Framing Conflict: Why American Congregations Cannot Not Talk about Israel

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It has become nearly a truism of American Jewish life that communities and congregations have a difficult time engaging in civil discourse about Israel (Beinart 2010, 2013; Baron 2015; Waxman 2016). After decades of playing a unifying role in American Jewish life, Israel now seems like a point of disagreement and even distrust. We do not believe it is an overstatement to say that Israel has become one of the most divisive issues in the American Jewish community. Israel has become such a fraught issue that communities, organizations, congregations, and schools (to say nothing of families) regularly avoid the issue rather than risk what they fear might be a significant disagreement. Clearly, the larger context for this situation is political, but the ways in which public discussion of Israel is playing out in synagogues, on college campuses, and in the halls of Jewish communal organizations indicate that there is more at stake in talking – and not talking – about Israel than just attitudes, feelings, or beliefs about the country. For some, the fear of talking about Israel has led to near paralysis and a sense that everyone, no matter where they can be found on political axes, feels like they represent the minority and, just as importantly, that their position is the right one. This article is an attempt to understand this phenomenon through a case study of a single congregation addressing why the members in this congregation find it so hard to talk about Israel.

We found a congregation that tended to avoid discussing Israel owing, in large measure, to their own internal conflicts about what Israel means to them and what role they think Israel should play in their community. This case is symbolic of how the present circumstances are a sharp reversal of that of mid- and late-20th century American Jewry, which enjoyed a largely uncritical love of Israel (Moore 1996; Katz 2015). For decades, Israeli flags hung unquestioned in synagogues and movements adapted liturgies to reflect American Jewish excitement over the rise of the young State. Into the 1990s, the American Jewish consensus remained quite strong but witnessed the introduction of a few small but significant organizations arising to represent the liberal Zionist wing of American Jewry. Organizations like the New Jewish Agenda or American Friends of Peace Now gave progressive American Jews ways to express their politics but always within a decidedly Zionist framework. Though these groups absorbed their share of criticism and even attracted

some fierce rebukes, they largely worked to channel their progressive politics to influence American Jewry with a Zionist perspective characteristic of mainstream American Jewry of the time.

While it is possible to point to any number of historical moments that fractured the American Jewish consensus about Israel (the Yom Kippur War, the 1982 massacre at Sabra and Shatila, the First Intifada, the Second Intifada, the 2014 war on/in Gaza), the fact and ferocity of the present circumstance is beyond dispute. Some organizations have tried to set the terms of debate by enacting guidelines outlining what kinds of speech and what kinds of programs can appropriately fall under their banner.[1] Others have taken stances that maintain a firm boundary between their work and Israel, refusing to speak or act publicly about Israel as a matter of policy. The discussion continues almost daily in the Jewish press, in scholarship, in philanthropy, on Twitter, and at high level convenings of Jewish communal leaders. Yet, all the "new initiatives," investments in Israel education, and attempts to cultivate "civil discourse" have done little to change the fact that American Jewish communities find themselves in an unusual predicament: Most American Jews express a fondness for and a connection to Israel, but when they get together it is increasingly hard to find productive ways to talk about Israel with one another.

The result, in some cases, has been devastating for communities both large and small. At any point on the political spectrum, one can identify people who are either prepared to sit in silence or are ready to walk out if their politics are not adequately represented. In this tense atmosphere it has become an almost impossible challenge for any organization, big or small, to create hospitable, respectful occasions for people to come together and discuss Israel, its place in the world, and its role in American Jewish life. The problem is not just that there is no consensus on the role of Israel in Jewish life or on the appropriate way to establish a peaceful future in the Middle East. The problem is that American Jews seem uniquely incapable of even having the discussion in the first place.

This article represents a response to this situation by trying to understand its dynamics close up. We focus on a single case study of a non-Orthodox congregation in the San Francisco Bay Area. Weeks of ethnographic research, 46 in-depth, semi-structured one-on-

[1] For example, see the San Francisco Jewish Community Federation's funding guidelines, which lay out expectations with respect to grantees' attitudes toward the State of Israel, including BDS. https://jewishfed.org/federation%E2%80%99s-israel-funding-guidelines. Also see Hillel International's similar Israel guidelines with respect to "standards of partnership" for organizations seeking to partner with campus Hillel. https://www.hillel.org/jewish/hillel-israel/hillel-israel-guidelines.

one interviews, and two focus groups yielded bountiful data about the difficulties involved in talking about Israel, people's relationships to Israel, and their feelings about Israel and ethics, as well as about their own communities, concerns, and commitments. We found a congregation whose Israel story tracks along the established narrative – but not entirely and not exclusively. By focusing on a single congregation, we have been able to obtain greater nuance and finely-grained detail than has previously been possible as we seek to understand why it is so difficult to talk about Israel.

Why this story? Why this congregation?

This article began with a request from a senior member of the congregation, and, as is often the case, the project began over dinner. During that conversation, one of the congregants mentioned Ilan Baron's book *Obligation in Exile* (2015) and the difficulties of debating Israel in Jewish communities. The congregant was interested in learning more about his own community's views about Israel. Specifically, he wondered whether the vocal but small number of dedicated Zionists were representative of the community membership, and he was concerned about how views about Israel might harm or potentially help the recruitment of new members into the congregation. His concerns were largely informed by broad national studies like the Pew Research Center's *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (2013) and by the many accounts in the Jewish press of how challenging it has become to talk about Israel. He felt them to be accurate representations of his community, but he still wondered what to do. Our host, though himself a lay leader in the community, did not have insights into how his peers felt about Israel or why they found it so difficult to discuss Israel. He was also not prepared to look into it or facilitate communal conversations about Israel on his own initiative. We volunteered our scholarly efforts and, after some back-and-forth with the community leadership, were granted permission to interview members of the congregation, clergy, and staff.

In spite of the congregation's generally welcoming attitude, we were attentive to the sensitivity of the topic. Consequently, we took a reflexive approach to the project, which, at a minimum, emphasized the "researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it" (Davies 2008, 7). Scholars have become increasingly sensitive to reflexivity in politics research, owing largely to ethical concerns involved in both the research process of knowledge production (Neufeld 1993) and the positionality of the scholar (Amoureux and Steele 2016). In the case of this research project, the researchers are exploring a topic they experience in their own lives as Diaspora Jews with

multiple connections to Israel (Baron 2015, 2016), thus making a reflexive positionality unavoidable but also central to the research itself.

The study initially focused on answering the following three questions:

- How do congregants understand what Israel means, represents, or signifies for themselves and their community?
- What are the challenges and obstacles to public discussion about Israel in the congregation?
- How does Israel function in the narratives about the Jewish commitments of individual members and of the congregation itself?

