

## Original Research Reports

# Between Tikkun Olam and Self-Defense: Young Jewish Americans Debate the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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### Abstract

In this study, we examined processes associated with ingroup members' break from their ingroup and solidarity with the outgroup. We explored these processes by observing the current dramatic social change in which a growing number of young Jewish Americans have come to reject Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. We conducted a yearlong participant observation and in-depth interviews with 27 Jewish American college students involved in Israel advocacy on a college campus. Findings suggest that Jewish Americans entering the Jewish community in college came to learn about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a lens of Jewish vulnerability. A bill proposed by Palestinian solidarity organizations to divest from companies associated with Israel (part of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions or BDS movement) was also interpreted through the lens of Israel's vulnerability. As the college's Student Union debated the bill, a schism emerged in the Jewish community. Some Jewish students who had a strong sense of their Jewish identity and grounded their Judaism in principles of social justice exhibited a greater openness to the Palestinian narrative of the conflict. Understanding of Palestinian dispossession was associated with the rejection of the mainstream Jewish establishment's unconditional support of Israel. Moreover, dissenting Jewish students were concerned that others in the campus community would perceive them as denying the demands of people of color. We discuss our observations of the process of social change in relation to social science theories on narrative acknowledgment and collective action.

**Keywords:** Jewish Americans, narratives, Israel, BDS, collective action, victimhood, activism, social change, diaspora, intra-group conflict

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In many successful movements for social change, members of a hegemonic group break from their own group to call for the redressing of historical inequalities (Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008). Often, younger generations lead the way in breaking from their ingroup's traditional stance to fight for the rights of the outgroup (Aptheker, 1982; Stewart & McDermott, 2004). For instance, in the United States in the 1960s many white middle-class youth joined the freedom rides to support the demands of the black civil rights movement (Dollinger, 2000; Schultz & Cook, 2002). More recently, the struggle for same-sex couples' rights was overwhelmingly supported by straight

young adults (Klarman, 2012). In this research, we go beyond merely noticing the role of young adults in social justice struggles to examine the micro-processes of social change whereby some young adults break from their ingroup and politically organize in support of a marginalized other. We focus on one particular group of young adults and one particular social justice issue: the responses of Jewish American college students to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the last several years, a schism has emerged in the Jewish American community in relationship to Israel's treatment of Palestinians (Beinart, 2010; Jewish People Policy Institute, 2015; Nathan-Kazis, 2013). This split reflects differences in the extent to which it is legitimate to criticize the Israeli government's policies, including Israel's blockade of Gaza and its expansion of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank (Landy, 2011). On one side of this schism are mainstream Jewish interest groups and organizations that present Israel as a progressive, just, and modern country (Sasson, 2013). On the other side of the split are a growing number of relatively new organizations critical of the Israeli government's marginalization and dispossession of the Palestinians, such as J-Street U and Jewish Voice for Peace (Judis, 2014). The growing schism in the Jewish community is best exemplified by the Open Hillel campaign. Led by Jewish college students, this campaign calls on Hillel (the Jewish student center on college campuses) to open its doors to speakers and organizations that "delegitimize" Israel's ongoing occupation of the Palestinians (<http://www.openhillel.org/about/>).

The debate among Jewish American young adults is occurring within an already contentious campus climate in which Palestinian solidarity organizations are calling for university divestment from companies associated with the Israeli occupation (Guttmann, 2015). Such calls are part of a larger Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) nonviolent grassroots movement that aims to resist Israeli occupation of Palestinian land through tactics of divestment of funds, an academic and commercial boycott of products, and economic and judicial sanctions on the state of Israel (Barghouti, 2011).

In the research reported in this article, we examine what leads some students active in the Jewish campus community to advocate for Israel, and others to take a critical stance towards Israel and the occupation of Palestine. We ground our exploration in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and narrative psychology (Bruner, 1990) because of the importance of group narratives in shaping how members of diaspora groups come to understand conflict they do not experience directly (Ben Hagai, Zurbruggen, Hammack, & Ziman, 2013). Using in-depth interviews, we aim to provide a phenomenological in-depth account of the narratives told by Jewish young adults who advocate for Israel, as well as those who dissent from the mainstream Jewish community's unconditional support of Israel. We complement our narrative analysis of interviews with participant observation in campus events to account for the role of contextual factors in contributing to the schism in the Jewish campus community. Our aim is to illuminate the current historical trend of increasing criticality towards Israel among Jewish American young adults, as well as to contribute to psychological theorizing about diaspora identity formation, intragroup conflict, and collective action.

Importantly, in this study we were only interested in participants who were involved with the Jewish community on campus – participating in events, meetings, and organizations that were part of the Jewish campus community. Of course, there are also Jewish students who are active in non-Jewish organizations protesting the Israeli government, such as Students for Justice in Palestine, but because they do so independently of an organized Jewish community, interviews with them are not included in this analysis.

## Psychological Model of Collective Action: Social Identity Theory

The predominant paradigm used to understand social change and collective action within psychology is rooted in social identity theory (Brown, 2000; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Social identity is defined as the aspect of the self-concept that reflects individuals' knowledge of the social categories to which they belong. When individuals identify with a group or when group identity becomes salient, individuals will come to see themselves based on their group identity and the group's values and norms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Individuals who identify strongly with the ingroup are more likely to identify with the prototypical image of the group and see themselves as holding a shared faith with other group members (Leach et al., 2008).

How people define the ingroup and conceptualize the group's prototypical image will have implications for how the outgroup is framed. When people adopt a definition of the national collective based on ethnic or religious prototypes they are more likely to endorse discriminatory policies towards those who are not part of the ethnic or religious group (Verkuyten, 2004). For instance, English participants who understood their national identity based on essentialist ethnic terms were more likely to support groups acting against asylum seekers (Pehrson, Brown, & Zagefka, 2009). On the other hand, a definition of the group based on a superordinate higher-level category, such as humans, victims, or immigrants, may lead to greater acceptance of marginalized minority groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009; Subašić et al., 2008; Vollhardt, 2009).

The nature of identification with the ingroup will further impact how the outgroup is seen. Attachment to the ingroup that resembles "blind" patriotism (i.e., unquestioning positive evaluation of the group) will lead individuals to glorify the group and feel an obligation to become loyal to and uncritical of it. On the other hand, individuals who identify with the group in a constructive manner are motivated to improve the group. Constructive identifiers are more likely to be critical of the group in order of improving the wellbeing of the group members (Staub, 1997). Research suggests that individuals with high levels of blind patriotism are more likely to frame and perceive the outgroup as threatening compared to those who are disposed towards constructive identification (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999). Studies from Israel suggest that Jewish Israelis who glorify Israel are more likely to justify violence towards Palestinians, in comparison to those who are attached to Israel, but whose attachment does not have a glorifying quality to it (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006; Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, Halevy, & Eidelson, 2008).

## Collective Narratives

The essence of a group is often articulated in the group's collective narrative. Bruner (as cited in Salomon, 2004, p. 274) defines collective narratives as "social constructions that coherently interrelate a sequence of historical and current events; they are accounts of a community's collective experiences, embodied in its belief system and represent the collective's symbolically constructed shared identity." An important type of collective narrative is a group's account of its history. Such accounts serve as a master narrative that defines who the collective is and the problems the collective has faced in the past and must confront in the present (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Liu & László, 2007; Sibley, Liu, Duckitt, & Khan, 2008). Collective narratives invoke group values and norms. Common themes shaping the collective narratives among groups enmeshed in a prolonged violent conflict include: a sense of collective threat, victimhood, hope for peace, exceptionalism, and dehumanization of the other (Adwan & Bar-On, 2004; Bar-Tal, 2007; Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014; Hammack, 2011).

