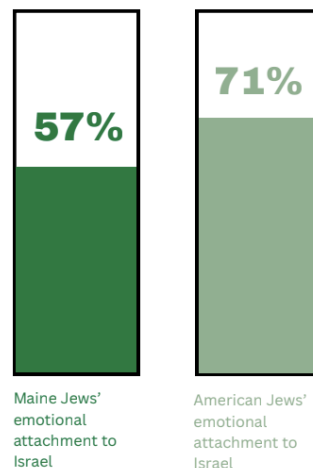


# Why Are Jews in Maine Less Emotionally Attached to Israel Than the American Jewish Population as a Whole?

By Drew Gannon

In Brandeis University's [2024 Jewish Maine Community Study](#), researchers asked the question, "How emotionally attached do you feel to Israel?" 57% of Maine Jews say they are very or somewhat attached compared to 71% nationally, which was found by JFNA in their study [Survey of Jewish Life since October 7: Israel Conversations](#). To find the answer as to why Maine Jews are less emotionally attached, I have researched and drawn on numerous sources, including the 2024 Community Study, recent [JFNA surveys](#), [Pew's 2020 study](#), other secondary sources, and my classmates' and my own interviews with members of the Jewish community in Maine. Voices from the Maine Jewish community reveal a nuance that numbers cannot. Lower attachment to Israel does not equate to a lack of interest. For many Jews in Maine, Israel evokes love, grief, pride, and frustration, often all at once.

Maine Jews are significantly less emotionally attached to Israel than American Jews



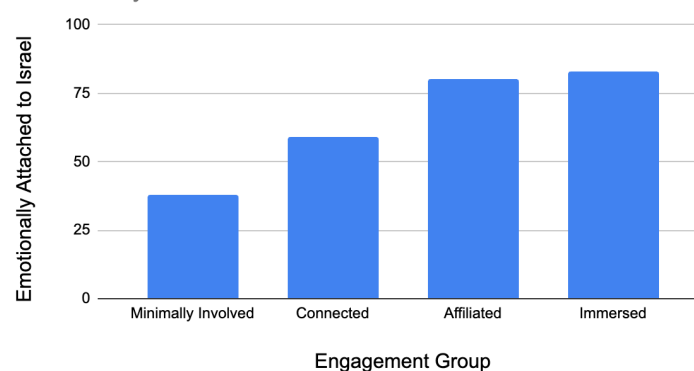
It is worth taking time to consider what lower attachment actually means. For years, scholars have taken note of American Jews “distancing” themselves from Israel. But as sociologist Theodore Sasson argues in *The New American Zionism* (2014), that narrative

misreads the evidence. Sasson finds that American Jewish engagement with Israel through advocacy, philanthropy, tourism, and media consumption is at least as intensive as it was a generation ago, if not more so. He argued that it wasn't the level of engagement that changed; rather, it was the character. Engagement for American Jews became more personal, more politically contentious, and more critical of Israeli government policies. As we will see, Maine's Jewish community fits this pattern, and possibly takes it a step further.

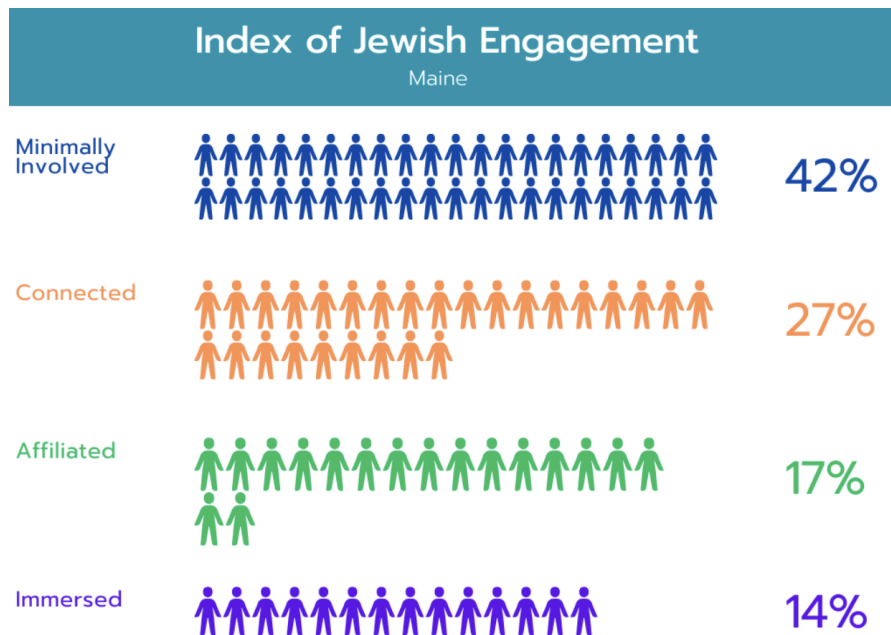
### **Who are Maine Jews? Demographics and Engagement**

