

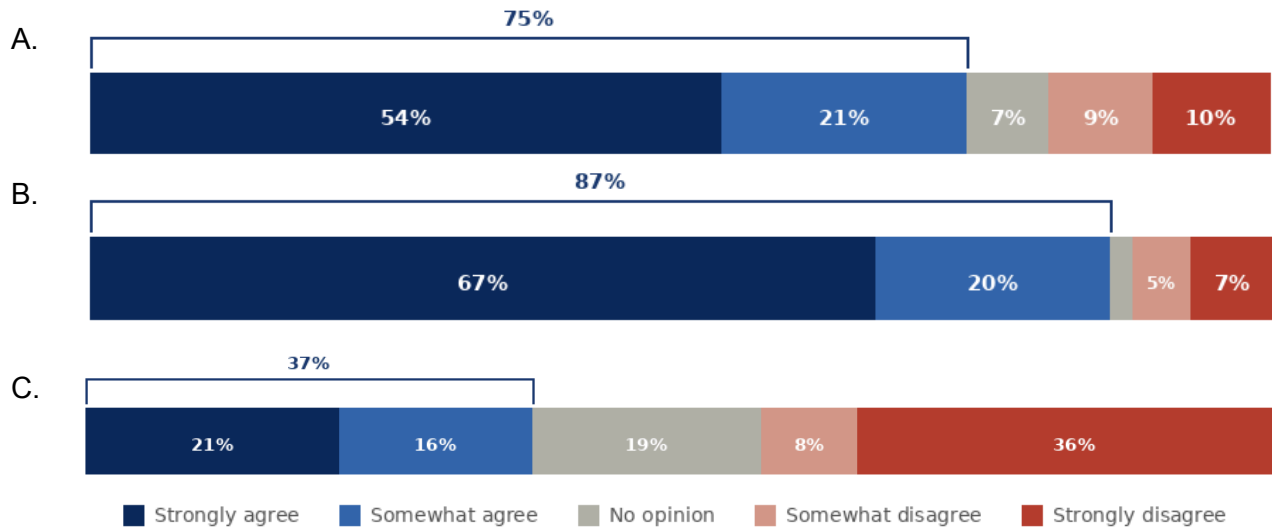
Zionist in Practice, Not in Name: Complex Jewish Identity Among Jewish Mainers

Anthony Long

Zionism: Support for a Jewish refuge in Israel. Although this definition is straightforward on paper, it has become anything but simple. This is especially true for Jewish Americans, and Jewish Mainers in particular.

According to the 2024 Jewish Community Study of Maine, 75% of Jewish Mainers agree that it is important for Israel to be a Jewish state. Another 87% agree it is important for Israel to exist as a refuge for the Jewish people, now and in the future. By these metrics, and using the textbook definition, Jewish Mainers are Zionist. However, using the same study and looking at Figure 1, only 37% of people agree that they are Zionist ([Jewish Maine](#)). This signals that the label could have become something else. So what could explain this phenomenon?

Figure 1



A. *"I consider it important for Israel to be a Jewish state."*

B. *"I consider it important for Israel to exist as a refuge for the Jewish people, now and in the future."*

C. *"I consider myself to be a Zionist."*

On paper, many people believe antisemitism is a reason people stay away from the label. As Dr. Matthew Boxer explains, "One common explanation is that the label of Zionist has become tainted; that is, some number of respondents might actually think of themselves as Zionists but are reluctant to say so as part of a survey for fear of the negative connotations such an identity might bring" ([What is Zionism?](#)). Boxer additionally explains how this is only part of the explanation, and a better explanation lies in how people perceive the word Zionism, and the differing definitions of this word.

