

# MOMENT

**LEBANON**



# VOL. 7, NO. 7

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# WHAT AMERICAN JEWS BELIEVE

## An eye-opening report on a recent survey of attitudes toward Israel

### STEVEN M. COHEN

Is it getting harder for American Jews to love Israel?

Just six months ago, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg wrote in the *New York Review of Books* that "during the last five years, there has been a perceptible weakening of support within the world Jewish community for Begin's Israel." At the same time—and in the face of grim economic conditions—pledges to the United Jewish Appeal are up, as are membership in and support for AIPAC, the principal pro-Israel lobbying organization in Washington.

What do American Jews believe? Are we, as Norman Podhoretz proclaimed in the Sunday New York *Times Magazine* shortly after the Six Day War, "all Zionists"—and, if we are, what do mean by Zionism? Is enthusiasm still growing—or has disillusionment set in?

For the first time, we can move beyond speculation in answering such questions as these. A recent national survey provides us with solid information on the dispositions of American Jewry so far as Israel is concerned. Sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and conducted by this author, the survey offers fascinating—and often surprising—information regarding our beliefs.

### Loving Zion vs. Being a Zionist

Once the United Nations, in its infinite wisdom, decided that Zionism is racism, we had no choice; all of us became Zionists. But it is clear that our Zionism is an expression of stiff-neckedness rather than of ideological conviction; we wear the badge, but resist the beliefs that go with it.

Zionism, in its classical turn-of-the-century version, deprecated the Diaspora. The classic doctrine held that Jews could not be at ease outside of Zion, and should not want to be. It taught, on the one hand, that anti-Semitism was so endemic to Western culture that it was folly to imagine we might live in genuine harmony with

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*Steven M. Cohen is in the Sociology Department at Queens College and at the Center for Jewish Studies, CUNY. He is the author of the forthcoming book, American Modernity and Jewish Identity, to be published by Tavistock.*

our neighbors. But if, somehow, we did, then there was always the other hand—the threat of mass assimilation. One way or the other, no good could come of Diaspora life. Zionism was necessary to protect the Jews from the twin threat.

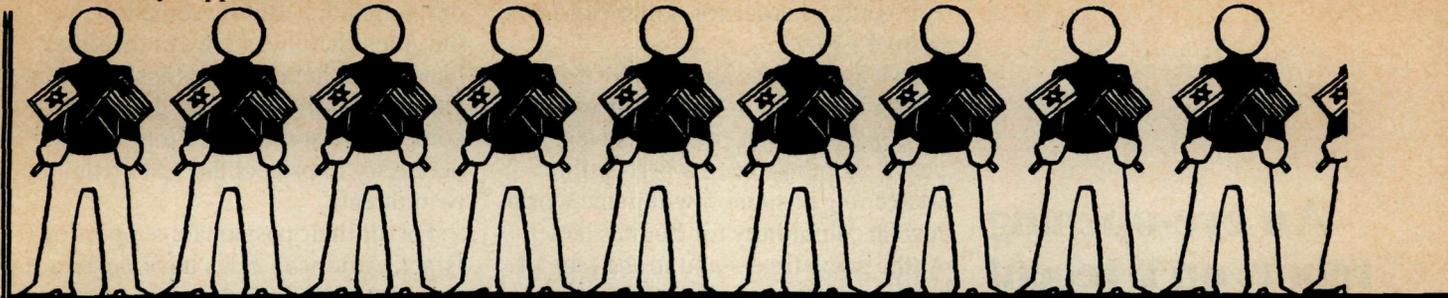
For all their passionate support of Israel, American Jews have never accepted the Zionist analysis nor its implications. And "We are all Zionists" notwithstanding, they do not accept it today. In fact, by a margin of better than three to one (61 percent to 17 percent), respondents to the 1981–2 National Survey of American Jews agree that "there is a bright future for Jewish life in America."

If the Jews do not feel "pushed" out by America, do they, as the Zionists have hoped, feel "pulled" in by Israel? Not if aliyah—immigration to Israel—is the measure of attraction. A vast majority of the sample—81 percent—disagree with the statement, "Each American Jew should give serious thought to settling in Israel," as against a mere 12 percent who endorse this view. (Lest those who press for aliyah be disheartened, it should be noted that if only 10 percent of the 12 percent who think the matter worthy of serious thought were to follow the thought with action, the number of American Jews moving to Israel would reach about 70,000—better than 20 times the actual number that make the move annually.)

