Findings:

- Two panelists, Dov Waxman and Steven Cohen, emphasized the unprecedented nature of the divisions among American Jews today over Israel.

- Dov Waxman, observed that certain sectors of the American Jewish population – the younger, the non-Orthodox, the politically – are less likely to support current Israeli government policy when it conflicts with their beliefs or political views.

- Steven Cohen, saw this and other data as evidence of continuing detachment over time among non-Orthodox Jews, especially as it relates to children of intermarriage. Cohen thinks that life stage is only a variable for people that are in-married and raise Jewish children; for the intermarriage demographic, detachment does not change across life stages.

- Theodore Sasson maintained that future American Jewish alienation from Israel was not a given, and that data indicates continuing support among the younger generation. Waxman seemed to support this when he maintained that the divisiveness of the current debate is evidence that American Jews still care deeply about Israel, not they are becoming more detached from it. Sasson also disagreed with Cohen’s assessment of the children of intermarriage demographic, maintaining that lifestage is still an important variable and that participation in Birth Right could bolster attachment among them as well.

Lecture Summaries:

Moderator: Mijal Bitton, NYU-Steinhardt and Shalom Hartman Center of North America

Dov Waxman, Northeastern University

The overarching point is that while emotional attachments to Israel may persist, the political consensus of American Jewish unity in support for Israel is eroding, and that public debate among American Jews has become more acrimonious than ever before. American Jews are more
critical of Israel, and the topic has become more divisive than in the past, though this does not necessarily mean they are becoming more detached (on the contrary, this may indicate the extent to which American Jews are still attached to Israel). Two issues that are particularly contentious in American Jewish discourse concerning Israel is the question of establishing a Palestinian state and the Jewish settlements over the Green Line.

Waxman identified three fault lines in the debates over Israel: Between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews (the former tend to be more supportive of settlements); between political liberals and political conservative; and between younger and older Jews. According to Waxman, data from surveys suggests that the more secular, liberal and younger the American Jew is, the more likely she or he tends to be dovish and to support Israel only to the extent that it accords with their beliefs. For this sector, support for Israel is no longer automatic – while they care about Israel, they see Israel less in need of their support, and are only willing to support it conditionally. The divide over Israel has exacerbated preexisting American Jewish fault lines – religious, political, and cultural.

_Theodore Sasson, Brandeis University_

Sasson sought to answer the question: Are American Jews becoming more indifferent to Israel, particularly as new generation comes to the fore? Sasson argued that, in fact, data culled from younger Jews shows the opposite to be the case. Studies have shown that youth detachment from Israel has not increased over time, suggesting that this is more the product of a particular life stage mood than a growing historical trend. Data collected from participants and non-participants on Birth Right-Taglit indicate that those who supported Israel prior to the Gaza War of 2009 did not waver in their support afterwards, even if they were politically liberal, suggesting that attachment to Israel may transcend politics (though, in light of Pew data, Sasson recognized that this matter is far from clear and requires more research).

Sasson does think, however, that there is a correlation between detachment and intermarriage, especially as it relates to children of these couples, and that population is steadily increasing. However, even here he argued that when you break down community into those with two Jewish parents and those who have one, in the former attachment to Israel has never been strong. Furthermore, participation on a Birth Right-Taglit trip (today, thirty-three percent of participants are children of inter-marriage) can buck the trend, so it is not entirely clear that his means that detachment on the whole will increase. Sasson concluded that while the future is difficult to predict, it is certainly not the case the American Jewish detachment is inevitable.

_Steven M. Cohen, HUC-JIR_

Cohen made a distinction between “attachment” to Israel and “approval” of Israeli government policy. Regarding the former, he disagreed with Sasson, arguing that detachment is indeed on the rise, especially among the non-Orthodox. Cited Pew which indicates that there less Jews attached to Israel, nearly half as much, among middle aged than among older Jews. Decline taking place
because of intermarriage, with children of these unions on the whole distanced from Judaism and due to the fact that there is no counterpart to Israel in Christianity (compare, for instance, Passover and Easter).

Regarding “approval,” Cohen thinks that there are many among the older, more religious, and more politically conservative who back the Israeli government, but again, the more politically liberal and those from intermarriage backgrounds are less likely to do so. The more liberal you are, the more likely you are to not just criticize the Israeli government, but also to become more detached from Israel.

Cohen concluded by insisting that the American Jewish world has never been this divided when it comes to Israel. He also maintained that there is less civility in the discourse on Israel coming from the Right than the Left.