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Support by American Jewish groups for Pollard release is troubling

In recent days, a variety of American Jewish organizations have embarked on a campaign to secure the release from prison of Jonathan Pollard, a civilian intelligence analyst for the U.S. Navy who was convicted in 1987 of spying for Israel, a crime for which he admitted his guilt and was sentenced to life in prison.

Indeed, Rabbi Haskell Lookstein of the Synagogue Council of America said,, "[V]irtually every major American Jewish organization has asked for Pollard's release." Full-page advertisements on behalf of Pollard have appeared in newspapers. The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, representing more than 50 groups, recently signed on to this campaign. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform Union of American Hebrew Organizations, and Rabbi Raphael Butler, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, have called for Pollard's release, saying his sentence "is grossly disproportionate with his crime" and that Pollard is a "contrite offender."

The fact is that such groups and individuals do not speak for the vast majority of American Jews on a matter for which they have no mandate to do so. This is in no sense a "Jewish" or religious question. Intelligence experts report that Pollard committed a massive betrayal of national security. He is said to have stolen more top-secret documents than almost any U.S. spy in U.S. history. Former CIA Director R. James Woolsey said, "[H]e stole huge amounts of intelligence, measured in cubic yards."

Beyond this, Pollard is not contrite. In recent interviews, he has indicated that he still sees himself as a "front-line soldier deep in enemy territory, taking a last stand on a small hill." He went so far in a January interview as to call the United States a "foreign country."

Why some Jewish leaders and groups have seen fit to embrace Pollard is difficult to understand. They seem to have substituted a dedication to Israel for the dedication to God that Judaism, a religion of universal values, demands. They have seriously confused politics and religion, and in doing so, have ill served the American Jewish community in whose name they pretend to speak.

Such a crusade may be understandable for those who have embraced the Zionist view that Israel is "central" to Judaism and to the life of American Jews. It is, after all, the Zionist view that all Jews living outside of Israel are in "exile."

The fact is, however, that the vast majority of American Jews reject such a philosophy. They believe themselves to be Americans by nationality and citizenship and Jews by religion, just as their fellow citizens are Presbyterians, Catholics or Baptists. Their religion does not involve political activity of the kind manifested in the campaign for Pollard.

Whether Pollard has served a sufficient portion of his term and should be released now or at some time in the future is a question about which reasonable men and women may disagree. In the future, our judicial system will deal with this matter. For Jewish religious groups to mount a crusade on behalf of an admitted spy and to charge that he is in prison because of bigotry is something else again. It tells us more about the priorities and interests of such groups than it does about the merits or demerits of Jonathan Pollard's life sentence for espionage.

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