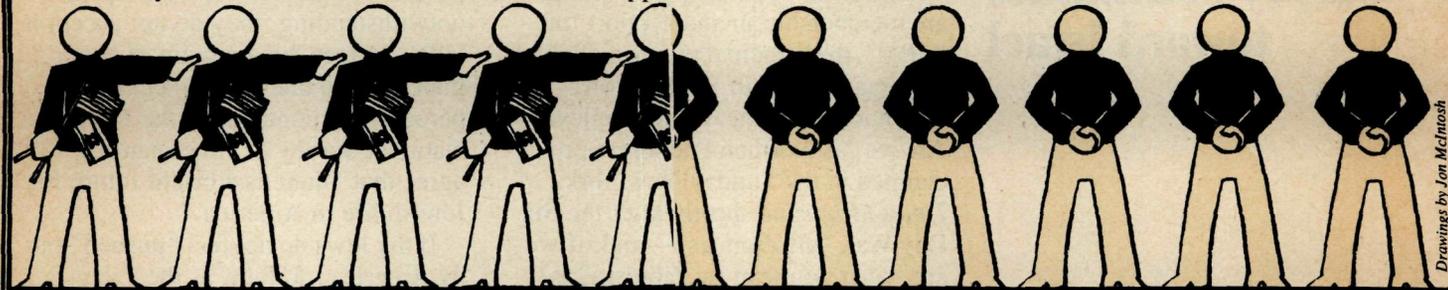
Nor, finally, do American Jews feel at all uncomfortable in their endorsement of Zion from a distance. The doctrine that support for Israel is "good" for America has taken firm root amongst American Jews. By a margin of three to one (75 percent against 25 percent), they reject the notion that "there are times when my devotion to Israel comes into conflict with my devotion to America." And fully 93 percent hold that "U.S. support for Israel is in America's interest." Similarly, 76 percent agree that "Jews should not vote for candidates who are unfriendly to Israel," indicating once again a fundamental acceptance of the legitimacy of pro-Israelism in this bright-futured land.

If any cloud diminishes the brightness, it is a nimbus of skepticism regarding the reaction of other

92% say support for Israel is in America's interest



46% say most other Americans don't believe support for Israel is in America's interest



Drawings by Jon McInosh

Americans towards the Israel-America relationship. Less than a majority of our sample—46 percent—accept that “most Americans think that U.S. support for Israel is in America’s interest.” Thus a very large number of Jews believe themselves to be in a minority in their conviction, evidently saying, in effect, “We think that Israel is good for America, but other Americans don’t seem to know that.”

Yet that perception does not, apparently, engender any sense of threat, any more than essential rejection of classical Zionism engenders a sense of conflict. The future remains bright; pro-Israel passions can and should be expressed here in America. In the words of the folksinger Phil Ochs, “I’ll give you all the money you ask for, but don’t ask me to come on along.”

### For the Love of Israel

Although classical Zionism does not fare well among American Jews, there is no question at all of their fierce attachment to Israel. That attachment is powerfully expressed in the extraordinary agreement of 33 percent of our sample with the statement, “If Israel were destroyed, I would feel as if I had suffered one of the greatest personal tragedies in my life.” The full power of such a statement may not be adequately appreciated by members of a community so very deeply committed to Israel. Perhaps it becomes more telling if we try to imagine how

Americans would react, say, if the same question were asked of New Yorkers about California—or, for that matter, even about New Jersey.

This question goes a good deal farther in establishing the near-meta-physical importance of Israel to American Jews than the usual polling question which asks whether Jews regard themselves as pro-Israel. We, too, asked that simpler question, and the answers were comparable to those elicited by major polling organizations, with 94 percent describing themselves as pro-Israel. Surely there is no other item (save, perhaps, for hostility to anti-Semitism) which so unites American Jews. For all practical purposes, American Jewry is unanimous in its positive orientation towards the Jewish State. (Of the 94 percent, almost half described themselves as “very pro-Israel,” slightly more than half answering simply “pro-Israel.” The remainder of the respondents were “neutral,” with only one percent describing themselves as “anti-Israel.”)

The level of unease American Jews must feel when thinking about Israel is dramatically illustrated by reactions to the statement, “Israel’s future is secure.” Seventy-one percent disagree with that statement, indicating that at some level, they live with the tension of knowing that a “great personal tragedy” is a distinct possibility. Indeed, when asked to choose among a list of Jewish issues and concerns, the “secu-

rity of Israel” was deemed “very important” more often than any other issue.