The congregation is medium-sized, non-Orthodox, and in the San Francisco Bay Area.[2] While not representative, strictly speaking, of a movement or a demographic, it is a fairly typical congregation with a full-time staff including a rabbi, a cantor, and an educator, and a rich slate of educational events for members of all ages and life-phases. The congregation owns its own building with a parking lot, and there is another congregation not far away, on whom they keep a wary, if appreciative, eye as they track members coming and going. The congregation has a steady schedule of b'nai mitzvah, an active youth group, adult education offerings, and a long list of volunteer opportunities and committees to join. Membership, as best as we could assess, tilted toward an older demographic, but the religious school served many younger families with children. Some congregants have lived in the area for a long time but only joined recently, while others moved into the area recently and joined right away. We spoke with 55 members in 46 individual interviews and two focus group discussions with members of the Executive Board and the Social Action Committee. The demographics of the community, like many such communities, are biased in membership over 40 years of age, and our sample reflects that. A majority of interviewees were older than age 50, and our youngest participant was age 13.[3] We actively sought to interview as wide a sample of the community as possible, and we obtained a gender-balanced representation (51.9% male, 48.1% female).

We sampled participants through a variety of means. Support from the leadership of the congregation made it possible to take advantage of existing email lists. We further benefited from an endorsement from the president of the congregation, who sent out emails

[2] The name of the congregation is a pseudonym as are the names of all individuals quoted or identified in the article.

[3] The interview protocol was approved via our institutional research ethics processes, and included a requirement for parental consent for interviews of children.

about our project and encouraged participation. We sent out community-wide notices prior to our first field visit to allow for sufficient advance notice, and we circulated emails again when we began our fieldwork. We had a community member compile a list of individuals to contact, and starting with these individuals we snowball sampled until we reached a saturation point in the community. All told, we interacted with approximately one-fifth of the adult members of the congregation. To complement our congregant interviews, we attended synagogue events, including two prayer services, and interviewed the clergy and administrative staff. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and we analyzed the transcripts with a qualitative data analysis platform (Dedoose) using a deductive coding approach.

Framing the American Jewish Conflict

It would not be an understatement to say that Israel and the attendant belief in a Jewish nation-state dominated American Jewish communal life for much of the 20th century. In the years prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, American Jews gave money and support to the nascent Zionist enterprise in Palestine. After 1948, American Jews adopted and helped invent Israeli culture as part of a broader, global vision of Jewish life (Spiegel 2013; Katz 2015). In some ways, the apparent vitality of Israel (due in no small measure to its emerging military might and to the romance of the kibbutz) helped revitalize Jewish culture around the world in the wake of the Holocaust. Israel served an important role for American Jewry, not least in becoming a focus of "civil religion" (Bellah 1967; Woocher 1986) but also in regard to the relationships across and within American Jewish communities, and between the United States and Israel (Hirschhorn 2017). For much of the 20th century, American Jews rallied around Israel as an idea and a political entity, finding in it inspiration, unity, and a hopeful Jewish narrative of rebuilding, as evidenced by books like Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958).[4]

In spite of the cultural unity aroused by the establishment of the State of Israel, relationships between Israel and Jews living elsewhere remained somewhat fraught. Jews from Arab lands received a less-than-warm welcome when they emigrated en masse during the early years of the State (Segev 1986; Massad 1996; Smooha 2008), and Prime Minister David ben Gurion had to be told to stop harping on about American Jews moving to Israel

[4] See also Moore (1996).

and settle for their financial support instead (Marcus 1996; see also Cohen 1975, 2003; Rosenthal 2001).

Nevertheless, Israel remains a focal point for American Jewish life. Most US synagogues feature an Israeli flag in their sanctuary; students at Jewish day schools regularly study about and even travel to Israel; Taglit-Birthright Israel remains an educational juggernaut for college students; and annual Israeli Independence Day celebrations are regular occurrences in Jewish communities around the country. Israel also features strongly in investigations of Jewish identity. To take but one example, the Pew Research Center's *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (2013, 81) noted that "[m]ost American Jews feel at least some emotional attachment to Israel." The Pew survey also found that 43% of respondents noted that "caring about Israel" was an "essential" part of what being Jewish means to them (Pew Research Center 2013, 14, 83). According to the Pew survey, caring about Israel is not the most popular feature of the meaning of being Jewish (remembering the Holocaust is), and it is only one percentage point more popular than "having a good sense of humor." However, considering that only 19% of respondents consider "observing Jewish law" to be central to their Jewish identity, Israel's importance clearly is meaningful, as more respondents felt strongly about Israel's significance than felt that *halacha*, religious observance, and other cultural practices or beliefs were "essential" to what being Jewish meant to them (Pew Research Center 2013, 14). Furthermore, almost every Jewish community demographic study asks a full slate of questions about attitudes toward Israel, and much has been made about claims that American Jews are feeling more "distance" between themselves and Israel (Cohen and Kelman 2010; Sasson et al. 2010). Meanwhile, evaluations of educational programs like Taglit-Birthright Israel crow about their successes at forging stronger bonds between participants and the State of Israel (Saxe et al. 2006; Saxe et al. 2007; Saxe 2008; Saxe and Chazan 2008; Saxe et al. 2008; Kadushin et al. 2011; Saxe et al. 2012).

However, the nature of these bonds can vary considerably, especially as Israel may no longer serve as a source of Jewish unity but of division. As Dov Waxman writes in the introduction to his book, *Trouble in the Tribe*, the conflict about Israel within Jewish communities is important because "[i]t threatens to divide the American Jewish community, weaken American Jewish support for Israel, and impact U.S. Government policy toward Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" (2016, 2). Exploring how Israel is understood within Jewish communities is thus an important area of study, relevant to our knowledge of the construction of contemporary Jewish identity and of the role that Israel plays in that construction. If Israel is contributing to a crisis within the American Jewish community, this

poses a significant complication to the meaning of the Jewish State for the Jewish people. Phrased differently, if Israel is assumed to help Diaspora Jews connect (or reconnect) with the Jewish people and strengthen their sense of Jewish identity, but Israel is having a divisive effect, there is a significant challenge here for the construction and understanding of Israel's role in fostering strong Jewish identities and communities. Relatedly, to the extent that Israel is understood to be a Jewish State for the Jewish people, it logically follows that we ought to know as much as possible about how Diaspora Jews understand Israel's greater role for Jewish peoplehood.

Many people are convinced that Israel's divisive role in American Jewish life is political in nature and that it stems from opinions about Israel's treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 2015, the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI) in Jerusalem published *Jewish Values and Israel's Use of Force in Armed Conflict – Perspectives from World Jewry*. That report (Rosner and Herzog 2015, 6) recognized that Israeli policies – especially military or security ones – can have a negative effect on the connection that Diaspora Jews have with Israel and that such policies are germane to their own lives:

> Many Diaspora Jews feel that Israeli decisions affect their lives in their own countries in many ways: from personal security, through issues of identity and religion, and their broader relations with the non-Jewish world. They understand that Israel must make decisions that affect its own future and destiny. And still they expect Israeli decision-makers to understand their points of view–to listen to them, to be sensitive to their needs and relate to their realities as part of the decision-making process.

