



RELUCTANT OR REPRESSED?

Aversion to Expressing Views on Israel Among American Rabbis

A Report of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs
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October 8, 2013

JCPA
JEWISH COUNCIL
FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Rabbis and the Challenges of Expressing Their Views on Israel

Since its founding in 1948, Israel has held a special place in the hearts and minds of American Jews, indeed of Jews around the world. Over time, American Jews have mobilized on Israel's behalf and have made Israel a central focus of their philanthropy. Nearly half of adult American Jews have visited Israel, and year after year thousands make their way to Israel to “make *aliyah*,” that is, to live in the State of Israel.

Whatever the level of Israel-related commitment and engagement among the American Jewish public, Jewish communal leaders typically display even higher levels of involvement and commitment to Israel. **While American Jewish leaders today remain passionately attached to Israel, they divide on many moral and security issues facing the state.** Like Israelis, Jewish leaders – including rabbis – hold contrasting views on the value and ideal direction of the peace process, the true intentions of both Israeli and Palestinian leaders, the advisability of settlement expansion, and related matters.

Rabbis with policy stances at variance with other Jewish leaders, their congregants, or the Israeli government can find such situations especially vexing and problematic. For rabbis (perhaps even more than for others in prominent positions in Jewish life), the challenge is not only to sort out their own positions on complex Israel-related issues, but also to discern how to express views that may challenge, annoy, or even distress friends and people who hold influence over their careers and livelihood. They frequently find themselves fearful of or caught in the maelstrom of tension regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their personal views about it.

Among the concerns with which they grapple are:

1. What policies will best enhance Israel's security?
2. How do complex moral imperatives come to bear upon alternative Israeli actions, and which values come into play in deciding what to say, as well as where, when, and how and to whom?

3. How will their words and actions affect images of Israel among American Jews, thought leaders, the politically influential and American society at large?
4. How will expressing one's views on Israel – especially if they are controversial – affect one's effectiveness and standing as a Jewish leader?

As can be readily imagined, rabbis are especially likely to undergo powerful, and often shifting cross-pressures regarding how they formulate and express their views on Israel. For most rabbis, Israel is no passing matter, as most have had extensive personal experiences with Israel.

Generally they have spent considerable time studying there, learned colloquial and classical Hebrew, and studied sacred texts that serve to deepen their theological and personal relationship with Israel. With numerous family members and friends in Israel, and ready access to news and discourse about Israel, rabbis are exposed to major currents and details in the debates about Israeli society and policies. Moreover, rabbis are often seen as moral exemplars. As such, their constituencies expect them to teach, speak out, and comment upon important value-laden issues of the day, of which Israel is surely one of the most prominent and pressing.

And, as much if not more than other leaders, rabbis (especially congregational rabbis) must navigate the conflicting passions of the communities they serve and lead. To complicate matters, they must do so not only knowing that their pronouncements will bear the imprimatur of their synagogues, but also will be subjected to the will of lay leaders who ultimately hold the power to determine their compensation and, more critically, whether they will retain their jobs.

Survey Objectives: Assess the Repression of Expression

Anecdotal evidence speaks to numerous instances in which congregational leadership pressure rabbis – be it implicitly or even explicitly -- to repress or at least re-shape the public expression of their views on Israel-related policy matters. In this context, we undertook this study of American

rabbis and how they speak about Israel. The [online survey](#) of 552 rabbis fielded in the spring of 2013, whose results are reported here, addressed two key questions:

1. To what extent do rabbis, in fact, repress publicly expressing their privately held views on Israel?
2. Which rabbis more often fear expressing their views? How is repression or self-censorship related to denomination, political values, Israel-related positions, seniority and other possibly influential factors?

This report presents the findings from the first large-scale survey of American rabbis' challenges in expressing their views on Israel. As we shall see, they report very strong attachment to Israel. However, they mesh that attachment with varying degrees of concern about Israeli policies, as well as a significant reluctance to publicly share their true opinions. Nearly half of the rabbis in this survey hold views on Israel that they won't share publically, many for fear of endangering their reputation and their careers.