To understand why Maine Jews are less emotionally attached to Israel, it helps to first understand who Maine Jews are. Brandeis researchers divided the community into four engagement groups based on participation in Jewish life and activities such as attending services, organizational involvement, holiday celebration, and practicing at home. According to the community study, the minimally involved group “marginally engages in Jewish activities, holidays, or institutional Judaism.” The connected group “exhibits high participation in holiday and religious-based activities.” The affiliated group “actively participates in many aspects of Jewish life.” And finally, the immersed group “engages frequently in nearly all aspects of Jewish life.” The groups reveal a clear pattern: the more engaged someone is in Jewish life, the more emotionally attached they feel to Israel.

Maine Jews Who Are More Engaged in Jewish Life Are More Emotionally Attached to Israel



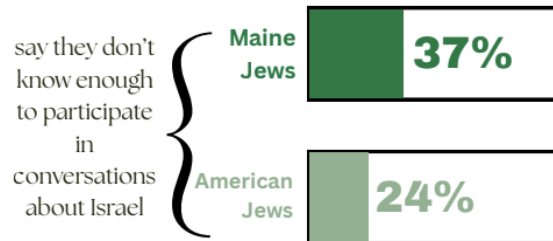
The minimally involved, connected, affiliated, and immersed groups make up 42%, 27%, 17%, and 14% of the Maine Jewish population, respectively. Maine’s Jewish community is heavily concentrated at the less engaged end of the spectrum. These minimally involved Jews not only barely engage in Jewish life at all but also have little emotional attachment to Israel.



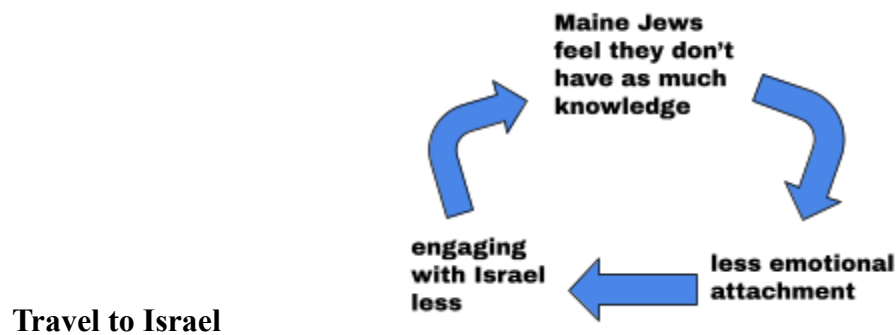
### Confidence Gap, Which Could Be Mistaken as a Knowledge Gap

According to the community study, 80% of Maine’s Jewish adults follow news about Israel somewhat or very closely; this community is not completely checked out. Nationally, Pew 2020 found that only 57% of American Jews follow Israel news closely at all. Now, these numbers are not exactly comparable, as one is pre-October 7th and the other post-October 7th; however, it goes to show that Maine Jews are absolutely paying attention. Nevertheless, the community study found that 37% of Maine Jews say they don’t feel they know enough to participate in conversations about Israel, and JFNA’s Israel conversations survey shows that number nationally is only 24%. That is a confidence gap, not a knowledge gap. Jews in Maine are reading and watching the news but not feeling equipped to discuss it.

Maine Jews are more likely than American Jews to feel they don't know enough about Israel to talk about it

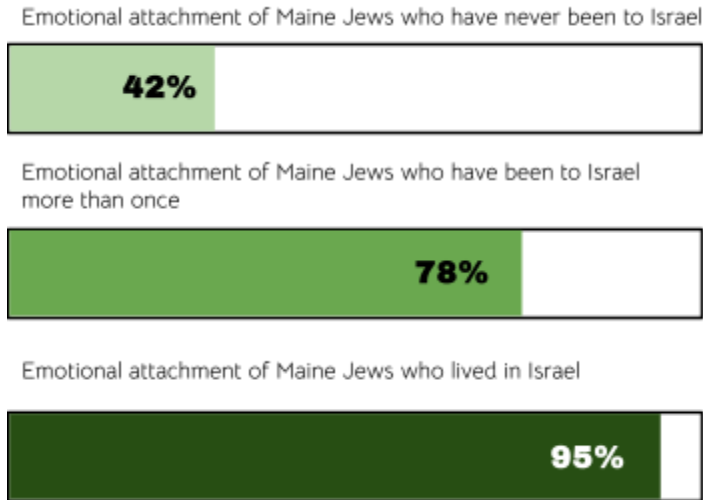


There's a real possible cycle going on here where Jews who feel they have less knowledge about Israel will reinforce their lack of knowledge by being less emotionally attached to Israel, which results in less engagement with Israel.



