
Bnai Jeshurun Rabbis Rapped Again On Israel

By **Stem Education**, www.thejewishweek.com

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B'nai Jeshurun's 88th Street entrance.

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Congregants of the Upper West Side synagogue B'nai Jeshurun (<http://www.bj.org/%E2%80%8E>), known worldwide for its spirited services, have for the second time in about a year condemned two of their rabbis' most recent public statements on Israel, this time in an e-mail petition.

The rabbis spoke out in late January, when Rolando Matalon and Felicia Sol signed a letter criticizing Mayor Bill de Blasio for offering the lobbying group AIPAC an open door at City Hall and stating that AIPAC (<http://www.aipac.org>) speaks for Israel's hardline government and right-wing supporters, but not for all Jews, including them.

That letter, said the displeased group of congregants in their petition, "paints AIPAC into an ideological corner."

"Please understand that your words, besides being factually incorrect, are offensive to many of your congregants," the congregants wrote in their response, dated Feb. 7, adding that, "You should be standing with Israel."

The synagogue did not respond to repeated quests for comment.

Forty-eight congregants, about half of whom shared a surname with at least one other signer, signed the letter. B'nai Jeshurun has several thousand of congregants and is so big that it's known as a "mega-

synagogue.”

“We are a diverse synagogue,” said Gil Kulick, 72, a retired diplomat whose has been a member of the synagogue for 11 years and who is an active volunteer with both BJ and J Street, the lobbying organization known as a left-leaning AIPAC alternative. “I have no doubt that the vast majority of the community support the rabbis’ freedom to speak their consciences.”

The group that sent the petition is a vocal minority, said Kulick, who signed the letter criticizing the mayor. He believes that many congregants likely agree with the sentiments expressed in the de Blasio letter, he said.

But the synagogue’s diversity includes a group of important financial supporters that rejects the synagogue’s left-leaning attitudes toward Israel, said one congregant who wished to remain anonymous. That group is behind both this most recent petition and the outcry against the rabbis last year, when they sent an e-mail to the congregation that praised the UN’s vote in favor of Palestinian statehood, the congregant said.

The rabbis apologized for that e-mail and said that it was sent prematurely, “through an unfortunately series of internal errors.”

“Whether intentional or not,” the signers of the current petition stated, “your reckless signing of the Mayor’s letter has, once again, deeply offended many of your members, and provoked turmoil within our congregation.”

Fifty-eight people signed the message to de Blasio, including feminist Gloria Steinem, writer Erica Jong and musician Emmanuel Ax. Those signatories included at least two married couples.