Looking deeper, using national data from the JFNA survey surrounding Zionism, 37% of American Jewish people consider themselves Zionist, matching the percentage in Maine. Nationally, Jews who don't identify as Zionist associate the word with things like ethnic supremacy, unconditional support for Israeli government actions, or the denial of Palestinian identity altogether ([JFNA national survey](#)). Although national data and Maine data cannot necessarily be compared, we can make assumptions that Jewish Mainers may have similar associations and assumptions surrounding the definition of Zionism. If people do not support the Israeli government, and they believe supporting the government is a part of the definition of Zionism, then they would not consider themselves to be Zionist. In reality, it is very similar to our own country. Someone who does not support the current government of the United States may be less likely to hang an American flag outside their house as they feel less supportive of the country as a whole. Despite this lack of support, they can still be a proud patriot in the same way a Jewish person can be a Zionist even if they do not support the government. Pat Rosenberg puts it perfectly when she says, "I love Israel, and I'm really angry with Israel, the government, and the path that it's taken. You can love something and still be angry with it" ([Rosenberg](#)).

Speaking of politics, the political makeup of Maine could be a reason that explains the low amount of self-identifying Zionists. Looking at Figure 2, 68% of all Jewish Mainers consider themselves to be either very liberal or liberal. Among very liberal Jewish Mainers, only 7% strongly agree that they identify as Zionist. Among liberal Jews, 22% strongly agree that they identify as Zionist ([Jewish Maine](#)). Recently the left has been more critical of Israel as a state than the right, and the large makeup of left-leaning Jews could help to explain the low percentage of Zionists. According to national data collected by the Pew Research Center in 2020, Jewish Americans are much less likely to be emotionally attached to Israel if they are a Democrat with 47% of Democratic Jews being either not at all emotionally attached or not too emotionally attached to Israel opposed to 27% of Republican Jews being not at all emotionally attached, or not too emotionally attached to Israel ([Jewish Americans](#)). If someone is not emotionally attached to Israel, they are less likely to engage with it and consider themselves to be Zionist. This data is from 2020 as well, and the political scene now has become more polarized, so this gap could be bigger.

Figure 2

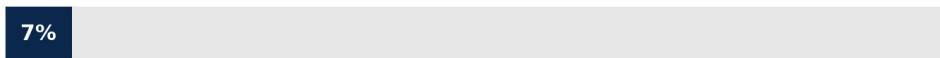
Political ideology of Jewish Mainers



Of these Mainers — share strongly agreeing they identify as Zionist Liberal



Very liberal



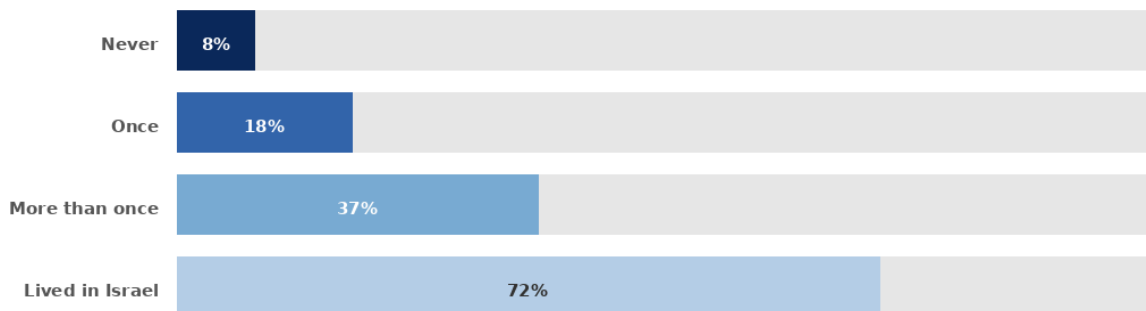
An additional explanation could be the travel to Israel of Jewish Mainers. Looking at Figure 3, over half of survey respondents, 53%, have never been to Israel, and of these people, only 8% claim the label, strongly agreeing they identify as Zionist ([Jewish Maine](#)). The lack of exposure to Israel could help to explain the low percentage of Zionists. Many people have not been able to visit the country and see what it really stands for. They have not been able to interact with everyday Israeli citizens, which may help to explain why so few people consider themselves Zionist.

