U.S.-Israel relationship for years to come, and then invest the bulk of their advocacy in influencing those strategic targets... If pro-Israel students aren't marching anymore, it's because they've found a more effective way of getting the job done.⁷⁵

Despite the pragmatism of their strategic responses and proclaimed determination to provide education and guidance, these groups tend to be quite narrow and extreme, since their mission is to combat any forms of negative imagery or allegations against Israel. They are therefore highly reactionary, limited to condemning Palestinians or Islam and in its place, lauding Israel. Furthermore, they are not interested in providing programming for students

⁷⁴ Peter Beinart. “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment.” *The New York Review of Books*. June 10, 2010.

⁷⁵ Barry Silverman and Randall Kaplan. “Pro-Israel College Activists Quietly Successful on Campuses.” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. May 9, 2009.

who want to learn about and discuss, for example, the way in which the separation barrier or IDF policies harm Palestinians in the West Bank. “These students are searching for a more nuanced position that permits them to be pro-Israel, as well as pro-Palestinian; to be able to protest the heinous terror while calling for an end to the occupation; to argue in favor of the security fence and also for diminishing the number of checkpoints.”⁷⁶

To try and fill this void, a student organization called the Union of Progressive Zionists (now the campus wing of J Street, called J StreetU) was created to respond to increasing demands by Jewish students on campus that the dominant “pro-Israel” approach does not represent them.⁷⁷

J StreetU presents students with an opportunity to engage voices from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide on campus. Polarizing voices claiming exclusively ‘pro-Israel’ or ‘pro-Palestinian’ positions have come to dominate the discourse on many campuses across North America, obscuring the complexity of the conflict and subsequently alienating significant numbers of students.⁷⁸

All these Jewish campus groups function within the accepted “pro-Israel” paradigm and are in fact vying for the same target group – the silent, disillusioned majority.

There are also organizations that have existed for decades, such as Americans for Peace Now and the Zionist Organization of America, which have turned their attention to the campus by joining the ICC and reaching out to students, perceived to be the most important target group in the battle over Israel’s image. However, despite working under the same “pro-Israel” umbrella, the ICC member organizations sponsor programs and lectures that convey very different understandings of support for Israel and sometimes even butt heads. For example, in 2007, the UPZ caused a press storm for sponsoring a campus tour of a group of

⁷⁶ Seidler-Feller (2005), 36.

⁷⁷ Ethan Porter. “Progressive Zionists Go Back to School: New Organization Hopes To Fill a Void in Campus Discourse About the Middle East.” *The Forward*. August 13, 2004.

⁷⁸ J Street U Mission Statement: <http://www.jstreetu.org/about/who-we-are>

former Israeli soldiers from Breaking the Silence (an Israeli organization of reserve soldiers that give testimonials of their service in the territories, speaking about the moral cost of the occupation).⁷⁹ Critics, most prominently the Zionist Organization of America's Morton Klein, demanded to rescind the UPZ's membership in the ICC, claiming that it is "at odds with the coalition's mission of promoting a positive image of Israel on college campuses."⁸⁰ The ICC ultimately decided not to kick out UPZ, after concluding that its actions did not conflict with the stated goals and etiquette of the coalition.⁸¹ This is just one of a large number of incidents regarding the qualification of the legitimacy of programs brought to campus. The choice of what kind of program an Israel advocacy group sponsors on campus has become highly charged and constant allegations of bias are thrown around.

Israel advocacy on campus can therefore be understood as a microcosm and focal point of the general trend of polarization that is now ripe regarding Israel advocacy in the American Jewish community. Since academia is a framework that lends itself to open debate and critical thinking and is anathema to hermetic, formulaic, binary positions, the campus arena has in this sense catapulted the debate into the spotlight; it has exposed the complex and acrid battle that is being waged by different American Jewish organizations over Israel's portrayal in the Jewish community as well as American public opinion at large. The Jewish media has since been filled with stories about the polarization itself.

Because of the polarized nature of discussion about Israel in the American Jewish community, American Jews have generally been asked to take one side or the other. Either Israel is wrong, or it is right.... Whatever our political views, we owe it to

⁷⁹ "We demand accountability regarding Israel's military actions in the Occupied territories perpetrated by us and in our name." See: www.shovrimshatika.org/about_e.asp

⁸⁰ Ben Harris. "Is Tough Love for Israel Still Love: Question Splits a Campus Group." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. December 19, 2006.

⁸¹ For ICC Statement on Breaking the Silence, see:

http://www.hillel.org/about/news/2007/jan/ICCStatement_2007Jan23.htm

ourselves as an American Jewish community to end the simplifications and generalizations.⁸²

This divisive state has become especially apparent since J Street came on the scene in April 2008 as the self-proclaimed alternative to AIPAC, which was the only body lobbying congress on behalf of Israel until then. Its very establishment is evidence of the split within the community as there are now two official lobbies that proclaim to speak on behalf of the community and compete for the formulation of American involvement in Israel. J Street thus represents the culmination of many years of struggle by elements within the community to gain acceptance as an alternative, but equally legitimate, “pro-Israel” voice. “By enlarging the pro-Israel tent, allowing more American Jews to identify themselves as being pro-Israel without having to be uncritical knee-jerk supporters of Israeli governments, Jstreet has already made a vital contribution to the American Jewish community.”⁸³

As the next chapter will show, this new constellation of the organizational landscape is redefining the line not only what remains inside the “pro-Israel” paradigm, but also what is outside it, as new developments and issues that arise are being tackled and classified. Since due to the divergent voices and polarization, it is not always clear what is meant by “pro-Israel” and who has the authority to define it, the following chapter will look at how the very term “pro-Israel” is codified and employed and how this is affecting the conception of contemporary Jewish identity in America. It is not enough to understand the shift to polarization but also to evaluate how the term “pro-Israel” is utilized within this context.

