



# Ripples from the **MATZAV**

Grassroots Responses of American Jewry  
to the Situation in Israel

CARL SCHRAG

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE  
The Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations

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Photos:

Background: National Solidarity with Israel Rally, Washington, April 15, 2002, courtesy of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Foreground: Local pro-Israel demonstration, courtesy of Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School, Livingston, NJ.

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## **Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations of the American Jewish Committee**

The Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations, founded in 1982 as an arm of the American Jewish Committee, is an interpreter of Israeli and American Jewry to each other, and seeks to build bridges between the world's largest Jewish communities.

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- An intensive immersion seminar for American college faculty in the history, politics, culture, and society of modern Israel, conducted by Brandeis University. The goal is to enable college professors to teach courses on their home campuses on modern Israel, in all its complexity, as a Jewish and democratic state.
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- Studies of the respective communities, particularly of their interconnectedness, published in both Hebrew and English, in conjunction with the Argov Institute of Bar-Ilan University. These have included monographs, among others, on "Who Is a Jew," "Post-Zionism," and Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel.
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The Koppelman Institute has succeeded in reaching out to leaders who ultimately will shape the minds of thousands of followers in developing a more positive and productive relationship between Israel and American Jewry.

Harold T. Shapiro, Ph.D.  
Chairman

Steven Bayme, Ph.D.  
Director

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# Foreword

The collapse of the Oslo peace process and the outbreak of the “terror war” in recent years have again raised the specter of American Jewish distancing from Israel, especially among younger American Jews. Thus commentators on weakening Israel-Diaspora ties point to the cancellation of summer travel programs by leading youth movements as well as the depressingly low rate of American Jewish visitations to Israel generally. Others focus on political disagreements with the direction of current Israeli policy. The latest issue of *Heeb*, a hip journal by young Jews for young Jews, for example, features an interview with Professor Noam Chomsky on Middle Eastern politics. Still others point to the issue of “who is a Jew” (or, more recently, “who is a convert”) as a long-festering sore between American Jewry and Israel.

Nonetheless, questions remain whether this widely held view of American Jewish alienation from Israel is, in fact, accurate. To be sure, as assimilation in America proceeds apace, many American Jews distance themselves from all things Jewish—including Israel. In that sense, in direct contrast to expressed Jewish forebodings, increased intermarriage poses a far greater danger to the future health and vitality of American Jewry than does the specter of anti-Semitism. Yet notwithstanding the reality of assimilation, the base of support for Israel among American Jews appears fairly stable. The 2004 American Jewish Committee Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion indicated that 75 percent of American Jews feel close or very close to Israel and define Israel as central to their Jewish identity. Similarly, almost one-third of American Jews predict enhanced ties between Israel and American Jewry over the next five years while only 10 percent predict attenuated ties. These findings are consistent with patterns discovered in earlier surveys. Moreover, Israelis who lament the weakness of American Jewish attachments to Israel often focus more on patterns of tourism than on degrees of political activism, thereby downplaying the critical role that Jewish political activism has played in nurturing the relationship between Washington and Jerusalem that has transcended party and politics for over five decades.

In this context, we commissioned Carl Schrag, a former editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, to probe the nature of grassroots political activism undertaken by American Jews since the collapse of Oslo and the outbreak of the “terror war.” In this report, commissioned by the Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute of AJC in partnership with the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Schrag traces a broad panoply of pro-Israel activism inside the American Jewish community. Not all the efforts he documents are necessarily constructive, nor will all prove

sustaining. Yet these efforts do represent new initiatives undertaken by concerned American Jews, especially younger people, to enhance support for Israel within American society.

To be sure, considerable grounds for concern remain. The situation on campus regarding Israel is by no means favorable, although the Jewish community needs to focus more on the core problems on campus of widespread indifference to Israel or evenhandedness between the Israeli and the Palestinian causes rather than the few headline-grabbing incidents of anti-Semitism, which are by no means emblematic of campus attitudes toward Israel. Similarly, as Schrag notes, Orthodox attachments to Israel are far stronger—both personally and politically—than those of non-Orthodox American Jews, suggesting a critical weakness within the liberal movements that needs to be addressed.

Given these concerns, however, what does one make of American Jewish attachments to Israel during the current *matzav* (Israeli shorthand for the present political and security situation)? I suggest that American Jews are experiencing a quiet agonizing concerning Israel and the Middle East. Generally, most wish to be supportive of Israel, yet are experiencing some ambivalence in expressing their support. This “quiet agonizing” emanates from at least three types of sources: Some permit ignorance concerning Israel to spill over into hostility. Thus we find pronouncements by Jewish university professors claiming that the creation of Israel in 1948 was a tragic mistake that can only be rectified by creating a binational entity—thereby, ironically, fulfilling the most extreme of Palestinian aspirations for a unitary state rather than a two-state solution. For others, the agonizing emanates from sincere misunderstandings or distortions of the media, e.g., the flap over the nonexistent Jenin “massacre.” For still others, the agonizing emanates from the automatic American assumption that all problems must have a solution.

The “quiet agonizing” assumes, however, that the Arab-Israeli conflict is fundamentally about issues of borders, settlements, refugees, etc.—difficult problems, to be sure, but ones that rational people, in rational dialogue with one another, will manage to solve. American Jews who question one or another aspect of Israeli policy do need to be able to express themselves, for the true test of a democracy is its capacity to handle political dissent. Yet Jewish dissenters often fail to understand that the core of the Middle East conflict is existential, meaning that what is in question is the very moral right of a Jewish state to come into existence. Here the centrality of Israel to contemporary Jewish identity and peoplehood cannot leave room for the delegitimization of Israel as a Jewish state that is so currently popular in a variety of intellectual, cultural, and even religious circles. American pro-Israel activism needs to articulate this theme



of Israel's moral right to exist as primary, even while allowing for expression of dissent from one or another aspects of its policy. Carl Schrag's paper examines the nature of American Jewish activism during the current *matzav*. We thank the author and our two cosponsors, CRB and JTA, for making possible this publication, which suggests that grounds for optimism about the depth of support for Israel within the Jewish community coexists with concern for the future quality of the Israel-American Jewish relationship.

Steven Bayme, Ph.D.

*Director*

*Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute*

*on American Jewish-Israeli Relations*

*American Jewish Committee*



## Introduction

Like a lot of American Jews, David Gibbs found himself growing upset at how Israel was being portrayed by the world in general, and by American media specifically, in the months following September 11, 2001. The fifty-one-year-old attorney from Wellesley, Massachusetts, hadn't been to Israel since 1982, and he hadn't been involved in pro-Israel activities, but as he heard more and more people around him criticizing Israel, he wanted to take a stand.

"I've always been politically active," he said, adding that his activism had focused on what he termed "regular American causes" such as civil rights. Global events "awakened in me the idea that my activism needed to involve Jews," he continued. "I feel Israel and the Jewish people are in more trouble than they ever were before."

Gibbs became active in the David Project, a Boston-based start-up group that advocates for Israel. Each week, he devotes five to ten hours to the group's efforts in the community and on college campuses.

Why the David Project? Gibbs said he liked the hands-on opportunities to help that the small group offered him. "Maybe I'm not being fair, but the type of events I saw [at larger organizations] focused on fundraising and cultivating ties with important people.... There's an advantage to a small, agile, dedicated organization that focuses on one thing—getting the message out there."

Gibbs is not an isolated example. Since the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the outbreak of Palestinian violence in the fall of 2000, American Jews have been in a crisis mode of proportions not seen in many years. Across the land, individuals, organizations and communities have been galvanized by the relentless onslaught of reports and images coming from Israel. Among active, pro-Israel American Jews, similar patterns emerged: Each day brought new e-mails filled with tales of senseless attacks, frightful incitement, outrageous media bias, and a variety of calls to action. Conversations in synagogues, day schools, offices and other places where Jews gather turned increasingly to "the situation," a direct translation from the Hebrew shorthand "*hamatzav*" used by Israelis to refer to all the woes of the era. While the broader American public may not have been obsessing—indeed, even if most American Jews weren't overly concerned—active, committed, pro-Israel Jews were beside themselves.

It was a sharp turnaround from the sense, shared by many during the 1990s, that Israel was on the cusp of peace and prosperity, and that American Jews could stop worrying about the Jewish state. Many had allowed themselves to believe that the Jewish state was finally on the road to normalcy, and that committed, concerned

American Jews could comfortably turn their attention to the newest flashpoint of concern: Jewish continuity in the United States.

From the earliest days of Jewish communities in this land, 350 years ago, continuity has been a constant concern. But when the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey was published, its findings about a sharp increase in intermarriage set off alarm bells in Jewish communities across the U.S. Thinking that Israel—which was at the start of a peace process that looked promising—would be just fine on its own, many American Jews turned their efforts to ensuring Jewish continuity at home. This effort, they believed, meant their focus had to be on synagogue life, day schools, Jewish education, and other endeavors that would build Jewish identity and foster a sense of belonging. Israel was unceremoniously shunted aside in favor of the new crisis of continuity.

