
Rabbi Rolondo Matalon

By **Jonathan S. Tobin**, dc-
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It has become a commonplace observation in some portions of the organized Jewish community to complain that American rabbis are afraid to discuss Israel with their congregations. The assumption underlying this claim is that to criticize the State of Israel is the kiss of death for Jewish clergy who live in fear of offending wealthy donors. It's all very sad but, in fact, completely untrue. Critics of Israel aren't shunned in American Jewish life. If anything, they have a much better chance of being heard in the secular media—and given space on the opinion pages of major newspapers such as the *New York Times*—than those who attempt to defend the Jewish state against the slanders that are hurled at it by both its Arab foes and Jews who adopt a “more in sorrow than in anger” pose.

Consider the rabbis at a prominent synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, B'nai Jeshurun. Two of them, Rolando Matalon and Felicia Sol, signed a letter (as this story in New York's *Jewish Week* reported (<http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/new-york/liberal-jews-criticize-mayors-comments-aipac>)) attacking New York City mayor Bill de Blasio for speaking at an AIPAC event where he said, "City Hall will always be open to AIPAC. When you need me to stand by you in Washington or anywhere, I will answer the call and I'll answer it happily 'cause that's my job." The letter they signed said the following: "The needs and concerns of many of your constituents—U.S. Jews like us among them—are not aligned with those of AIPAC, and no, your job is not to do AIPAC's bidding when they call you to do so. AIPAC speaks for Israel's hard-line government and its right-wing supporters, and for them alone; it does not speak for us."

As it happens, B'nai Jeshurun's congregants include a number of people who are deeply involved with AIPAC. They are predominantly liberal themselves, as well as predominantly Democratic Party voters, and as such, they give the lie to the idea that AIPAC is a right-wing cabal. They have issued a public letter of their own, expressing their profound distress at their rabbinical leaders for their spurious attack:

Please understand that your words, besides being factually incorrect, are offensive to many of your congregants. As our rabbis, your public comments reflect on our synagogue and on us. We are proud supporters of AIPAC, and we object to the way you mischaracterize the work that AIPAC does and the diverse political affiliation of its many members. Your letter is divisive and contains false and unsubstantiated statements. By attempting to paint AIPAC into an ideological corner, you have injured AIPAC's ability to continue its bipartisan efforts, and in so doing have hurt the State of Israel as well.

You can read the rest of the letter [here](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/BJAIPAC-Letter-1.pdf)
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This letter reveals a sobering truth: the most pressing problem for American Jews is not the failure of spiritual leaders to disassociate themselves from Israel and its backers but the scandalous impunity with which some prominent rabbis and Jewish organizational leaders use their pulpits to undermine the pro-Israel community and lend aid and comfort to those seeking to wage economic war on the Jewish state. It takes little courage these days to denounce the pro-Israel cause; the rewards of doing so are actually quite substantial. Rather than needing more tolerance for those who seek to support their disgraceful campaign of delegitimization, perhaps what is required is for more American Jews like the signatories of the letter opposing their rabbis' statement to find the guts to start speaking out against those who seek to shout down the Jewish state's defenders.