



Dear Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, Rabbi Philip Scheim, and Distinguished Members of the Rabbinical Assembly,

Thank you for your letter and for this opportunity to engage in a dialogue with you on these important issues.

As I have learned from my teachers in the Jewish community, the one who is wise is “halomed m’kol adam,” the one who learns from everyone (Mishna Avot 4:1). In my Muslim tradition, we pray to the Lord to “enrich me with knowledge” (Quran, 20:114).

In this spirit I enter into this dialogue with you. It is also this spirit—of listening and learning from every person—in which I have strived to conduct myself in my life of public service, and if I am so fortunate, as chair of the Democratic National Committee.

You ask important and spirited questions—no doubt reflecting the feelings of your leadership and laity around our country and the world.

These are issues I care a great deal about. As a 20-year-old I traveled to Auschwitz and Birkenau, which had a tremendous impact on me. I bore witness with my own eyes to the horrors of the Holocaust, and while I know there is much more to the American Jewish experience than the experience of survivorship, my understanding and connection to the Jewish people from that moment was forever changed.

I remembered that trip profoundly in 2003 when, as a member of the Minnesota State Legislature, I helped prosecute one of the most heinous mistruths of our society—Holocaust denial. It was almost 30 years after I stepped foot in the death camps of Europe that, as a Member of Congress, I organized a briefing in honor of Holocaust Memorial Day for Imams who travelled to Auschwitz on a study tour.

My pursuit of justice in all corners of the earth has been a lifelong endeavor—which started here at home, in my own family. My mother Clida taught me and my brothers from a young age about our grandfather’s work to organize Black voters in the 1950s in rural Louisiana. The Civil Rights Movement was an ever-present force in our house growing up—a struggle you as Conservative Rabbis know about a great deal. As my Jewish brothers and sisters have taught me, it was the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who marched arm-in-arm with Dr. Martin Luther King in Selma. Rabbi Heschel left his position at the esteemed Jewish Theological Seminary to put his life on the line to stand up against injustice, and as he put it, to “pray with his legs.”

It was with that same vision that I, more than 20 years ago, was inspired by the idea of the Million Man March in Washington DC. Together with the likes of Rosa Parks, President Obama, Stevie Wonder, Maya Angelou, as well as countless other political and civil rights leaders who have stood with the Jewish community for so many years, I sought to bring together African American men and women to pray with our legs.

We sought to continue the fight against injustice and uphold the legacy of so many who came before us like Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King.

At the time of the march, Rodney King was beaten in Los Angeles. Many Black people were suffering at the hands of police. Unemployment was high. The Willie Horton scandal was fresh. In this environment, Minister Farrakhan was speaking to large audiences about the pain and frustration in my community. At the time, I did not grasp Farrakhan's anti-Semitism. It was difficult for me to see that the struggle for equality for African Americans could be subverted into hatred of others, specifically anti-Semitism. I focused on Farrakhan speaking to concerns of Black men. When I became aware that he made hateful statements about other groups, including the Jewish community with whom I was so close, I knew that I must reject his teachings. And I rejected them completely. I have long since denounced such bigotry and have continued — and always will continue — to reject anti-Semitism in all its forms and manifestations.

In that spirit, in 2009, after a spate of anti-Semitic hate crimes, I condemned these horrific acts and voted for H.R. 1913—a bill that expanded federal authority in the prosecution of hate crimes. The Conservative Jewish movement was one of the influential faith voices supporting the bill.

I thank you for acknowledging in your letter my record on fighting for social justice and equality. I take great pride in the relationships and partnerships I have built with the Jewish community, especially with some of my closest friends in Minnesota.

As friends, we have always had an open, honest, and productive conversation about many topics, including Israel.

Together we have fought against BDS and continuous attempts to delegitimize Israel in Minnesota, in the United States, and around the world. I have said time and time again that BDS does not help anyone advance the goal of a two-state solution. Let us be clear: the two-state solution is the only solution that leads to peace and security for Israel and the Palestinians. I proudly affirm that in this letter to you and anywhere I am invited to offer my thoughts.

I believe that we can never lose sight of the humanitarian costs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—be that a fallen IDF soldier or child starving in Gaza. My advocacy for the release of kidnapped IDF soldier Gilad Shalit and for the return of the remains of other fallen soldiers has been praised by the Shalit family and the Israeli government.

We must work toward a resolution to the conflict, and until then, we must advocate for a decrease in tension and an increase in the standard of living for all those affected by the conflict.

It is from that perspective that I cast my vote during the summer of 2014. In my mind, confident that the Iron Dome funding that I have always strongly supported would pass, I cast a vote reflecting my commitment to restoring calm and quiet at a moment of violence.

My voice was not being heard and I felt in the moment that casting my vote was a vital way to amplify my message. It was the wrong way to speak out and it was the wrong way to vote. I regret it deeply.

Make no mistake: I support Iron Dome and Israel's right to defend itself. I have voted for \$27 billion in bilateral aid and assistance to Israel including the most recent Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the United States and Israel, which is being heralded as the largest aid package in the history of

the United States. I have always had and will continue to have a total commitment to Israel's security and ensuring that Israel can live peacefully in the Middle East.

My belief in a secure and democratic Jewish state can be seen in my full-throated support of the final Democratic Platform. After the final Platform was determined by a fair vote, I worked tirelessly behind the scenes to encourage committee members to support it. It really is a remarkable document—the most progressive Platform in the history of the Democratic Party with strong language supporting Israel's right to security and prosperity. It reads:

*"A strong and secure Israel is vital to the United States because we share overarching strategic interests and the common values of democracy, equality, tolerance, and pluralism. That is why we will always support Israel's right to defend itself, including by retaining its qualitative military edge, and oppose any effort to delegitimize Israel, including at the United Nations or through the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement.*

*We will continue to work toward a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict negotiated directly by the parties that guarantees Israel's future as a secure and democratic Jewish state with recognized borders and provides the Palestinians with independence, sovereignty, and dignity. While Jerusalem is a matter for final status negotiations, it should remain the capital of Israel, an undivided city accessible to people of all faiths. Israelis deserve security, recognition, and a normal life free from terror and incitement. Palestinians should be free to govern themselves in their own viable state, in peace and dignity."*

While in 2012 there was divisiveness in the Platform when it came to Israel, I worked hard to ensure that in 2016 there would be unity.

I believe that a two-state solution is also in America's national security interest, and I believe that American Jews should be vocal in their advocacy for it and all other issues of concern. I believe all people should have their voices heard in our democracy, and I will continue to advocate for citizens further involvement with their elected officials. The Jewish community champions these robust engagements and has much to teach the rest of America. When I spoke to my Muslim brothers and sisters years ago, I was encouraging them to learn from you and to make their voices heard. We are a more vibrant democracy when more people participate more actively.

Jews have faced thousands of years of discrimination, demonization, and persecution. I join you in the struggle to end this destructive behavior. We cannot let the forces of hatred paralyze our efforts to pursue peace and justice.

We have a long list of vital efforts that the Rabbinical Assembly and the coalition of decency on Capitol Hill have worked in partnership. The RA has stood for civil rights, environmental stewardship, for refugees and immigrants, and for a secure Israel. I commit to you that together we will secure Israel's well-being and preserve the achievements that give us so much pride.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith Ellison". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.