⁸² Jay Michaelson. “It’s Complicated: Why Ambivalence is Good for Israel...and American Jews.” *The Forward*. May 10, 2010.

⁸³ Dov Waxman. “J Street Expands the Pro-Israel Tent.” *BESA Center Perspectives Papers* no. 96. November 11, 2009.

Chapter Three | The Implications of the “Pro-Israel” Trope

It should now be clear that there are divergent and polar interpretations of how American Jewish organizations relate to Israel and advocate for it. What is behind this polarization? Is it a question of one’s true allegiance to Israel? How should one understand what the term “pro-Israel” signifies when used to characterize a stance or group? If recognizing the right to Palestinian statehood and advocating for East Jerusalem to become the capital of a future Palestinian state can now be considered part of the “pro-Israel” tent just as much as insisting all of Jerusalem is unified and should eternally be under Jewish sovereignty, where does one draw the line at what is in fact still included, and in turn, excluded, from the “pro-Israel” concept? This question is especially pertinent due to how the media throws the term around.

So many important distinctions are elided by mainstream press when it assumes there are only two positions on the Middle East, and that they can be adequately described by the terms ‘pro-Israel’ and ‘pro-Palestinian.’ Various people are said to hold views that are one or the other, and the assumption is that these are discrete views, internally homogenous, non-overlapping.⁸⁴

For example, *Haaretz* recently published a story about reactions to Elie Wiesel’s personal ad in the *New York Times*, referring to it as the “‘pro-Israel’ Jerusalem ad.”⁸⁵ *Haaretz*’s usage of the term indicates that “pro-Israel” in this context indicates alignment with the current Israeli government position on Jerusalem. However what Wiesel actually

⁸⁴ Judith Butler. “The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique,” in *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon. New York: Grove Press, 2003, 263.

⁸⁵ Barak Ravid. “U.S. Officials Slam Pro-Israel Jerusalem Ad.” *Haaretz*. April 21, 2010.

expresses in the ad is not that Jerusalem's future should be determined by Israel's parliament or democratic processes, but rather that Jerusalem's status is simply "above politics" altogether due to his personal conception of Jewish historical, primordial entitlement to the city. As such, the elected government line is in fact irrelevant to Wiesel and thus, the newspaper's choice to preface the ad with the "pro-Israel" label seems unhelpful and counterintuitive. It calls into question the merits of the ability of "pro-Israel" to be a *descriptive* term as much as it is a normative or *prescriptive* term.

At the last AIPAC annual conference in Washington, Harvard law professor and outspoken commentator on Israel Alan Dershowitz accused representatives from J Street of falsely advertising themselves as "pro-Israel." "I reject J Street because it spends more time criticizing Israel than supporting it," he said. "They shouldn't call themselves pro-Israel" and proceeded to accuse J Street of dividing the Jewish community.⁸⁶ Dershowitz followed this up with an article explaining that the reason J Street can no longer claim to be pro-Israel is because linking Israeli actions and American interests is tantamount to blaming American soldiers' casualties on Israel's failure to reach a settlement with the Palestinians. Dershowitz substantiates this claim by citing a statement made by J Street Executive Director Jeremy Ben-Ami and arguing that it is in fact "code" for something else.

Although Ben-Ami doesn't explicitly make a direct connection between Israeli actions and American casualties, his use of the phrase '[resolving the conflict is not only necessary to secure Israel's future, but also] critical to regional stability and American strategic interests,' is a well-known code, especially these days, for the argument that there is a connection between Israeli actions and American casualties. In lending support to that dangerous and false argument, J Street has disqualified itself from

⁸⁶ Natasha Mozgovaya. "Dershowitz Lays into J Street in AIPAC Conference Dust-Up." *Haaretz*. March 22, 2010.

being considered "pro-Israel"⁸⁷

In his published response, Ben-Ami rebukes Dershowitz for construing his words. “You acknowledge that I don't make the very statement that you attribute to me in your lead paragraph, but you then go on to knowingly state that my words are "code" for making that connection. Really? Code? Who's got the codebook, Alan? My words stand for themselves.”⁸⁸ Ben-Ami goes on to explain that it is Dershowitz’s attempt to monopolize the meaning of the term “pro-Israel” that inevitably leads many to stray from embracing the “pro-Israel” label. “Your tactics are what makes being "pro-Israel" so unattractive that college students who do love and support Israel are afraid to be labeled "pro-Israel." They are not running away from Israel. They are running away from you.” Ben-Ami thus makes a distinction between what he sees as constructive and destructive advocacy for Israel. “Frankly, the kind of diatribe that you engage in, replete with falsehoods, name-calling and guilt by association represents all that is wrong with the way the "case for Israel" has been made for far too long.”⁸⁹

While both Dershowitz and Ben-Ami proudly identify as “pro-Israel,” they clearly have very different notions of what this means, and are representative of the polar ends within the self-identified “pro-Israel” camp. Both of them use the term to denote what they see as the legitimate way to express support for Israel and in this sense, “pro-Israel” has become a codeword, a signifier for a wide variety of connotations, all of which claim to constitute the authority on Israel advocacy. In this specific polemic, Dershowitz associates too much criticism of Israel as reason for doubting J Street’s “pro-Israelism” and thus deliberately places Ben-Ami in the camp with those that have blamed the Israel lobby for America’s war

⁸⁷ Alan Dershowitz. “J Street Can No Longer Claim to be Pro-Israel.” *Huffington Post*. April 21, 2010.