Historians examining Jewish Americans' views on the Middle East suggest that the 1967 Six-Day War served as a turning point in Jewish Americans' relationship with Israel. This war was a historical moment in which a unifying

narrative about Israel emerged. This narrative frames Israel as intending to live in peace but also having to defend itself from Arab attacks. The narrative had a unifying effect on the Jewish American community because it brought together two important themes in Jewish life: the pursuit of peace and social justice, and a concern with Jewish vulnerability (Goldberg, 1997; Seliktar, 2002; Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). To Jews who understood their Jewish identity as associated with values of *tikkun olam* (reparation of the world) and the pursuit of social justice (MacDonald, 1998; Krasner, 2014), Israel was seen as a beacon of social equality due to the construction of socialist villages (kibbutzim) across Israel, and a welfare state that gave a home to Jewish refugees from across the world (Landy, 2011). To Jews who understood their Jewish identity as defined by continuous persecution suffered throughout the centuries, the attacks from Arab armies were seen to legitimize their concerns over the safety of the Jewish people. Moreover, Israel's triumph over the Arab armies offered hope to those concerned with Jewish vulnerability, while establishing Israel's role as a secure home. The consensus following the Six-Day War gave shape to a narrative about Israel that integrates both social justice intentions (*tikkun olam*) and concerns over Jewish vulnerability (Goldberg, 1997; Seliktar, 2002).

Among groups enmeshed in a prolonged conflict, the ingroup's narrative will often disavow or delegitimize the narrative of the other (Adwan & Bar-On, 2004; Salomon, 2004). Like the Jewish Israeli narrative, the Jewish American narrative on the conflict that emerged following the 1967 war ignored the Palestinian narrative on the conflict (which in turn ignores the Jewish narrative). The Palestinian narrative is rooted in the Palestinian history of indigeneity to the land, dispossession, and oppression under Jewish occupation. The Palestinian master narrative highlights Palestinians' presence on the land for many centuries. Palestinian ties to the land were disrupted with the arrival of Jewish immigration supported by colonial powers and the indifference of neighboring Arab states to the Palestinians' plight (Khalidi, 1997). The dispossession of the Palestinians from their native land culminated in the catastrophe of the 1948 Nakba in which approximately 750,000 Palestinians were forced out of their homes (Dowty, 2012; Morris, 2004). The dispossession of the Palestinians was further cemented when Israel conquered the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza strip in the 1967 Six-Day War, and began building Jewish settlements in the newly occupied land (Erekat, 2015; Said, 2000). The affinity between the Palestinian narrative and the histories of other colonized groups has led to coalition-building activism that brings together activists from across racial and ethnic groups (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009; Davis, 2016). Advocacy that frames the Palestinians' cause as a fight against settler colonialism is especially common on U.S. college campuses (Hahn Tapper, 2011; Hallward & Shaver, 2012).

## Processes Deterring and Promoting Narrative Acknowledgement

Peace education and reconciliation efforts among groups in conflict suggest that a key component of reconciliation is an acknowledgement of the other's narrative (Bar-On, 2001; Pettigrew, 2003; Salomon, 2004). Among groups in conflict, such as Jewish Israelis and Palestinians, acknowledgment of the other's narrative is complicated by several factors. First, the violence between the groups is associated with structural barriers that deter members of each group from coming into contact with members of the other group. Second, engaging with the narrative of the other that contradicts one's own view serves as a symbolic threat to one's sense of self and reality (Bar-On, 2008; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010; Chaitin, 2008). Additionally, because both the Jewish and the Palestinian narratives encompass themes of victimhood, members of these groups are less likely to accept the narrative of those who have harmed them (Chaitin, 2014; Klar, Schori-Eyal, & Klar, 2013; Sagy, 2002; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015). Finally, the power imbalance between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians (regarding control over the military, land, and resources) makes acknowledging the Palestinian narrative less pressing (Maoz, 2011).

Nevertheless, certain processes are associated with increased acknowledgment of the other's narrative. Peace education and intergroup contact encounters that combine both increased affective empathy and learning of the other's narrative can help increase mutual recognition of the outgroup story. For instance, Israeli and Palestinian educators created a curriculum in which both the Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives were presented side by side. Dialogue programs in which participants' personal narratives were discussed (as opposed to historical events or political debates) were also likely to decrease ethnocentric talk among participants (Bar-On, 2001; Chaitin, 2014; Maoz, 2011). When contact encounters reduce power imbalances between Jewish and Palestinian participants, there are also more moments of narrative recognition (Ben Hagai, Hammack, Pilecki, & Aresta, 2013). Finally, peace education that focuses on the ways in which power shapes identities is also associated with increased criticality towards commonsense acceptance of hegemonic narratives and increased openness towards new ways of understanding intergroup conflict (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011; Dessel & Ali, 2012).

Young adults' recognition of the other's narrative is complicated by processes of identity development. Arnett (2000) argues that processes of identity formation extend from the adolescent years through college. During emerging adulthood, between the ages of 18-26, young adults explore and come to position themselves in relationship to social class, racial, ethnic, and sexual identity categories (Arnett, 2006; Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Emerging adults' exploration of their identity during college years may involve a deepening understanding of their group's historical victimization. Learning about the collective trauma experienced by one's group may lead young adults to isolate themselves within their group so that they regain safety, and to engage in "us versus them" thinking (Worrell, Cross, & Vandiver, 2001). Acquiring a sense of collective identity through immersion in the ingroup's collective trauma may be associated with decreased recognition of the suffering of others (Cross, 1991; Duncan, 2010).

Although some processes of identity development among college students may be associated with intergroup conflict, other processes may increase intergroup solidarity. The campus environment provides opportunity for learning about both Palestinian and Jewish histories away from violent conflict zones. Learning about different histories in a relatively safe environment may increase individuals' openness to engage with the story of the other. Increased knowledge through learning and personal contact is associated with increased involvement in ally activism on behalf of a disadvantaged minority (Droogendyk, Wright, Lubensky, & Louis, 2016; Louis, Amiot, Thomas, & Blackwood, 2016).

Moreover, intersectional discourses that ask students to consider the ways they are privileged as well as the ways they are oppressed may increase recognition of similarities between one's own group and other oppressed identities (Case, 2012; Cole, 2008; Dessel, Ali, & Mishkin, 2014). Attention both to the ways one's identity is disempowered and to the ways in which it is empowered is associated with increased sensitivity to the oppression of other groups, and increased self-efficacy to engage in coalition building to work towards social justice (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, Curtin, Kende, and Kende (2016) show that those women who have experienced sexism but are also able to recognize their privilege as cis-gender women are more likely to be allies to transgender women. In another example, a Jewish Hungarian activist was motivated to activism against the dehumanization of Roma people due to their awareness of their relative privilege in contemporary Hungarian society in relation to historical injustices associated with the Jewish Shoah.

## The Present Study

We conducted the current study to understand the social psychological processes associated with a schism in which some Jewish young adults advocate for Israel, and others break from their ingroup and organize in support of Palestinian rights. Grounding our investigation in social identity theory and narrative psychology, we were interested in the ways in which group values interact with collective narratives and campus debates in shaping how Jewish Americans come to think about their identity and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Additionally, we examined the role of contextual factors, specifically in relation to Palestinian advocacy organizations' support for a bill critical of Israel, and the shifting of young adults' understanding of their Jewish identity and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## Method

### Participants

Interviews and observations for this study were conducted at a large public university in California. Twenty-seven individuals (7 men, 20 women) who identified as Jewish American and who were active in the Jewish community were interviewed. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 25. All indicated that they came from a middle-class background; most grew up in cities in Southern California including San Diego, Los Angeles, and the San Fernando Valley, and a few were from wealthy cities in Northern California such as Palo Alto, Cupertino, and Napa. One participant was from the central valley of California (an area of fewer economic resources with many migrant farm workers). Six of the 27 participants indicated that their parents emigrated from Israel to the United States.