How quickly perceptions change. Certainly the issues related to Jewish continuity, Jewish education and intermarriage have not been resolved, but the barrage of unnerving news from Israel has prompted many Jews in this country to rethink their earlier decision to take Israel off the short-list of front-burner issues.

In the early stages of the war of terror, as I met Jews across the U.S., I was impressed by what seemed to be a growing awareness of the issues facing Israel and a gripping passion about the threats faced by the Jewish state. My interactions tended to be with a self-selected core group of people who cared enough to affiliate and to seek information about the matzav, but even within this subgroup, I sensed a greater sense of urgency and a deeper understanding of the issues at hand than what I had found before the current crisis.

I wanted to subject this superficial impression to closer scrutiny. Rather than meeting people wherever I happened to be traveling, I wanted to seek out individuals and groups that could tell me about how their lives had changed, how their impressions of Israel—and their own connection to it—had been modified. I wanted to see what Jews across America—in small communities as well as the major population centers—were thinking, saying and doing about Israel. Perhaps most importantly, I wanted to assess the likelihood that the current spike in interest and concern might be the beginning of a widespread effort to invigorate Jewish communities across the country. To do that, I would need to meet the new activists and probe the community leaders.

Working with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, I set out to canvas a selection of communities across the country. The JTA secured funding from the American Jewish Committee and the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, and commissioned a series of articles assessing the state of American Jewish views about, and ties to, Israel.

This monograph draws on the 150 interviews I conducted with Jews in more than twenty communities across the country. Much of the material appeared in the JTA series, although it has been revised and expanded for this monograph. Most of the interviews took place in the spring of 2004, and that is the frame of reference when times, events, and ages are mentioned. My research was conducted before the November U.S. presidential elections were a central focus of American Jewish conversation, which explains why the Bush vs. Kerry question is not discussed here.

This is not a scientific survey; while I draw on the work of social scientists and survey the existing data, this report is based on a journalistic excursion into the American Jewish heartland. The picture drawn in these pages is based on conversations with hundreds of Jews, ranging from the highest figures in Jewish communal life to individual volunteers and grassroots activists far from the centers of Jewish institutions.

As the experience of the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey underscores, it is becoming increasingly difficult to gather accurate quantitative data about the American Jewish community. This report is an impressionistic account of the ways in which many American Jews have reacted to the ongoing crisis in Israel, and how they are expressing their feelings about Israel in this volatile, unsettling era. By telling the stories of dozens of activists and newly concerned American Jews, I believe I have presented a fair picture of the diverse ways American Jews are thinking about Israel. The experiences I have documented, and the sentiments I have highlighted, represent some of the important trends in the American Jewish community.

I devoted much of my attention to the grassroots start-up pro-Israel efforts that have emerged across the U.S. since the fall of 2000. I did so because I believe these sparks of passion and commitment represent a new opportunity for American Jewry to harness young, dedicated people who care about what they see as a key aspect of Jewish peoplehood and Jewish survival. Many of my conversations with leaders in the organized Jewish community focused on what they are doing, or could be doing, to draw these freelancers and newcomers into the ranks of the broader community. If such efforts are not made, many of the most outspoken pro-Israel advocates of this era may, over time, fade away from the scene and return to their former lives, lives in which Israel and Jewish peoplehood did not occupy center stage.

## Waking Up to a New Reality

Jim Hiller was in a jovial mood when I called him on a Sunday morning in the spring of 2004. “I’ve got a herd of picketers outside two of my stores,” the fifty-six-year-old Detroit grocery-store owner said, with a devilish tone that told me he relished a good fight. The picketers were protesting Hiller’s decision to feature Israeli products in his six-store chain. Rather than back down, Hiller seemed to take pleasure in digging in for what has become an increasingly public demonstration of his support for Israel.

Concerned about the economic price Israel had been paying since the start of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000, Hiller began stocking Israeli produce, cheeses, and canned goods in his store. “You cannot imagine a person who would be less likely than me to do this,” Hiller said while protesters handed out leaflets to shoppers. Until a few years ago, his main connection to Israel was what he calls a “perfunctory” annual gift to a local charity that supported the Jewish state. Now he sells some 1,000 Israeli products to his mostly non-Jewish customers, and he’s a hero in the Jewish community.

Across the country, many Jews have sought ways to show their support for Israel as the country’s security and diplomatic situation has deteriorated since the peace process collapsed. The outpouring has been dramatic, often coming from the least expected sources. Countless American Jews have been deluged by e-mails forwarded by people who never seemed to show any interest in Israel prior to the intifada. Petitions, links to articles, dire warnings, heartfelt appeals—cyberspace has opened the door to a new world of involvement that allows people who in years past might have remained passive to get involved with just a few clicks of the mouse.

Many American Jews have rallied in more active ways. Letter writing, demonstrating, and fund-raising are but a few tools in the arsenal of today’s pro-Israel activists. The common thread is passion and a sense of mission, spurred by a feeling of connection to the Jewish state and its inhabitants. But how significant is this spate of activism, concern and advocacy? Is the underlying relationship between American Jews and Israel actually changing, or are we witnessing a temporary upswing in the activity of a small, even shrinking, activist core? Are the efforts of a few concerned Jews masking a larger phenomenon of growing distance and ambivalence among the majority?

Many of today’s activists come from outside the traditional core. Some had been involved in other aspects of their local Jewish communities (synagogues, day schools, JCCs and other frameworks), while others had been altogether unaffiliated or inactive. John Carey, a designer from San Francisco, is one such newcomer. Until recently, Carey, thirty-nine, was an apolitical person who says he “had no opinion on the subject” of Israel. But the self-described Berkeley liberal was jolted by the September 11,

2001, terrorist attacks, and he began to read in order to understand what was happening. His reading list included Thomas Friedman, David Shipler, Kenneth Pollack, and Leon Uris, and he got hooked on *Commentary* magazine. "All of a sudden, I was 'neoccon man,'" he said.

Carey and his pro-Israel friends lamented Israel's poor public relations efforts. "Each time the Israelis brought out another general" to speak on American television in thickly accented English, Carey said, he thought that there must be a better way.

It is easy to be a critic, but until recently inactive Jews rarely did more than lodge their criticism to anybody who would listen. Like many others in the past four years, Carey decided he could not keep silent. He began to design posters and bumper stickers to press Israel's cause. He worked with people at the University of California at Berkeley, at the time a hotbed of anti-Israeli activity.

Now Carey has created BlueStar PR, which has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant money to improve Israel's image. Carey says his activities on behalf of Israel also help him and other Jews live more secure lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where anti-Israel sentiment is prevalent. But he's bothered by a sense that too many other people have remained silent. "The stuff that's out there has not worked," he said. "Am I the first person to think of this?"

Hiller and Carey are just a couple of examples of this awakening. For some, the turning point was the October 2000 lynching of two Israeli army reservists in Ramallah; others say the August 2001 bombing of Jerusalem's Sbarro's pizzeria prompted them to take action. Still others cite the spate of attacks in March 2002, including the Passover massacre of thirty Israelis who were sitting down to a Seder. Still others, like Carey, say that September 11 prompted a new sense of connection with Israel. Whatever the trigger, many American Jews have sought meaningful ways to stand up and be counted. Interviews with activists yield a crop of similar sentiments: People point to the lessons of history, including the Holocaust, and say they can't stand by silently. Some see a clear link between the terrorism aimed at Israel and America's own war on terrorism. Israel, they say, is the world's canary in the mine shaft.

Some had never paid much attention to Israel. Others say their sense that Israel had been on the road to peace and prosperity enabled them to step back and focus on other issues, but they felt compelled to get involved when they saw how rapidly the dream of Middle East peace evaporated. Many people expressed their concern by writing checks to their local federation or other charities that support projects in Israel. Through hundreds of local campaigns, the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization of North American Jewish federations, raised \$360 million in its Israel Emergency Campaign.

Despite all of the concern being expressed at so many levels across the country, very little concrete research has been done about the changing attitudes of American Jews toward Israel. Jehuda Reinharz, president of Brandeis University, lamented the absence of research about American Jews' connections to Israel. "People say all kinds of things about what is going on and what the relationship is, but there is very little data," he said.

Last year, after studying the scholarship that existed on the relationship between American Jews and Israel over the past twenty years, Reinharz issued a report called "Israel in the Eyes of Americans: A Call for Action." In it, he noted that American Jews tend to claim to support Israel—but, for the most part, that's not backed up by an understanding of the country or the issues it faces.

"I would not want to guess how many American Jewish leaders really understand Israel," said Reinharz, who came to the United States from Israel in 1961. "How many can read or speak Hebrew? Very few American Jews go to Israel," he went on. "Their knowledge is peripheral, and as time passes, the young generation knows even less."