The report was careful to highlight the variety of views on Israel among Diaspora Jewry, but the fact that an Israel-based think tank established by the Israel-based Jewish Agency is taking seriously the view that Israel's actions are contributing to a crisis in Jewish communities is a significant development in itself. As the report notes:

> A sense of crisis has emerged in many Jewish communities regarding their relationships with Israel, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to discuss Israel because of the bitter political disputes these discussions spark. This difficulty may lead to the exclusion of Israel from Diaspora community agendas, and is an obstacle to communicating Israel's actions and policies to the Jewish public within a sympathetic communal framework. (Rosner and Herzog 2015, 9)

By itself, this acknowledgment is in some ways astonishing since, for so long, Israel has been a virtually uninterrogated source for global Jewish connectivity and unity. Acknowledging the divisive role that the politics of Israel can play in Diaspora Jewish communities is one thing but, as we argue, this dynamic cannot be traced solely to political differences.

Indeed, as Shaul Kelner (2010) notes in his book about Birthright tours, a large part of the motivation behind these funded trips to Israel for Jewish youth is not necessarily to turn them into Zionists ready to move to Israel, but to help encourage and foster an ongoing connection with the Jewish people and to strengthen their sense of Jewish identity in the Diaspora (see also Saxe and Chazan 2008). Indeed, the case of Joy Stember, an artist who produces metal arts Judaica, is illustrative of this point. As she writes on her website and in published brochures:

> In the winter of 2010, I went on a Taglit-Birthright trip to Israel. While there, I was captivated by the landscape, culture and history. When I returned home I felt a stronger connection to Israel, my culture and my identity as an artist. This journey profoundly changed my perspective and led me to discover my true passion. I began to focus on creating contemporary Judaica full-time [*sic*] and opened the Joy Stember Metal Arts Studio, LLC. This decision has not only provided great personal fulfillment but also the opportunity to share my craft with the world (Stember n.d. See also Glidden 2016).

Her example is striking in that she is clearly aware of the role that Israel plays not only in her sense of Jewish identity but also in her professional life. She has made the choice that, as Isaiah Berlin noted in a speech in 1975, is the hallmark of Israel's significance for Diaspora Jewry:

> Today, individual Jews have this choice. They can be passionate supporters of the State of Israel or they can ignore it. They can contribute to it, can live there, can visit it constantly, can regard themselves as its emissaries abroad. They can have any relationship they wish with it which is desirable in a free, open-textured liberal society. This was not open to them before. And this is the achievement (Berlin 1975).

Mirroring the choices that Berlin identifies (see also Liebman 1973), the majority of works about the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora tend to be driven by one or another political or ideological concern. In addition to edited collections that chronicle so-called "dissident" Jewish voices about Israel, such as Adam Shatz's *Prophets Outcast* (2004) or Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon's *Wrestling with Zion* (2003), any number of books evidence the challenge of expressing criticism of Israel as American Jews. For example, the collection edited by Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman, *Kingdom of Olives and Ash: Writers Confront the Occupation*, is designed to offer storytellers the opportunity to address any responsibility they might feel "for the crimes and injustices perpetrated in the name of that home and its 'security'" (Chabon and Waldman 2017, ix). Almost a decade earlier, Verso published a collection of essays edited by Anne Karpf, Brian Klug, Jacqueline Rose, and Barbara Rosenbaum (2008), which is also structured around explicitly Jewish authors

writing about criticism of Israel and how they experience their identity as Jews within the context of public debate about Israel. Often the arguments center around the experiences of "speaking out" against the conventional consensus of Israel support and the reasons for such criticism. In this vein, Judith Butler's *Parting Ways* (2012) provides her book-length argument for adopting a Jewish perspective in critiquing Israel. Jacqueline Rose's *The Question of Zion* (2005) offers a related and critical account of Zionism, also framed as coming from a Jewish perspective.

Other scholars with even more expertise in Jewish history also find themselves looking for alternative narratives about Israel and Zionism. Of particular interest in the body of complementary literature are works by historians, especially David Myers and Noam Pianko, both of whom have written about Simon Rawidowicz, an important Jewish Studies scholar who held a brief correspondence with Ben Gurion and who was deeply troubled by the Zionist project's negation of the Diaspora. As Rawidowicz argued, the adoption of Israel as the name of the new Zionist State displaced any recognition of the people of Israel by the State of Israel. This displacement was also evident in Israel's poor policies on minority rights, as doing so went against the experience of Diaspora life that emphasized so importantly the need for minority rights (Rawidowicz 1986; Myers 2008; Pianko 2010).

We find in these bodies of literature efforts to voice what Jewish criticisms of Israel can look like. The theoretical works advance political arguments of a normative nature directed toward what political stance to take on Israeli policy and the relationship between Israel and Jewish identity. The historical works seek out voices from the past that can provide guidance on the same issue.

Yet, the most widely published literature of relevance is what could be described as sociological (Sasson et al. 2010; Sasson et al. 2012; Sasson et al. 2014; Sasson 2015) or political (Dinur 1969; Beilin 2000; Hazony 2001; Avishai 2002; Dershowitz 2003, 2008; Judt 2003; Rose 2005; Ben-Moshe and Segev 2007; Gorenberg 2011; Eizenstat 2012) attempts to establish what these various positions mean and what they portend for the future of Jewish life in and beyond the State of Israel (to say nothing of the countless histories of the Arab-Israeli conflict, of which there are too many to cite and any selection of which would betray ideological positions). Most of these approaches have been gathered up beneath the overarching framework of the "distancing hypothesis" (Cohen 1996; Hartman and Hartman 2000), which holds that American Jews are growing more affectively or politically distant from the State of Israel. This issue was so hotly and fiercely debated that the journal *Contemporary Jewry* dedicated an entire issue in 2010 to its discussion. While scholars

debate whether or not this is the case, the terms of this debate are reduced to a single, positivist measure, and despite the rhetorical power that the language of distancing holds, the debate has limited the range of scholarly discussion and empirical investigation to a fairly narrow measure of American Jews' relationship to the State of Israel and whether it is more or less strained than it was in the past.

It is therefore notable that we are familiar with only three contemporary books that have tried to broaden, rather than reduce (Rosenthal 2001; Taras and Weinfeld 1990; Sasson 2010) the understanding of Israel's changing place in Diaspora Jewish communities. The most recent is Dov Waxman's *Trouble in the Tribe* (2016), which tracks changes in American Jewry's relationship with Israel from one of general support for Israel to one of increasingly internal division and disagreement. As Waxman argues, the previous consensus (assuming there even was one) for supporting Israel has eroded, becoming fragmented and often hostile. Waxman's central argument is that this change is a consequence of changes within the American Jewish community over time and not only because of Israeli policy and politics.