### Procedures

#### Researchers' Positionality

The participant-observation and interview research team was led by the first author, a Jewish-Israeli graduate student in her early thirties. The second author is a white, non-Jewish faculty member who was involved in designing the study and in data interpretation but did not directly participate in conducting the interviews or in the participant-observation. The first author's perspective was informed by previous studies that she conducted looking at Jewish Americans' attachment to Israel and the narratives that play a role in the reproduction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Additionally, her secular Jewish identity and experience growing up in Israel impacted directly by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, led her to wonder why and how Jewish Americans come to see their identity as connected to Israel. Like many other Jewish Israelis, she held an assumption that Jewish Americans tended to romanticize Israel, refusing to acknowledge the many problems the state faces (see [Shalev, 2016](#)). In some senses the lead researcher's positionality in the Jewish community can be considered akin to an "outsider within" ([Collins, 1986](#)). She was an outsider because of her foreign Israeli identity and because she was not involved in the campus Jewish community before the start of the study. She was an insider because her Israeli identity afforded her a privileged position as somebody whose life history was closely impacted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; as such, she was welcomed into the Jewish community on campus and to discussions about the conflict.

To increase reflexivity and peer examination of the researchers' assumptions, the main investigator was aided by two research assistants with different relationships with Israel: an Asian American undergraduate student who lived in Israel for some time and had Jewish Israeli relatives, and a Jewish American undergraduate student who

was active in both the Jewish conservative religious movement as well as more progressive campus politics related to Israel. The different positions and quality of ties to Israel led our team to notice many of the common-sense assumptions with which we approached the research. As a team, our goal was to create a better understanding of how to facilitate more inclusive dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the college campus. We were committed to approaching the stories of young adults on both sides of the debate over Israel with openness, deep empathy, and commitment to fairness. Specifically, to be fair towards our participants, we aimed to interpret their utterances holistically, based on threads of meaning they articulated throughout their interviews.

### **Announcement and Recruitment**

The research was announced to participants as a study, sponsored by a grant from the University's Chancellor, that aimed to gather information in order to create a more inclusive dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The main researcher's positionality as a Jewish Israeli was apparent to participants and may have shaped their understanding of the research as sympathetic to Israel advocacy. Nevertheless, we also made sure to explain to participants that we were conducting interviews with a wide range of activists including pro-Palestine advocates. As we were conducting the study on a campus where accusations of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism were exchanged across debate lines, activists interested in telling their own side of the story welcomed our research goal and endeavor.

At the beginning of the research the main investigator introduced herself to leaders in the campus Jewish community and explained the goals of the study. In the initial stages of the study, the main investigator and the two research assistants attended events (e.g., Campus Shabbos dinners), meetings (e.g., Jewish Student Union meetings), and classroom lectures (e.g., History of Modern Israel), in which Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were discussed. In those events we introduced ourselves to organizers and participants and invited them to be interviewed for the study. Research assistants also sent messages asking students active in the Jewish fraternity and sorority, as well as students active in other organizations, if they were interested in participating in the study. We also used a snowball recruitment methodology, asking interview participants to recommend other key players in the Jewish community on campus who could be interviewed.

### **The Interview Schedule**

The primary sources of data for this research are transcripts from in-depth interviews with members of the Jewish community on campus who were engaged in learning and debates related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Jewish-Israeli lead researcher (the first author) analyzed the data and conducted most interviews. After training with the lead investigator, two interviews were conducted by the Asian American research assistant. The interviews were conducted in a quiet room in the psychology building on campus. All interviews began with the interviewer reading a prompt to participants explaining that the goal of this research was the creation of a more inclusive and constructive dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on campus. The prompt explained that participants were interviewed because of their role advocating on behalf of Israel or Palestine. It also explained that findings would be shared in campus forums and academic publications. All interviewees signed a consent form that detailed the study goals and participants' rights. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 30 and 120 minutes.

After reading the prompts and signing the consent form the interviews begin with several short-answer questions documenting participants' demographic information (i.e., age, hometown, parents' occupation and social class). The first substantive question asked participants to recall the first time at which they started thinking and caring about Israel or Palestine. We also asked when the participants first thought about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

After discussing experiences in their childhood and adolescent years that contributed to their knowledge of Israel and the conflict, we asked participants to discuss their experiences of becoming involved in the Jewish community and advocating for Israel or Palestine in college. A final set of questions asked participants to discuss positive and negative experiences they had encountered discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on campus, as well as ways they thought a more constructive dialogue could be promoted. The interviews were semi-structured and participants were asked to elaborate on their answers with examples and clarifying questions (Josselson, 2013).

Questions in the semi-structured interviews included “When did you start caring about Israel?” “Before coming to college, did you participate in any advocacy or learning programs related to the conflict? If so, why did you get involved? What did you do?” “In college, have you participated in any advocacy or learning programs related to the conflict? If so, why did you get involved? What did you do?” “Have you had any negative experiences or positive experiences talking about the conflict?” All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the exception of references to real names, which were changed to pseudonyms to protect the privacy of participants.

### Grounded Theory Guidelines

In analyzing the interviews, we followed grounded theory methodology. We were particularly influenced by the guidelines of Corbin and Strauss (1990), Charmaz (2006) and Dey (1999). The grounded theory methodology prescribed by Corbin and Strauss aims to account for how actors make meaning of social reality, and how this meaning changes under different conditions. Furthermore, grounded theory analysis does not assume that findings can be generalized across situations, but rather aims to explore a phenomenon in depth and clarify the conditions that give rise and structure to a social phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Our assumptions in conducting this research were influenced by the constructivist approach to grounded theory by Charmaz (2006). This approach sees the researcher’s account of an event as a construction influenced by their own positionality (Haraway, 1991). Findings from grounded theory research are not meant to generalize to other populations rather, they are meant to induce theoretical postulations that may apply to other contexts with similar sets of conditions.

To decrease individual bias, two researchers (the first author who interviewed the participants and a Jewish American research assistant) independently examined interview transcripts using line-by-line analysis. A careful reading and re-reading of the transcripts was accompanied by memo-writing and the identification of reoccurring concepts and themes. Reoccurring concepts were then grouped into more abstract theoretical categories. We were also interested in the relationship between reoccurring categories. To understand the relationships between categories we examined the interaction between events and actions, as well as the interactions across different interview transcripts. To further enhance theoretical sensitivity, we compared emerging categories among participants who articulated criticality towards the mainstream Jewish establishment on campus ( $n = 10$ ), and participants who were motivated to advocate in support of Israel ( $n = 17$ ).

### Triangulation

We complemented and contextualized our understanding and interpretations of the interviews by collecting observational data. We attended campus meetings, classes, and events related to the debate surrounding Israel/Palestine on campus. We took notes following the events, and shared and discussed these notes as a research group in weekly meetings. The notes from the events were used to make sense of themes raised in the interviews.

## Timeline of Observations

The lead researcher began piloting interviews and conducting ethnographical observations in the spring term before the study formally began. During this time, the campus community engaged in the first debate over a divestment bill proposed by the Palestinian advocacy groups. Starting in the fall of the following school year, we began conducting interviews and more formal observations that lasted until the end of the school year. Many of the interviews were conducted around the start of the school year, and about a third in the middle and end of the school year. We conducted one in-depth semi-structured interview with each participant. Towards the end of the observation period the university's student union debated the divestment bill for the second time.

## Findings

In this section, we first describe common themes in interviewees' explanations of their attachment to Israel, and how they came to understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We first highlight reoccurring categories and the relationships between categories in the stories told by young adults who advocated for Israel, then illuminate reoccurring categories and relationships in the stories of young adults critical of Israel. In the last part of this section, we describe how members of those different groups made sense in their interviews of a divestment bill introduced to the Student Union by Palestinian solidarity organizations.

