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Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gestures as he addresses the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) policy conference in Washington., (Photo by: REUTERS)

An open letter to AIPAC

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If AIPAC involves itself in religious conflicts and takes stands on issues unrelated to Israel's security, it will narrow its base of support.

AIPAC deserves the wholehearted support of every Jew. As we enter the Three Weeks, during which traditional Jews observe acts of mourning to remember the destruction of the Temple, I am reminded of an incident that occurred 56 years ago at this time. Rabbi Moshe Sherer, the legendary leader of Agudath Israel of America, was invited to meet with president John F. Kennedy regarding an upcoming vote in the United Nations that was unfavorable to Israel.

The meeting was scheduled for the Ninth of Av, a day of mourning when Jewish law prohibits shaving or wearing leather shoes. Faced with the prospect of meeting with the president looking disheveled, he turned for guidance to the leader of the generation, Rabbi Aharon Kotler.

Rabbi Kotler told him in no uncertain terms that he was required to shave and wear his best when meeting the president, because the security of the Jewish nation was on the line.

Passionate concern for Jewish life has characterized Orthodox Judaism throughout history. That passion has carried over to our time, and thus the Orthodox mainstream lies wholeheartedly behind protection of Israel and its 6 million Jews.

By every measure, Orthodox Jews are the strongest supporters of Israel. They make aliya in overwhelmingly greater numbers than do members of the American Reform and Conservative movements, and they visit in much higher percentages as well. Every year, tens of thousands of Orthodox high school graduates spend a year studying in Israel before embarking on other pursuits.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Orthodox Jews, myself included, have embraced the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, attending its policy conferences and dinners, and serving as board members. An Orthodox Jew was a recent past president of the organization.

Historically, AIPAC has returned that embrace in two ways. First, it keeps its events glatt kosher. But just as important is the way AIPAC focuses upon its core mission of supporting the strong relationship between the United States and Israel. It stays out of partisan matters upon which AIPAC supporters are themselves divided. AIPAC's broad appeal to all of those who care about Israel's safety enables it to include Jews with differing ideologies under its tent.

Hundreds of thousands of active Orthodox Jews refrain from supporting their local Jewish Federations and other Jewish organizations that vocally support nontraditional religious values. AIPAC has historically, and commendably, chosen a very different route.

Thus AIPAC's protest to Prime Minister Netanyahu, opposing his decision regarding nontraditional egalitarian prayers at the Kotel, was astonishing. AIPAC leaders strayed from their mission and involved themselves in a hotly debated area of religious concern.

To be certain, AIPAC's leaders are entitled to have a voice and opinion just like anyone else. But to take a stand as an organization pushes away Orthodox support.

The timing is extremely unfortunate. The Orthodox are not only the most committed to Israel's

security, but are also the only growing segment of the US Jewish community, according to a Pew Research Center report and other recent surveys. And they are growing robustly, now representing the plurality of affiliated Jews under 18.

With this misguided appeal to Benjamin Netanyahu, AIPAC has disenfranchised one of its strongest bases of support, observant Jews who could easily turn to Orthodox-run advocacy groups instead. My support, my congregation's, and the support of much of the Orthodox community cannot be taken for granted.

If AIPAC involves itself in religious conflicts and takes stands on issues unrelated to Israel's security, it will narrow its base of support. And as Tisha Be'av reminds us, each year, once something is lost it does not easily return.

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