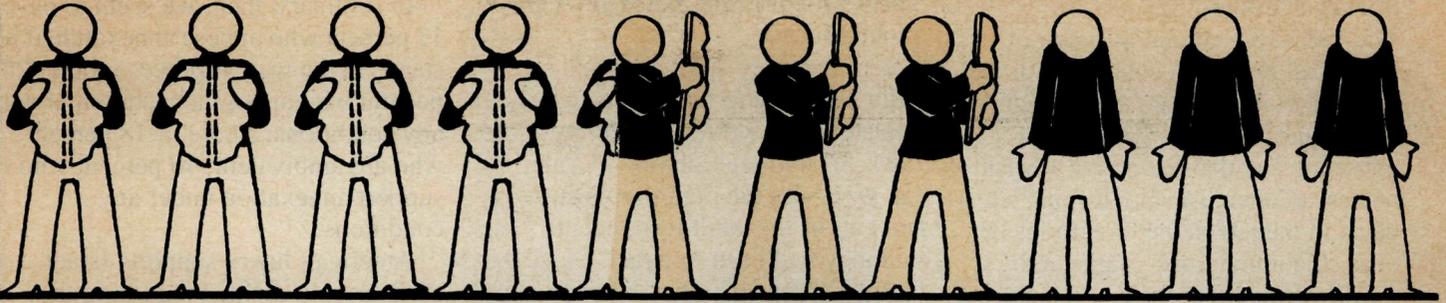
This concern is not only attitudinal; it is reflected in behavior, as well. Thus two-thirds of our sample report that they “often talk about Israel with friends and relatives.” Any sense that Israel is taken for granted, or that American Jews have wearied of its chronic crises, is simply not supported by our data. Over and over again, Israel emerges as the object of concern and consensus.

### Israel Yes, Its Policies Maybe

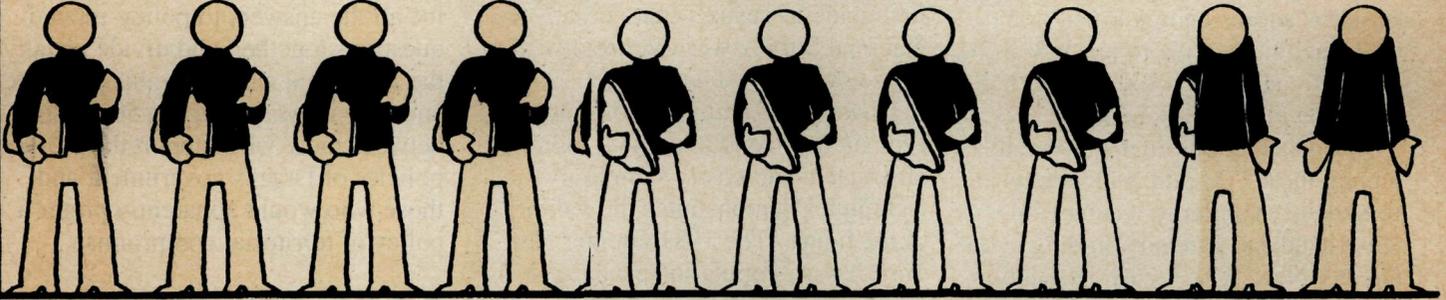
As against the evident attachment—really too weak a word to express the depth of feeling here—to Israel, we find considerable dissent from Israel’s current policies. From a variety of questions, it appears that about 25 percent of our sample are critical of those policies.

Twenty-three percent of our respondents feel that Israel’s policies are “too hawkish”; another 4 percent find them “too dovish.” At the same time, 74 percent feel that they are “about right: not too ‘hawkish’ or too ‘dovish.’” Given the fact that fully 37 percent (!) of America’s Jews have travelled to Israel, that a very large number make a point of reading about Israel in the daily press, that a considerable number follow developments and debates within Israel through the pages of the international edition of the *Jerusalem Post* or other media, that divisions

42% prefer annexation of the West Bank to a Palestinian state; 28% prefer a Palestinian state; 30% are undecided



41% say Israel should exchange territory for peace; 41% say no; 18% are undecided



within Israel are fairly well-reported in this country, it is probably at least as noteworthy that 74 percent find Israel's policies "about right" as it is that 27 percent find them either too dovish or too hawkish. (Note, however, that the survey was conducted before this spring's unrest on the West Bank and before Israel's assault on the PLO in Lebanon.)