The second book is Ilan Baron's *Obligation in Exile* (2015), which, unlike Waxman's (2016) book, relies on original interviews spanning Jewish communities in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada as well as interviews with Israeli officials. Baron's argument is substantially different in that he is not concerned with trying to explain the change in consensus but rather is interested in developing a philosophically informed theory by which to understand contemporary conflicts about Israel within Diaspora Jewish communities. Baron agrees with Waxman that ideology is not a compelling lens through which to understand Diaspora Jews' connection with Israel, but unlike Waxman, Baron suggests that the connection is understood phenomenologically (and ontologically) owing to how attachments with Israel inform Diaspora Jews' sense of self (Baron 2015, see also Baron 2016 and 2018).

The third book is Keith Kahn-Harris's *Uncivil War* (2014). This unique work is built around a series of dinners at the author's home at which he and his wife, Deborah, hosted various members of British Jewry to discuss Israel. Guests from different demographics and political persuasions were invited. Kahn-Harris's book focuses exclusively on British Jews, offering a classification scheme in which to locate the different political positions among British Jews in their dealings and views with Israel.

One advantage of these works is that they have highlighted how longstanding concerns about Diaspora Jews and Israel heading in different directions have an empirical

basis (Vital 1990; Rosenthal 2001). The disadvantage is that they necessarily generalize and can miss important nuances or complications that can be revealed in smaller scale qualitative work. In particular, what the larger studies cannot properly address is the role of individual narratives in shaping commitments and conduct. Larger studies, for all they broadly illustrate, are improperly resourced to interrogate in detail tensions about the role of Israel in the expression or formation of Jewish values. The ethnographic approach of the present effort provides a valuable contribution to these existing population studies and will complement studies of historical documents, policy statements, and media reports. Understanding how one American Jewish congregation is struggling to understand Israel and its place in the lives of a firmly rooted Diaspora community provides invaluable insights into the future of both the Jewish people's relationship with Israel and Israel's relationship with Diaspora Jewish communities.

What We Did Not Find

We developed an interview protocol that tread lightly on politics while still ensuring that we could elicit reasonably illustrative responses from our interview subjects. We thought we were stepping into complex and nuanced conversations, active debates, and a topic that was poised at any moment to erupt into discord. Both researchers, in our own research for other projects, had seen that happen before and all of the literature on the topic reinforced our concern. But as we began our research, we found something unexpected: Public discussion of Israel was barely a source of tension in the community. As a matter of fact, it was barely there at all.

This finding was not something we anticipated and it took us by surprise. Indeed, the members of this community seemed to be reading the same reports that we were. Many (N=32) told us that Israel played a divisive role in the community, but their own experiences of Israel in the community revealed a different truth. There was solid alignment in interviewees' political self-description: 73.4% of the participants identified themselves as Zionist (from steadfast supporters to critical supporters), compared to only 13.3% who did not say and 13.3% who expressed ambivalence about the label. Over half (N=34) had visited Israel themselves and, furthermore, they shared nearly universal agreement that Israel was important for Jewish identity. If so many believed that Israel was a source of contention in the community, where were the lines of debate? Why were we not hearing what we thought we were going to hear? Where was all the discord? Where was the animosity? What of the disagreements that could threaten to tear the community apart?

The internalized narrative that Israel was a source of division seemed contradictory to the generally positive and widely shared perspective about the significance of Israel. In general, the interviewees agreed about Israel, but they feared that others did not. Individual politics, however conflicted they might be, did not appear to wither their understanding of Israel as a significant factor in Jewish identity and culture. Frequently, they used their politics to qualify their feelings about Israel, and a small number of interviewees led with their politics, but in the main, politics was not the sole or determining register in which congregants expressed their relationship to Israel.

From the political left, Mira Kaempt expressed the views of many others when she explained, "I care about Israel. I want Israel to survive. You know, I'm Jewish. I think it is very important and I don't like a lot of the stuff that Israel does."[5] Another member shared, "I care about Israel, but I have problems with a lot of things that the State does, and that does become harder to reconcile the longer that it goes on that way.[6] Others explained that they loved Israel, even if they did not love its government, and they drew analogues to the United States to make their point.

Congregants who held practically opposite political perspectives took an almost identical approach when sharing their attitudes about Israel. One expressed his appreciation for Israel by connecting it to his disappointment in American Jews, who he believed were willing to give up on Israel for political reasons:

> There's all these important issues, but when someone takes issue with one of those things, and they're willing to [say], "I can't support Israel," or "I won't support this organization," or "I won't go there," or whatever, they don't criticize any other country … and this is Jews I'm talking about. They're not willing to see the forest through the trees. People aren't saying, "I'm going to leave America because of Roe v. Wade or because Roe v. Wade could be overturned," or "because we have a level of racism." Whatever you may think of it, there's some racism, or there may be a great deal of it underneath, but people aren't saying, "I can't support [the] United States anymore; I'm going to have to leave this country" because of their issue. But Jews will turn their back on Israel.[7]

Contra Waxman's (2016) conclusion that political differences portended "trouble in the tribe," or Peter Beinart's (2010, 2013) or Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman's (2010) contention that American Jews are "distancing" themselves from Israel, the congregants in our study

[5] Interview with the author(s), August 24, 2017.
[6] Rob Gordon, interview with the author(s), August 24, 2017.
[7] Ed Rothberg, interview with the author(s), September 6, 2017.

were able to articulate their politics while still expressing a shared sense that Israel was a crucial resource for Jewish life and a source of personal meaning and pride.

Instead of pointing solely to politics, our interviews yielded a much more nuanced and complicated set of concerns and strategies that congregants used to both engage with and deflect engagement with Israel. Naomi Miller told us, "I just kind of avoid it."[8] She explained, "I know there are a few people who are definitely very strong in AIPAC… I used to be able to talk to them, but once there seemed to be the schism of J Street and AIPAC. And AIPAC…I don't talk to them anymore…. I mean, I talk to them about other things. I don't talk to them about Israel, just because I know they would be very disapproving of the fact that I support J Street."[9] Naomi's perspective and strategy were both representative of this congregation. People believed the topic to be too hot to handle, so their strategy was not to fight it out in committees or in public, but to avoid it. Other members of the community, like Naomi, were happy to avoid talking about Israel even as they held strong opinions about it. Given the general agreement among community members, why did they fear broaching the subject? Given the general consensus on Israel's importance, why was Israel not central in the life of this Jewish community? And, if Israel was not as central as we first thought, what role did it play in this community and how did the congregants understand the role that Israel, and they, played?