### Young Adults Advocating for Israel

**Discovering Israel and Palestine** — Like other young adults from ethnic minority groups who leave their families to go to college, many of the Jewish students we spoke to experienced an awakening of their ethnic identity in college (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008). Some young adults who advocated for Israel told a story in which being Jewish was of little importance to them until college when, in search of a community and people with similar cultural roots, they came to the Jewish center (Hillel) and found friends they felt particularly comfortable with. For instance, Sophia, a main leader of Israel advocacy on campus, mentioned in her interview having little experience with Jewish practices before coming to college, but during college her wish for a closer community brought her to regularly attend the Jewish student center.

I got involved [in the Jewish community] my sophomore year. I didn't have a strong Jewish upbringing when I was a kid. I never had been to a Shabbat dinner in my life ...but I was looking for a community to really be part of, outside of the kind of friends I met freshman year...and so there was a gentleman who worked at the Hillel and he mentioned there was this conference in Boston that I should go to learn about Israel, and I said oh ok.

Other leaders in Israel advocacy on campus positioned themselves as having basic engagement with Judaism growing up. To prepare for their Bar or Bat Mitzvahs they went to Hebrew schools, and some of them continued to engage in the Jewish community in weekly afterschool Jewish studies programs (e.g., Midrasha). These students spoke of discovering modern Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians in college. For instance, when the interviewer asked Kevin when he started caring about Israel he answered,

it's funny, I didn't know much about Israel or Palestine until maybe two years ago [in college.] It's really weird... I knew the Jewish people existed for thousands of years.... And from what I could gather I knew that Jews lived there [in Eretz Yisrael]... I didn't know there was, what we call the conflict.

Our analysis of interviews with students like Tiffany, Kevin, Sophia, and Sally suggests that in college, some Israel activists became closer to Judaism, while others became conscious for the first time of the conflict with the Palestinians.

Not all of the students who took leading positions as pro-Israel advocates situated themselves as discovering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in college. Dan, who grew up in California, remembers feeling deep identification with Israel since a young age. In Dan's story Israel was always "a very big issue and I've had people talking about it ever since I started Sunday school in elementary school". Dan described becoming involved in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) already in high school, and attending several AIPAC conferences by the time he got to college. When he came to college he continued to advocate with the organization.

**Israeli-American students** — Like Dan, several Israeli-American identified students also described being enmeshed in discussions about Israel since a young age. Analysis of their interviews suggests that their attachment to Israel was facilitated through an emotional attachment to their Israeli parents, among other family members. These young adults remembered being accompanied by their parents as they watched the Israeli evening news (via satellite technology), listened to chart-topping music hits from Israel, and followed social media updates from friends and family living in Israel. These practices, together with semi-annual trips to Israel, strengthened their attachment to the country. Yael's reflections below exemplify memories invoked by other Israel activists whose parents immigrated to the United States from Israel.

We get Israeli news [at my home.] We pay like an extra \$600 to just get Israeli news and Israeli TV shows, because that's how important it is for our dad to get information right away. It's because he has brothers and sisters in Israel, so he talks to them multiple times a day. ...I call them to say "Shabbat shalom" to see what's going on. They call me to see what's going on with school. Like, I consider myself when they ask me, 'What are you?' I say, 'Oh, I'm an Israeli American.'

Caring about Israel for students like Yael, Michal or Chaim was associated with caring about their family (e.g., grandparents) who live in Israel as well as being attached to Israeli culture including music, food, and television. Israel, as Chaim explained, "represented my home essentially... I felt like that was also part of my identity".

In sum, most of the Jewish American advocates for Israel we talked to described discovering Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in college. In college, they shifted from an understanding of Israel as Eretz-Yisrael (an ancient place which served as the setting for biblical stories) to Israel as a modern vibrant society enmeshed in a violent conflict with the Palestinians. A minority of participants, mostly with parents who immigrated from Israel to the United States, described being attached to Israel since a young age. These students' affective attachment to their parents and to relatives in Israel was associated with an incorporation of modern Israel into their sense of identity. The pathway with which Jewish Americans came to care about Israel was through their attachment to other Jewish Americans and Judaism, and for those who identified as Jewish Israeli, identification occurred through family ties and to a lesser extent through attachment to Jewish culture.

**Learning about Israel's vulnerability** — As some of the Jewish American students we studied became involved in the Jewish community on campus, they were encouraged to participate in trips to Israel, conferences in different parts of the U.S., and classes and events associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Often, interest groups sponsored by Jewish philanthropists and the Israeli government were able to cover the full costs of these trips.

Tiffany described how she came to attend her first AIPAC conference. She remembered going to a Shabbat dinner to hear a speaker who discussed political topics, and hearing an announcement after the talk:

"If you're interested in this topic, if you're interested in politics, (I was interested in politics in general), there's this conference in Washington D.C. The AIPAC one, and we could possibly get you on it." And so I said, "sure!" And a week and a half later I was going to the conference. Yeah and with a zero knowledge of the conflict, whatsoever. And I went to this AIPAC conference and it was like woahhh... people were protesting outside about the settlements, and I asked people next to me, "What's a settlement?" And they said "It's complicated, we'll tell you later"... and I remember Netanyahu's speech really stuck with me. He did the "walks like a duck, talks like a duck, it is a duck." He did that with Iran.

Tiffany, Kevin and Sophia's general interest in politics led them to accept the invitation extended to members of the Jewish community to go on free trips to AIPAC conferences or to conferences of other Israel advocacy organizations. In these conferences they met powerful political leaders. Leaders like Netanyahu introduced them to Israel's vulnerability.

At times, visits to Israel also highlighted Israel's existential vulnerability to Jewish college students. Students who had gone on trips sponsored by political organizations that advocate for Israel remembered gaining a sense of Israel's vulnerability as they visited the country. Sophia, for instance, described her visit to the Golan Heights on the border between Syria and Israel:

At first I didn't get it and it hit me when I was in Israel. ...we went up to the Golan Heights and I saw with my own eyes ... oh there's Syria like you could walk to Syria right now. Oh there's Lebanon and you realize ...oh they want to kill you.

Some trips to Israel, such as those sponsored by political organizations, included lectures and sightseeing activities at the border with Gaza or Lebanon. On these trips, students directly witnessed and discussed Israel's vulnerability and need for self-protection from Arab attacks. Other trips, such as Birthright, discussed the conflict indirectly.

The Taglit-Birthright program is a Jewish experiential education program that takes Jewish Americans between the ages of 18-26 on a ten-day free trip to Israel. Over half a million young Jewish Americans have toured Israel as part of the Birthright trip ([Taglit-Birthright](#), n.d). Young adults who participated in Birthright described gaining a sense of Jewish vulnerability not directly through a discussion of the conflict, but indirectly through the delineation of safe and unsafe areas. Sally remembered,

They never talked bad about Palestinians or anything like that. One time we were in a little town, and they said over there is the Muslim quarter, don't go over to the Muslim quarter it is very dangerous. Like, if you go over there you know there's no guarantee we can get you back like they made a huge deal about it.

The Jewish narrative that Israel needs to protect itself from Arab attacks was communicated through the delineation of safe spaces that excluded Palestinians (see also [Kelner, 2010](#)). The process of border-making inherently created a feeling of threat and fear.

**Standing up for Israel** — Both Jewish Israeli and Jewish American young adults came to be motivated to advocate for Israel when they sensed attacks on Israel's image on campus. For young adults like Michal, with family ties and a love of Israeli culture, emotional attachment to Israel became subsumed in a political preoccupation with the need to secure Israel's good image. When Michal came to college, she hoped to start a club celebrating Israeli

culture. Instead, she found that much of the discussion about Israel was related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She explained,

I wanted to start an Israeli club [in college]. I wanted us to make shakshukah [omelets common in the Middle East] and play Matkot [a game played on the beach in Israel], and do Israeli stuff. I found this booth that was the Israel Action Committee and I was like oh, it has the word Israel in it [it] must be awesome.

