On American Jews Protesting Israel's Prime Minister

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I remember when Israel became a partisan issue in America.

It was 2015, and the country was debating the Iran nuclear deal. The Democrats were for it, the Republicans were against it, and they were at each other's throats.

Both parties sought to promote their position by undermining the other side. John Boehner, then the Republican speaker of the House and President Barack Obama's chief political adversary, decided a good way to do that would be to invite the prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, to make the case against the Iran deal directly to a joint session of Congress.

Boehner apparently figured that having the leader of America's greatest ally in the region speak against Obama's position on his home turf would prove to be so embarrassing to the President that he would have to relent.

Netanyahu, ever the politician, saw an opportunity to gain political leverage by driving a wedge between Jewish voters and the Iran-deal proponents in the Democratic Party. So, he happily accepted Speaker Boehner's invitation.

But their strategy backfired. President Obama was infuriated that Netanyahu would have the gall to come here and slam him in the highest-profile forum possible. This was more than a diplomatic no-no; it was public political attack on the President of the United States—one you'd expect from his Republican opponents, but not from a foreign ally, especially one that depends so heavily on American support.

This is why Israel became a partisan issue: because Boehner and Netanyahu's gratuitously aggressive move, and Obama's angry response to it, forced Democrats in Congress to decide whom to stand with: the president of the United States or the prime minister of Israel.

Since the establishment of Israel in 1948 until this pivotal moment in 2015, this isn't a choice that American politicians of either party ever had to make.

America and Israel were rock-solid allies. Sure, U.S. Presidents and Israeli prime ministers had their disagreements over things like loan guarantees and settlements in the West Bank, but, generally speaking, they were hashed out behind the scenes.

When I worked in the Senate in the early 2000s, it was a given that Republicans and Democrats alike would go out of their way to be present when the Israeli prime minister spoke at the annual AIPAC conference.

But this changed in 2015, thanks to our leaders' political miscalculations and personal peevishness. Forced to pick a side in the public rift between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu, they

sided with Obama. Many of them boycotted the prime minister's speech, and the President didn't discourage them from doing it.

This was a totally rational political decision for Democrats to make; and had Netanyahu antagonized a Republican President, I have no doubt that the Republicans in Congress would have done the same.

But Netanyahu should have known better. He should have known that by accepting that invitation, and then by attacking the President in his speech, he would end up putting half the Congress in a position where they had to pick a side—and that he would lose.

And Israel would lose.

We've seen the consequences of that play out in our politics since October 7. And we saw it especially this week, when Prime Minister Netanyahu came to speak to Congress again.

He no longer has the political standing in America that Israeli prime ministers used to have. Many will say it's because the way he's conducted the war in Gaza and his opposition to a Palestinian state are outrageous—and they might be right about that.

But pre-2015, even if they passionately disagreed with his policies, no mainstream officeholder boycotted the prime minister of Israel. They do it now because Netanyahu has openly aligned himself with one political party in America, the Republicans, and that creates a political incentive—and political cover—for people in the other party to boycott him, protest him, and denounce him publicly.

It's a very sad and damaging thing for Israel and for the Jewish people, in my opinion. But here we are.

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I'm angry at Netanyahu for creating this political situation. And, like a lot of American Jews, I find it embarrassing that Israel's prime minister is on trial for bribery and corruption, and has cynically pursued policies to make a two-state solution less likely, and has a reputation for being such a scoundrel.

I'm also angry at what I saw this week from some prominent Jewish politicians.

I saw Jewish members of Congress go on CNN to proudly tell the world they were boycotting the prime minister of Israel and to denounce him with every political epithet in the book.

I saw Jews in red T-shirts protesting in the Capitol Rotunda. I saw Jews in black hats waving Palestinian flags and anti-Israel placards.

And though I haven't seen them personally, I have heard that even some rabbis joined in the protests.

I understand they despise Netanyahu. I understand they blame him for misconduct of the war, for the suffering of innocent people in Gaza, even for making Israel vulnerable to the October 7 attacks in the first place. Those are valid opinions. And I affirm their right to speak out.

But just because you have the *right* to do it, doesn't mean you *should* do it.

