

Opinion | This Is Not the Time for American Jews to Protest Netanyahu

As the rabbi of Manhattan's Park Avenue Synagogue, I protested against Prime Minister Netanyahu last year, in solidarity with Israel's pro-democracy movement. Ahead of his speech to Congress, U.S. Jews should think twice when weighing in on matters of Israel's security and leadership at wartime

Elliot Cosgrove Jul 21, 2024 4:02 pm IDT 🔔 Follow

Grateful as I am to spend my summer in Jerusalem, the challenges of leading a North American congregation continue to follow me by way of email.

"Rabbi," wrote one colleague of mine. "Prime Minister Netanyahu will be speaking before Congress on July 24. Netanyahu represents a danger to Israel, to its democracy, to the hostages and to the peace of the entire region. Park Avenue Synagogue needs to send a delegation to DC to join American Jews and Israelis in declaring Netanyahu persona non grata!"

That very hour, another email appeared in my inbox, this colleague insisting just the opposite. "Rabbi," they wrote me. "I understand an effort is underway for American Jews to protest Netanyahu's upcoming visit. No matter what one's views of the Prime Minister, whatever the facts of this war may be, under no circumstances should Park Avenue Synagogue join the protests. There will undoubtedly be huge

anti-Israel and anti-Zionist protests in DC that day, and American Jews have no place in such a setting."

The emails not only reflect the lived life of a congregational rabbi, but also go to the heart of the evolving and conflicted relationship between American Jewry and Israel in our especially tumultuous times.

I understand why my colleagues reached out to me. On September 22, 2023, I [spoke in New York's Dag Hammarskjold Plaza at the United Nations in proud solidarity with Israel's pro-democracy movement on the day Netanyahu spoke there](#). I declared my heart to be with the protestors on Kaplan Street, believing then (as I still do) that Netanyahu's ill-advised efforts [for judicial reform](#) were a threat to Israel as a liberal democracy. If half of Israel could protest the proposed reforms as an expression of their love for Israel, why not American liberal Zionists too?

And then, just weeks following the [attacks of October 7](#), my congregation proudly sent a delegation of hundreds to join the thousands from around the country at the "March for Israel" in Washington. Israelis had just been massacred en masse and others taken hostage to Gaza in the deadliest day in Israel's history and Israel was now at war in Gaza with Hamas. It was not the time to name our objections with this or that policy of the Israeli government, but to stand together in grief and support.

Just as Israel's pro-democracy movement pivoted to mobilize relief efforts across the Jewish state, so too American Jewry. We set aside our internal differences, heard from a politically diverse line-up of speakers, and expressed

our unflinching solidarity with those who supported Israel in its hour of need.

And now – over nine months later – how shall we respond? Israelis are back on the streets every Saturday night and often throughout the week – outside the Defense Ministry headquarters in Tel Aviv or blocking the Ayalon highway.

Is it not, one might ask, time for American Jewry to do the same in our country?

Despite the overlap in politics and personality between last year's protests and the present ones, it is the differences between the two that are worth noting.

Last year's protests concerned an internal debate regarding Israel's balancing act of being both a Jewish and democratic state. The present protests concern questions regarding how Israel should prosecute a war against its external enemies who would seek its destruction.

Last year's protests pitted two competing views concerning proposed judicial reform – those for and those against. The present protests do not fit neatly into identifiable camps, nor are the gatherings uniform in nature.

What is taking place in Hostage Square is different from the message of protesters on Kaplan Street and that of the hostage families demonstrating nearby on Begin Road across from the Defense Ministry – and for that matter what is heard in Jerusalem, Carmiel and elsewhere.

Some protestors give voice to their antipathy, and frankly, their rage against the government, charging Netanyahu with failing to secure Israel on October 7 and abandoning the

hostages and the country. Some are decidedly apolitical. Some give voice to the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza. The return of the hostages is of paramount concern to all, with some of the gatherings less of a protest and more of a prayer circle (or primal scream). All protest gatherings I have attended express support for the well-being of IDF soldiers.

Yes, polls show most Israelis are dissatisfied with Netanyahu, including among the right, and many Israelis are calling for early elections, but not all are. While coalitions are forming amongst the groups, there remains a diversity of views regarding the path forward.

Strident as the voices protesting the government -- and specifically Netanyahu who they charge is prolonging the war and scuttling a hostage deal in order to remain in power -- best as I can tell a clear and viable political alternative has yet to emerge. These are not the protests of 2023.

Such observations, amongst others, help inform the answer to the present decision facing American Jewry. Laudable as what is taking place in Israel may be, American Jewry must be circumspect before presuming to mirror Israeli activism. We are not the ones sending our children to the front lines against Hamas or coping with hundreds of thousands of displaced citizens. In a time of war, American Jewry should think twice when weighing in on matters of Israel's security and leadership.

Furthermore, the present toxicity of anti-Israel sentiment in America does not lend itself to nuanced understanding of differences between those in the U.S. seeking the release of hostages, those calling for a cease-fire, those protesting

Israel's government, and those denying Israel's right to self-defense and self-determination.

Perception matters. Whatever statement a Jewish anti-Netanyahu protest in Washington may yield, the gains would be far outweighed by the harm inflicted on Israel's standing in America and the world.

In the chess game of Middle East politics, I fear the public display of daylight between American Jewry and Israel would serve to strengthen the resolve of Israel's enemies and, by extension, even further delay the swift return of the hostages.

"There is a time and place for everything under the heavens," teaches Ecclesiastes. This is not the time for American Jewry to protest Netanyahu, the face of the Israeli government, no matter what our objections to him may be. The guiding principle of American Jewry can be distilled to "First, do no harm."

If one must go, then let your banner and chant be to bring home the hostages – on that desperate humanitarian need we can all agree. Not every slogan needs to be said, not every policy needs to be protested. When Netanyahu speaks before Congress on Wednesday, there will be no delegation from my community to Washington.

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