Figure 3

Travel to Israel among all Jewish adults



Of these Mainers — share strongly agreeing they identify as Zionist



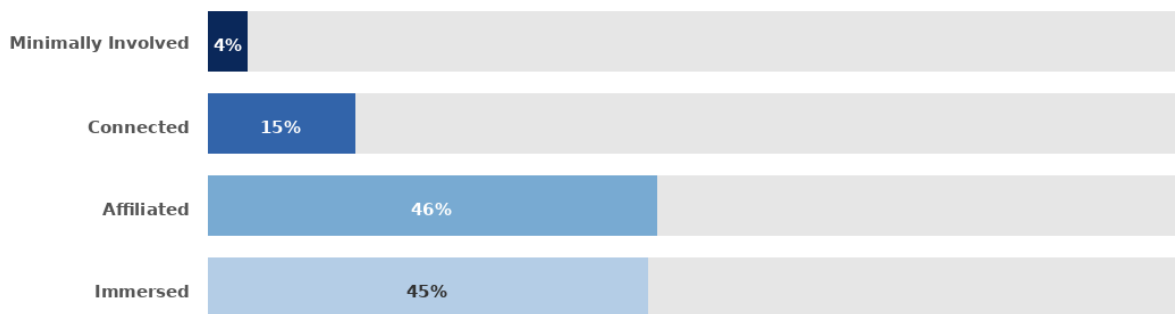
Additionally according to Figure 4, it is important to note, 42% of Jewish Mainers are in the minimally involved category of Jewish engagement. This group marginally engages in Jewish activities, holidays, or institutional Judaism. Of these people, only 4% strongly agree that they identify as Zionist ([Jewish Maine](#)). The large percentage of minimally involved folk, and the low self-identification of Zionists among this group could also help to explain the low percentage of Zionists within Maine.

Figure 4

Jewish Engagement among Jewish adults



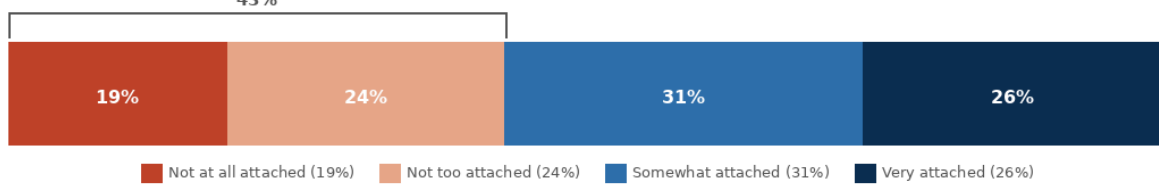
Of these Mainers — share strongly agreeing they identify as Zionist