More specific questions regarding those policies were also asked, and appear to confirm the existence of a significant minority that takes exception to Israel's policies. Three out of four American Jews agree that "Israel is right not to agree to sit down with the PLO" since it "is a terrorist organization that wants to destroy Israel," but 18 percent disagree with that assessment. Similarly, 64 percent hold that an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank "would probably be used as a launching pad to endanger Israel"—but 11 percent disagree and 25 percent are undecided.

There is, apparently, general agreement—with a significant minority exception—that the Palestinian movement represents a danger to Israel. But American Jews are very sharply divided over the question of Israel's retention of the territories that came under its control in the Six Day War. That issue is, of course, the central issue of Israeli politics these days. We are often reminded that there is widespread opposition in Israel to the prospect of a Palestinian state between

Israel and the Jordan River, and that opposition is shared by most American Jews. But the rejection of an independent Palestinian state does not mean that there is an equivalent consensus, either in Israel or among American Jews, regarding the disposition of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. When American Jews are asked to choose between the two extreme positions—either annexation of the West Bank by Israel, on the one hand, or a Palestinian state, on the other, 42 percent prefer annexation, as against 28 percent who, evidently thinking annexation the more serious threat, prefer a Palestinian state. On this question, fully 30 percent of our sample are undecided, suggesting the very serious reservations a majority of American Jews seem to hold regarding the prospect of annexation. (Note that if half the 30 percent who are undecided are added to the 28 percent who reject annexation outright, we have 43 percent—which means that some number of those who regard the prospect of a Palestinian state as a danger to Israel—64 percent of the sample—apparently think annexation is an even greater danger.)

From these data, it is difficult to discern whether American Jewry is "hawkish" or "dovish" in its disposition towards Israeli policy. There is certainly widespread appreciation of the difficult choices Israel faces as well as considerable support for a tough policy. The data suggest—

although they do not "prove"—that there is a large number of American Jews, on the order of 40 percent, who accept a tough Israeli policy, alongside a somewhat smaller group—25–30 percent—who reject such a policy, and a very substantial number, almost a third of the total, who are undecided. Quite likely, this undecided group will support whatever policy Israel chooses to pursue.

This breakdown, and especially the existence of a 40 percent hawkish element, is confirmed by responses to the following question: "Should Israel be willing to return to Arab control most of the territories" if she "could be assured of peace and secure borders?" Here, the sample splits evenly, 41 percent to 41 percent (with 18 percent undecided). In the context of unfolding events in the Middle East, it is entirely possible that many of the 41 percent who resist the return of "most of the territories" even in conditions of peace and security simply do not accept the plausibility of those conditions. But it is also possible that they have accepted Israel's right to those territories, believing either that retention of the territories does not exclude peace, or believing that their retention is more important than peace. In any event, these 41 percent are the hardcore support for the announced Israeli policy of "no more territorial concessions."

Here a curious finding emerges. We have 41 percent who oppose the return

## Survey Methodology

The 1981-82 National Survey of American Jews was conducted in the fall and winter of 1981-82. About 1,700 questionnaires were sent to households with "distinctive Jewish names" (Cohen, Levine, Kaplan, etc.) listed in the telephone directories of over 50 communities—large and small—throughout the continental United States. About 300 were returned ("addressee unknown") or were ineligible ("We're not Jewish"). Of the remainder (1,400), about half completed the questionnaire.

The distributions on major variables among these 700-odd respondents are remarkably similar to results Paul Ritterband and I are now finding in our Greater New York Jewish Population Study for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. (The New York Survey interviewed more than 4,500 respondents in an eight-county area and used a sophisticated and meticulously constructed sampling design.)

In addition, we know from sociologist Harold Himmelfarb's earlier analysis that "DJN" ("distinctive Jewish name") Jews hardly differ from "non-DJN" Jews; in this respect, preliminary analyses of the New York data are also encouraging. That is, if Jewish name-changers were once different from name-keepers, that difference has become muted over the last two or three generations.

A.B. Data of Milwaukee supplied the names and addresses of Jews for two-thirds of the sample (the eight large metropolitan areas) for the National Survey. Milton Himmelfarb and Geraldine Rosenfield of the American Jewish Committee participated in the construction of the questionnaire.

of the territories even as a trade-off for peace and security. We may think of them as "annexationists," for if they are not prepared to accept the return of the territories in exchange for peace, they are surely not prepared to accept their return in exchange for anything less than peace. The curiosity is that this number does not increase if, instead of asking people to choose between annexation and peace, we ask them to choose between annexation and a West Bank Palestinian state. In

## Three Out of Eight Adult Jews Have Visited Israel

One of the more startling—and initially upsetting to those of us who administered the survey—findings of the 1981-82 National Survey of American Jews was the high proportion (37 percent) of the adult respondents who said they had been to Israel. Since the figure is so much higher than has commonly been supposed, the finding at first made us suspect that perhaps the National Survey was over-representing Jews involved with Israel.