**Travel to Israel**

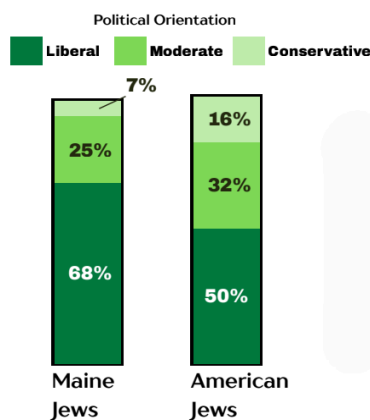
Travel to Israel is one of the strongest predictors of emotional attachment. According to the community study, among Maine Jews who have never been to Israel, 42% are somewhat or very attached. Among those who have been to Israel more than once, 78% are attached, and among those who lived in Israel, 95% are attached. Pew 2020 confirms the same nationally: 90% of American Jews who had lived in Israel or visited multiple times felt at least somewhat attached, compared to fewer than half who had never been.



But travel does not explain the Maine-to-national gap, because the two groups visit at nearly identical rates. 47% of Maine Jewish adults have visited Israel at least once, and Pew 2020 found that 45% of American Jews had done the same. What travel *does* explain is variation within Maine: 70% of the minimally involved group has never been to Israel, while 68% of the immersed group has traveled there at least once, including 21% who have lived there. Travel builds the kind of firsthand connection that news-following alone cannot, and the minimally involved majority of Maine Jews largely lacks it.

### Political Gap

Layered on top of the engagement and travel dynamics is Maine’s political character. Maine’s Jewish community is significantly more politically liberal than American Jews nationally, and liberal Jews feel less emotionally attached to Israel and less proud of its actions.



In Maine, 68% of Jewish adults identify as liberal, compared to 50% nationally. In the American Jewish community, 45% of conservatives feel very emotionally attached to Israel, whereas just 14% of liberals feel very attached ([American Enterprise Institute](#)). There is not exactly data for Maine Jews on emotional

attachment based on political ideology, so there is no way to tell for sure how this dynamic plays out in Maine. However, based on the statistics that represent the broader American Jewish population, we can infer that the same is true in Maine: liberal Jews feel much less emotionally attached to Israel than conservative Jews. Therefore, the large liberal population in Maine's Jewish community could be a meaningful factor in why Maine Jews are less emotionally attached to Israel than American Jews as a whole. Even so, political liberalism does not mean abandoning Israel. Pew 2020 found that nationally, 82% of American Jews, including most liberals, said caring about Israel is "essential" or "important" to what being Jewish means to them. In Maine, 77% of Jews say the same. But that care increasingly coexists with sharp criticism of the Israeli government. In Pew 2020, only 25% of Jewish Democrats gave Netanyahu "excellent" or "good" ratings, compared to 82% of Jewish Republicans. And only one-third of all American Jews believed the Israeli government was making a sincere effort toward peace with the Palestinians. In Maine, where Democrats vastly outnumber Republicans, that skepticism toward the Israeli government may run even deeper.

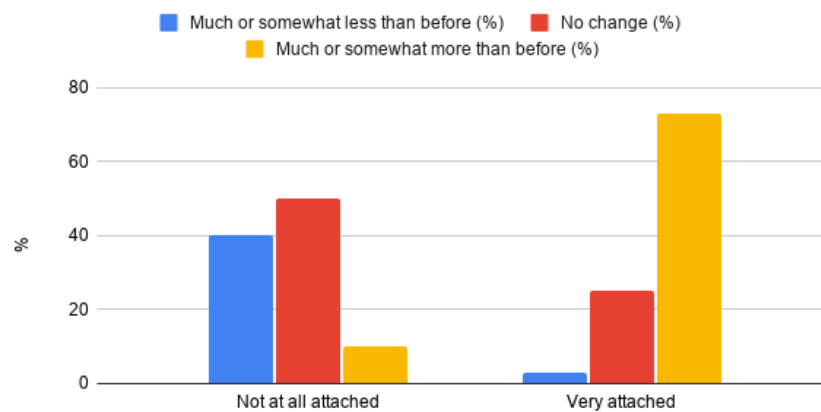
Theodore Sasson's 2014 analysis offers a useful frame here. He argued that political polarization in the American Jewish community around Israel was itself evidence of deeper engagement. He explained that as more Jews traveled to Israel, consumed Israeli media, and formed personal relationships with Israelis, they increasingly exercised their own political judgement rather than deferring to communal organizations.