Three Ways of Framing Israel

It is clear that congregants' behavior is not only driven by their own experiences or political opinions. Other elements are at play in establishing the meaning of Israel in their lives and in the life of the congregation. What kinds of conceptual apparatuses are they using to make sense of Israel in the congregational context? To answer that question, we turn to Erving Goffman's theory of frame analysis. At its core, Goffman's theory is about how people make meaning of objects or phenomena by placing them in context. "I start," he writes, "with the fact that from an individual's particular point of view, while one thing may momentarily appear to be what is really going on, in fact what is actually happening is plainly a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance, and so forth" (Goffman 1974, 10). Goffman argues that an action that seems to be "plainly" understood actually draws its meaning from its larger contextual or

[8] Interview with the author(s), August 24, 2017.
[9] Naomi Miller, interview with the author(s), August 31, 2017.

cultural frame. What is "really going on" is not solely the product of an individual's unique process of meaning-making, but rather emerges out of culturally established frames that facilitate individual and collective interpretive efforts. For example, when the media frame certain phenomena as "problems" or "dangers" (like terrorist attacks or stranger abduction) and omit mention of other, more likely events (like car accidents), they are creating what David Altheide (1997) has called "problem frames" (see also Glassner 1999). These, in turn, shape the ways that people evaluate dangers in and to their lives and inform their decisions about everything from how to vote to the "unmarked reality of everyday routines" (Cerulo 2002, 2006; Brekhus 2015, 48).

In our interviews, congregants deployed three interrelated frames to describe Israel's place in the community. Following Altheide (1997), we call the first frame the "problem frame" because it describes talk about Israel as a problem. The second frame is called the "resource frame," which understands Israel as a cultural resource for world Jewry. Congregants couched this in terms of Israel's place in fostering a "Jewish identity" and the ways in which Israelis contribute broadly to a sense of "pride" among American Jews. Within the resource frame, Israel is symbolically powerful but abstract and distant. The third frame is the "local frame," which picks up on Israel's distance from the daily lives of most congregants and the operational concerns of the congregation. This frame renders Israel as but one concern among many that face the congregation, including sustaining memberships, budget concerns, and the bandwidth of congregants trying to manage the demands of career, family, and community. Though distinct in their articulation, the three frames interact with one another, reinforcing a sense that the risk of arguing about Israel is not worth the cost to the status, health, and peace of the community.

We will discuss each frame in turn before moving to a discussion of the relationship between them.

The Problem Frame

Even Israel's most vociferous supporters acknowledged the difficulties in talking about Israel in the congregation. While people offer many reasons why this is the case, they have nevertheless largely internalized the problem frame and deploy it readily. But it is clear that the broadly accepted narrative is that talking about Israel is difficult, potentially disruptive, and likely not worth the risk posed by raising the issue. While congregants differed with respect to the role they wanted Israel to play in the life of the congregation, and their feelings about how prominent Israel should be in the community varied, they

nevertheless agreed that talking about Israel was a significant challenge. Similarly, though they represented an array of personal political positions, they generally agreed that talking about Israel posed a unique problem.

Members explained that "you have to be so careful what you say,"[10] describing the issue as a "hot potato."[11] One congregant summed this attitude up nicely, saying, "I think it's a sensitive topic, because I think there are some people who are very avid supporters of Israel. There are some people...who, you know, [think] Israel could do no wrong. There are some people who have a more nuanced view. I think because we're all polite Californians, we don't engage in discussions...within the synagogue that are going to get people upset."[12] Another member noted, with respect to talk about Israel in the congregation, "The most striking feature is the silence."[13] Still another explained that she actively chooses to avoid talking about Israeli politics with others in the community: "I will avoid talking about Israel in terms of politics. Of course, if people are traveling there, we have a great talk like, 'Where are you going to go? What great thing[s] are you going to see?' You know, that sort of thing. But Israeli politics...I avoid it. I think other people might too."[14]

This frame was even mobilized by one of the leaders of the community, Hannah Gardner, who explained, "[It] definitely feels like criticizing Israel is not really on the table.…[It] doesn't feel like a safe conversation to have."[15] Hannah continued to express her concern about the impact it might have on membership specifically: "I don't think it feels very safe for people to offer a variety of views about Israel. It feels like we'll lose important people if we do that."[16] This attitude was also shared by others. A board member commented, "I think we should be less political because I think we'll alienate a lot of people as well."[17] When asked if she talks about Israel with other members, Naomi Miller, who earlier said that she avoids the topic when possible, admitted that when she does, she approaches the topic "carefully."[18]

Notably, not all talk about Israel is considered explosive or forbidden. It is possible to talk about travel plans, food, science and technology, or the arts. Moreover, in the context of

[10] Fania Kremberg, interview with the author(s), August 30, 2017.
[11] Rose Lerman interview with the author(s), August 31, 2017.
[12] Morgan Wise, interview with the author(s), August 23, 2017.
[13] Shlomo Hartman, interview with the author(s), August 27, 2017.
[14] Naomi Miller, interview with the author(s), August 31, 2017.
[15] Interview with the author(s), September 5, 2017.
[16] Interview with the author(s), September 5, 2017.
[17] Robert Goodman, interview with the author(s), August 29, 2017.
[18] Interview with the author(s), August 24, 2017.

conducting research for this article, congregants willingly shared with us their feelings about Israel, and they were fairly free in talking about how they avoided or encouraged talking about Israel in the congregation. While they deployed the problem frame in talking about Israel, they nevertheless spoke openly with us. Some kinds of talk, therefore, seemed acceptable and some seemed too risky. This suggests that the problem frame, despite its ubiquity and its appeal to conventional wisdom, cannot entirely capture the dynamics that guide talk of Israel in the congregation. There are other frames at work.

The ubiquity of the problem frame aligns with conclusions drawn from previous research: that American Jews have a difficult time talking about Israel inside their institutions. In fact, given the high levels of agreement among members of the congregation about how important Israel is to them as Jews and given how many of them have traveled to Israel, it seemed, at times, like the "problem narrative" had become part of the problem itself. Congregants seem to have grown accustomed to talking about Israel as if one could not talk about Israel, and have thus turned the problem narrative into something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Books like Waxman's (2016) and reporting about intra-Jewish conflict both describe and normalize the problem narrative, perhaps inadvertently bolstering the appeal and application of the problem frame. It is important to note that the problem frame surfaced repeatedly in our interviews without a single account of a public argument or disagreement about Israel among the members of the congregation. They found themselves talking about not being able to talk about Israel without being able to identify an example of a time when talking about Israel led to an uncomfortable confrontation. They have internalized the problem frame without actually facing or experiencing the problem itself.

When we dug into the context for the problem frame and tried to understand with greater sensitivity the dynamics of this frame – where it came from and when and how congregants deploy it – we found that it was often informed by two other frames that are in tension with one another. The problem frame alone cannot account for the ways in which members of this congregation shape their desire and ability to talk about Israel. It is not enough to claim that the relationship between the members of this congregation and Israel is definitively weakening or "distancing," nor is it sufficient to point, as Waxman (2016) does, to politics as the sole source of the problem frame. To be sure, some congregants might be generally conflict averse or, more specifically, they might feel that maintaining a kind of "cold peace" in the congregation is worth more than having a public disagreement. If this is true, then it reveals other frames that congregants have been deploying to make sense of the situation. Therefore, the problem frame is inadequate as the sole explanation. Consequently,

we approach the problem frame in a triangulated relationship with two other frames that individual congregants use to make sense of the situation.