However, examination of other recent surveys conducted with more sophisticated and costly sampling techniques demonstrates the validity of the figure. The 1981 Greater New York Jewish Population Study (see "Survey Methodology") finds exactly the same figure. In addition, a recent nationwide random sample survey conducted under private auspices found that 38 percent of adult American Jews had travelled to Israel. (Indeed, 35 percent had been to Italy.)

These findings may be contrasted with those reported for the 1970-71 National Jewish Population Study conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations. There we learn that only 16 percent of adult Jews had ever visited Israel. Apparently the proportion of Israel travellers has more than doubled in the past decade. (These figures say nothing about frequency of visits.)

In short, the number of American Jews who have visited Israel is *much* larger than has been thought.—S.M.C.

the one case, 41 percent prefer annexation; in the other, 42 percent. These are, of course, essentially the same people. The shift, when the two questions are put side by side, is in the number of "undecideds." Choosing between annexation and a Palestinian state, there are 30 percent undecided; choosing between annexation and peace, there are 18 percent undecided. Virtually all the "undecideds" in the first of these two choices have moved to the "peace" column in the second.

In summary, then, we seem to have 12 percent who oppose annexation if it stands in the way of peace; another 28 percent who oppose annexation under any conditions; a core of 18 percent who are ambivalent; 40 percent who support annexation under any conditions.

American Jewry supports Israel, but is deeply divided regarding the choices Israel must make. If we examine all the answers to policy-related questions together, and divide equally the 18 percent who are ambivalent, we end up with very nearly a 50-50 split between those who support the present policies of Israel's government and those who would apparently prefer a policy of territorial compromise.

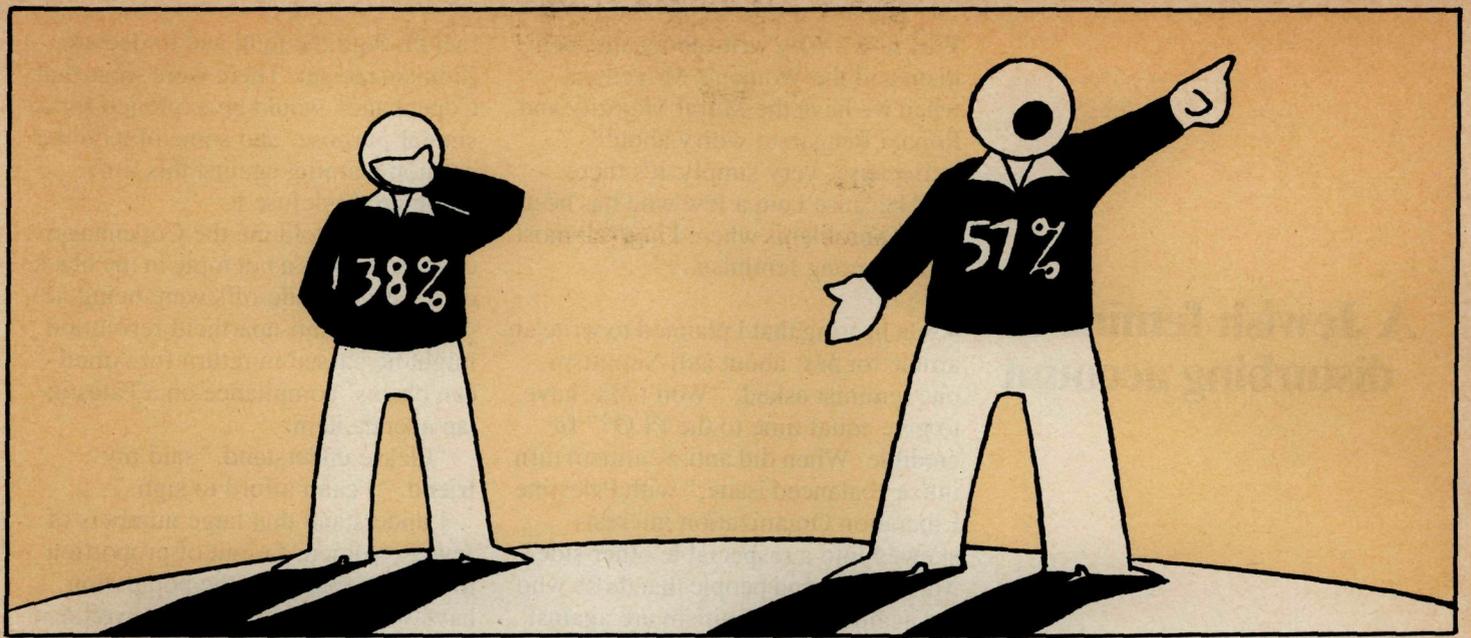
## Who is For? Who is Against?