⁸⁸ Jeremy Ben-Ami. “Alan Dershowitz is Wrong.” *Huffington Post*. April 22, 2010.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

in the Middle East. Dershowitz's allegations against Ben-Ami therefore stem from his belief that J Street does not express a fundamental allegiance to Israel that would translate into unconditional support and thus bar it from openly criticizing the state or even point out its bearing on American interests. Ben-Ami, on the other hand, stresses that it is precisely the ability to have critical discussion of Israel that facilitates many American Jews to express their allegiance to Israel. He does not counter Dershowitz by accusing him of not being "pro-Israel," but is rather concerned with the way in which the term is abused.

Indeed, J Street's *raison de'tre* was, like Breira before it, to change the very way in which Israel is discussed and provide a voice for dissenters: "For too long, a deep polarization has characterized the conversation on Israel, or lack thereof, across America...J Street provides a political home for this majority's views and makes clear to politicians and policymakers alike that no one group can claim a monopoly on what it means to be pro-Israel in America...J Street aims to redefine and expand the very concept of what it means to be pro-Israel...Being pro-peace is indeed, being pro-Israel."⁹⁰

Although both figures would like to claim that their version of "pro-Israel" is the true and correct one, their polemic exposes the fact that there is no fixed definition of what it means. "Pro-Israel" has certainly become a trope since it is used figuratively and rhetorically to connote constantly expanding and changing definitions, depending on what Israel does, the larger geopolitical context in a given period, and the amount of consensus and authority that a specific entity is able to garner behind that definition. This explains why in the 1970's, Breira's push for Israel to negotiate with the PLO was considered hostile to Israel, but has since permeated this paradigm and is now accepted as part of it. That is why today it is no longer taboo to call Arab-Israelis Palestinian citizens of Israel, as Palestinian nationalist goals have become widely recognized. As Dox Waxman has recently argued, the "pro-Israel"

⁹⁰ See: <http://jstreet.org/page/pro-israel-pro-peace>

community is not homogenous or centralized but rather fragmented and diverse, to the point that Israel is no longer as unifying symbol as it used to be, but rather an increasingly divisive one.

The pro-Israel lobby in the U.S. is not a cohesive political actor at all, and should not therefore be discussed as one. Instead, we should recognize the divisions within the pro-Israel community—divisions which I have suggested are likely to deepen over time—and thus pay more attention to the shifting balance of power between the centrist lobby and its left-wing and right-wing rivals. The future of American pro-Israel advocacy will be shaped by this internal competition between the three camps within the pro-Israel community.⁹¹

While this helps explain why Israel is an increasingly charged and polarized issue among the various groups that identify as “pro-Israel,” it cannot account for those voices within the community who are deemed outside the “pro-Israel” tent, whether because they do not identify as such or are currently not recognized as such. However, even though they may not fit into the camp, they are still weighing in on an important and dynamic debate that is taking place.⁹² In order to understand American Jewry’s shifting relation to Israel it is therefore not sufficient to look only at “American pro-Israel advocacy,” as this is in many ways an artificial label used to try and exclude those views and positions that the establishment does not agree with at a specific point in time. It is therefore necessary to look at those issues just beyond the “pro-Israel” paradigm as these reflect an entirely other schism in American Jewry today. It is this bifurcation between what is labeled internal and external to “pro-Israelism” that is determining the future of American relations to Israel.

⁹¹ Waxman (2010), 23.

⁹² It is important to note that one need not be Jewish in order to be “pro-Israel,” as exemplified by evangelical Christians who are staunch supporters of Israel, the most famous of which is Pastor John Hagee, founder of Christians United for Israel. This group supports Israel out of the belief that Jews must rule in the Land of Israel so as to prompt the Second Coming, when Jews will either convert to Christianity or die. Being “pro-Israel” should therefore not be equated with being Jewish or necessarily in Jewish interests.

If thirty years ago the “pro-Israel” boundary was the recognition of Palestinian rights to a state in the West Bank and Gaza, then today it is primarily the divestment issue.⁹³ Calls for boycotting or divesting from institutions or companies engaged in what is deemed to be the mechanisms of Israel’s occupation (control and discrimination of the non-citizen Palestinian population) are considered beyond the “pro-Israel” paradigm. Organizations from AIPAC to J Street have all agreed such measures are to be refuted and combated outright. Hillel president Wayne Firestone has explicitly called those students (whether Jewish or not) who advocate for any form of divestment “anti-Israel” and those students who are countering these efforts (whether Jewish or not) “pro-Israel.”⁹⁴

The Jewish Federation of the San Francisco Bay Area, as an entity that funds programming for the local community, has recently redefined the criteria for which an Israel-related program can receive funding.. They recently added third issue states that they do not provide funding to organizations that: “advocate for, or endorse, undermining the legitimacy of Israel as a secure independent, democratic Jewish state, including through participation in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, in whole or in part.”⁹⁵ Discussion of divestment is a clear taboo in the “pro-Israel” community and any attempt to consider its worth is met with indignation.

The global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement started out as a Palestinian initiative that went public in 2005 and calls for the imposition of various means of economic sanctions on Israel until it “meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian

⁹³ This does not necessarily suggest that divestment will eventually become accepted as mainstream within the “pro-Israel” establishment the way recognition of Palestinian state has, however it is similar in that it is currently the divisive line between “pro” and “anti” Israel stances.

⁹⁴ Wayne Firestone. “Fighting the New Divestment Effort On Campus.” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. May 6, 2010.

⁹⁵ JCF Policy Statement on Israel-Related Programs by its Grantees. February 18, 2010. Available online: <http://sfjcf.wordpress.com/2010/02/18/policy/>

people's inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with international law.”⁹⁶

The BDS Movement bases its call on the conviction that Israeli policies as regards Palestinians are akin to Apartheid South Africa and that the same tools that were used to defeat Apartheid in South Africa should be applied to Israel. As such, the word “apartheid” has become an extremely popular and controversial term. The BDS Movement has been conducting “Israel Apartheid Week” across the world on university campuses in order to garner more attention and support for its cause. However, the term has also been used as a way of trying to urge Israel in the peace process as a way to prevent Israel from becoming an apartheid regime.

