

Don't Condemn Nadler for Voting Present on "Anti-Zionism is Anti-Semitism" Resolution

AMY NEUSTEIN | 15 DEC 2023 | 06:30

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REP. JERROLD NADLER -

When the House of Representatives introduced a resolution declaring "anti-Zionism is antisemitism," Manhattan Congressman Jerrold Nadler, the longest serving Jewish member of the House, voted "present"—de facto an abstention from voting for or against the resolution. In a floor speech before he cast his vote, Nadler opined, "Under this resolution, those who love Israel deeply but criticize some of its policy approaches could be considered anti-Zionist." Pointing to the maelstrom of controversy over Israel's judicial reform that occupied headlines this past year, Nadler declared: "That [the resolution] could make every Democratic Jewish member of this body, because they all criticized the recent Israeli judicial reform package, de facto anti-Semites."

Certainly not a lone voice in his decision to abstain given that ninety-two Democrats also voted "present," Nadler was still rebuked in certain sectors of the Jewish community. Some saw him as "weak," while others saw him as "disloyal." Many were confused as to why a Jewish lawmaker would not support this resolution equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism.

However, what many failed to see is that Jerry Nadler in his thirty-year history as a federal lawmaker has tenaciously clung to the principle of freedom of speech—the liberty to speak one's mind without fear of retaliation, censorship or legal sanction—in his voting on house bills and in his speeches on the floor as well as in his public addresses to the community. In addition to his strong voting record for Israel during his long tenure in Congress, Nadler has openly expressed his affinity to the principles of freedom of speech, for he cherishes these freedoms perhaps even more so because he is Jewish and, like most Jews in the United States, his ancestors faced severe religious persecution in the countries from which they fled. And freedom of speech, if abridged, truncated or countermanded by federal lawmakers will swiftly erode Democracy, for the slippery slope from restricted speech to totalitarianism does not present plainly visible markers along the way.

I first met Jerry Nadler in 1988 when I served on a speakers' panel at the Goddard Riverside Community Center on Columbus Avenue and West 88th Street. Nadler, who was an Upper Westside assemblyman at the time, gave the keynote speech at this community meeting to discuss the serious danger that family courts posed to sexually abused children who were deliberately placed in the custody of the abusive parent. The meeting was spearheaded by longtime community activist Maxine De Seta. Listening to Nadler on that rainy afternoon in April, I found myself in awe of his ability to speak so fluently and substantively about the egregious miscarriages of justice that left sexually abused children with the predatory parent. Nadler didn't mince words: he publicly called it the "judicial rape of children." He held the principles of freedom of speech so close to his heart that thereafter he introduced a series of bills to strip the family courts of secrecy and to make it illegal for a judge to impose a "gag" order on a mother that would prevent her from seeking the emotional support she so desperately needed.

When I look back, what I remember about Nadler was the dignity he showed my father, a prominent rabbi, educator, and scholar from Brooklyn. At a two-day landmark hearing into the atrocities of family court, my father was invited by Nadler to serve as the lead witness. He addressed my father with great respect. Years later, he would present my father with a very special award at the Ponevezh Yeshiva annual dinner held at the downtown Marriott.

No one could claim today that Nadler, himself a product of a yeshiva education, was indifferent when the "anti-Zionism is antisemitism" resolution came before the House last week. Yet, in the corridors of chatter he is chastised as a traitor for not voting affirmatively.

This troubles me because I know Nadler is being sorely misjudged. In my search for an answer, I found a way of engaging in a constructive dialog about Nadler's vote last week without devolving into a screaming match. Quite serendipitously, I found my answer in a list of articles on the Israel-Hamas war and its effects on the Jewish community that I had received the other day. The articles were curated by Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer of the Coalition for Jewish Values, an organization of rabbis who follow the tenets of traditional Judaism, and who are dedicated to impacting positive social change.

Among those articles was a link to an insightful essay in the *Forward* by historian Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. Dr. Kurtzer declared, "It is essential that when Jews find ourselves on opposite sides of a dividing line, we do not dehumanize or make one another proxies for the ideologies of institutions we detest." So, if Nadler's vote on the "anti-Zionism is antisemitism" resolution is adverse to one's belief system, can we try to restrain ourselves from deriding him as symbolic of the far-left?

Amy Neustein, is the co-author of "From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers are Running from the Family Courts—and What Can be Done about It" (University Press of New England, 2005); A follow-up book, "Mother-Mugging: The Civil Rights Crisis in the American Family Courts—and What Can be Done about It" is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.