conflict. A majority of Israeli Jews, in contrast, voted for right-wing parties that openly oppose the Obama administration’s approach to negotiations and settlement of the conflict. Do these developments signal a parting of the ways?

Among American voters as a whole, these developments appear to be having an effect. According to Gallup surveys, pro-Israel sentiment is higher among Republicans (85 percent) and independents (60 percent) than among Democrats (48 percent). Thus far, however, this pattern of diverging sympathy for Israel has not spread to the Jews. Although Jewish liberals and conservatives disagree over Israeli policies (for example, the future of West Bank settlements and Jerusalem) they do not express differing levels of emotional attachment. For American Jews, Israel, as such, remains a nonpolitical issue.

It is possible that these dynamics could change in the future. Today’s political tensions may intensify and lead to the kind of alienation Beinart describes. And other forces, such as intermarriage, are at work that may yet drive down American Jewish attachment to Israel. (In the Cohen Center survey, 14 percent of respondents who grew up in intermarried households — compared to 36 percent who grew up in inmarried households — felt very connected to Israel). The fact that the previous generations of American Jews became more attached to Israel as they aged does not guarantee that today’s young adults will follow in their footsteps.

But new forces — such as travel initiatives like Taglit-Birthright Israel — are pushing in that direction. Since its launch a decade ago, Birthright Israel has brought more than 250,000 Diaspora Jewish young adults to Israel. In recent surveys, for the first time, the proportion of young adults who have been to Israel is greater than the proportion of middle-aged adults. And going to Israel is a key factor in becoming emotionally attached (the Cohen Center survey reports that 57 percent of those who have been to Israel — compared to 17 percent of those who had not — felt very connected).

We cannot know with any certainty whether increased travel will counterbalance opposing tendencies — such as intermarriage and political alienation — but there is good reason to believe it will. In the future, discussions about Israel may become increasingly contentious. But such is sometimes the price paid for intimacy. At the moment, there is simply no good evidence in the survey numbers to support the view that the world’s two largest Jewish communities are parting ways.

Counting American Jewry

Leonard Saxe

In a translation that makes the complex seem simple, Anglo Jews call the fourth book of the Torah “Numbers.” Although counting and numbers play a role in the biblical account of our people’s story, the Hebrew name of this book — B’midbar, or “In the Wilderness” — is a more apt descriptor of our physical and spiritual wandering in the desert. Nevertheless, the English translation captures what has become an obsession, carried through to the modern era, in counting our numbers.

Over the last several decades, the American Jewish community has invested more funds in sociodemographic studies of the Jewish population than it has in any other form of systematic social research. In recent decades, major national studies of the size and characteristics of the American Jewish community have been conducted in parallel with the 1990 and 2000 U.S. censuses. As well, it has become common for local Jewish federations to sponsor decennial studies of their populations.

Although I have benefited from communal support to conduct some of these studies, I am a reluctant contributor to this knowledge base. Knowing the number of Jews in the United States and in local communities is far less interesting and important than understanding their character. Unfortunately, conducting demographic research has drained attention and resources from the task of better understanding the dynamics of communal engagement and the effectiveness of our efforts to engage and educate new generations.

Key to my pessimism with our counting obsession is that we have not been able to conduct very good studies. Modern demographic studies are often treated as if they are censuses that yield actual counts. But they are surveys of a “rare” population and are strongly affected by coverage and nonresponse errors that can provide misleading results. “Who is a Jew?” questions
notwithstanding, it’s extremely difficult to locate Jews and to estimate accurately their numbers.

When the Israelites were wandering in the desert, b’midbar, their number was counted initially to assess military strength. The contemporary American version is to count our numbers so that we know how to plan for communal needs. But planning requires an understanding of who the people are and what they need. It requires the ability to look “backward” at how Jewish identity and engagement have evolved and, at the same time, the capacity to look forward and predict the future. Even if we could overcome challenges to locating a representative sample and we could develop accurate “point estimates” of the number of Americans who claim Jewish identity, our data would be insufficient.

What, then, would be useful and what is feasible in terms of resources and methodology? One approach is to synthesize existing data from dozens of surveys that ask questions about religious and ethnic identity. This approach enables us to have accurate data at a relatively low cost and, equally important, to track population changes over time. But the demographic data does not shed much light about the Jewishness of the population or the impact of changes in communal structure. To understand those issues, we are conducting additional studies with representative, albeit imperfect samples, that allow us to track longitudinally how Jewish identity and behavior change.

What is essential about any research is that it enables comparison. In the case of population numbers, assessing trends — the growth or decline of the community — is more important than the actual numbers. It is the comparison of population estimates over time, not the numbers themselves, that are most significant. Similarly, being able to compare those who engage with the community and those who don’t — and identifying the causal factors — is the basis for policy analysis. A new generation of studies is needed.

New ways of doing and understanding research on American Jewry will provide not only a number-based account of the community’s evolution, but also the analytic base for understanding how we are acculturating and preserving Jewish tradition. It will assess our strength in spiritual and intellectual prowess as well as our numeric strength. This research will provide tools to understand how we relate with one another, and how we relate with Jews in Israel and around the world.

Parasha B’midbar describes God’s instruction to Moshe, “Se’u et rosh kol adat bnai Yisrael.” “Take a census of the whole Israelite community.” The instruction is not simply, “Moshe, tell me how many people you have … give me a number.” It is far more profound. Literally, the text translates as, “Lift up the head of the Israelite community.” The biblical injunction should be the byline of social scientists who aid the community in their research. We need to uplift the community with knowledge and, in so doing, contribute to a vibrant future.
American Jews, or Jewish Americans, are Americans who are Jews, whether by religion, ethnicity, culture, or nationality. Today the Jewish community in the United States consists primarily of Ashkenazi Jews, who descend from diaspora Jewish populations of Central and Eastern Europe and comprise about 90–95% of the American Jewish population. During the colonial era, prior to the mass immigration of Ashkenazim, Spanish and Portuguese Jews represented the bulk of America's then-small Jewish population.