Not so long ago, "apartheid" was a hotly disputed term when applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Now even advocates for Israel, such as entertainment magnate Edgar Bronfman and former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, have warned that Israel faces an antiapartheid struggle unless it can get to a two-state solution, and fast.⁹⁷

The “pro-Israel” community deems the BDS Movement to be a fancy name for an unabashed campaign to delegitimize the very right of Israel to exist as a Jewish State. They reject the comparison of Israel to apartheid on account that it holds Israel solely responsible for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and implies that the solution is a single binational state that does not differentiate between Jews and others. As such the community has been investing serious efforts into combating divestment bills wherever they pop up and identifying different strategies for fighting divestment have become a hot topic at the AIPAC conference and other

⁹⁶ BDS Movement website: <http://bdsmovement.net/?q=node/159>

⁹⁷ Phillip Weiss and Adam Horowitz. “American Jews Rethink Israel.” *The Nation*. November 2, 2009.

Israel advocacy related programs and campus events.⁹⁸ J Street's effort to combat the BDS movement has been a counter-campaign called "Invest, Don't Divest" in which they stress the need for a two-state solution to the conflict.⁹⁹

While J Street has stated that Israel engages in unfair treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, it rejects the notion that negative, restrictive actions such as divestment should be taken in order to force Israel to cease certain policies. This is because the divestment issue is currently at the heart of the question of the line between what is considered legitimate or "honest" criticism of Israel and what is deemed hatred, slander and rejection; which, put another way, can be considered the line between what is still the very edge within the "pro-Israel" tent and what is outside it. As one article recently noted: "J Street, much castigated by many the Jewish community for its ongoing, strident criticism of the Israeli government, "passes the test" as an honest critic of Israel because it condemned the BDS movement."¹⁰⁰ The stance on divestment is the litmus test for the qualification of one's affinity to Israel. This is why Jewish Voice for Peace, the Jewish organization most associated with the call for divestment, is excluded from the "pro-Israel" paradigm.

However, just as what it means to be "pro-Israel" is not static and there are a wide range of views that are included in the tent, so are there many views that may be classified under divestment. To be in favor of selective divestment does not necessarily mean rejection of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, even though this might be the desired implication by some. Israeli professor Neve Gordon, who came out in support of divestment, has explicitly stated that he believes it is the only way to ensure a two-state solution to the conflict, and preserve – not abolish – Israel's existence as a Jewish state. He also notes:

⁹⁸ Josh Nathan-Kazis. "How to Beat Back Israel Divestment Bill: Get Organized." *The Forward*. April 21, 2010.

⁹⁹ For more on J Street campaign see: <http://www.jstreetu.org/featured/invest-dont-divest>

¹⁰⁰ Haviv Rettig Gur. "Campaign Planned Against Israel Boycott." *The Jerusalem Post*. March 11, 2010.

“Ideologically, the two-state solution is more realistic because fewer than 1% of Jews and only a minority of Palestinians support binationalism.”¹⁰¹ For Gordon, exerting external pressure on Israel through divestment is intended to preserve Israel’s existence as a Jewish state and lead to the exact same end product (a two-state solution) that is a mainstream position in the “pro-Israel” community.

The topic of divestment is thus highly nuanced and complex, but what is of importance to this paper is not determining its merits (as a normative judgment is irrelevant and will not be taken here) but exposing how it is being confronted and branded within the establishment. Because the issue is still a part of the American Jewish debate on Israel that is thriving – it is just not happening in the hallways of “pro-Israel” institutions. By excluding this voice from the “pro-Israel” tent, the establishment – and by extension onlookers – are not only dismissing these views as, at best misguided and at worst, antisemitic, but also dismissing the members of the community who are grappling with these views. They are effectually pretending like they do not exist and are not part of the debate. “Because of Israel, have Bay Area Jews who do not believe in a specifically Jewish state, now forfeited their right to be part of the Jewish community? Have Jews who love Israel but are seen as too critical, or who support a boycott to make their criticisms manifest, been effectively excommunicated?”¹⁰²

The issue here is thus not whether or not divestment is a “pro” or “anti” Israel stance, as this is highly subjective and particularistic. It is rather to ask whether the insistence on classifying people and ideas as such contributes to the ability to understand the debate, or whether it in fact stifles and obscures it.

¹⁰¹ Neve Gordon. “Boycott Israel.” *The Los Angeles Times*. August 20, 2009.

¹⁰² Bradley Burston. “Rebranding Israel as a State Headed for Fascism.” *Haaretz*. May 18, 2010.

[I]f we say that the case of Israel is different because the very identity of the student is bound up with the state of Israel, so that any criticism of Israel is considered an attack on ‘Israelis’ or, indeed ‘Jews’ in general, then we have ‘singled out’ this form of political allegiance from all other forms of political allegiance in the world that are open to public disputation, and engaged in the most outrageous form of silencing and ‘effective’ censorship.”¹⁰³

Speaking to a group of students from the University of California, Berkeley regarding the divestment vote that recently took place on the campus, Judith Butler, a Jewish professor and board member of Jewish Voice for Peace, addressed the difficulty in merely speaking about issues surrounding divestment. “Let us begin with the assumption that it is very hard to hear the debate under consideration here. One hears someone saying something, and one fears that they are saying another thing. It is hard to trust words, or indeed to know what words actually mean.”¹⁰⁴ Butler addresses the rhetorical obstacle presented by the “pro-Israel” label, whereby if something or someone is not included in it, they are simply written off, thus reducing the issue to binary terms. From the moment the question of divestment came on to the scene about a decade ago, its classification as an anti-Israel or anti-Semitic act has made it nearly untouchable in the American Jewish establishment.