The Survey and the Sample of Rabbis

In May - July, 2013, the Jewish Council of Public Affairs (JCPA) and the researchers (Steven M. Cohen and Rabbi Jason Gitlin) invited rabbis whose email addresses appear on JCPA lists assembled over the years to participate in a survey on "Discussing Israel." The JCPA rabbis' list consisted of rabbis – heavily Reform and Conservative -- who had become known to JCPA by way of rabbinic engagement in JCPA campaigns in support of civil discourse, in opposition to Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel [aka BDS], opposition to gun violence, and support of American action in preventing atrocities in Sudan. Other rabbis were added to the participants through various additional lists.

The major contours of these rabbis are as follows (see [survey results](#) for precise figures):

- Over three-quarters are male.

- Their median age is in the late fifties, with about a quarter under 45 and about a fifth 65 or older.
- Their median year of ordination is about 1992.
- About 70% work in congregations.
- Of those in congregations, the largest numbers are Reform and Conservative, while a very small number are Orthodox, and a few are Reconstructionist.
- Of those in congregations, about 80% hold the most senior rabbinic position in their congregations.

In short, the 552 rabbis in this sample do not constitute a fully representative segment of American rabbis, with a significant under-sampling of Orthodox rabbis. The non-representative nature of the sample obviates strictly generalizing to the universe of American rabbis. However, the pattern of relationships between and among measures can nevertheless prove instructive, as the findings point to patterns that are consistent with side knowledge and social theory. As with any opt-in panel, the results must be seen as suggestive and taken with a greater degree of caution than with probability-based samples.

Findings

Rabbis' Strong Attachment to Israel

As a preliminary matter, we should underscore that the rabbis' strong attachment to Israel, overall, is one that does not vary by political affiliation or opinions on policy in Israel. Among the key findings relevant to this inference are the following:

- Almost all have been to Israel, and 88% have visited four times or more.
- Not quite half (44%) have visited Israel in the past year and 70% have been to Israel within the last three years.
- As many as 91% have studied in Israel, a finding consistent with the widespread practice of committed Orthodox Jews (especially future rabbis) to study in Israel during their gap year or later, and the requirements by rabbinical seminaries such as the Jewish Theological Seminary (Conservative), Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform) and Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (Reconstructionist) that their students spend a year in Israel.
- Almost all rabbis frequently follow the news about Israel, be it in the mainstream media, or Israeli newspapers online, or by way of social media.
- As many as 93% say they are very attached to Israel, a figure about double that found in many studies of rank-and-file American Jews.
- Similarly, 90% say that caring about Israel is a very important part of their being a Jew “to a great extent,” also far higher than among the Jewish public at large.
- Of those who give divrei Torah as part of their job, about half have given five or more such talks on Israel in the past year.

Surely, this sample of rabbis (probably not unlike American rabbis in general) demonstrates a deep commitment to Israel, one which is both expressed and shaped by frequent and multiple trips to Israel for study and other purposes.

Dovish and Divided on Peace and Policies

With respect to Israel's policies toward its conflict with the Palestinians, the results point to what must be viewed as a fairly dovish posture on the part of most of these rabbis. Their varied and complex positions might well align most of them with the left-of-center and leftist Zionist political parties and personalities in Israel. For example, we may look at the results for a bellwether question -- whether Israel should undertake a freeze on expanding settlements on the West Bank, a position rejected by the current government. Among the rabbis, the number of unqualified endorsers of this position exceeded unqualified rejecters by a six-to-one margin (62% agreed "to a great extent," and only 10% agreed to a settlement freeze "not at all").

In terms of being perceived as truly wanting peace, the current Israeli government certainly "outperforms" the Palestinian Authority among this sample of American rabbis. However, upon close examination, we find that these rabbis' images of what may be called, "the peace-seeking credibility" of the Israeli government are not all that favorable. We asked them, "To what extent do you agree that the current Israeli government truly wants peace?" Only 20% answered, "to a great extent;" another 39% said "somewhat;" and the rest (41%) answered "a little, not at all or not sure." To be sure, we have no explicit point of comparison here. But the results certainly suggest that large numbers of Reform and Conservative rabbis leading congregations and other Jewish communities in the United States are not fully convinced that the current Israeli government really wants peace with the Palestinians.

Taking the matter further, we compared the results on who truly wants peace for the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. We found that just over half (52%) believed the

Israeli government wants peace more than the PA, and the rest (48%) gave the two sides equal scores (35%) or rated the PA higher in terms of wanting peace (13%). Among congregational rabbis, we find an expected denominational gradient. All responding Orthodox rabbis see Israel as wanting peace more, followed by just over two thirds (69%) of the Conservative rabbis, but less than half (45%) of the Reform rabbis.