This lack of intimate understanding of Israel begs some different questions: When American Jews say they support Israel, exactly what image of Israel are they talking about? The answers are varied. Some respond to images conjured up by their own visits to the Jewish state or particularly stirring stories they've heard. Others respond to a religious or biblical notion of the Land of Israel, and still others may be hard-pressed to explain precisely what motivates them. One thing does, however, seem to unite most activists—an image of a country and a people that need help. Most American Jews who seek to help Israel point to a sense of shared destiny or Jewish peoplehood as a key motivator. And what policies do these activists support? Most defer to the democratically elected government of Israel, saying they will support whatever policies Israel embraces. Others, however, differentiate between their support for Israel and their opposition to certain Israeli policies and actions. This dissent comes both from the left and the right, with some American activists advocating for a more conciliatory Israeli stance, while others call for Israel to reject popular notions of territorial compromise.

The impact of the current threat to Israel can be compared to other tense moments in the Jewish state's history—but there's a major difference in the response of American Jewry. Steven Bayme, director of the American Jewish Committee's Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations, noted that the weeks preceding the 1967 Six-Day War were a seminal moment that brought Israel and Diaspora Jews closer together. Have the collapse of Oslo and the attacks of September 11 served as a similar moment for this generation? Maybe not.



The difference, Bayme said, is that assimilation has rendered many American Jews unconcerned with developments in the Jewish realm. “I don’t think you can make the argument about 2004 that is made about 1967,” he said, because “too many Jews do not care.” Only one in three American Jews has ever visited Israel, Bayme noted, and far fewer actually can connect with Israelis in their own environment.

The concern about weakening Jewish identity is not new, nor is it limited to the Israel-Diaspora paradigm. Jeffrey Solomon, president of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, noted that Jews long have feared that younger members of the community will not share the older generation’s commitment. When Solomon became chief operating officer of the UJA-Federation of New York in 1986, he said, he read minutes from board meetings dating back to 1917. “The one theme that came through in each of the past seventy-five years was, ‘Will the next generation be here in our seats? Are we the last generation?’” he recalled. Solomon, who in his current position has commissioned extensive research about the attitudes and interests of young American Jews, says he is not surprised by the large number of start-up pro-Israel groups since 2000. He says younger Jews are more attracted to entrepreneurial approaches to Jewish and Israel-related issues, as opposed to the larger, established communal frameworks that have prevailed for so many years. These changes are not happening in a vacuum, he said. He noted that many educated young Jews are not affected by the memory of the Holocaust or the rebirth of a sovereign Jewish state. And they are completely unaware of the Soviet Jewry movement, which mobilized so many of their parents in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s.

Lacking historical context, many of today’s pro-Israel activists are unaware or dismissive of the role played by established organizations in Jewish communal efforts over the years. This leads many of them to chart their own course as they seek to help the Jewish state.

## **Core and Periphery**

Among the committed core of pro-Israel American Jews, it’s easy to get the sense that “everybody” is joining the cause. In day schools, synagogues, federations, and other venues, sometimes it seems that everybody is talking about Israel, and most people are voicing similarly supportive messages. But the picture is different when one looks beyond the central institutions of American Jewish life. Most Jews outside of those institutions and their constituencies aren’t involved in pro-Israel activities today. Indeed, they weren’t in the past either.

The American Jewish Committee conducts an annual survey of American Jewish

opinion. Its 2004 poll shows that the community's sense that "caring about Israel is an important part of my being a Jew" has held steady over the past several years, at approximately three-quarters of respondents. AJCommittee has not used the annual poll to probe more deeply into how American Jews have responded to the crisis.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee is widely viewed as having succeeded in harnessing American Jews' pro-Israel passion. Since the collapse of the peace process, AIPAC's membership has soared from 55,000 to 85,000. Nonetheless, as AIPAC executive director Howard Kohr acknowledged, "the number is still fairly small," and he hopes the ranks will continue to grow. AIPAC's successes—witness the strong bipartisan support Israel enjoys in Washington—may prove the organization does not need hundreds of thousands of members in order to succeed, but Jews' sense of connection to Israel goes beyond AIPAC. The questions remain: Are more American Jews getting involved today than in the past? Does the new activism mark a turning point in the relationship between American Jews and Israel?

Hebrew University sociologist Steven M. Cohen conducted a survey in late 2002 that sought to measure American Jews' attachment to Israel. Cohen found that one in ten American Jews said they had become more involved with the Jewish state since the intifada began, while the number was one in five among the under-thirty-five set. But Cohen determined that these shifts were statistically insignificant. No other survey of this sort has been conducted since Cohen finished his.

Many of the people involved at the core of pro-Israel advocacy have a gut feeling that Cohen's survey missed a trend. Steven Nasatir, president of Chicago's Jewish United Fund, questioned Cohen's findings. "This does not reflect the people I'm talking to," he said. In Chicago and across the country, he noted, many Jews who could not be considered core activists have gotten involved in a wide range of pro-Israel advocacy efforts. While stressing that he has not reviewed Cohen's data, and that he respects Cohen's work, Nasatir is convinced that the survey did not tell the true story of the mobilization that he sees in his own community and across the nation.

Among grassroots activists, the findings also do not ring true. "There are real changes going on," said Daniel Rosove, a freshman at the University of Oregon who said pro-Israel activity on his campus boomed over the past year. Esther Renzer, who is president of Stand With Us, a Los Angeles grassroots start-up that advocates for Israel in the community and on college campuses, pointed to a higher level of involvement among L.A.'s Jewish community. "Everyone will have a stronger Jewish identity because of this period," she predicted.

But Martin Raffel, associate executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, which is the umbrella organization of community relations councils across the

U.S., withheld judgment as to whether the ranks of the activist core of pro-Israel American Jews has actually grown. In 2000 and 2001, at the beginning of the crisis, he said, the number of people seeking to get involved grew substantially. As the war of terror dragged on, he added, "There is a burnout effect for some people.... There is a core group of advocates who will always be there when necessary," but he said it is too soon to judge how many of the newcomers will become a part of that core group.

### **Among the New Grassroots Activists**

Jewish organizations have been a part of the landscape in Jewish America for more than a century but, as voluntary associations and institutions, they have never been able to boast full membership of the community. Currently, less than half of all Jews in this country choose to affiliate with a synagogue, and fewer still join other kinds of membership organizations.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that many American Jews who have felt compelled to "do something" for Israel in recent years have looked for a vehicle outside the established organizations. Some, to be sure, did not even know that any such organizations were addressing advocacy issues, and others, like Roz Rothstein and Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, didn't think any of the established groups were doing the job properly.

For months, Los Angeles Jewish activist Roz Rothstein had been watching the events in Israel with increasing horror. But it was the hair-raising accounts of the bludgeoning murder of two Israeli teenagers in a cave near Tekoa in May 2001 that compelled Rothstein to act. She invited forty people from a variety of organizations and backgrounds to a meeting in her living room. "There was nothing being done," Rothstein said. "I wasn't getting any mail. I wasn't even being solicited to buy Israel Bonds, and I'm on every list. We wanted to see what we could do together."

Stand With Us was born that night, and Rothstein today is its executive director. The group, which trains pro-Israel advocates and runs a variety of educational activities in Jewish institutions and on college campuses, is one of a new breed of pro-Israel advocacy start-ups that have been launched in large part because their founders believed they were filling a void.

Major Jewish organizations have long engaged in pro-Israel advocacy in schools, interfaith groups, campuses, the media, and among elected officials. Some of the newcomers felt the Jewish establishment was slow to respond to Israel's crisis after the Palestinian intifada began in September 2000. Others simply were unaware of existing advocacy efforts and drew up plans to advance Israel's cause in the United States.

Around the time that Rothstein established Stand With Us, Jennifer Laszlo

Mizrahi had given birth to her first child and was trying to run her million-dollar political consultancy from home. After years traveling around the globe, Mizrahi found herself watching television for hours while her son slept. What she saw on the news upset her, and she decided she would write a check to a Jewish organization that addressed media coverage of the Middle East conflict. But Mizrahi couldn't find an effort that seemed sophisticated enough—so she decided to tackle the job herself.

She closed her consultancy and established The Israel Project, a Washington-based effort to help pro-Israel spokesmen hone their message. Mizrahi, whose clients included the Clinton-Gore team, collaborated with other political consultants, including Frank Luntz, whose clients come from the Republican side of the political spectrum. The two united around their desire to get Israel's message out to the American public.

Mizrahi has conducted polling about how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is presented to American audiences and has trained pro-Israel spokesmen. "We run The Israel Project the same way I would run a political campaign," said Mizrahi, forty. But she stressed that the stakes are very different: "Whether we win or lose with the images affects whether Jews will be able to live securely in Israel, America, and Europe," she said. While some observers would say that Mizrahi overestimates the impact of her efforts, few can deny that she has developed a major following that includes support from UJC, JCPA, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and others from the so-called Jewish Establishment.