The liberal Maine Jew who is angry at Netanyahu's government is still engaged in the way Sasson described. But the emotional weight of that engagement has grown heavier since 2014 in ways his framework only partially anticipated.

## The Impact of October 7th

October 7th divided American Jews nationwide, including Maine’s Jewish community. Among those who were already very attached to Israel, 73% felt more attached afterward. Among those who were not at all attached beforehand, 40% felt much less attached, and 50% felt no change at all. The event deepened existing divisions rather than creating new unity.

Change in attachment since October 7th of Maine Jews who are not at all attached and who are very attached



Age plays a large factor into these numbers. Nearly one in four Maine Jewish adults ages 18-34 reported feeling much less attached to Israel after October 7th, which is more than twice the rate of any other age group. For younger Maine Jews, the war intensified skepticism rather than solidarity.

The interviews conducted for this project put a human face on these statistics. In my own interview with Pat Rosenberg of Mount Vernon, Maine, she described a shift in how she sees Israel itself: “I love Israel, and I’m really angry with Israel. You can love something and still be angry with it.” Pat grew up viewing Israel as almost mythological, “It was beautiful, new, and promising,” she said. Today: “Now I look at it as old, corrupt, and tired.”

Erica Nadelhaft, who lived in Israel for 5 years and did her graduate work at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, expressed a version of this tension that many liberal Maine Jews will recognize. In Anthony Long's interview with her, she said, "I really love the country, but at the same time, right now, it also brings up an incredible amount of frustration. Why are you making it so difficult for those of us who just absolutely love this country?" Her support for Israel's existence, she stressed, is unconditional, but her support for the current government is a different matter entirely.

These voices capture something the simple "emotional attachment" measure cannot: that caring and criticizing are not opposites. For many Maine Jews, the difficulty of October 7th was not that it made them stop caring, but it made caring more painful and more complicated than ever before.

## **Conclusion**

Maine Jews do not lack care; what they lack is confidence and comfort. The community's demographic tilt toward minimal engagement means a large share of Maine Jews never developed the deep Jewish literacy or firsthand Israel experience that correlates most strongly with emotional attachment. Its heavy liberalism means that engagement, when it happens, is more likely to be complex and critical than simply supportive. And October 7th sharpened all of these tensions at once.

Sasson's core insight that critical engagement with Israel reflects caring, not alienation, still holds even if the landscape has shifted dramatically since 2014. The 87% of Jewish Mainers who consider it important for Israel to exist as a refuge for the Jewish people, now and in the future, matters. The community is clearly not checked out.

The most hopeful sign of what is possible comes from Jennie Shapiro, a Jewish educator who co-founded Chavurat Habayit in Maine. Jennie grew up in Maine and attended Hebrew school. In my interview with her she described her Hebrew school experience with candor: “I grew up going to Hebrew school, and I dreaded it.” The experience, she said, left people with a distorted picture of Judaism as something you did inside a building on schedule: “You go in, you learn your Jewish whatever, it was really boring, and then you got a bar or bat mitzvah, and then you left, and then you didn’t think about it again until you raised your kids.” Israel, as a real place with real geography and a living culture, barely entered the picture.

Her relationship with Israel changed through direct experience. Her husband’s mother is Israeli, and Jennie has visited Israel around 10 times since they began dating. She describes falling more in love with it each trip: “It’s pulsing with life when you’re there... You see Muslims, you see Christians, you see Jews, and everyone is together, and everyone’s getting along, and it just doesn’t seem as crazy as it does in the media.” That firsthand immersion, which the data shows is a powerful driver of attachment, is exactly what she felt most Hebrew school students never got.

After October 7th, feeling that her synagogue’s priorities had shifted away from what she needed, Jennie coped by building Chavurat Habayit, a community program she co-founded with two other women, entirely volunteer-run, that is now growing rapidly. The organization’s core mission is to teach children conversational Hebrew and to connect them to Israel through maps, stories, and a modern context. The result Jennie described from this was the repairing of a large disconnection between Jews and Israel, which was, in her words, “sort of the core of Judaism.”

Jennie’s story is, in miniature, the story that this essay has been tracing. She experienced disconnection caused by shallow Jewish education, and no firsthand Israel experience, then

broke the cycle through direct personal ties to Israel, and now is working to give others what the data shows they most need.

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