Policy choices are not randomly distributed throughout the American Jewish population. Instead, distinctive patterns emerge, and these are of considerable interest.

As might be expected, those who most enthusiastically support Israel's policies also score high on "caring" for Israel. It does not, however, follow that those who are critical do not care. On the contrary, most of those who are critical also score high in "caring." In general, there does not appear to be a direct relationship between "caring" and "endorsement." Instead, other variables—age and education in particular—are important factors in shaping attitudes.

Younger respondents and the better educated (especially those holding post-graduate degrees) are less likely either to care or to endorse. By and large, this comes as no surprise, since other research has pointed to the general erosion of involvement in things Jewish among later-generation Jews and among those in youthful family stages. So, too, the better educated—other things being equal—tend to score lower on most measures of Jewish commitments and practice. When we adjust for age and education, we find that the debate over the wisdom of Israel's policies is not between those who care more and those who care less, but, generally, between people with a deeply shared common concern who disagree on substantive matters.

In this general context, there is one



38% believe U.S. Jews shouldn't criticize Israeli policies in public; 57% reject that view

other finding of special interest. Of late, much has been made of the alleged decline of support for Israel among liberals. In our sample, defining liberalism in terms of the major public issues of the day (e.g., ERA, defense spending, busing, quotas), liberalism is not independently associated with a decline in concern for Israel. Liberals tend to be younger and better educated than moderates or conservatives, and, as I have already noted, younger and better educated respondents tend to be a bit less likely to express concern for Israel. But once we control for age and education, the difference disappears. Liberalism does not undermine concern for Israel, as some neo-conservatives have claimed, nor does concern for Israel automatically make Cold Warriors of Jews, as some left-liberals have alleged.

What liberalism *does* is spur opposition to Israel's policies. If, for example, we take those liberals whose concern for Israel is as high as that of other political groupings (i.e., moderates, conservatives) in our sample, we find that they voice considerably less support for annexationist positions. They deem themselves pro-Israel, and they are as passionate as Jews in general regarding Israel, but they (evidently) distinguish between Israel and its government-of-the-day.

The existence of such a group is a fact with important implications for Jewish public policy. If the general as-

sumption is that the measure of one's concern for Israel and commitment to it is the extent of one's support for the policies of the Begin government, a significant number of American Jews will be defined as outside the communal consensus. Those elements within the American left who oppose Israel will smugly validate their conviction that only the right supports Israel, for that is how it will appear. Yet the appearance does not reflect the reality, which is that there is much diversity of perspective within the broad pro-Israel consensus of American Jewry.

#### The Question of Dissent

It is no surprise that the community has some difficulty in dealing with its own diversity. Based on Jewish attitudes towards civil liberties in general, one might suppose that Jews would be entirely comfortable with vigorous intra-communal dispute regarding virtually any public issue of our time. Jews, after all, score higher than any other major American ethnic or religious group on endorsement of the right of free speech for homosexuals, Communists, atheists and other "unpopular" types. But the issue of Israel cuts very close, and there has been a long-standing and intense debate amongst Jews regarding the propriety of publicly expressing any dissent from Israel's policies. In our sample, 38 percent of the respondents agree that "American Jews should not criticize Israel publicly." Yet, despite the

arguments against such debate, 57 percent of our respondents disagree with that statement. Given the uncomfortable choice between preserving a commitment to free discussion and maintaining the façade of communal consensus, three out of five Jews opt for the former.

#### In Short

In short, the American Jewish community is just about as richly diverse as one would expect. No Jewish issue preoccupies it so much as Israel, and none elicits such profound concern. Those outside the community who point to differences among Jews regarding the wisdom of Israel's policies and think to derive from those differences an erosion of support for Israel are badly mistaken. Just about all Jews care for Israel. Most also support Israel's policies; a sizeable minority does not. All—unless they are made to feel otherwise—have a place within the Jewish community, within a consensus that may have little in common with classical Zionist ideology, but has very much to do with contemporary Jewish identity. ★