The rabbis tend to assign blame to the Palestinian side for the failure to make peace. When asked “In your view, who is more to blame for the failure of Israelis and Palestinians to reach a peace agreement?” over a quarter blamed the Palestinians “somewhat more” than Israel, and 37% saw the Palestinians as “much more to blame” than Israel. This finding is suggestive of both the diverse and nuanced opinions held by these rabbis, in addition to their near universal support for Israel overall.

These results are notable insofar as Israeli officials and their supporters have long argued to the American public and the world at large that Israel is far more interested in peace than the Palestinians. But these results show some considerable doubts among rabbis, with even a majority of rabbis from the largest denomination demurring from the idea that Israel truly wants peace more than the Palestinians.

Liberal Democrats in America

One powerful explanation for the rabbis’ generally left-of-center views on Israel lie in their distribution of political views in the American context. Essentially, the rabbis’ left-of-center worldview in American politics extends to a similarly positioned worldview on Israel.

To provide the details: Of those rabbis in this sample with a declared partisan identity, Democrats exceed Republicans in the sample by the wide margin of 78% to 3%. In terms of their self-declared political identities, liberals significantly out-weigh conservatives 59% to 8%. The left-right political balance among these rabbis is tilted even further to the left than non-Orthodox

American Jews generally. This includes, most likely, their own congregants. For example, in the survey of American Jews conducted in 2012 by the Workmen's Circle, among non-Orthodox respondents, Democrats out-numbered Republicans by the margin of 63% to 16%. Among the same respondents, self-defined liberals out-numbered conservatives by 59% to 22%. In short, non-Orthodox Jews are generally liberal Democrats, but their rabbis are even more liberal and more Democratic in their political identities.

It follows that the rabbis strongly approve of President Obama. In terms of his overall performance, those who approve surpass those who disapprove by 85% to 10%. With respect to the President's handling of US-Israel relations, rabbis who approve amount to 77%; in contrast, just 15% disapprove.

To examine the correspondence between the rabbis' political identities and their views on Israel, we developed two indices. One measures American political belief in terms of self-proclaimed identity (liberal / moderate / conservative) and party identification. The other measures one's dovish-hawkish stance on Israel in terms of: views on settlements, blame for the failure of the peace process, and image of commitment to making peace on the part of the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. The strongest doves were defined, in effect, as those who most oppose the settlements, most vigorously blame Israel for the failure of the peace process, lack credibility in Israeli government's commitment to making peace, and view the Palestinians as genuinely seeking peace.

Stance on Israel (“Hawks” vs. “Doves”) by Political identity

Stance on Israel	Political identity			Total
	Very liberal	Liberal	Moderate-Conservative	
Dove	55%	33%	6%	30%
Moderate	42%	56%	47%	47%
Hawk	4%	11%	4%	22%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

As is apparent from the table above, American political identity strongly influences dovishness/hawkishness on Israel. Moving from left to right in American political terms, the percentage defined as doves declines from 55% to 32% to 6%; in contrast, the number of Israel hawks grows from 4% to 11% to 47%.

About One Third are Fearful of Expressing their Views on Israel

Several survey questions asked the rabbis the extent to which they were ready or reticent to candidly express their views on Israel. With some variation, about a third of the rabbis – on each of the five relevant questions – testified to restraint, reluctance, or repression of their true views. To illustrate, the survey asked, “As compared with your publicly stated positions as a rabbi, your private views on Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians are generally ...” While two thirds say that their public and private views coincide, a third responded otherwise. Over 18% say that their private views are more dovish than those expressed publicly, and just over 12% said that, in effect, they are “closet hawks.”

Consistent with this finding is the number – about 39% -- who sometimes or often “avoid expressing your true feelings about Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians for fear of

offending your listeners or those around you.” Almost half report that in the last three years they have refrained from publicly voicing their views on Israel, and over one-in-six have refrained several times or more often.

The fact that most rabbis feel comfortable expressing their personal point of view is arguably a positive finding. Yet the existence of a sizable minority who feel otherwise can be a cause of concern for a community that champions open and free discourse on key issues affecting it.