In the spring of 2004, The Israel Project launched a Press Ambassadors program to train Israel advocates across America to serve as liaisons to local journalists and editors whose input shapes coverage of the conflict. Mizrahi said her communications expertise has been bolstered by cooperation with groups that have community-relations experience. The latest effort is co-sponsored by the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization of North American Jewish federations, and the JCPA, which encompasses local community relations councils and national advocacy organizations. The choice of Shoshana Cardin—a former chair of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations—to head up the Press Ambassadors program represented an important step toward merging The Israel Project's work with Establishment efforts for Israel.

Raffel, JCPA's associate executive director, welcomed the emergence of "boutique operations" in Israel advocacy. "Not everyone is suited for working through the Establishment," he said. Others question whether it makes sense to set up new organizations each time somebody identifies a new need.

Some start-ups discover they need the infrastructure and activists of local federa-

tions and community relations councils, and end up collaborating with the established organizations. Gail Hyman, UJC's senior vice president of communications, noted that many start-ups have developed creative approaches to spreading pro-Israel messages. "The federation system needs to pay attention because good ideas come from many sources," she said, pointing to Israel shopping fairs and The Israel Project as two examples. Those ideas have come from countless groups. They range from individual undertakings and informal, grassroots efforts based in synagogues or living rooms to well-funded operations focusing on one aspect of the broad picture of image making.

### **What is "Advocacy?"**

For many Jews, the term "Israel advocacy" immediately brings to mind biased media coverage of the Mideast conflict. Indeed, media coverage and the situation on college campuses have sparked the greatest interest among many American Jews. Most advocacy work isn't as exciting or glamorous as seeing your letter published in the *New York Times*; Raffel and others point out that there are many important ways to build support for Israel. A comprehensive advocacy program aims to address all of them. Few, if any, of the boutique operations do that.

Some, like Israel at Heart, have a singular mission. Founded by New York businessman Joey Low, it brings three-person teams of young Israelis to college campuses and Jewish communities across the United States. The Israelis tell their own stories and help audiences see sides of Israel other than the conflict they see on TV. At a recent meeting at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, two young Israeli men and one woman, all college students and Israeli army veterans, spoke about their daily lives to a group of fifteen law students. "I don't need people to become activists," Atalia Birman, twenty-three, said after the session. "I don't need them to comment on every article they read. My goal is to open their minds. That's why I'm here."

Judging by the response from the audience, Israel at Heart's informal framework works. "Everybody should try to hear their story," second-year law student Daniel Bakondi said.

The Boston-based David Project offers training sessions that teach people to "promote a fair and honest understanding of the Middle East conflict." Tactics include putting the Israeli-Palestinian standoff in context by comparing it to other international conflicts and by assessing the parties' behavior and standards. At a training session in Los Angeles for Stand With Us activists, Charles Jacobs, founder of the David Project, sought to reframe discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict. "It's not about occupation and refugees," he told the crowd in a Los Angeles conference room. "The con-

flict is about Jewish existence in the Middle East.”

While Jacobs concedes that it helps to know the details of the Arab-Israeli conflict, he used the Hebrew term for public relations when he told the group, “You do not need to know everything. I can make a case for ‘*Hasbara* for Dummies.’” Part of the David Project’s approach to spokespersonship is the art of spin. Jacobs offered tactics for turning a challenge or a question into an opportunity to present a preplanned message or make a statement. While this tactic works well on television—witness the success of some Palestinian spokesmen—the most effective advocates still are armed with facts, figures, and a solid grasp of history.

Although many of the start-ups have focused on media coverage of the intifada, the notion that there’s a problem with media coverage of the Middle East isn’t new: The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America has been operating since 1982, but it has grown significantly since the intifada began. It has been joined by Honest Reporting, which encourages people to hold newspapers and television networks accountable for their coverage.

In communities across the country, scores of informal media monitoring groups have cropped up to keep tabs on local news organizations. Local JCRCs, as well as the national Jewish defense organizations, offer guidance. Other approaches to media coverage have been undertaken by well-funded niche operations, including Israel 21C and Access/Middle East.

Israel 21C, whose slogan is “Israel beyond the conflict,” promotes stories about aspects of life in Israel that have nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict. It works with journalists to place stories from Israel about scientific, medical or technological breakthroughs. Access/Middle East positions itself as a tool for journalists providing “context to the events as they break in the Middle East.” The group’s Web site aggregates stories from hundreds of sources, and the group holds conference calls and briefings.

Despite their enthusiasm for innovative efforts, many Israel advocacy veterans caution against a tendency to identify “advocacy” with the media. Jay Tcath, director of Chicago’s JCRC, said certain high-profile advocacy activities have enjoyed extensive attention out of proportion to their real importance. “We go through fads where media coverage is the 800-pound gorilla,” he said. “Then campus becomes the flavor of the month. There are individuals in start-ups who are convinced they have the magic bullet to solve these particular problems.” But the nature of the situation in Israel “is much more complicated,” he cautioned.

The Establishment organizations have been working hard to convince activists that “advocacy” means much more than media monitoring and campus work. Last

year, UJC and JCPA offered six regional advocacy training workshops, and JCPA provides consulting services to communities as they implement local advocacy efforts. Raffel and others said the goal of enhancing American perceptions of Israel is better served by a broad effort to educate, not a narrow focus on battling media bias. In mid-2004, UJC provided funding to JCPA for the implementation of a two-year plan to turn their crisis-based advocacy efforts into a longer-term operation to support Israel advocates across the country.

The huge array of start-ups begs the question: Does Israel need so many approaches to building positive public opinion? While everyone I have interviewed on the subject acknowledged that some of the start-ups have made a contribution, Lisa Eisen, program director for the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation, predicted that when the dust settles, the established organizations still will be doing most of the work. “These flavor-of-the-week efforts make a splash and then dissipate,” Eisen said, stressing that she was not referring to any start-up in particular. “I don’t know about the sustainability of some of the newer organizations.”

Sustainability comes from having enough ideas, energy, money, followers and reach to remain vital and relevant. Some niche operations have developed close working relationships with Establishment groups, but when considering the efforts of those that strive to stay independent, a key question has to be whether that independence helps the pro-Israel cause or merely dilutes activists’ efforts. It’s also important to consider what happens to a start-up’s activists if the start-up shuts down.

Some of the new activists say nothing would make them happier than to be able to close shop and return to their former lives. “If Israel was at peace and the crisis subsided, I would look forward to reopening my business and going back to my life,” Mizrahi said. “Unfortunately, I don’t see that happening in the near term or the long term.”

### **Start-Up Shutdown: A Good Idea that Got Left Behind**

When it comes to boutique advocacy efforts for Israel, there may be something of a Darwinian process at play. “It’s a lot like the free market with venture capital,” says Stephen Hoffman, president and CEO of UJC. “Not every program can get enough capital to stay alive long enough to show a profit.”

Some significant pro-Israel boutique operations have solidified their position among the campaigns and efforts under way across the country. The Israel Project is the best example. While still an independent entity, today it partners with UJC, JCPA,

the Conference of Presidents and JCRCs across the country. Other efforts have been developed by well-meaning individuals—and then abandoned.

Three years ago, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with a group of Jewish entertainment executives in Hollywood and challenged them to do something about Israel's image problem. A group of people rose to the challenge and formed Project Communicate. They developed an innovative advertising campaign designed to raise awareness about Israel on college campuses and to encourage Jewish students to get involved. The participants put up some seed money and the Los Angeles Jewish federation provided additional funding. A pilot program was rolled out on four Southern California campuses, where ads placed in campus newspapers showed the common bonds between young Americans and Israelis. "Go-cards" distributed on campus stressed the same themes. The organizers supplemented the campaigns with focus group meetings of uninvolved Jewish students on each campus.

Brent Cohen, one of the participants, says the results showed the group had found an effective way to reach what he calls one of the most elusive targets of organized Jewish outreach: unaffiliated young Jews. He says the focus groups turned into identity-enhancing sessions for the participants, and the ad campaigns shifted support away from the Palestinian side. If Project Communicate had been an undertaking of an established organization, its initial success might have been parlayed into a national rollout, and the "go cards," posters, ads, and focus groups that engendered so much interest in Southern California might be staples on dozens of campuses nationwide today. But Project Communicate was an underfunded effort by a bunch of well-meaning, busy people.

"It was never designed to be an organization with infrastructure," says Dan Adler, a venture capitalist who was a key member of the team. Many of those involved in the effort have remained active in pro-Israel causes, but the pilot program's promising results haven't led to any further use of Project Communicate's model. Cohen, forty-one, who now is chief operating officer of Access/Middle East, speculated that the reason no established organization has adopted Project Communicate's model may have to do with the "Not Invented Here" syndrome common in the high-tech world: Companies often are loathe to use technologies they didn't develop themselves, and Cohen surmised that Jewish organizations may look at advocacy efforts that come from outside with a similar reticence. UJC's Hyman, JCPA's Raffel, and others dispute this, saying that start-ups and individuals working outside the Establishment can be a source of many new and creative approaches. Indeed, the Establishment has embraced numerous ideas that were "Not Invented Here"—including The Israel Project, America's Voices, Israel at Heart, and others.