Referring to Harvard University President Lawrence Summers’ assertion in 2002 that the call for divestment is antisemitic in effect, if not intent, Butler has tried to distinguish between critical and discriminatory language.

It would seem that the discourse itself, if allowed into the public sphere, will be taken up by those who seek to use it, not only for criticism of Israel, but as a way of doing harm to Jews, or expressing hatred for them. Indeed, there is always that risk, a risk that negative comments about the Israeli state will be misconstrued as negative

¹⁰³ Butler (2003), 253.

¹⁰⁴ Judith Butler. “You Will Not Be Alone.” *The Nation*. April 13, 2010.

comments about Jews. But to claim that the only means that such criticism can have is to be taken up as negative comments about Jews is to attribute to that particular interpretation an enormous power to monopolize the field of reception for that criticism....The criticism is thus not taken for its face value, but given a hidden meaning, one that is at odds with its explicit claim. In this way, the explicit claim does not have to be heard, since what one is hearing is the hidden claim made beneath the explicit one. The criticism against Israel that is levied is nothing more than a cloak for that hatred, or a cover for a call, transmuted in form, for discriminatory action against Jews.¹⁰⁵

Reception of Walt and Mearsheimer's is a good example of this, since the establishment reacted by deeming the authors as anti-Israel and even antisemitic, and thus disqualifying their ideas. This is despite the fact that no matter how much one might have disagreed with their arguments, the professors clearly stated their aims at the outset and displayed sensitivity to the line between criticism of Israel and its delegitimization.

Examination of Israel's policies and the efforts of its American supporters does not imply an anti-Israel bias, just as an examination of the political activities of the AARP does not imply bias against older citizens. We are not challenging Israel's right to exist or questioning the legitimacy of the Jewish state. There are those who maintain that Israel should never have been created, or who want to see Israel transformation from a Jewish state into a binational democracy. We do not."¹⁰⁶

Not only did the Anti-Defamation League condemn the book as anti-Jewish, but it also prompted ADL director Abe Foxman to write a book in response.¹⁰⁷ As one scholar has noted: "The Mearsheimer-Walt paper is a strangely sloppy product of respected if frustrated scholars. However, the reaction to their paper demonstrates the tendency for argument on

¹⁰⁵ Butler (2003), 251-2.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2007, 12.

¹⁰⁷ Abraham Foxman. *The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

these issues to escalate quickly beyond analysis to ad hominem attacks meant to silence rather than advance debate.”¹⁰⁸ The consequence is that events like this have called increasing attention in the community to how Israel can negatively affect the image of Jews and Judaism in general, thus exposing the implications of conflating Judaism and Israel (and in turn, antisemitism and anti-Zionism).¹⁰⁹

Today, non-Israeli Jews feel themselves once again exposed to criticism and vulnerable to attack for things they didn't do. But this time it is a Jewish state, not a Christian one, which is holding them hostage for its own actions. Diaspora Jews cannot influence Israeli policies, but they are implicitly identified with them, not least by Israel's own insistent claims upon their allegiance. The behavior of a self-described Jewish state affects the way everyone else looks at Jews. The increased incidence of attacks on Jews in Europe and elsewhere is primarily attributable to misdirected efforts, often by young Muslims, to get back at Israel. The depressing truth is that Israel's current behavior is not just bad for America, though it surely is. It is not even just bad for Israel itself, as many Israelis silently acknowledge. The depressing truth is that Israel today is bad for the Jews.”¹¹⁰

Whether or not one agrees with the sentiment that Israel is “bad” for Jews, there is no doubt that Israel's reputation and actions implicate Jews all over the world and that Jews have a stake in what Israel does. “Jews inside Israel cannot separate themselves fully qua Jews from the Jewish community abroad, just as diasporic Jews cannot escape from the realities of the modern state of Israel.”¹¹¹ When Israel commits controversial acts, such as the recent war in Gaza (and the ensuing controversy surrounding the Goldstone report), or is mired in criticism for not cooperating with US demands, American Jews take notice and subsequently

¹⁰⁸ Thomas (2007), 16.

¹⁰⁹ For discussion of distinction between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, see: David Myers. “Can There be a Principled Anti-Zionism? On the Nexus Between Anti-Historicism and Anti-Zionism in Modern Jewish Thought.” *Journal of Israeli History* 25, no. 1, 2006.

¹¹⁰ Tony Judt. “Israel: The Alternative.” *The New York Review of Books*. October 23, 2003.

¹¹¹ Shain (2000), 186.

try to disassociate from the country and question its justification for being a mouthpiece of world Jewry. “This isolation from other countries worries Israel's friends and is responsible for the rift with Diaspora Jews, hence Israel is losing its inimitable voice as the representative of the Jewish public. One of the most important achievements of Zionism is being taken away from us.”¹¹² This is why certain groups, and specifically some prominent intellectual figures have been emphasizing the distinction between Jewish and Israeli identity.¹¹³

In holding out for a distinction between Israel and Jews, I am calling for a space of critique and a condition of dissent for Jews and non-Jews who have criticisms of Israel to articulate, but I am also opposing anti-Semitic reductions of Jewishness to Israeli interests. The ‘Jew’ is no more defined by Israel than by anti-Semitic diatribe. The ‘Jew’ exceeds both determinations, and is to be found, substantively, as this diasporic excess, an historically and culturally changing identity that takes no single form and has no single telos.”¹¹⁴

Although the Holocaust, antisemitism and Israel have long been forceful and unifying symbols of Jewish identity in America, employed by organizations to rally purpose while staving off assimilation and disillusionment, they have also been counterintuitive at times. The notion that American Jews must always support Israel lest it be destroyed has played on a sense of fear that has had the adverse effect of boxing in definitions of Jewishness, which no longer correspond to the reality of Israel’s image and role. The unresolved conflict with the Palestinians, exacerbated by repeated reports of human rights abuses by Israel, along with the recent rightward shift of Israel’s government, have contributed to a growing need of American Jews to redefine and reclaim their Jewish self-image, one that is distinct from Israel’s. “For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check

¹¹² Shlomo Avineri. “What’s Happening to Diaspora Jews?” *Haaretz*. May 10, 2010.