This triangulated relationship makes it harder to express one's position and, it seems, increases anxieties around not knowing enough, not having perfectly logical political positions, or simply acknowledging how to reckon with what is, by all accounts, a complicated situation. They might be "wrestling" with Israel, as some in Israel education have suggested (Sinclair 2013), in which case we would have seen more pronounced internal conflict about Israel, but we did not. What we found instead were members of this congregation in the San Francisco Bay Area whose understanding of talk about Israel was guided by three intersecting frames, where none could take precedence and the dynamic balance of the three revealed how the congregants themselves made sense of Israel, their congregation, and their relationship to both.

The Resource Frame

A majority (N= 38) of the interviewees expressed their understanding that having a connection with Israel is essential for Jewish identity in a generalized way, or that Israel provided a sense of "pride" for American Jews. Israel, they explained, held a largely positive valence for them, and they expressed warm feelings or a generalized affection for it, even if they have never traveled there. In the resource frame, Israel served as an important symbol both for them, personally, and for their larger community. The symbolic power of Israel was not up for debate and was expressed by congregants regardless of their political positions. The resource frame demonstrates the persistent power and love of the values in the idea of Israel. These values exist with relative independence from immediate encounters with Israeli daily life or Israeli politics at the state level.

Rocky Matas captured what many others expressed, calling Israel a "core value," before continuing, "I think [there is] the sense of identification with Israel [when] things are going well. We're happy somebody Israeli wins the Nobel Prize or does something, [and] we're proud of their achievements, [we] take pride in their achievements."[19] Another, older member of the congregation explained that "Israel is a kind of genetic thing with my family,"[20] while another congregant told us, "I think that we have to be cautious about the political aspects of Israel, but I think that Israel as a Jewish State, Israel as a Jewish

[19] Interview with the author(s), August 28, 2017.
[20] Fred Davidson, interview with the author(s), August 28, 2017.

homeland, I think that's something that we can all rally around."[21] Another member expressed what others felt, explaining, "I identify with the country, and I'm very grateful that it exists. It has enriched my Judaism, my Jewishness."[22] Still another shared, "[I]t is important to me that there is a strong Jewish State,"[23] and the fact that the congregation has a specific "prayer for Israel in each service certainly makes me feel more comfortable."[24] Hannah Gardner told us how important it was to see the Israeli flag in the synagogue, despite the awareness of political differences: "People are going to walk in the door, and they're going to want to wave their blue and white flag and feel really good about this country. And let's not talk about any of the negative stuff."[25]

This sense of pride, however, has not translated into programming or ritual in the congregation. One member expressed her frustration with this situation:

> I think we need to teach silly things, like Israeli dancing. I mean, come and have fun. Sing folk music. Dance. Have speakers that, literally, exploit Israel. Come and tell us what's going on there. Bring medical authorities and show us what the heck is going on at Hadassah Hospital besides the windows.…Let's do music. Let's do science and medicine. It's extraordinary! Or even a slideshow of some of what's going on. Show us what I think we're missing: pride.[26]

The perceived absence of pride among her peers suggests that this congregant has not shared her feelings about Israel with others – with whom she would have found many sympathetic people. While they may have differed about how that should look in the life of the congregation, many would have shared her sense that Israel is a point of pride for them and others.

Ruth Shinwell offered a more holistic notion of the relationship between Israel and American Jews, explaining that Jewish identity and Israel are "symbiotic." Israel, she explained, helps strengthen Jewish identity, and "Jewish identity helps sustain the interest in Israel."[27] One of the leaders of the congregation tried putting its relationship in context using a similar framework: "I would say it's not a central driving force of the congregation, but it's a piece of our identity, one of the branches of our identity."[28] Another congregant explained,

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[21] Uri Davidson, interview with the author(s), August 27, 2017.
[22] Mort Kaplan, interview with the author(s), August 31, 2017.
[23] Seb Smith, interview with the author(s), September 3, 2017.
[24] Seb Smith, interview with the author(s), September 3, 2017.
[25] Hannah Gardner, interview with the author(s), September 5, 2017.
[26] Edith Spiro, interview with the author(s), August 24, 2017.
[27] Interview with the Author(s), August 24, 2017.
[28] Hannah Gardner, interview with the author(s), September 5, 2017.

"[E]ven if there are people that don't have any connection to Israel, it's still ingrained in the culture and things like that. I think that most people, or most American Jews at least, have a deep-down desire: they want Israel to thrive and be successful … even if they have no physical touch to it."[29] As another congregant put it, "I think it is an emotional attachment. It's this sense of Israel [that] certainly makes me feel safe."[30]

Other congregants cited their experiences in Israel as a source of their connection to it, and as a source of enrichment of their lives in California. Naomi Miller spoke about how her time in Israel influenced her appreciation of Shabbat. "I love [that] in Israel that Shabbat can be Shabbat so easily. And so it makes me really want to make [Shabbat].... Not that I'm very good at it, but it makes me value Shabbat more, definitely."[31] Reflections like these identified the source of congregants' warm feelings toward Israel, which took shape almost wholly independent of any consideration of the larger political situation.

Another congregant, who had not traveled to Israel, spoke romantically about the impact she imagined such a trip would have on her. The search for a truthful account of life in Israel was also evident in how she treated Israel as an important destination, not simply another tourist stop:

> I think I look at [Israel] like a place that is just an extension of my family and I just want to go visit…. I want to spend more time than I probably would spend anywhere else. I don't think I could go for a short period of time. I think I would want to go for long enough that I didn't feel like I was being rushed [from] one place to another. So I kind of look at it a little bit like a home; so you don't want to rush it. It's not really a visit. I feel like it's… maybe the one place you go [where] you know you belong. You're not like a tourist or a stranger. That's the impression … that I have.[32]

Another congregant, who admitted that she felt she ought to know more about Israel, nevertheless felt some ambivalence about the fact that she did not care about Israel as much as she felt she should. As she explained, "I think I need to be educated, basically, about Israel."[33] When we asked her to explain, she replied, "Because I feel I should care."[34] The feeling of caring about Israel was strong enough that this congregant felt like she needed to learn more, which perhaps would allow her to care more than she does. By not caring as much as she felt that she should, she was concerned that she might not be fulfilling some core

[29] Max Dieson, interview with the author(s), September 3, 2017.
[30] Seb Smith, interview with the author(s), September 3, 2017.
[31] Naomi Miller, interview with the author(s), August 31, 2017.
[32] Krystal Moser, interview with the author(s), August 27, 2017.
[33] Ella Shipton, interview with the author(s), August 22, 2017.
[34] Ella Shipton, interview with the author(s), August 22, 2017.

aspect of Jewish life. This is another articulation of the resource frame: she expressed her sense that Israel could serve as a source for her own Jewishness even if at present it did not.