Whatever the reason for Project Communicate's crash-landing, Cohen made no effort to hide his disappointment. "The people who should know about the program do," he says. "It boggles my mind. Maybe they think they have better ways to spend their money, but this campaign worked. We reached unaffiliated Jewish students. We found them, motivated them--and dropped them," he said. "How pathetic is that?"

### **College Campuses: Crisis or Opportunity?**

Common wisdom has it that Jewish students are facing a deep crisis as college campuses across the United States burn with anti-Israel fervor. Certainly there has been an outpouring of anti-Israel agitation at many campuses since the Palestinian intifada began in September 2000. Faculty, especially in the field of Middle Eastern studies, often are anti-Israel, and student efforts to force schools to divest their holdings in companies that do business with Israel have garnered headlines, if not mass support.

In the fall of 2003, Israeli Cabinet minister Natan Sharansky visited thirteen American college campuses and reported that he was horrified by what he found. In articles that were published in Israel and the U.S., Sharansky recounted conversations he had with Jewish college students who told him they felt helpless in the face of anti-Israel agitation, and he concluded that even those who care are ill-equipped to refute the Arab propaganda.

But aside from the most egregious cases of anti-Israel agitation on campuses, is the common wisdom true?

Some say the campus scene in fact should be a source of hope and inspiration for the Jewish community. At scores of schools across the country, pro-Israel students have mounted a dramatic effort over the past two years to take back campuses from anti-Israel activists.

"We have spent the last two years trying to tip the balance on campus in favor of Israel," said Alexander Ross Berger, twenty, a junior at George Washington University in Washington. He and others say they have succeeded by targeting student leaders, the fraternity system, and other campus opinion makers.

The turning point was spring 2002, when Israel responded to a wave of Palestinian terrorist attacks by invading the West Bank. Palestinians claimed Israeli troops massacred hundreds of Palestinian civilians in the Jenin refugee camp in April of that year. The fallacious charges sparked anti-Israel demonstrations worldwide. At the University of California at Berkeley, students returned from spring break to find that someone had lobbed a cinder block through the glass doors of the Hillel building. Then came a large, out-of-control rally commemorating an episode in Israel's 1948

War of Independence in which Jewish militiamen killed Arab civilians at Deir Yassin.

One Jewish student described the rally as “one of the scariest moments of my life.” The crowd called Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a Nazi, and people spat at anybody who seemed to question the anti-Israel sentiment.

But even at the height of the crisis, the situation was never as clear-cut against Israel as it seemed. As some 1,500 to 2,000 anti-Israel students rallied, and a smaller number occupied a campus building during the Deir Yassin rally, thousands of Berkeley students were casting ballots for student government officers. When the results were published, Jesse Gabriel, who had been a member of the Israel Action Committee, had been elected student body president. Gabriel and Daniel Frankenstein, another Jewish student, had spent the year as what Frankenstein called “the dynamic duo of Israel activists” in the student senate, so there could be no question of where his sympathies were.

Gabriel’s freshman year coincided with the beginning of the Palestinian intifada. Not knowing how to advocate for Israel, he did what thousands of other supporters of Israel had been doing for decades: He tried to convince protesters that they didn’t understand the situation. Over time, he said, he came to realize that he had little chance of winning an argument with someone who was holding a poster denigrating Israeli soldiers as Nazis.

That summer, Gabriel, Frankenstein, and Rebecca Simon, another Berkeley student, went to Washington to participate in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s Saban National Political Leadership Training Seminar, an intensive program for 250 college students from sixty campuses. “We were given the tools to take back the campus,” Frankenstein said on a spring afternoon, seated in a shady spot at an outdoor café near Berkeley’s campus. “Not only have we taken it back—we own the campus now.”

Rather than engaging in shouting matches and refuting every anti-Israel comment, poster, or speaker, the students were taught to promote their own agenda of pro-Israel messages by networking with campus leaders. Simon organized a campus visit by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and used it to build relationships with a wide range of student leaders.

Many Jewish organizations have campus outreach and support programs, but many observers believed they wouldn’t be able to cooperate. The Israel on Campus Coalition, established in 2002 by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation as anti-Israel agitation on college campuses was growing, set out to coordinate multiple efforts to help students adopt a proactive approach to pro-Israel activity. “We have to unlearn many of the old approaches,” said Wayne Firestone, who directs the coalition

and Hillel's Center for Israel Affairs. "You don't have to chase after every extremist who says something nasty about Israel. It just isn't worth the time of Jewish students, who can do more important things to impact on public opinion on campus."

The ICC has succeeded in bringing together organizations with diverse viewpoints—its two dozen members run the gamut from the dovish Americans for Peace Now to the hawkish Zionist Organization of America—though they don't see eye to eye on every issue. Some might say the coalition isn't diverse enough. While many students have mobilized to support Israel, others say they feel alienated by efforts to line them up behind Israeli government positions.

In May 2004, a controversy arose over the removal of Jilian Redford as Hillel president at the University of Richmond in Virginia after Redford sent an e-mail to the Israeli Embassy in Washington, asking, "Could you please stop sending me e-mail after e-mail about radical Zionist propaganda?" according to news reports. Hillel officials said they objected to the tone of Redford's comments. When she refused to apologize, the local JCC, which oversees Hillel, relieved Redford of her duties.

Robert Blecher, a Middle East history professor at the university, organized a letter-writing campaign in Redford's defense. "It is a sad day for Judaism when standing up for one's beliefs is deemed inappropriate," the letter stated. Firestone denied any effort to stifle diverse points of view. Redford had every right to explore her Jewish identity and ask critical questions about Israel, he said—but as an individual student, not through her position as Hillel president.

Some groups help students speak out against the Israeli government, though not necessarily against Israel itself. Recent Brandeis University graduate Judah Ariel, twenty-three, works closely with students across the country as campus committee chair of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, a dovish group. "A lot of students are very pro-Israel, but their sympathies lie with Labor or Meretz, not with Likud or the settlers," he said. "Brit Tzedek helps them find ways to express their Zionism and their support for Israel in the way we believe is the only option for Israel."

Ariel said that on many campuses, Hillel and other organizations welcome Brit Tzedek and other left-wing activists, though he notes that at Brandeis some students treated Brit Tzedek as an anti-Israel threat. "I wish it were possible for the groups that make up the pro-Israel community to be more open to the democracy and debate that is one of the great things about Israel," he said.

It isn't rare for Jewish students to be critical of Israel; some even are prominent pro-Palestinian activists. And others who care about Israel don't want to get involved in political debates at all; they may prefer to participate in Israeli dancing or Israeli cultural activities, or choose religious observance or community service.

But many Jewish students are stumping for Israel on campus. In 2003, three students from the University of Oregon in Eugene went to Washington to attend AIPAC's annual policy conference, which draws thousands of activists—including hundreds of students—from across the country. In 2004, twelve students from Eugene signed up, part of a contingent of 850 students from 150 campuses who went to Washington for the AIPAC policy conference.

Lach Litwer, twenty-four, a senior from Portland, Oregon, majoring in psychology and business, has played a key role in building the pro-Israel community on his campus. Litwer said he was not involved in Jewish campus activities until the day he went to Hillel for free pizza and was recruited to join Alpha Epsilon Pi, a Jewish fraternity that has put Israel advocacy at the center of its national agenda. Last year, AEPi's director of programming invited Litwer to attend AIPAC's policy conference. Then Litwer learned about the birthright Israel program, and got the chance to see Israel last June. Birthright, which offers free ten-day trips to Israel to Jews ages eighteen to twenty-six who never before have been on a peer trip to the Jewish state, has had a significant influence on campus activism.

Hillel serves 15 percent to 30 percent of Jewish students, Hillel's president, Avraham Infeld, said, but birthright offers an opportunity to reach out to another 40 percent of Jewish students—those who aren't opposed to Jewish or Israel-related activities but have not felt compelled to explore them. "If we can pinpoint five or six participants on every birthright bus who have leadership ability, they can be the ones to reach the 40 percent," Infeld said. "We need to find those leaders and invest heavily in them."

Litwer, who serves in the U.S. military reserves and is considering signing on for active duty after graduation, said Israel has become a central part of his identity. He said the growth of pro-Israel activity on campus excites him. "I almost wish I wasn't graduating this year," he said. "I want to see what we can do next year."

He'll be leaving the campus in good hands: Two rising stars of Israel advocacy on the Eugene campus—Jonah Fruchter, nineteen, from Minnetonka, Minnesota, and Daniel Rosove, eighteen, from Los Angeles—are completing their freshman year. The two collected hundreds of signatures for a campus petition in support of Israel. AIPAC coordinated similar petition campaigns at dozens of campuses this year.