When Michal started college, she went to an event called Israel 101, which she expected to be about Israeli culture. Instead, she described the group discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and talking about

how people were like bashing Israel...and there were instances where Hillel buildings were graffitied with swastikas and like a lot of anti-Semitism. I was like is this really what college is like? I never knew that people could be that cruel.... I was like, you know what, I didn't ever really consider myself to be an activist but I guess if no one else is going to speak up for this country...maybe I should help and do something.

To many, like Michal, Yael and Chaim, the enjoyment of Israeli culture, food, games, and music translated into political advocacy when they came to college and became aware of the attacks on Israel and the Jewish community. To people like Sophia, who came to learn about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during college, taking a position that is pro-Israel on the campus came to feel threatening. Sophia remembers,

Like people talk about racism and sexism [on this campus], and it exists...I mean I've seen it, but you know somehow if you're a white Jewish girl, then nothing can affect you. But I've walked through the center of campus wearing an Israel shirt, and it can be hostile. I mean, it's kind of shocking.

Among Israel activists on the campus we studied, the need to stand up for Israel became even more pressing when Palestinian advocacy organizations introduced a divestment bill calling on the university to divest investment from companies associated with the Israeli military (see below).

In sum, among young adults who became Israel advocates in college, a sense of Israel's vulnerability and its need to defend itself became apparent through combinations of experiences. First, as they visited conferences in which Israeli leaders explained the threat Israel is facing, second, when they visited Israel (especially border towns) and recognized the short distance between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Furthermore, emotional ties to family in Israel facing the dangers of a violent conflict also cemented a sense of vulnerability. Finally, a sense that Israel must defend itself was enhanced when Israel advocates became engaged in political debates on campus, especially around the divestment (BDS) bill.

### Young Adults Critical of Israel

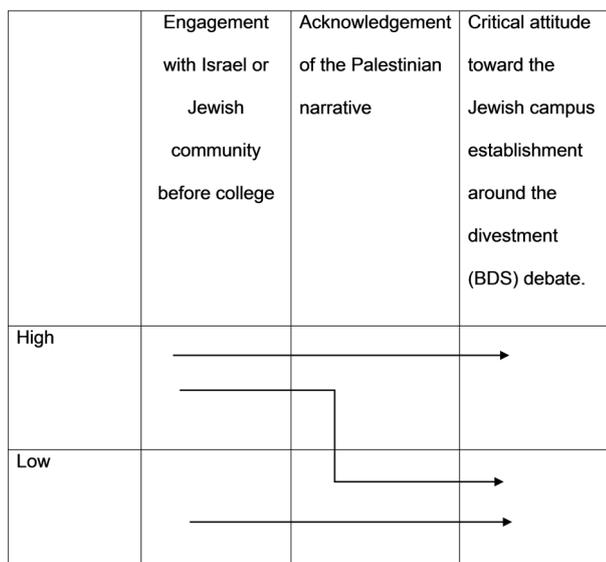
**Involvement in Jewish life from a young age** — Jewish students who were active in the Jewish community on campus and grew critical of Israel tended to tell a different story of their Jewish identity. The students we interviewed who took a critical position on Israeli policies towards Palestinians told a narrative in which they were deeply involved with Jewish culture from a young age. In their interviews, they spoke of a deep sense of belonging to the Jewish community that helped them overcome adolescent insecurities. Jessie described her Jewish youth group's camp:

I just feel like [summer camp] was my home away from home, and the place where all my really good friends were, where I could truly be me and express myself and be silly, but also serious in an emotional way that I didn't have at home, or just home didn't really allow.

Like Jessie, Jennifer felt especially embraced by the Jewish community. During adolescence, Jennifer lost a person close to her; it was during a trip with other Jewish adolescents to the death camps in Poland and to Israel that she felt fully embraced. When she told her Jewish peers during the trip about her loss, she felt they accepted her.

I remember when I did tell them about what I had experienced [loss] it was like oh it was fact, it wasn't my identity, and it was the first time I was just able to be and to just be myself, and to feel it's ok to be who I am and these people will still embrace me, these people still care about me, they all believe in similar things I do. And these friends are people who, three years later, are still my best friends.

Many Jewish college students who became more critical of Israel in college tended to tell a narrative in which they were enmeshed in Jewish life since a young age. In their story, the Jewish community helped them resolve a sense of isolation or alienation in their lives. This story is similar to that of some pro-Israel advocates who highlighted their connection with Israel since a young age, and is different from the narrative of many staunch supporters of Israel on campus who, in their narratives, highlighted that they entered the Jewish community or discovered modern Israel only in college (see [Figure 1](#)).



*Figure 1.* Observed trajectories of Jewish young adults' engagement with Israel advocacy.

Perhaps the reason that Israel advocates highlighted their strong attachment to Judaism was because of the rhetorical consequences of this positionality. The rhetorical consequences of young Jewish adults who are critical of Israel positioning themselves as insiders to Judaism were two-fold. First, stressing the importance of the Jewish community in their life balanced their criticality of Israel advocacy and sustained their identity as very connected to the community. Second, positioning themselves as insiders to the Jewish community gave more weight and legitimacy to their criticality of the mainstream Jewish establishment, compared to those who were critical of the Jewish establishment but had loose ties to the Jewish community.

**Tikkun Olam and social justice values** — The students we spoke to who were enmeshed in Jewish education since a young age saw their Jewish identity as associated with values of tikkun olam and the pursuit of social justice. Jewish culture's focus on tikkun olam and social justice activism is rooted in the Jewish community's aim

to make sense of the trauma of Jewish persecution in the diaspora. Parts of the Jewish community aimed to deal with the trauma of the Holocaust by focusing on actions that repaired the world (Krasner, 2014). In Israel, one of the lessons drawn from public discourses on the Holocaust is the postulation that Israel needs to demonstrate higher humanitarian values than other nations (Klar et al., 2013). Values of tikkun olam and commitment to social justice values were framed as essential components of Jewish education. Isaac describes the values he learned from his camp:

[My values] I think are coming from my camp values that I got like years and years ago: the equality of human life and value.... I have this connection to Israel because I'm Jewish and I think that's inherent. Based on that principle, I want to do work where the light in everybody will be recognized in them and they achieve their full potential.

Zionist-socialist youth groups that some study participants attended emphasized critical political discussion of capitalism, income inequality, feminism, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yehudit explained that her youth group had two pillars: Zionism and socialism. She described the camp she was a counselor in as follows:

(...) living communal it is shown through our communal money, the way we like educate our kids to share, like eating together we educate about Israel in a way that loving Israel you need to be critical of it. So that's an interesting take on Zionism, because usually when people normally think of Zionism it's like 'I love Israel unconditionally no matter what' and our camp is about...understanding both points of view. Teaching the kids about the Israeli side as well as the Arab side. Sometimes we focus more on the Arab side because they already have that Israeli education background.

**Openness to the Palestinian narrative** — The combination of long engagement with Judaism and Israel and the commitment to tikkun olam seemed to also be associated with an interest in understanding the Palestinian narrative of the conflict (see Figure 1). Israel advocates had a narrative that positioned themselves as discovering Israel and its vulnerability in college. In contrast, students more critical of Israel had a narrative of deep engagement with Israel and the values of tikkun olam, which was associated with an orientation towards greater openness to the Palestinian narrative on the conflict. It wasn't that these young adults necessarily took different kinds of trips to Israel (although some students did go to Israel with right or left-wing political organizations), but that the students critical of Israel seem to describe themselves as particularly focused on understanding the Palestinian narrative of the conflict.