Why do so many rabbis sometimes restrain expressing their true feelings on Israel? Their motivations derive in part from fear of sanctions of one sort or another. While one in five (21%) say that to at least some extent they, “fear significant professional repercussions were you to voice your honest opinions about Israel or particular government policies.” A similar number (21%) believe that at least several times “members of the congregation or agency where you work [have] strongly criticized you for views you have voiced on Israel.” And, also a similar number (21%) report that “the congregation or agency where you work refrained from programming about Israel because of fear of controversy or conflict.”

Clearly, however measured, a sizable minority of rabbis express significant concerns about their ability to freely express their views on Israel-related policies. But, which rabbis in particular are more likely to express such concerns?

More Fearful: More Recently Ordained and the Dovish

To explore who are more or less concerned with the hazards of freely expressing controversial views on Israel, we constructed a composite index that consists of responses to the following three questions:

- *How often, if at all, do you avoid expressing your true feelings about Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians for fear of offending your listeners or those around you?*

- *To what extent do you fear significant professional repercussions were you to voice your honest opinions about Israel or particular government policies?*
- *In the last three years, have you ever refrained from publicly voicing your views about Israel?*

Using the full range of responses to each of these questions, we then divided the resulting distribution at arbitrary cut-points such that 31% are dubbed, “very fearful,” 27% “somewhat fearful,” and 41% “not fearful.”

We learn that those ordained since 2000 express higher levels of fear than their more senior colleagues:

Fearful Index by Year of Ordination

How fearful?	Ordained 2000		Total
	Ordained 1999 or earlier	Ordained 2000 or later	
Very fearful	26%	43%	31%
Somewhat	28%	27%	28%
Not fearful	46%	30%	41%
Total	100%	100%	100%

As many as 43% of the more recently ordained (2000 or later) score high on the fearful index as compared with just 26% of those ordained earlier (1999 or earlier). One reason for this gap, of course, is that more junior rabbis occupy lower status position, are objectively more at risk and subjectively feel more vulnerable. Another, as we demonstrate presently, is that those with more dovish views tend to feel more fearful of expressing their views on the conflict.

Indeed, more dovish rabbis express higher levels of concern with openly airing their views on Israel than the relatively more hawkish rabbis:

Fearful Index by Hawk-Dove Stances on the Conflict

How fearful?	Hawks and Doves			Total
	Dove	Moderate	Hawk	
Very fearful	43%	29%	25%	32%
Somewhat	31%	27%	20%	26%
Not fearful	26%	44%	56%	42%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Among the doves, the proportion deemed very fearful of publicly expressing their true views reaches 43%. In contrast, the comparable number among their hawkish counterparts falls just shy of 25%.

Conclusion

With Israel the subject of such passion among a large number of American Jews, and an even larger numbers of their leaders, including their rabbis, divisions about the moral and political issues related to Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians are inevitable. Given these differences, it is also inevitable that leaders, especially those with views somewhat at variance with those held by official Israeli leaders and their American Jewish supporters, will find it challenging to publicly articulate their views on the conflict. If such is the case for leaders in general, matters are probably even more complex for rabbis. Rabbis are charged with serving as moral leaders and exemplars, yet they are also beholden to and subject to the whims of congregants and others who exercise control over the rabbis' careers and employment conditions.

This national survey of American rabbis (largely non-Orthodox) explored the conflicts attendant upon expressing candid views on Israel-related issues. It found evidence that a substantial minority of rabbis feel that they refrain from fully sharing their views in public, in part because of fear of professional repercussions. Understandably, these fears are more acutely felt by younger rather than older rabbis and by policy doves rather than policy hawks.

For communal leaders and policy makers, the survey's results point to the need to advocate increasing civility in the conduct of discourse and debate around Israel. Repression of such debate and the free expression of views by people – such as rabbis – who are deeply committed to Israel means the loss of an opportunity to engage members of the Jewish public with a full variety of views about Israel and the conflict. A stifled debate means a less healthy discourse and missed educational opportunities, to say nothing of leadership and rabbinic careers that are injured as a consequence. The openness and vigor of Israel's democracy can well serve as a model and frame for the discussions of Israel's policies that can and should characterize the parallel discourse among America's Jews – including their rabbis and other communal leaders.

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To view survey questions and response frequencies, please visit:

<http://jewishpublicaffairs.org/rabbisurvey>.