The empowerment of pro-Israel activists isn't limited to Berkeley and Eugene. Hillel has placed unprecedented emphasis on Israel over the past two years and works closely with AIPAC to develop strong advocacy groups on campus.

Jonathan Kessler, AIPAC's leadership development director, oversees a far-reaching program to groom thousands of pro-Israel leaders on campus. Through seminars in Washington, trips to Israel and a network of campus liaisons who work with student

leaders, AIPAC helps students build a pro-Israel presence on campus. "I do not agree that anti-Semitism on campus is rampant," Kessler said. "I do not agree that we're losing the battle, and I do not agree with the alarmists who assert that the sky has fallen. Generally speaking, Jewish students are not scared."

The key is hope, not fear, he said. "I want my own children to grow up confident but to know that it's not always easy to be Jewish or pro-Israel," Kessler said. "It's up to parents and institutions to prepare young people for the challenges they'll face."

At Berkeley, the approach seems to be paying off. In 2004, two years after pro-Israel students mounted their pro-Israel campaign on campus, barely 150 people showed up at the third annual Deir Yassin demonstration. Gabriel noted that a pro-Israel petition on campus garnered over 1,500 signatures, while an online petition from Students for Justice in Palestine has garnered only about 150 signatures in three years.

In 2004, AIPAC launched a pilot core education program at four campuses. Groups of about fifty students at the University of Texas in Austin, Washington University in St. Louis, Northwestern University in Chicago, and American University in Washington, D.C., underwent on-campus training to get more comfortable talking about Israel and to identify creative ways to generate support for the Jewish state. At a recent session at the University of Texas, students brainstormed about how to engage other students in discussions about Israel. They role-played situations ranging from a chance encounter at the dentist's office to a conversation between roommates. The pro-Israel group, Texans for Israel, was named Best Political Group on campus in April 2004 by the UT Leadership Board, which recognizes the achievements of student-run organizations each year.

Gabriel, the former student body president from Berkeley, acknowledged that there are uncomfortable moments for Jews and pro-Israel students at Berkeley. But he argued that it's a wonderful time to be Jewish on campus. "The most empowering lesson is that when the Jewish community comes together, we can do anything," he said. "We may be small, but we can effect change. That's what happened at Berkeley."

## **What Does It Mean to Be "Pro-Israel" Today?**

Every week, Sheldon Berman distributes an e-mail compilation of "must-read" articles and commentaries about Israel from a variety of media outlets around the world. He began distributing his newsletter about three years ago, when he and other members of his synagogue, Baltimore-area Suburban Orthodox Congregation Toras Chaim, decided they needed to take steps to educate their 260 member families about events

in Israel. “We’re a very Zionist *shul*,” he said, “and we wanted to prove it.”

Just what does it mean to be pro-Israel in America today? How do American Jews express their ties to Israel?

The old joke says that whenever two Jews get together, they have three opinions. That’s certainly true of the ways American Jews express their support for, and concern about, the Jewish state. Does support for Israel mean writing a check, attending a rally, visiting or even moving there? Politically speaking, does it mean defending the government’s policies or advocating different ones? The questions take on added significance at times of crisis in the Jewish state, and the answers go a long way in reflecting the relationship between American Jews and Israel.

The American Jewish Committee’s 2004 Survey of American Jewish Opinion found that some 75 percent of respondents said they feel very close or fairly close to Israel, and 74 percent agree that “caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew.” A smaller, but still significant majority of respondents, 63 percent, said they believe they should support the positions of Israel’s elected government even if they disagree with them.

But beyond survey numbers are the actions taken. One measure of support for Israel is a visit or long-term stay. Berman has visited five times in the three-and-a-half years since the Palestinian intifada began. Next year, his son will study in a yeshiva there.

According to Brandeis University professor Jonathan Sarna, Berman is fairly typical of the Orthodox community. “There is a huge difference between the Orthodox community and others,” Sarna said. “The Orthodox have by and large continued to go to Israel and to send their children to Israel.”

Nathan Hyman is a junior at the Orthodox Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community High School in Baltimore. “You’d be a different kind of Jew if you were disconnected from Israel,” he said. “The message I’ve gotten from being in this school is that Israel is a cornerstone of the Jewish faith.” He added, “It seems natural to be involved.” The school has changed its Israel studies curriculum in light of the current unrest, according to Joshua Gurewitsch, who chairs the Jewish history department. Students learn to read media accounts of the conflict with a critical eye, and guest speakers help prepare seniors for potentially hostile encounters with anti-Israel activists on college campuses.

Many of Beth Tfiloh’s students will get additional reinforcement before going to college. Most of the ninety seniors go to Israel on an extended class trip, and many spend a year studying in yeshivas or other educational programs before going on to college.

While Orthodox youngsters may have the most all-encompassing immersion in

Israel education, other movements also seek to instill in their youths a strong tie to the Jewish homeland. Just a few miles south of Beth Tfiloh, in Bethesda, Maryland, members of United Synagogue Youth, the Conservative Movement's youth arm, have been volunteering to run a phone bank for the Koby Mandell Foundation, which supports victims of terrorism in Israel. Mandell was a thirteen-year-old Israeli-American who was bludgeoned to death by Palestinian terrorists in 2001. Mandell's parents had made *aliyah* from Maryland, where his father, Seth, had been a Hillel director.

One recent night, eight high school students phoned donors across the country to seek support for the foundation's Camp Koby, which provides a camp-style break for Israeli children who have lost a loved one to terrorism. Taking a quick break between calls, fifteen-year-old Abe—the organizers asked that last names not be published—said that learning about Mandell helped him put a face on the terrorism he learns about in religious school.

"I feel good to be doing this," he said. "It's better than sitting at home watching TV."

The group surpassed its goal the night I visited them, raising \$1,681 for Camp Koby.

As the teenagers in Bethesda learned when they raised money for a humanitarian cause in Israel, caring about the Jewish state isn't expressed only by political activism and advocacy. Across the country, many start-ups focus on showing a different kind of solidarity with Israel—or, more to the point, with Israelis. Clicking on the Internet, concerned friends of Israel can express their support by arranging to have hot pizzas and cold soft drinks delivered to IDF soldiers on patrol far from home, or by twinning their own bar mitzvah with the bar mitzvah of an Israeli who lost a loved one to terror.

Increasingly, people-to-people efforts seek to link Jews in Israel and the U.S. Project 2000 pairs dozens of communities in Israel with cities across America for more than merely a fund-raising connection. Professional exchanges between doctors, engineers, teachers, and others are a staple of the program, but other kinds of bridge-building has been better-suited to the reality of recent years, in which travel to Israel has been infrequent. Letter-writing projects link schoolchildren and encourage them to explore their common bonds, and Internet-based chess tournaments have brought together Jews of all ages across the ocean.

Many of these people-to-people efforts are spearheaded by large Jewish organizations—mainly federations—but others are the brainchild of grassroots activists who seek to stress the human connection between Jews in Israel and around the world.

The summer of 2004 brought a sharp rise in the number of young Jews of all denominations who have been traveling to Israel, leading to increased opportunities to

forge meaningful ties between Jews here and there.

Rabbi Barry Block, of the Reform Temple Beth-El in San Antonio, Texas, said his congregants are very interested in Israel. He said that though they had shied away from Israel travel following the collapse of the peace process in late 2000, now “we’re back—with a lot of excitement.” In the summer of 2004, six of Block’s young congregants went to Israel with the Reform Movement’s youth arm, the National Federation of Temple Youth. That’s the same number that went in 2000, before the intifada began. Another congregant went to Israel on a high school study program. Last year none went, and the previous year there was only one. “We’ve busted the federation’s budget for Israel scholarships,” Block said with pride.

At the college level, enrollment for study-abroad programs at the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, and other Israeli institutions of higher learning are on the rise again, after falling sharply for several years.

If resuming travel to Israel is a sign that Jews are adjusting to the new reality of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, then a return of dissent and disagreement is another indicator. Observers say that, like Israelis, many American Jews who care about Israel but disagree with the government’s policies felt compelled to keep quiet during the early part of the intifada, when Israel was under constant attack. But recent stirrings on the political left show that the limits of silence are being reached in Israel, and American Jews who disagree with Israeli policy—or are supporting Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s plan to withdraw from Gaza—also are speaking up.

“There’s more than one way to be pro-Israel,” said Steve Masters, forty-four, a Philadelphia lawyer who was a founder of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, which describes itself as a pro-Israel, pro-peace, and pro-human rights organization. Since its founding in April 2002, Brit Tzedek has advocated dismantling Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and pushing Israel’s leaders to be more forthcoming in peace negotiations.

When Sharon met President George W. Bush in Washington in April, Brit Tzedek delivered to the two leaders a petition signed by 10,000 American Jews calling for the Israeli government to offer financial incentives to settlers who relocate into Israel proper. Masters, who chairs Brit Tzedek’s advocacy and public policy efforts, maintained that the group’s positions are embraced by many Israelis. “I distinguish between support for Israel and support for Israel’s government,” he said.