What do we think people will make of the sight of American Jews protesting the prime minister of Israel when he's a guest in our country? When, just across the street in front of Union Station, people are spray-painting monuments and brandishing signs with slogans like "Hamas is coming" and "All Zionists are bastards" and "Allah is gathering all the Zionists for the 'Final Solution'"?

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I wonder if these Jewish protestors know about Dathan. Have you ever heard of him? He's in the Torah. He's mentioned in this week's portion, in fact.

I first learned about Dathan from Cecil B. DeMille's movie *The Ten Commandments*. (It was my favorite movie as a kid.)

Dathan is played with menacing villainy by Edward G. Robinson. He's a Hebrew slave in Egypt, but he despises his people's leaders and craves power for himself, so he kisses up relentlessly to the future pharaoh, Ramesses II, played by Yul Brynner.

It so happens that when Moses kills the Egyptian taskmaster, Dathan is there and sees it go down. When he finds out that Ramesses is looking for the killer, Dathan puts the word out that he knows who did it, and he's willing to turn the guy in—for a price. Ramesses agrees to pay it, and Dathan tells him that the man he's looking for is Moses.

In this respect at least, Cecil B. DeMille's story is true to the rabbinic midrash. Like DeMille, the rabbis cast Dathan as a malevolent figure who not only turns Moses in to the pharaoh, jeopardizing his life, but also repeatedly incites the Jews against Moses and creates dissension in the community.

In this way, Dathan becomes the prototype of what the sages call the *mosser* or the *malshin*—meaning: a Jew who informs on, or speaks negatively about, his fellow Jew to the non-Jewish authorities.

The halakah regards this as a very serious offense because it can endanger not only the individual who is informed on or denounced, but also the Jewish community as a whole.

In fact, it's such a grave sin that the sages added a curse in the daily prayer book against the *malshinim*, Jews who slander their fellow Jews to the non-Jewish government.

Now, it's important at this point for me to explain that the "informer" or "slanderer" in the classical halakah is someone who commits the very specific act of either turning in a fellow Jew to hostile

gentile authorities, or of speaking ill of a fellow Jew in a way that could cause the government to look unfavorably on the Jewish community.

I am *not* saying that the Jewish lawmakers and activists protesting Netanyahu are guilty of this transgression. I am not saying they are doing what Dathan did, and I am not likening Netanyahu to Moses, God forbid.

What I am saying, though, is that we can learn something from the alarm our tradition sounds about the Jewish community airing its internal conflicts and grievances publicly—especially when some in the audience have dangerous designs against us and are looking for an opportunity to act on them.

Bottom line: Our tradition is clearly wary of giving political cover, even unintentionally, to people who want to cause us harm. And for good reason.

To be sure, the ancient sages and medieval rabbis worried about different consequences than we do today. In their times, the kingdom might impose higher taxes or harsher restrictions on the Jewish community or send soldiers in to burn down their village.

Today, I think we have to be worried about inadvertently fanning the flames of anti-Zionism, weakening what's left of the bipartisan American support that Israel so desperately needs, and further emboldening Hamas and Iran.

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So, to those who will say, "We have a right to protest"; I say, "Yes, you do."

To those who say, "We are morally outraged by Netanyahu's policies"; I say, "I understand. Support Israeli organizations that oppose him."

Buy a plane ticket and go stand with the many Israelis who are protesting the prime minister *in Israel*. That's part of a healthy democracy; and as a Jew, you have a stake in the future of the Jewish state.

But, please, recognize that the impact is totally different when American Jews publicly protest the prime minister of Israel on American soil—when he's *here*, no less.

It might be nuanced to us, but it's not nuanced to the millions of Americans—including congressmen and senators—who just see Jews protesting the Jewish state while its fighting for its very existence. And it's certainly not nuanced to the people who spray-painted those slogans on the DC monuments.

In a post-October 7 world where Jewish students are endangered on college campuses, and Iran has fired missiles at Israel, and a drone just hit Tel Aviv, and antisemitic violence is being committed in American cities, and more than 100 Israelis and several Americans are still being held hostage by Hamas—*even if Netanyahu is the worst prime minister in the history of Israel*—the Jewish state and the Jewish people cannot afford this right now.

Our enemies are out there, and they're active. We see it on the news every day. And we just can't afford to give them any more political cover.