For instance, Maya's parents were part of the counter-culture movement and values of tikkun olam were important in her upbringing. Her parents completed their doctorate degrees in the 1970s in Israel, and when they eventually returned to the U.S., they remained very attached to Israel as well as critical of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinians. When Maya was in high school, she joined a program offered by the youth group of her conservative synagogue in which she spent a semester in Israel. She described her experience:

It was interesting to be there for such a long time instead of visiting and to really immerse in the culture... Because you can hear everything on the news but it's different to actually witness it. And to actually hear different points of view on what's going on. It really opened my eyes and I think my program did a great job of not succumbing to a lot of the American Jewish stereotypes of a one-sided view... We talked to Israeli Arab students around our age...they just told their stories of how it is growing up in Israel as an Arab and they were citizens but they still felt very discriminated. That was actually the first time I heard the story of Arabs living in Israel and really saw the hardship that they went through every single day. So

that really initiated my interest in the conflict and learning more about it. Especially from their point of view.

Students who saw their Jewish identity as rooted in principles of social justice were likely to pay greater attention to the Palestinian narratives on the conflict. Yehudit, for instance, decided to spend her year abroad in Jerusalem. There she befriended a Palestinian who discussed the consequence of Israel's occupation on his life.

He would also tell me stories about the way he was treated or the way he doesn't go out to the bars in Jerusalem 'cause of the looks he gets. Or how he had this horrible horrible pat-down, that made him want to throw up and cry when he was trying to go back through Israel after traveling in Africa. That makes me really sad because this is actually happening.

For many of the Jewish Americans we spoke with, spending time in Israel and talking to Arabs and Palestinians provided them with a window to understanding life under occupation. They became aware of inequalities, racial profiling, and the discrimination Palestinians experience in Israel. The dissonance between values of social justice and tikkun olam, and extensive knowledge of how Palestinians are treated in Israel, enhanced their criticality of the Israeli government as well as Israel advocacy on campus.

**Against the impulse to stand up for Israel** — Many of the Jewish young adults who were critical of Israel made a distinction between themselves and Jewish Americans who saw it as their task to stand up for Israel. In their interviews, these young adults made differentiation between themselves and the mainstream Jewish establishment who supported Israel unconditionally. Jewish college students tended to frame prototypical Jewish Americans as romanticizing Israel. Dana's family emigrated from Israel to the United States and her grandmother was involved with the Israeli left; she explained that one of the reasons she stopped going to her Jewish camp was because she felt they romanticized Israel. She remembered:

Everyone kept ignoring the like human rights issues that were going on [in Israel]. You know how Israel treats the people in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Nobody wanted to talk about that. Everyone just wanted to talk about how great Israel was and everyone should move there. And I was just like, well I've been there before and you know it's not so great all the time.

Shira, who attended both a conservative youth group and a socialist Zionist youth group, was critical of her peers in the conservative youth group saying, "They love loving it [Israel] almost more than to find out more about it." Young Jewish Americans like Shira maintained a critical stance towards the mainstream Jewish establishment who they thought of as romanticizing Israel at the expense of truly learning about the country, including the Palestinians' conditions under Jewish occupation.

These young Jewish Americans made a distinction between themselves and those who advocated for Israel; they perceived themselves as engaged in deep study compared to having a perspective based on what they thought of as blind love and romantic vision. This distinction allowed them to justify their criticality as rooted in knowledge about, and commitment to, Judaism. The impetus to make distinctions was different among students who advocated for Israel and those who were critical of it. While students who were critical of Israel made distinctions between themselves and those who advocated for Israel, the latter were more subsumed with making distinctions between themselves and Palestine advocates. Students advocating for Israel focused on Palestinian advocacy organizations as their main reference groups and saw themselves as competing with the pro-Palestine activists over campus public opinion.

### When the BDS Movement Came to Campus

At the end of the school year the Palestinian solidarity organization on campus proposed a bill to the Student Union that called on the university to divest funds from Israel. Such bills are part of an international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement that aims to fight the Israeli occupation through divestment tactics inspired by the struggle against the South African apartheid regime. Our interview analysis, as well as our observations, suggests that the Jewish students advocating for Israel and those critical of Israeli policies had vastly different reactions to the introduction of the bill that called on the university to divest from companies associated with the Israeli occupation.

**Israel advocates' reaction to the divestment bill** — In their interviews, Jewish students who advocated for Israel framed the bill in terms of a discourse that sees Israel and the Jewish people as vulnerable to attacks by outsiders. The bill was interpreted as an attack on Israel. Chelsea explained,

When it [BDS bill] came to campus last year, even when I still had less background in the conflict, I was very against it because it paints things in shades of black and white...the Palestinian perspective is wanting to end what they call the occupation, and among other things, by doing things that attack Israel. Boycott Israel, don't send money to Israel, Israel's an apartheid state, insult Israel....that puts Israel's guard up, literally and figuratively. It increases Israel's need for defense... For my perspective, that is why it completely goes against any kind of reconciliation, it plays on old narratives and anti-Semitism.

Jewish students who advocated for Israel saw the divestment bill as an attack on Israel, as well as based in an anti-Semitic logic where Jews do not have the right to self-determination. The attack on Israel was seen as having implications for Jewish students who support Israel. For instance, Yael remembered thinking "I don't care if I fail my final I do not want BDS coming to this campus... Because it would show me as a student on this campus that what I stand for [Israel] is completely wrong". The divestment bill presented a threat to these Jewish students because it suggested to them that they could not celebrate the part of their identity that was tied to Israel. This threat led many in the Jewish community to unite and fight the bill. Julie remembered thinking "the Jewish community needs to be a community at times like this, because if we're not, we get squashed." Rachel remembered preparing for the divestment debate:

All of a sudden BDS came, and all of a sudden they're like these rushed meetings like urgent important meetings, all the Jewish students, even if they weren't that involved, you only saw them a little bit, they all came, they were all united... There were people who were attacking Israel, and we had to like, overnight, come up with arguments against it.

The divestment bill was imagined based on the same schema as the Arab attacks on Israel – as an unjust attack on Jews that required unity so that Jewish young adults (or Israel) could defend themselves. Jewish advocates had the sense that the Jewish community was under siege and had to come together (see also [Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992](#)). Jewish students aiming to protect Israel came together to support the Israeli narrative on the conflict, in order to protect Israel's positive reputation and their own reputations as supporters of Israel.

Before the bill was voted on by the Student Union, there was a debate. The structure of this debate is standard across many college campuses. As in town hall meetings, students stand in line to take their turn to speak on behalf of Israel or the Palestinians. This line is often long and the event lasts for several tense hours, ending with the Student Union voting on the bill in the late hours of the night or even the early morning.

In the debate over the bill, each side recited its own narrative, creating a polarizing environment. Rachel described how she and other Jewish students experienced the BDS debate:

We would stay in the Student Union meetings till 2 in the morning, and listen to these people basically saying, you know apartheid, and all this crazy stuff, and how babies being separated from their mothers, and that the Israeli government is like an oppressor. It was crazy; I've never really felt so like the victim. Because I didn't really know that much about it, that people [the Palestinians], except that the Palestinians didn't like Israel. This girl came up and she was from Malaysia and she said my people were repressed, and I have solidarity with the people from Palestine. But babies are being separated from their mothers in like 100 other countries, why, would you single out Israel?! I just remember standing up there, and I would talk in front of all these people who are staring at you, thinking that you are like a terrible person.