The president of Brit Tzedek, Marcia Freedman, who made *aliya* and served in the Israeli Knesset before returning to the U.S., where she now lives in Berkeley, California, accuses the organized community of stifling dissent on Israel. She says the old joke about two Jews having three opinions is no longer accurate. “Now you get ten



Jews, one allowed opinion. Everything else is traitorous," she said. "It's intimidating to be told, 'You're threatening Israel by saying that.' If you're told that what you're saying is dangerous, you start being quiet."

Some community leaders have dismissed such gripes as unfounded, arguing that there simply are fewer dissenting voices because so many American Jews perceived that even Israel's most generous peace offers elicited a belligerent Arab response.

Some Jews seem to be simply turning away from Israel rather than wrestling with the difficult issues. "Almost no one talks about Israel," said Gerald Bubis, who was the founding director of the School of Jewish Communal Service at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles and is a prominent figure in left-of-center pro-Israel groups in Los Angeles. "Far more people just are not interested in Israel today because it is just too painful for them." As an example, he cited the charities chosen by children at their bar mitzvahs. In years past, many children asked that gifts be made to Israel-related charities, he said, but today he sees many more choosing local causes.

Still, in recent months, Bubis, who is retired, has noticed something of a resurgence of left-of-center voices in his community. Attendance has increased at programs sponsored by the local Peace Now chapter and the Progressive Jewish Alliance, which promotes left-of-center views on Israel.

Dissent rears its head in countless ways, in communities large and small. In Eugene, Oregon, Rabbi Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin watched with alarm a couple of years ago as congregants' discussions about Israel became increasingly heated. He initiated the creation of a Jewish Community Relations Council, hoping it would serve as a tool for internal discussions and formulation of consensus views. But it hasn't always worked as intended.

Some members of the community have dropped out of the JCRC or declined to join at all because they feared it had a left-wing bent. Others have stayed away for the opposite reason, fearing it toes the Israeli government line. A local Jewish-Palestinian peace group, founded by an ex-kibbutznic, operates outside the JCRC, and the two groups eye each other with suspicion. Recently, JCRC members planned to write an opinion column about Israel's West Bank security barrier for the local newspaper. When they couldn't agree on a position even after lengthy debate, the op-ed was shelved, and they turned their attention to issues on which they could agree, such as working with local schools to create a Middle East curriculum free of bias.

The disagreements in a small community like Eugene seem tame compared to the scene in San Francisco. The director of the region's JCRC, Doug Kahn, noted that thousands of local Jews can be counted on to mobilize around Israel-related issues, but he said he is worried by the large number who simply have "moved on" to other issues

or causes. He added that the collapse of the Israeli left has led many on the left in his community to step back from their pro-Israel activities.

“It has been a challenge to keep them engaged,” Kahn said, adding that a relatively small number have become pro-Palestinian activists. The real problem is long-term, he said, and it didn’t start in the last few years: He points to the 1982 Lebanon War as the beginning of a period in which many American Jews grew disillusioned with Israel.

“It’s fairly easy to mobilize the activist core around issues related to campus or media,” he said. “There tends to be not enough attention paid to a diminished attachment felt by a larger cross-section of American Jews.”

### **Where Grass Roots and Establishment Meet**

Shoshana Cardin, a former chairwoman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said national organizations were slow to recognize the threat posed to Israel by events since the Palestinian intifada began in September 2000. “There was not an appearance of a lot going on,” she said. “There was not a national voice.”

Across the country, grassroots activists stepped in to fill that perceived void. This isn’t the first time grassroots activists have pushed important issues onto center stage in the Jewish community: The Soviet Jewry movement, which recently marked its fortieth anniversary, got started largely due to the efforts of individual Jews who were far from the center of communal power.

Richard Wexler, vice chairman of UJC, called the efforts of the past several years a refreshing development. “This was a grassroots embrace of Israel,” he said. “The organized Jewish community’s activities were a response to the demand by local communities around the country to do something.” Wexler was referring to UJC’s Israel Emergency Campaign, which raised \$360 million above and beyond regular federation fund-raising campaigns. Some critics say much more could have been raised, but Wexler termed the emergency campaign a “remarkable” success—especially since it came during an economic downturn in the United States.

In early August, UJC and the JCPA announced that \$1.7 million of the emergency campaign’s funds would be used to fund two years of the groups’ joint Israel advocacy efforts. One community leader, who asked not to be identified, said the allocation was a response to the success of grassroots efforts.

As important as funds are, getting people involved and making Israel part of American Jews’ lives may be even more important. In the spring of 2002, when Israel

suffered a long series of grisly terror attacks, culminating with the Passover massacre in Netanya, in which thirty were killed, grassroots activists across the U.S. were again calling on the organized community leadership to *do something*. That “something” took the form of a massive rally that was held in Washington, D.C., on April 15, 2002. In a remarkable coordinated effort between the Conference of Presidents, UJC, other organizations, and the grass roots, dozens of buses and planes were chartered from cities across the country, bringing more than 100,000 people to the capital for the most dramatic show of support the American Jewish community has mustered since the outbreak of violence.

The Washington rally was a response to a popular call for action, but many new activists don't even know they care until they experience some form of rude awakening. When Rebecca Simon enrolled three years ago as a freshman at the University of California at Berkeley, she expected to be surrounded by bright young people who were intent on open debate and inquiry. In her first week on campus, Simon saw a poster of a Jewish star superimposed on a swastika and naively assumed there must be an interesting story behind the mixed symbols. She approached the man who was promoting it and asked him to explain it. She was shocked when he refused to shake her hand because he assumed she was a Zionist. That was Simon's first introduction to hatred of Israel.

Determined to get involved, the Orange County, California, native gravitated to Hillel and pro-Israel groups on campus. Since then, she has gone from knowing nothing about Israel to being a sharp, inquisitive advocate who lobbies elected officials and spreads pro-Israel messages on campus. Simon is typical of the new activists: Until something clicked, she had had no interest in Israel and never expected to become involved. Her chance encounter with anti-Israel propaganda ignited a desire to make a difference, and she found support and guidance from a variety of established organizations, including Hillel and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, as well as a core of like-minded activists.

Across the country, many American Jews have felt compelled to get involved on Israel's behalf. Some have found their place in large, established organizations, while others have started or joined new pro-Israel efforts.

The survey conducted in late 2002 by Hebrew University's Steven M. Cohen found no significant change in the number of people active on behalf of Israel, but activists across the United States tell of individuals being moved to “do something” in ways similar to Simon: Some write a check, others talk about the situation with friends, still others join ongoing advocacy efforts or start new ones.

Some of the start-ups, born in a burst of passion and concern, have grown,

matured, and begun to develop into high-profile undertakings, while others remain small or fade away altogether.

Wexler acknowledged that many individuals have exhibited passion and new fervor in the past four years, but questioned how many will remain active in the long term. “Many of us who are engaged in fund-raising believe there is the potential for this to be a lost opportunity,” he said. “Without appropriate advocacy, we American Jews are going to lapse back into our previous habits.” What’s needed, he said, is leadership from the large organizations, and an effort to reach out to newcomers.

JCPA’s Raffel pointed to cooperation between start-ups and established Jewish organizations as an ideal way to take advantage of pro-Israel sentiment. “It’s a mistake to squelch entrepreneurship in Israel advocacy,” Raffel said. Start-ups and established organizations don’t always attract the same following, so by working cooperatively they can have a stronger impact, he noted. “Even if there’s no merger, we ought to strive for coordination wherever possible,” he said.

Malcolm Hoenlein, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations executive vice chairman, noted that grassroots activists played a key role in the Soviet Jewry movement of the 1970s and 1980s. He tries to maintain contact with grassroots pro-Israel groups today because, he said, “they energize us all.”

Raffel noted that Soviet Jewry activists were fueled by the human face of refuseniks. Following his own trip to the Soviet Union in 1985, he said, his activism was motivated by the individuals he had met and the people he wanted to help. That personal touch should be employed today as well, he said. “Israel has to be a place you care about, with people you care about,” he said.

If established organizations can tap grassroots activists and bring them into the communal structure, the grassroots efforts are more likely to be sustained, Hoenlein said.

Partnerships have been growing between established organizations and a variety of start-ups, including The Israel Project, Israel 21C, Israel at Heart, and others. As The Israel Project gained prominence, it began to work closely with large organizations. In April, Cardin agreed to chair The Israel Project’s new Press Ambassadors program. “The grass roots have been so concerned and anxious to participate in something that they have spurred the establishment to engage in very clear Israel advocacy efforts,” Cardin said, stressing that The Israel Project is only one such example.

The downside of grassroots efforts is that some good ideas may not be able to sustain themselves without the support of larger groups, and may fade away. Some observers say there’s a delicate balance between dependence and independence: If a large organization embraces a start-up and lends support, it can flourish—but if it absorbs the start-up altogether, it can lose the passion and vision that made the idea successful.