¹¹³ For example, Judith Butler, Norman Finkelstein, Daniel Boyarin, Noam Chomsky and Jacqueline Rose.

¹¹⁴ Butler (2003), 265.

their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead."¹¹⁵ Many Jews who want to consider divestment or at least debate it openly without fear of being deemed to anti-Israel or self-hating are increasingly disassociating themselves from Israel and instead, trying to reaffirm those values that they deem to be specifically Jewish.

Jewish groups and individuals who disassociate from Israel invoke values such as social justice, universal equality and human rights – all values, which they claim are the “authentic” characteristic of Jewish identity whose articulation can be found throughout Jewish history. “For many American Jews, the non-orthodox in particular, political liberalism is constitutive of what it means to be a good and caring Jews. For them, the quest for social justice, civil and human rights, and the concern for the welfare of the disadvantaged are the moral and religious content of the Jewish tradition”¹¹⁶ Many American Jews who are considered outside the “pro-Israel” tent are trying to assume authority on what is Jewish in a different way. While “pro-Israel” rhetoric emphasizes that Jewish identity is characterized by vulnerability and the importance of defensive nationalism, the non-“pro-Israel” rhetoric highlights equality, altruism and international norms of justice. The divide within the community that is spawned by Israel is directly related to how Jews interpret and take ownership of their collective memory.

Jews are being split apart less in terms of their experience of Israel and America than in relation to conscience and what Jews are willing to do and what they will refuse in terms of Jewish history and memory... Though many see the Jewish civil war as a battle over politics, with each side reading the other side out of Jewish history, the battle is really over Jewish memory and what that memory calls Jews to in the

¹¹⁵ Peter Beinart. “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment.” *The New York Review of Books*. June 10, 2010.

¹¹⁶ Bernard Susser and Charles S. Leibman. *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 63.

present. A sense of isolation, of being under assault, of being misunderstood, as always and everywhere being singled out, as always one step from a new persecution, is part of Jewish memory, to be sure. But the struggle for an interdependent empowerment, for justice and ethic, for risk-taking to achieve what seems unachievable is also part of Jewish memory, of remnant, of persecutions but also new beginnings. Solidarity with the Palestinian struggle might find its deepest roots here, in this alternative history that Jews of conscience seek to keep alive as vital to Jewish identity.¹¹⁷

How to assume authority over the legacy of the Jew as victim¹¹⁸ is the source of the split among American Jews in recent years. “This obsession with victimhood lies at the heart of why Zionism is dying among America’s secular Jewish young. It simply bears no relationship to their lived experience, or what they have seen of Israel.”¹¹⁹ In fact the notion of victimhood is so strongly-ingrained a concept in Jewish life and education that for some American Jews, the State of Israel’s role in oppressing the Palestinian population necessitates that they speak out, as Jews, in the name of other’s suffering. This is also why increasing numbers of Jewish organizations are dedicated to promoting universal equal rights for all peoples, such as the New Israel Fund and the American Jewish World Service, both of which have programs for sending American Jews to engage in social development work in less privileged, non-Jewish societies. Moreover, organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace and Tikkun stress in their rhetoric the Jewish value of “*tikkun olam*,” to repair the world by helping others.

¹¹⁷ Marc Ellis. *Israel and Palestine Out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Pluto Press, 2002, 47.

¹¹⁸ “The core of the Jewish self-image in the past, whether in the Diaspora or in Israel, was vulnerability, either physical, or psychological, or both.” Judith Elizur. “The Fracturing of the Jewish Self-Image: The End of We Are One?” *Israel Affairs* 8. no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 14.

¹¹⁹ Peter Beinart. “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment.” *The New York Review of Books*. June 10, 2010.

The palpable bifurcation in American Jewish circles today is therefore between those who interpret the legacy of victimhood as the justification for continued dominance of unequivocal support for Israel, and those who interpret the legacy of victimhood as justification for standing up and speaking out against every action Israel takes that is considered immoral, unjust or out of touch with one's beliefs. Both approaches stem from the same desire to assume authority over what it means to be Jewish today, and in both cases Israel can be portrayed and used in quite extreme ways to get the point across. It is this division that cuts across the community and is much more instructive of what is going on in America Jewish life today than whether or not you are "pro-Israel."

The attempt to place a clear boundary on what is included and excluded from the "pro-Israel" concept is therefore misguided. At least for analytical purposes, it is important to understand it as one large realm of de facto debate. The future of American Jewish relations to Israel and Israel's role in shaping identity is taking place not just inside the "pro-Israel" camp, but also well outside of it, where difficult questions are being asked about what it means to be Jewish today. As Arthur Hertzberg warned over twenty years ago, "American Jews would eventually run out of causes. They would have to face the question of meaning."¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Arthur Hertzberg. *Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 365.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the contours of the “pro-Israel” paradigm in American Jewish life in order to show the divisive effects that this concept has had on the community, as well as the changing nature of the discourse on Israel. Although even at its inception, there was disagreement among American Jews over whether Israel was the best way to ensure Jewish “normalization” and security, the country has nevertheless been an inspirational and centralizing force in the community as a haven for Jews and the embodiment of an explicitly Jewish way of life in modernity. However, finding a balance between support and criticism, allegiance and alienation, has proven especially difficult for the community, which continues to battle over what the limits of dissent on Israel should be and what this indicates about one’s Jewishness.