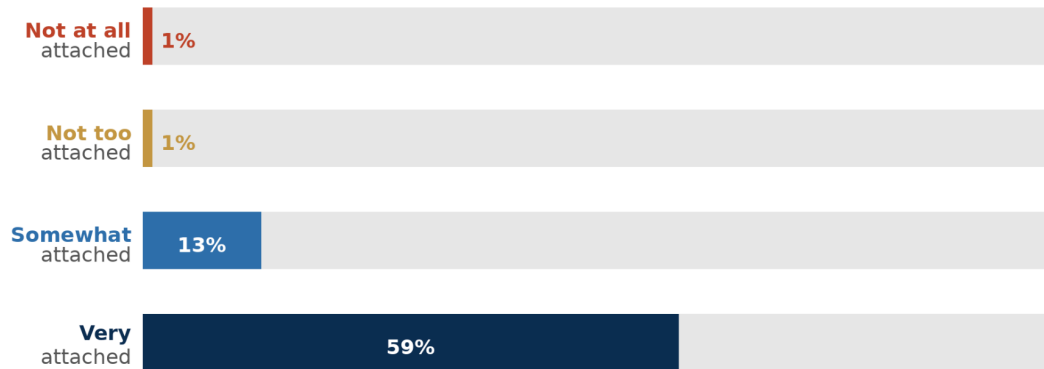
Similarly looking at Figure 5, 43% of Jewish Mainers are also either not at all attached, or not too attached to Israel. Of these groups, 1% of not at all attached Jewish Mainers strongly agree that they self-identify as Zionist followed by 1% of the not too attached group. Additionally, only 13% of the somewhat attached group and 59% of the very attached group strongly agree that they identify as Zionist ([Jewish Maine](#)). The large number of Jewish Mainers who do not feel as attached, and their low self-identification rates of Zionism could also help to explain the low percentage of Zionists in Maine. Additionally, Sam Zager speaks about what he calls "wrestling" a moral wrestling match that October 7th made much harder ([Zager](#)). He says: "October 7th was one of the ugliest days in Jewish history. But that does not give the state of Israel or the Jewish people moral immunity." He expands on the suffering this conflict has created on both sides, which could potentially help to explain why so few people in these categories strongly consider themselves Zionist. People could be very concerned over the human cost the recent wars have brought. Zager again says "I've been incredibly troubled because I see things I see, you know, suffering that I don't think has to happen among Palestinians. There's also suffering that doesn't have to happen among Israelis" ([Zager](#)).

Figure 5

Emotional attachment to Israel among all Jewish adults

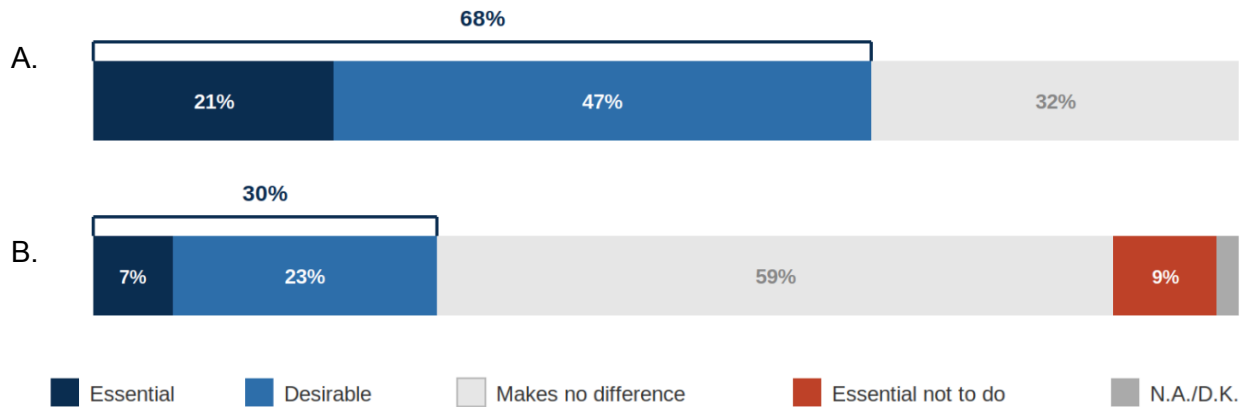


Of these Mainers — share strongly agreeing they identify as Zionist



Finally, the disproportionately low number of Zionist self-identifiers is not a new trend. Many people think this idea comes from the tragic events of October 7th, 2023, yet data shows this gap between attachment with Israel and Zionism has existed. According to a study conducted by Marshall Sklare on a community of Jewish people living in Highland Park, Illinois, in the 1950s, Jewish individuals find supporting Israel to be desirable, while supporting Zionism is not. Looking at Figure 6, it is shown that a combined 68% of Jewish people living in this area find supporting Israel to be either essential or desirable traits of being a good Jew while only a combined 30% of people find supporting Zionism essential or desirable (The image of the good Jew). This data is from over 70 years ago, showing the low number of Zionist self-identifiers is not new. Although the two communities presented, Maine and Highland Park, differ in location and time period, it is still important to note the similar trend. This tension between supporting Israel and rejecting the Zionist label is not just a statistical pattern, but it plays out in deeply personal ways for Jewish Mainers today.

