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"Should rabbis talk to their congregants about the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and do they have something special to add to the debate?"

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

What are the limits of the pulpit? Of rabbis freely speaking their minds? Who sets the agenda?

Years ago, as I was starting out in the rabbinate, I seem to recall an older relative of mine who cautioned me not to speak about politics, Israel, and a slew of other hot-button topics. What expertise, he said, did I have in these matters? Let my congregants form their own opinions or read Op Ed editorials if they want, but I should stick with religious, spiritual themes for coping with daily life and life's on-going challenges. In other words, with safe subjects.

But can the line be drawn so neatly? And is our mandate to stay safe or, occasionally, wade into some difficult and controversial waters?

While we're prohibited for tax status reasons from endorsing candidates, many rabbis don't hesitate to express their opinions on the issues of the day, and to buttress their positions from Jewish teachings or values. In some cases, the rabbi's purpose is to forcefully stake out a particular viewpoint and condemn others. Or to stay neutral, but to examine the meta-language of the debate and expose faulty thinking or contradictory arguments or both sides. Or, by airing certain controversial matters, demonstrate how a community can still talk civilly about them.

Talking about BDS falls into all these categories. But a rabbi "should not" be compelled to talk about this topic any more than he or she "should" be compelled to avoid it, or any other subject, for that matter.