Rachel and other students were versed in a Jewish Israeli narrative in which Israel and its army and government do not intend to hurt the Palestinians, but must protect themselves from ongoing attacks (Ben Hagai, Hammack, et al., 2013). Within this narrative, Jewish advocates for Israel were surprised by the amount of criticism directed towards Israel. Sophia recalled:

It might have been the most stressful three weeks...It was beyond stressful the amount of fear around this piece of paper (the divestment bill) was actually kind of ridiculous. Because, regardless the [administration] weren't going to divest from Israel. So, it really didn't matter. And, it was purely symbolic, and that was the other thing that, like, kind of bothered me about it... was you're fighting for something literally to hurt one population for symbolic gesture... the other [Jewish] students were so fearful, because we had heard what happened at other campuses. Like, students who felt unsafe saying they were pro-Israel, or that they were Jewish. But, fake eviction notices being posted on the Jewish doors. This is just to remind you of kind of the beginnings of the things, like the Holocaust.

The intense criticism directed towards Israel for a symbolic bill (the Regents of the university did not intend to divest funds from companies associated with Israel) left many Jewish students feeling a sense of vulnerability on a very personal level. To them, identification with the Israeli collective was reproduced through embodying the Jewish narrative in which they themselves had to stand up and stop attacks directed towards Israel. These attacks were personalized through the belief that if the bill passed, Jewish students would not feel safe on campus.

**Reaction to the divestment bill by students critical of Israel** — On the other hand, of those we interviewed, the young Jewish adults who were critical of Israel stayed out of the divestment debate. Their refusal to join the advocacy resisting the bill signified a break in the Jewish community. In their interviews, young adults critical of Israel said that as the divestment bill took center stage in conversation in the Jewish community, they became increasingly alienated from the Jewish community. The alienation felt by some Jewish students from the mainstream Jewish establishment was grounded in their knowledge of the Palestinian narrative. For instance, Jessie, reflecting on the divestment debate, said:

I found out once that Urban Outfitters [a fashionable clothing company] provides all this money to anti-equality anti-gay organizations. I was like I don't want to spend money there because they're giving money to these organization that I don't support. I was thinking in a silly way that this is what [the Palestinian solidarity organizations] are saying. Just by going to the university your tuition goes to an occupation that's like destroying your family's homes or killing your family.

Some Jewish students' deeper knowledge of the Palestinian narrative of the conflict allowed them to reason with the narrative of the other, positioning themselves as analogous to the Palestinians based on knowledge of the consequences of the occupation on their lives. This deeper understanding of the Palestinians' claims made these young Jews less likely to understand the divestment bill as an attack and more likely to sympathize, or at least not feel threatened by, the actions of the Palestinians.

**No, it's not anti-Semitic** — Relatedly, some Jewish young adults said that they felt alienated from the line of Israel advocates because they rejected the framing of the Palestinian side as anti-Semitic. They felt that accusations of anti-Semitism silenced not only those who supported the BDS bill, but also their own criticality. For instance, Shira explained:

I think that like the way that the anti-BDS side was representing the pro-Palestinians was very extreme and uneducated and negative. Like every single answer they gave was just anti-Israel is anti-Semitic...Afterwards I said something to them like I agree with your side, but the way that you're arguing was like really uncomfortable for a lot of people to listen [because] there are Jews that are anti-Israel and like they're not against themselves.

Maya, like Yehudit and Jessie, also spoke of the ways in which Israel advocates who used the word anti-Semitism ended up making them feel uncomfortable and silenced:

It was just very uncomfortable because I felt, and some of my friends that have similar views, felt that there was only one view on the Jewish side and if you had a different view, you just could not speak up.

Students critical of Israel felt silenced by their Jewish-majority in-group, which didn't allow (at least in the context of this debate) for a multi-dimensional and critical approach towards Israel.

**Stating white privilege and building alliances with people of color** — Jamie, who wrote for the Jewish magazine on campus, explained that she stayed out of the BDS debate because she saw the debate and the occupation of the Palestinians through the lens of feminist intersectional theory (Cole, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991). She explained:

I think it's an intersectional issue I guess is how I would overview it, in terms of like Jewish women have white privilege, maybe less so in a nuanced way than WASP women. But certainly I have white privilege. People don't discriminate against me for being Jewish in the same way that women of color are discriminated against for being women of color. And that dynamic doesn't just play out in America. Palestinian women are women of color, they're Muslim, so yeah, that's a big part of it.

Jewish students who disengaged from the Jewish community's efforts to fight the bill were sensitive of their position as white people with greater access to resources and power. Palestinian and Muslims were understood as racialized minorities who didn't have the privileges white people had. The understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, through the schema of racial struggle in the United States, further alienated young adults from the Jewish community who did not want to be seen as opposing the rights of minority groups. For instance, Jessie and Maya went to observe the divestment debate on campus. Nevertheless, they were not interested in speaking on behalf of Israel. Jessie explained:

It was also just shocking to see the room split, like how it was all white students and then the other side it's not... [Maya and I] were so unbelievably uncomfortable. It was like, don't look at us because this isn't us, but there was no other outlet for Israel politics on campus.

Students steeped in the Jewish education system, who identified with liberal values, commitment to tikkun olam and social justice activism, were disturbed by the splitting of the room into color lines, in which Jews were in opposition to people of color. This split was experienced by Jessie as a misrecognition of her and Maya's identities as Whites in alliance with people of color. Our observation and conversations with Jewish American college students throughout the year suggest that they became increasingly alienated from the Jewish community and its interpretation of the bill. They felt that their voices were silenced and that their identities as progressives committed to social justice were misrecognized. This led to discomfort, which in turn, spurred them to form their own organization. At the end of our observation, as the students debated the bill for the second time, Jessie and other Jewish activists we talked to broke from the Jewish community on campus and formed a Jewish advocacy organization critical of Israel's actions.

## Discussion

In this study, we sought to account for processes associated with Jewish American college students' advocacy for Israel and those processes associated with Jewish American critique of Israel advocacy. We found that those who advocated for Israel tended to become immersed in educational activities that focused on Jewish vulnerability upon entering college. These young adults saw the divestment bill as an attack on Jewish students. Through their advocacy for Israel, especially during the divestment debates, Israel advocates embodied the meaning of the Jewish narrative on the conflict: they wanted to live in peace but had to defend Israel from attacks.

On the other hand, Jewish American young adults who broke from the mainstream Jewish establishment tended to tell a story of an internalization of their Jewish identity through participation in Jewish camps, travel, and schools. Moreover, study participants critical of Israel narrated a personal story in which they were situated in a community since a young age that emphasized values of tikkun olam and the pursuit of social justice. This commitment led them to pay special attention to the Palestinian narrative.

The debate over the divestment bill that was initiated by Palestinian solidarity organizations highlighted the contradictions in opinions between members of the Jewish community on campus. Each group interpreted the bill differently. The Jewish students who advocated for Israel felt the need to protect themselves, while those who saw their Jewish identity as situated in social justice activism and who acknowledged much of the Palestinian narrative saw the bill as legitimate. The latter group felt that the Jewish establishment silenced their opinions, and felt threatened that others in the campus community would perceive them as displaying white privilege by ignoring the plight of minorities. These Jewish students' sense of being silenced and the threat to their progressive identity was associated with the establishment of a new Jewish organization that was critical of Israel.

## Theoretical Contributions

This study helps to illuminate the relationship between narratives and group identification. We suggest that through beliefs, specifically those grounded in narrative structures, individuals come to see themselves as part of a group. Whereas a social identity approach emphasizes a categorical nominal identification with the group, such as "we are all Jews," this study suggests that an imagination and perception of the group as having the same intentions and intended actions as the self is central to the process of group identification. An important moment in which the young Jewish Americans in our study came to identify with the collective was when they framed their values

in parallel to the values or the image of the narrative protagonist. This occurred when they saw themselves and Israel as intending to live in peace, but as having to defend themselves (Ben Hagai, Hammack, et al., 2013). On the other hand, when Jewish young adults also began seeing the conflict using the Palestinian narrative, they increasingly came to accept the actions of the Palestinian solidarity organizations. Integration of a narrative perspective on group identity and social identity theory suggests that a decrease in antagonism towards Palestinian solidarity organizations occurred when Jewish Americans came to see the conflict based on a superordinate narrative that encompasses elements of both the Palestinian and Jewish narrative. Like superordinate categorization, superordinate narrative is associated with increased support for peaceful solutions to conflict.