Figure 6



Marshall Sklare's question, asked about 22 practices to Jews in Highland Park, Illinois, in the late 1950s: "In your opinion, for a Jew to be considered a good Jew, which of the following must he do? Which are desirable but not essential that he do? Which have no bearing on whether or not you consider him a good Jew? Which must he not do?"

A. *Support Israel*

B. *Support Zionism*

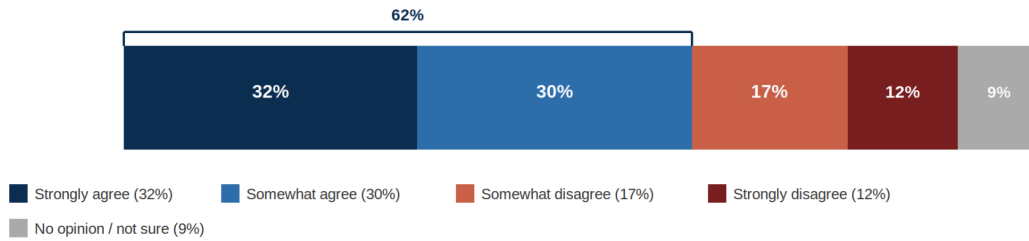
Pat Rosenberg describes what she calls a "split brain" ([Rosenberg](#)). She once saw Israel as a shining star. Now she describes it as old, corrupt, and tired, and yet she's still defending its right to exist demonstrating this complexity. Her husband Bill shares that complexity. He believes there was a good reason for Israel's establishment, but he fears the current government is generating antisemitism against Jews who don't even live there ([Rosenberg](#)).

Erica Nadelhaft, a former resident of Israel, puts it this way: "I really love the country — but 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?" This sentence perfectly summarizes the deep, complex relationship many Jewish Mainers share on the topic of Israel ([Nadelhaft](#)).

And then there's the topic of Palestine, which adds another layer of complexity. Pat Rosenberg again: "I remain sympathetic to the Palestinians. I understand that it is possible for people to reach a point where they can't stand it anymore — being deprived of their rights, their property, their futures" ([Rosenberg](#)). People who hold deep love for Israel also share sympathy for the people of Palestine. For example, looking at Figure 7, 62% of Jewish Mainers believe Israel regularly violates the human rights of Palestinians per the 2024 Jewish Maine Community study.

Figure 7

I think that Israel regularly violates the human rights of the Palestinian people.



Additionally, 31% of Jewish Mainers made a donation to exclusively Israel or exclusively Palestine. However, looking at percent of people who gave money to Israel, 22%, and the number of people who gave money to Palestinians, 16%, the numbers do not quite add up ([Jewish Maine](#)). These two statistics add up to 38%, revealing there must be Jews who have given money to both Israeli and Palestinian causes showing Jewish Mainers are empathetic to both sides of this conflict. This is shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Special donation behavior among all Jewish adults



Nadelhaft herself holds both deep sympathy for Palestinian suffering and real anger at Palestinian leadership for rejecting peace ([Nadelhaft](#)). She explains, "Palestine is almost more complicated because I feel a tremendous amount of sympathy for the suffering that they're undergoing. I also feel a tremendous amount of anger because for, I think for so many years they refused any offer of peace... and they've used that to turn us into, you know, the most hated nation on the face of the earth." This just shows no two people have the same opinion. The topics are extremely deep, and therefore generate complex opinions displaying the complexity of Jewish Mainers views on Israel, Zionism, and Palestine.

For Jewish Mainers, there are no clean answers. There is no single definition of Zionism that satisfies everyone, no unified position on Israel, no simple way to hold love for a country alongside grief for the people caught in its conflicts. What there is, instead, is the wrestling — the ongoing, uncomfortable, deeply human work of holding contradictions without resolving them. Perhaps that is one aspect of what it means to be Jewish in Maine today.

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