The term “pro-Israel” itself is inadequate for describing American Jewish relations to Israel, since it attempts to apply an *a priori* and uniform understanding of support for Israel, which does not exist. Israeli policies, American Jewish positioning and many other factors are constantly in flux, such that what constitutes positive engagement with Israel is highly dynamic and expansive. Furthermore, is it whether one is “pro-Israel” that determines what their views on Israeli policies are, or is it one’s views on Israeli policies that determine whether they are “pro-Israel?” It is therefore crucial that an analysis of American Jewish orientation towards Israel as one large spectrum with a wide array of views, none of which can easily be qualified as either “pro” or “anti” Israel. This in fact calls for a new way of thinking not only about positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the conflict itself, that go beyond dichotomous, either/or classifications.

It will require a radical redefinition of what it means to be an American who is pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian. It will require a conscious decision to get past the idea that

Israel must lose if Palestine is to win, and vice versa. It will require a willingness to consider a more nuanced, much less digestible reality. One in which your side is no longer obviously, indisputably, unfailingly in the moral right, and the other cast as the perp, the unredeemable murderer, the plague of both houses - in short, the problem. If this is to work, it will require an excruciating decision: letting go of one's self-definition as either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian. It will require a conscious effort to become pro-Mideast.¹²¹

Jewish existence in modernity, and in the Diaspora in particular, is characterized by a constant tension between trying to maintain a distinct identity (whether religious, cultural, ethnic or otherwise) and being an integrated and accepted part of society. This tension has played a significant role in the divide between the two centers of Jewry in Israel and America, within the context of where the survival of the Jewish people is most assured. Although after more than half a century, it is clear that Jewish existence can thrive in both centers, this is still a highly debated issue.

At a conference held by the AJC in 2006 to discuss Israel-Diaspora relations entitled “The Future of the Past: What Will Become of the Jewish People?” Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua – like Ben-Gurion before him – made a point to distinguish between the identity of Diaspora Jewry and Israeli Jewry. “As long as it is clear to all of us that Israeli Jewish identity deals, for better or worse, with the full spectrum of the reality and that Diaspora Jewry deals only with parts of it, then at least the difference between whole and part is acknowledged.”¹²² Although there are certainly significant differences between the two entities, Yehoshua’s distinction is inaccurate. It is not that Diaspora Jewry deals only with “parts” of Israeli Jewish identity, but rather that it deals with different parts. An American

¹²¹ Bradley Burston. “Pro-Mideast in America: Getting Past ‘Pro-Israel’ and ‘Pro-Palestine.’” *Haaretz*. February 17, 2010.

¹²² A.B. Yehoshua. “The Meaning of Homeland. A.B. Yehoshua Controversy: An Israeli-Diaspora Dialogue on Jewishness, Israeliness and Identity.” American Jewish Committee, 2006, 7.

Jew does not take part in the electoral and civic reality of Israel because he has chosen to remain outside it. However, he is nonetheless directly affected by the reality and decisions of the Jewish state, for better or worse. Moreover, while an Israeli Jew is held accountable for his identity as a Jew and an Israeli, an American Jew is often held accountable for his identity as a Jew, an American and a representative or extension of Israel, even though he has no say in those policies and regardless of his positions. This has created a complicated and difficult reality for a community that has, throughout its history, thrived on ideals of pluralism, tolerance and freedom of expression.

Although Israel was created with the intention of solving the question of Jewish identity and existence in modernity, it has not put an end to any questions, but rather has only conjured up new ones. “The assumption that we are in the midst of an ‘end of days,’ of a final resolution of the tension between the Jew and the world, is as yet unprovable. To date, even after the creation of the state of Israel, Zionism has neither failed nor succeeded.”¹²³

¹²³ Arthur Hertzberg. *The Zionist Idea*. New York: Atheneum, 1969, 17.

Bibliography

- Avineri, Shlomo. "What's Happening to Diaspora Jews?" *Haaretz*. May 10, 2010.
- Beinart, Peter. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment." *The New York Review of Books*. June 10, 2010.
- Ben-Ami, Jeremy. "Alan Dershowitz is Wrong." *Huffington Post*. April 22, 2010.
- Berman, Aaron. *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990.
- Brettschneider, Marla. *Cornerstones of Peace: Jewish Identity Politics and Democratic Theory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.
- Brubaker, Rogers and Frederick Cooper. . "Beyond Identity," in *Ethnicity Without Groups*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004, ch. 2.
- Burston, Bradley. "Rebranding Israel as a State Headed for Fascism." *Haaretz*. May 18, 2010.
- "Pro-Mideast in America: Getting Past 'Pro-Israel' and 'Pro-Palestine.'" *Haaretz*. February 17, 2010.
- Butler, Judith. "You Will Not Be Alone." *The Nation*. April 13, 2010.
- "The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique." In *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon, 249-68. New York: Grove Press, 2003.
- Cohen, Naomi. *Not Free to Desist*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972.
- Cohen, Steven M. *American Modernity and Jewish Identity*. New York: Tavistock Publications, 1983.
- Dershowitz, Alan. "J Street Can No Longer Claim to be Pro-Israel." *Huffington Post*. April 21, 2010.
- Divine, Donna Robinson. "Zionism and the Transformation of Jewish Society." *Modern Judaism*. 20, no. 3 (October 2000): 257-276.
- Eisenthal, Bram. "Protest Cancels Netanyahu Speech." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. September 9, 2002.
- Elazar, Daniel. *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995.
- Elizur, Judith. "The Fracturing of the Jewish Self-Image: The End of We Are One?" *Israel Affairs* 8. no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 14-30.