Beyond the ideas that grassroots groups develop, they also attract people who might not feel comfortable in more institutionalized efforts. Stand With Us has provided a framework for Allyson Rowan-Taylor to express her newfound passion for Israel. The interior designer said she had been content to live on the fringes of Jewish life until a 1999 visit to Israel changed her life. “Being involved with Stand With Us has put me in touch with how I feel as a Jewish woman,” she said, and she has become a frequent lecturer on Israel throughout Southern California.

Hoenlein said large organizations should be doing more to open themselves to community participation. “We’re always looking for ways to reach people,” he said. “I do not think we should diminish local initiatives, because they give people satisfaction. There are incredible resources in our community. They have to be involved.” Hoenlein, who was one of the prominent advocates on behalf of Soviet Jewry, sees a major difference between that struggle and the current activism on behalf of Israel. “We did not have organizations then; we had a movement,” he said. “It touched people’s hearts and souls in a way I don’t think we are doing today. We should be equally proud to reach out and mobilize people today.”

People like Simon, the Berkeley student, don’t see a risk of losing interest: In June, she participated in a birthright Israel trip, and returned home more motivated than ever.

Before her trip, Simon said, she had focused on Israel as an issue, rather than as a place filled with real people living their daily lives. Returning to Berkeley, she immediately enrolled in Hebrew classes and began to look for a way to spend more time in Israel.

Cardin pointed to the campus model as one which was worth emulating. Once students are empowered, she said, they can achieve a lot. “The future of Israel will determine the future of the Jewish people, including American Jews,” she concluded. “If we do not act with that in mind, we will be performing a disservice to our children and our grandchildren.”

Simon, for her part, sees the new connection she has forged to Israel as a central—and lasting—part of her life. “I don’t think I could ever be detached from this issue,” she said. “Everyone has to find their life’s purpose. I think I’ve found mine.”

## **Conclusion**

When I set out on my travels to gather the information for this report, I wanted to see how American Jews were responding to events in Israel. I wanted to test my sense that many were growing more active in advocacy efforts, and I wanted to explore how lasting this burst of involvement might be.

What, then, did I find?

I found countless personal stories and narratives that touched me: When I met people like Rebecca Simon, at UC Berkeley, or John Carey, of BlueStar PR, or Margot Helphand, who chairs the Eugene, Oregon, JCRC, I was impressed by their passion and determination to make a difference.

Some of these people really are making a difference. Others may be focused on a tree, causing them to miss the forest. But even if some of these hard-core activists may not be effecting change on a grand scale, their own lives clearly have undergone significant metamorphosis. Their Jewish identities have been burnished, and their commitment to the wellbeing of Israel is indisputable.

Nonetheless, for all the committed pro-Israel Jews out there—and there are many—there are many more who, in the words of AJC’s Steven Bayme, “just don’t care.” It’s the mixed blessing of America that Jews are so well-accepted that they can cease to care about Jewish peoplehood.

For so many years, Jews longed for acceptance. The good news is that it’s never happened as fully as it has in the U.S. in recent decades. The bad news is that this acceptance has prompted unprecedented numbers of Jews to opt out and drift away. Even those who do care often lack the knowledge or understanding of the issues required to stand up and be counted.

As I review the hundreds of conversations I’ve had with pro-Israel activists across the U.S., and I try to gauge what lasting impact their efforts and their passion may have, I find myself reverting to the questions that motivated me to launch this quest. Do the activities and actions of individuals make a difference? Will they actually help Israel? Will the organized Jewish community take note long enough to help the grass-roots activists find a place inside the “big tent” of Jewish community life? If not, will the energy represented by these mavericks be lost to the Jewish community and the pro-Israel camp?

Does all the good work being done by friends of Israel in this country really matter when fewer and fewer American Jews feel a connection to the Jewish homeland anymore?

Over at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the resounding answer is “yes.” AIPAC has become such an effective lobby, not by rallying millions of American Jews, but by building a dense network of relationships with lawmakers, public officials, and the people who work with them—all to ensure that the U.S.-Israel relationship remains strong.

AIPAC plays a crucial role in maintaining the close alliance between Washington and Jerusalem. In a world that has just one superpower, this relationship is more important than ever. For AIPAC to succeed, it doesn’t need a huge following beyond

its core supporters. But for the Jewish people to succeed and thrive, we all need more than the success that AIPAC delivers so consistently. That is where the grassroots efforts take on importance, and the established Jewish organizations must do more to reach out to the newcomers, to ensure they remain a part of the broad activist pro-Israel camp.

This report does not even begin to address the question of how well-informed Israelis are about the efforts undertaken on their behalf by their American *landsmen*, but if it did, I am certain the conclusion would be that other, or additional, steps need to be taken. For all of the shopping fairs, fund-raising, telethons, media monitoring efforts, and campus awareness campaigns in which friends of Israel have engaged, few Israelis are aware of the passion and concern on this side of the ocean.

Even when American Jews do travel to Israel in significant numbers, most Israelis remain largely oblivious to the ties that bind these Americans to the Jewish state. With the exception of Israelis who work in tourism or in the bureaucracies of the government or the Jewish Agency, few are aware of the role played by U.S. Jews, or of the role Israel plays in their lives.

Part of this has to do with the priorities that are stressed among pro-Israel activists. As anybody who is well-acquainted with American Jewry or the Israeli reality can attest, there's much more at stake than media bias and campus hostility. While both of these maladies are real, it's easy to conjure up a long list of challenges that could vie for precedence among pro-Israel American Jews.

But when I set out on this project, it was not my objective to order the priorities of American Jewish friends of Israel. I set out to sample the activism, advocacy, passion and conflicts being experienced by American Jews in this period of uncertainty, unrest and terror. And I found many dedicated people giving their all in ways they believe to be important.

There are, however, bigger issues at stake. Despite all of the talk of the centrality of Israel, only one in three American Jews has ever visited the country. And the terror war has had a very real impact on American Jews' readiness to visit the Holy Land. Last year, barely one million tourists from the entire world visited Israel, and only one out of four were Jews. Although the numbers have increased sharply in 2004, they have not yet returned to their 1990s level.

Few Israelis have any notion of the degree of pro-Israel activities under way across America. Few know about the funds being raised, the ties being forged, the education and advocacy efforts being advanced.

Despite the efforts of UJC and other American Jewish organizations to educate Israelis about American Jewry, as far as most average Israelis are concerned, if the

Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall in Jerusalem is bereft of American Jewish tourists, the American Jewish community must have washed its hands of Israel.

Fund-raising for Israel, monitoring the media, buying Blue and White, lobbying Congress, and all the other good deeds undertaken by so many well-intentioned Jews across America are important. But if the bridge between the members of the tribe who live here and there is neglected, these efforts lose much of their meaning.

For all the passion that John Carey pours into BlueStar PR, the San Francisco nonprofit that has placed pro-Israel billboards around the city and designs attractive pro-Israel posters and postcards, the fact that he hasn't been to the country in fifteen years inevitably informs his advocacy. The notion that no Israel advocate can make the case without understanding the place has, unfortunately, been played out repeatedly in recent years.

When Rebecca Simon returned from her birthright Israel experience, she said it infused her activism with a new focus and intensity. Only by actually experiencing the people and the land, she insisted, could she really understand the importance of her work in California. Her revelation applies beyond her own personal experience. Visits to Israel build living bridges between the people on both sides of the Israel-Diaspora paradigm. Perhaps that's why Israel at Heart, the start-up effort that brings teams of young Israelis on tours of American campuses and Jewish communities, gets such rave reviews. The teams talk about terror and security, of course, but they also talk about the pleasures of living in Tel Aviv and countless aspects of daily life. Nevertheless, bringing a few hundred articulate Israelis on tour won't bridge the gulf. That's where birthright Israel comes into play. Tens of thousands of American Jews have seen the country up-close, thanks to this program that offers free trips to the uninformed and unaffiliated. As those numbers grow, and as older Jews travel to Israel, the relationships between Israel and the Diaspora have a better chance of developing beyond platitudes and leaders, and spreading to the grass roots of people who care—on both sides.

Despite the polls, assimilation, and unrealistic notions about the Israel-Diaspora relationship from both sides, I come away from this odyssey filled with hope.

The ways in which so many Jews have embraced Israel and worked to enhance the American public's perception of the Mideast conflict *does* make a difference.

There's plenty of room for improvement, and much work needs to be done. But if more people find their place in organized Jewish life, and if their Jewish identity encompasses a true sense of peoplehood, then not only will they help secure American support for Israel at this difficult time, but their efforts will go a long way toward strengthening the links between Jews in Israel and the Diaspora.



*Carl Schrag is a former editor of the Jerusalem Post. He currently resides in Chicago, where he studies the changing relationship between American Jews and Israel. He lectures, teaches, and writes across the country.*



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