Examining the findings from this study from a narrative lens suggests a second contribution. The collective narrative in which Jews want to live in peace but must continually defend themselves encompasses two sets of values (or narrative themes) important to Jewish tradition. The value of tikkun olam is associated with the framing of Israel as a socially just society that aims to live in peace with its' Arab neighbors. The narrative themes of Jewish vulnerability associate with the framing of Israel as needing to defend itself from its Arab neighbors. A collectivity among American Jews we studied began to break when Israel was no longer seen based on these two narrative themes. When Israel was seen in dissonance with social justice values, Jewish young adults who saw their Jewish identity as attached to these values broke from the ingroup. Our observation of the Jewish community on campus suggests that the break in the Jewish community parallels a narrative break. This interpretation expands on existing narrative theories. The collective narrative represents different narrative themes; when these come to be seen as being in dissonance, the collective narrative splits, as does the ingroup. Our interpretation focuses on the importance of different themes in the collective narrative that are associated with a schism in the ingroup when it is faced with outside pressure. Nevertheless, an alternative explanation is also feasible. A multiple identity framework may view Jewish students as having a Jewish identity and a pro-Israel identity. When Israel was attacked, some students (maybe to protect their self-esteem) came to emphasize their Jewish identity, and distance themselves from a pro-Israel identity.

Our findings support and expand on theories of activism, especially theories that highlight the importance of shared opinion in promoting ally activism (Curtin & McGarty, 2016). This research offers the theoretical tool of a common narrative to understanding advocacy on behalf of the ingroup. Moreover, we show that when individuals come to identify with the outgroup narrative they are more likely to reject activism in support of the ingroup (the more Jewish students acknowledged the Palestinian narrative, the less likely they were to advocate for Israel). Like research on disadvantaged and advantaged groups, this research also demonstrates how historical victimhood and a sense of a privileged position might bring to greater openness to the suffering of the other (Curtin et al., 2016). Finally, processes of horizontal hostility (White & Langer, 1999) are associated with some members of the Jewish community siding with minority groups as opposed to what they perceive as a "White privileged" mainstream Jewish establishment.

This research also contributes to theories of ethnic identity formation in college. Like other ethnic minorities, some Jewish students saw college as a time to explore their identity (Arnett, 2006; Azmitia et al., 2008; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). For these students, immersion in the Jewish community led to a deepening understanding of anti-Semitism and the vulnerability of the Jewish people (see also Cross, 1991). The more Jewish students came to identify with their ethnic Jewish identity in college, the more likely they were to be exposed to narratives of Jewish victimhood, especially in relationship to Israel's vulnerability with respect to its Arab neighbors. A sense of vulnerability was further intensified in relationship to the divestment debate. This sense of vulnerability served to unify Jewish ad-

vocacy and call these students to action, as they felt they were under siege (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992). Moreover, a sense of collective victimhood was associated with decreased acknowledgement of Palestinian dispossession among Israel advocates. This finding is in line with other research on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that highlights the role of victimhood in reproducing the conflict (Chaitin, 2014; Klar et al., 2013; Sagy, 2002; Vollhardt, 2009).

On the other hand, some Jewish students who told a narrative that highlighted the internalized nature of their Jewish identity, based on a long engagement with Judaism, tended to be open to the ways in which Palestinians are also dispossessed and victimized. Our findings highlight how different discursive interpretations of a group's collective trauma can be associated with rejection of the narrative of the other or sensitivity towards the ways the outgroup also experienced oppression (Klar et al., 2013). Importantly, our observations do not suggest that Jewish college students disengaged from Israel (as has been suggested in some of the recent literature, see Cohen & Kelman, 2010), but rather that Jewish Americans who are active in the Jewish community came to identify with Israel in a more critical manner. In the process of exploring a more critical approach to Israel, these young adults came to distinguish themselves from what they saw to be the prototypical representation of mainstream Jewish Americans who romanticize and glorify Israel (Roccas et al., 2006).

## Limitations

We conducted this study on a college campus that emphasizes social justice education. The reputation of this campus as progressive might have influenced the type of Jewish young adults who chose to attend the university. As with other nonrandom convenience samples, results from this study should not be perceived as representative of Jewish campus communities across the U.S. Like other qualitative research, our aim is to offer a theoretical account. It is upon the reader to deem if these theoretical formulations are helpful in explaining similar events in other contexts.

The second limitation of our research is our framing of social change. The students that we situate as critical of Israel in this study did not join the Palestinian advocacy organizations supporting the divestment bill. Rather, the students critical of Israel were working within a liberal Jewish framework supporting an ending of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The moderation they exhibited and their commitment to work within Jewish organizations puts into question the extent to which their criticality represented a full process of outgroup solidarity. At the campus we studied, some Jewish activists work in Palestinian solidarity organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine. We did not include them in this study because we were interested in the varied perspectives occurring within the campus Jewish community (i.e., among students active in Hillel).

## Implications for Educational Policy and Future Research

Our findings suggest that Israel plays an important role in many Jewish American and Jewish Israeli students' sense of identity. Our findings also suggest that when students acknowledge the Palestinian narrative of the conflict, they are less likely to perceive the divestment (and BDS) debate in terms of anti-Semitism. These two observations suggest a need to create discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is inclusive to both the importance of Israel to some students' identities, as well as an understanding of the dispossession and humiliation the Palestinians experience on a daily basis. It appears that different segments of the Jewish community drift in different directions, where some Jewish young adults come to learn the Palestinian narrative while others are more focused on Israel's vulnerability. For this reason, we suggest that colleges and universities, as well as

Jewish organizations, create discourses that honor diaspora Jews' connection with Israel, as well as expose Jewish adults to the histories and current occupation of Palestine. On college campuses, it is important that pro-Palestinian advocacy is not dismissed as anti-Semitic or that Zionist advocacy is not dismissed as racist, rather that educators encourage a complex and emphatic dialogue about Israel and Palestine (see for instance, [Dessel et al., 2014](#)). A dialogue that highlights Jewish values of tikkun olam and commitment to minorities' rights may be associated with increased acknowledgement of the Palestinian narrative.

Additional correlational research with larger samples should examine if indeed a greater engagement with Israel and commitment to tikkun olam correlates with increased acknowledgement of the Palestinian narrative. Future experimental research may examine if priming individuals with different group values (e.g., tikkun olam versus Jewish vulnerability) causes greater willingness to participate in constructive and open conversation about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finally, further investigation of why some Jews are more attached to values of tikkun olam and why others see themselves as vulnerable will also benefit the current understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In conclusion, we found that when confronted by Palestinian advocacy on campus supported by discourses on minority rights, some members of the Jewish community came to see themselves like Israel -- as needing to defend themselves from attacks. On the other hand, young Jewish adults who told of a strong attachment to Judaism, and saw their Jewish identity based on values of social justice, came to acknowledge the Palestinian narrative. Their acknowledgement of the Palestinian narrative was associated with rejection of framing Jews and Israel as vulnerable and needing to defend themselves. Increased student activism highlighting the dispossession of the Palestinians on college campuses associates with increased schism in the Jewish community. Jewish Americans who understand their Jewish identity as containing values of social justice are more likely to become aligned with Palestinian rights activism.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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