- Ellis, Marc. *Israel and Palestine Out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.
- Feingold, Henry. *Bearing Witness: How America and its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995.
- Findley, Paul. *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby*. Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1985.
- Firestone, Wayne. "Fighting the New Divestment Effort On Campus." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. May 6, 2010.
- Foxman, Abraham. *The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Ganin, Zvi. *An Uneasy Relationship: American Jewish Leadership and Israel, 1948-1957*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005.
- Goldberg, J.J. *Jewish Power*. New York: Basic Books, 1996.
- Gordon, Neve. "Boycott Israel." *The Los Angeles Times*. August 20, 2009.
- Gorny, Yosef. *The State of Israel in Jewish Public Thought*. London: Macmillan Press, 1994.
- Harris, Ben. "Is Tough Love for Israel Still Love: Question Splits a Campus Group." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. December 19, 2006.
- Hertzberg, Arthur. *Being Jewish in America: The Modern Experience*. New York: Schocken Books, 1979.
- Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
- *The Zionist Idea*. New York: Atheneum, 1969.
- Judt, Tony. "Toni." *The New York Review of Books*. April 19, 2010.
- "Israel: The Alternative." *The New York Review of Books*. October 23, 2003.
- Kaplan, Esther. "The Jewish Divide Over Israel." *The Nation*. July 12, 2004.
- Kaplan, Mordecai. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. New York: Schocken Books, 1967.
- Kelner, Shaul. *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage and Israeli Birthright Tourism*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.
- Kim Kirschenbaum and Alix Pianin. "Administration Quiet about Massad." *Columbia Spectator*. September 8, 2009.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso Books, 2001.

Liebman, Charles. *Pressure Without Sanctions*. Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977.

Lipstadt, Deborah E. "Strategic Responses to Anti-Israelism and Anti-Semitism on the North American Campus." *American Jewry and the College Campus: Best of Times or Worst of Times?* American Jewish Committee, 2005, 10. Available online: <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=846567&ct=1718577>

Mozgovaya, Natasha. "Dershowitz Lays into J Street in AIPAC Conference Dust-Up." *Haaretz*. March 22, 2010.

Myers. "Can There be a Principled Anti-Zionism? On the Nexus Between Anti-Historicism and Anti-Zionism in Modern Jewish Thought." *Journal of Israeli History* 25, no. 1, 2006.

Nathan-Kazis, Josh. "Oren Speaking at Brandeis Creates a Commencement Controversy." *The Forward*. April 28, 2010.

----- "How to Beat Back Israel Divestment Bill: Get Organized." *The Forward*. April 21, 2010.

O'Brien, Lee. *American Jewish Organizations & Israel*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1986.

Popper. "Sharansky Quits Cabinet Over Gaza Plan, Naming Conditions for Return." *The Forward*. May 6, 2005.

Porter, Ethan. "Progressive Zionists Go Back to School: New Organization Hopes To Fill a Void in Campus Discourse About the Middle East." *The Forward*. August 13, 2004.

Ravid, Barak. "U.S. Officials Slam Pro-Israel Jerusalem Ad." *Haaretz*. April 21, 2010.

Rettig Gur, Haviv. "Campaign Planned Against Israel Boycott." *The Jerusalem Post*. March 11, 2010.

Rosenthal, Steven. *Irreconcilable Differences: The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001.

Sasson, Theodore. "Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement: American Jews' Changing Relationship to Israel." *Israel Studies* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1-32.

Saxe, Leonard, et al. "Generation Birthright Israel: The Impact of an Israel Experience on Jewish Identity and Choices." *Brandeis University Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies*, 2009.

Seidler-Feller, Chaim. "Advocacy and Education as Divergent Strategies in the Effort to Support Israel on Campus." In *American Jewry and the College Campus: Best of Times or Worst of Times?* American Jewish Committee, 2005. Available online:

<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=846567&ct=17185>

- Senior, Jennifer. "Columbia's Own Middle East War." *New York Magazine*. June 10, 2005.
- Shain, Yossi. "American Jews and the Construction of Israel's Jewish Identity." *Diaspora* 9, no. 2 (2000): 163-201.
- Silverman, Barry and Randall Kaplan. "Pro-Israel College Activists Quietly Successful on Campuses." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. May 9, 2009.
- Slater, Jerome. "Muting the Alarm Over the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The New York Times vs. Haaretz 2000-06." *International Security* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 84-120.
- Susser, Bernard and Charles Liebman. *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Thomas, Michael. *American Policy Toward Israel*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Tivnan, Edward. *The Lobby*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- Walt, Stephen and John Mearsheimer. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- Waxman, Dov. "The Israel Lobbies: A Survey of the Pro-Israel Community in the United States." *Israel Studies Forum* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 1-28.
- Wertheimer, Jack. "Jewish Organizational Life in the United States Since 1945." *American Jewish Year Book* 95 (1995): 3-98.
- Wiesel, Elie. "For Jerusalem." Ad published in *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* on April 16, 2010 and in *The New York Times* on April 18, 2010. Available online: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/137057>
- Weiss, Phillip and Adam Horowitz. "American Jews Rethink Israel." *The Nation*. November 2, 2009.
- Yehoshua, A.B. "The Meaning of Homeland. A.B. Yehoshua Controversy: An Israeli-Diaspora Dialogue on Jewishness, Israeliness and Identity." American Jewish Committee, 2006.
- Zeitz, Joshua Michael. "'If I am not for myself...': The American Jewish Establishment in the Aftermath of the Six Day War." *American Jewish History* 88, no. 2 (June 2000): 253-286.