The Local Frame

In contrast to the resource frame, which focused on meaning and pride in the abstract, the local frame emerged from the various explanations congregants offered for why Israel did not play a larger role in the life of the congregation. Most of their reasons revolved around concerns that faced their immediate community, from congregational issues involving membership and financing to personal interests or their acknowledgment that they had limited capacity to engage with everything they believed to be important.

While most (N=38) of the interviewees felt that Israel was central to Jewish identity, a smaller proportion (N=25) observed that Israel did not feature centrally in the life of their congregation. Israel is symbolically significant, they explained, but not central to their congregation, which was focused on serving the needs of the community. For many of those we interviewed, Israel figured in the congregation but only abstractly, and this distinguished their congregation from other congregations in the area. Hannah Gardner, put it this way: "I think it [Israel] is a piece of who we are. But I think [in] some congregations, Israel advocacy and a relationship with Israel is kind of one of their driving forces. I wouldn't say that about us. I would say it's a piece of who we are."[35]

A small number of the interviewees (N=8) simply told us that Israel did not concern them on a regular basis. Though they recognized Israel's significance to Jews in the abstract, They did not have a strong sense of connection with Israel. Though she felt that she ought to care more about Israel than she does, Ella Shipton still told us: "I don't really have a relationship with Israel."[36] Morgan Wise put her lack of relationship with Israel more starkly: "Jews were Jews before there was Israel. The Jewish identity comes from thinking you're Jewish. To me, the existence or non-existence of Israel as a country would not affect how I identified as a Jew."[37] This was a minority opinion, but one we nevertheless heard, and one that speaks to the power of the local frame as congregants constructed Jewish lives primarily around their own communities, identities, and experiences.

More typical was the position of people like Robert Goodman, a member of the Board, who told us of his strong connection to Israel, which he found to be in tension with

[35] Interview with the author(s), September 5, 2017.
[36] Interview with the author(s), August 22, 2017.
[37] Interview with the author(s), August 23, 2017.

the more pressing concerns facing his community. “It's meaningful to me,”[38] he told us, as he mused about what he understood to be the congregation’s lack of interest in Israel. Yet, he explained that he’s “always felt…that it's kind of [like] Israel's over there, and we're focused on the world around us, Jewish or not. It's more social in terms of the Greater Bay Area and the community and the Jewish Community, or the Israeli community is more out of sight, out of mind.”[39] As a result, he wished that Israel would play a more prominent role in the congregation, but he was clearer about how that role should not look than about how he thought it should look: “I don't think it should be something where it's jammed down people's throats. I think there should be a little stronger connection. I don't think they should be strongly advocating, getting very political about it. I think it should be stronger than it currently is because it just seems [the community is] dispassionate about it.”[40] Robert felt like he did not have the time or energy to invest in both Israel and his local community with the same vigor as he would have liked.

While Robert explained that that he felt pulled in two directions, other congregants attributed the lack of engagement with Israel to a concern over resources like money, time, and attention. Both individuals and the congregation’s leadership recognized that there is only so much time in the day and that they are working with finite resources. More than a few talked about their personal “limited bandwidth” and that Israel simply did not fit within a manageable range of commitments. Many of the interviewees spoke of first having to attend to work responsibilities, childcare, or aging parents. Similarly, they spoke of preferring to focus their attention in the congregation on alternative forms of worship or other areas of learning. When we asked people about issues in the congregation, we heard about membership rolls and attrition, about the educational program, and about trying to attract younger people. Israel, while symbolically significant (the congregation features an Israeli flag at the front of the sanctuary, and regularly says a prayer for the State of Israel), often did not rise to prominence in the issues that synagogue leaders were facing.

In an otherwise explicit discussion of the political involvement of the congregation, even as political action in the congregation ramped up in the wake of the election of Donald Trump and the Social Action Committee grew considerably in numbers and activities, we heard that Israel remained somewhat marginal. The congregation’s enthusiasm for political

[38] Interview with the author(s), August 29, 2017.
[39] Interview with the author(s), August 29, 2017.
[40] Robert Goodman, interview with the author(s), August 29, 2017.

action did not include Israel-focused activities. One concerned member lamented, “I watched that bloom, right? So Trump gets into power, everybody freaks out, and all of a sudden we have a huge social justice movement. We had five, six congregants [who are] passionate knocking on the clergy's door: ‘We need to do something. We need to step up.’ I've never seen that for Israel.”[41] The political activities of the congregation appear to be organized within the local frame, and people seem less urgent about politics with respect to Israel.

Some congregants explained that they calculated the perceived cost of fanning political flames in the community and opted to keep quiet in the name of congregational peace because they were committed, first and foremost, to maintaining their own community: “And would I want constant debate and disagreements in *shul*, here? I don't think so. Would I like other people's opinions to be close to mine? Of course, because I'm right. But I'm not sure that I wouldn't *(sic)* want the harmony of the *shul* to be disturbed.”[42] Another explained, “We have a community that wants to stay together for mutual betterment. It’s one of those subjects that where it broached wouldn't add to the harmony.”[43] When sizing up the members’ various concerns, the local frame tended to influence members’ actions, privileging their community over their more symbolic commitments to Israel.

One congregant deployed the local frame quite firmly, stating, “I don't pay attention to whatever they're doing to Israel. It's off my radar. I really don't engage in it.”[44] Another explained, “We're so far away, and there [are] so many distractions in the United States. You know, we got enough on our mind right now in terms of things that we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, let alone Israel.”[45] For other congregants, the abstract relationship with Israel became part of their rationale for focusing on life in their own community. As one such congregant shared, “I think mostly it is just a country that's on the other side of the world. It doesn't have any impact on my day-to-day life. In a sense, I'm glad that Jews have a place that they can militarily defend themselves in. I'm not sure that I would have chosen that place, just from a purely historic and strategic perspective. It's one of the regions of the world that's encumbered more times than any other region, so why would you want to hole up there?”[46]

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[41] Batya Gregson, interview with the author(s), August 29, 2017.
[42] Levi Gur, interview with the author(s), August 31, 2017.
[43] Morgan Wise, interview with the author(s), August 23, 2017.
[44] Helen Dubkov, interview with the author(s), August 24, 2017.
[45] David Benjamin, interview with the author(s), August 23, 2017.
[46] Shlomo Hartman, interview with the author(s), August 27, 2017.

In a focus group, some members of the Executive Board referred to the local frame and general lack of interest in increasing Israel-related programming as part of their rationale for not investing further in raising Israel's profile in the congregation.

> If you genuinely polled the synagogue and said, "what's the top ten things of interest that add value to your membership?" I don't think Israel would be in the top category…. Why would you put all this energy into something that people genuinely right now have limited interest in? They have an interest [in Israel], but it's not something that… [explains why] I came to this temple and why I'll stay here. How much value added do you get?.... Right now, I just don't get a sense, and maybe I'm wrong. I just don't see the sense there. I think there's other things that are on their [the members'] higher priorities that they want to see as part of their reason why they want to stay.[47]

Reading the congregation, its senior leadership saw little "added value" in increasing Israel-oriented programming because, as they saw it, people were less motivated by engaging with Israel than they were by other concerns. Consequently, the leadership decided to follow the interests of the community.

There are those in the community who wished the Board would or could take the initiative and advocate for more Israel-focused programming. Responding to the predominance of the local frame, those who wished Israel to occupy a more prominent role in the community expressed some frustration with Israel's marginal role. With some exasperation, one member explained that Israel is not a focal point of congregational life because "people are focused in on other problems. I don't know, I think it's sort of like they think, 'oh, Israel's going to be fine without my support.' I have no idea [why they feel this way]. I hope you interview them and find out why. Drives me nuts. It's pretty sad."[48]

Frames in Conflict

For many in this community, Israel provided an abstract resource for pride and identity, but its impact on their daily lives was mitigated by other, more immediate concerns. Israel, many congregants contended, played an important role for them and their community, but the urgency of more proximate issues drew their attention and effort. In the most pronounced versions of the local frame, Israel hardly mattered at all, and interviewees who emphasized the resource frame hoped that by engaging with Israeli culture their peers would build on the strength and pride that they drew. Even those who emphasized the resource

[47] Steven Dubler, interview with the author(s), September 7, 2017.
[48] Elizabeth Cohen, interview with the author(s), August 22, 2017.

frame still understood that the congregation and its members could not manage every desire and demand of every congregant.

The problem frame appeared to operate independently of the other two. However, our research found it to be intimately tied to the other two frames that congregants used when they described talking about Israel. As one congregant told us, "I think there's a place for Israel in every synagogue. I don't know that there's a place for politics as much in every synagogue because I see it dividing, because I see people just assume everybody feels a certain way, and then if you don't, it's like, 'What's wrong with you?'"[49] This comment foregrounds the three competing frames of understanding at play in the congregation. Her use of the problem frame mirrors the dominant narrative in American Jewish life, but the prominence of the problem frame obscures the presence of the other two frames by projecting responsibility for the apparent conflict onto conventional wisdom about American Jews, or onto politics more generally. The problem frame has become a paradigmatic example of Goffman's (1974) frame analysis because the more people have come to see that talking about Israel is a source of intra-communal conflict, the more reticent they are to talk about Israel and the greater the fear of conflict becomes. The logic, though, quickly becomes circular. Is Israel a problem because it is hard to talk about or is Israel hard to talk about because it is a problem?

In addition to the problem frame, examining at the ways in which members of this congregation talk about Israel has revealed two powerful frames – resource frame and local frame – at work. Both of these frames offer explanatory frameworks for people's individual relationships with Israel and for Israel's role in the congregation. And, importantly, each of the frames is in dynamic tension with the other two. Israel is a cultural and religious resource, but its distance from everyday life in the Bay Area puts it in tension with the local frame. At the same time, members' affection for Israel can elicit a sense that they ought to be focusing more on it if only they had the time. Yet, the fear of political discord is grounded in a sense that such discord would disrupt the local frame. The resource frame regards Israel as a source of pride, but the power of the resource frame cannot quite motivate people to engage with Israel more than they already do. At the same time, the local frame focuses on immediate concerns in the congregants' lives, relegating Israel, which they've told us is an important part of their Jewish world, to the margins of synagogue programming. Congregants' love of Israel and love of their own community are occasionally in conflict and occasionally in

[49] Kate Horton, interview with the author(s), August 29, 2017.

concert, and the ongoing negotiation of these two commitments shapes how congregants understand the implications of talking about Israel.

Congregants are regularly, if not entirely consciously, calibrating the relationship between these three frames. Congregants do think about and care about Israel, but it is not an immediate priority and has largely not been able to elicit strong commitments either by most individual members or by the congregation. As a result, Israel barely played any role in the daily life of the community. It remains an abstraction, a powerful abstraction, but an abstraction nevertheless. Other than the regular blessing for the State of Israel during prayer services, the presence of the Israeli flag at the front of the sanctuary, and elements of the religious school curriculum, Israel does not feature prominently in the day-to-day life of this congregation. Israel was not a regular topic of conversation among members, it was not a focus of the rabbi's sermons (there was little guidance from the clergy in general when it came to Israel) and, outside of the religious school, there was not much Israel-focused programming in the event calendar. In this community, the strong sense of pride people felt about Israel could not overcome the pressures of more immediate concerns and elevate the status of Israel in the community's programmatic life. In a sense, congregants' preference for a symbolic Israel allowed them to avoid political conversations and did not immediately compete for resources or "bandwith."

The resultant tension between Israel as an abstract resource for Jewish identity and the more immediate ways in which people operationalized their identities suggests that the problem frame is animated by a tension that is both communal and personal. People's internal conflict about the role Israel should play in their own lives, activities, and perspectives influences their desire to talk about Israel in communal settings. They can always elect to defer to the problem frame, which is readily available to them, but the problem frame is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: reticence to talk about Israel will not likely lead to greater public engagement. Getting people to the proverbial table to talk about Israel in this congregation was made more challenging because they did not feel strongly enough about Israel to push the issue. They rarely felt compelled to translate their affection for Israel into programming or public debate. They generally agreed about how they felt toward Israel, and, because they largely understood the place of Israel in their community through the local frame, they never felt compelled to put their largely shared local commitments at risk by raising political issues. They could love Israel from afar, in the abstract, without jeopardizing their communal connections.

Although American Jewish communal conflicts about Israel tend to focus on political differences, and both scholars and communal leaders interpret the phenomenon of Israel's increasing divisiveness in Jewish communities by applying the problem frame, an analysis at the local level reveals a more nuanced story. Goffman's frame analysis offers a useful way of examining how people make sense of complicated social phenomena like talking about Israel. Focusing on the relationship between the three meaning-making frames employed by members of this congregation reveals the ways in which people choose when and how to talk about Israel and when and how not to. Avoiding talk of Israel does not substantiate claims of American Jewish "distancing" from Israel, but neither is it evidence of acquiescence to one or another prevailing political trend. Instead, focusing on frames has allowed us to understand the ways in which congregational talk about Israel is driven by broader tensions between values and actions, between aspirations and application, and between abstract pride and concrete resources. Congregants' hopes for and dreams of Israel are mitigated by the realities of their lives as members of a local congregational community. Though they feel strongly about Israel, they are always weighing the resources it provides from those that it requires, and the benefits they derive from the potential costs that talking about Israel might incur for them and for the community to which they belong. However, there is more going on than a mere cost-benefit analysis. In negotiating across the three frames, congregants are not just allocating resources, they are making decisions about their own self-conceptions about what it means to be Jewish in the 21st Century, and what values Israel provides for them and to their communities.

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