

A LETTER FROM LOCAL SYNAGOGUE RABBIS TO UNC LEADERSHIP

Dear Judea Reform Congregants,

This afternoon my colleagues (Rabbis Greyber and Feldman) and I sent the following letter to the leadership of the University of North Carolina, expressing our deep concern regarding the course, "The Conflict over Israel/Palestine," specifically regarding the alarming biases of its instructor. We are, as you know, a community wholeheartedly in support of an educational approach that fosters many viewpoints, critical thinking, and, indeed, healthy and honest argumentation, particularly on matters as complicated as the conflict between Israel and Palestine. While I do not expect our words here to reflect the sentiment of each and every one of our JRC members, I do hope that we can each play a role in ushering in peace and understanding wherever we discover harmful biases, within and beyond our community.

There is no question that beneath the outrage surrounding this course there are layers of pain and trauma. My hope is that the response of the UNC leadership will reflect a more dignified approach to the complexity of this conflict and exemplify a greater degree of sensitivity to the pain and suffering of both the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. Entering Shabbat, I am holding in my heart the students on campus who are most intimately hurt by this controversial matter, as well as all of those in the UNC community (faculty, administration, staff), so many of whom turn to their houses of worship on matters of such personal sensitivity.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Matthew Soffer

August 13, 2021

Dear Leadership of University of North Carolina,

As rabbis of the three major synagogues in the Durham-Chapel Hill area with nearly 1,500 Jewish families including many students, faculty, staff and alumni of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, we are writing to express deep concern about the course, "The Conflict over Israel/Palestine." This course is scheduled to be taught by Ph.D. student Kylie Broderick whose comments on social media repeatedly question Israel's right to exist and demonstrate a dogmatic rejection of other perspectives.

The Israel/Palestine conflict is among the most contentious and complex conflicts in world history, and the importance of informed education of the narratives of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples is critical, especially within institutions of higher education. Portraying Israel only as an oppressor and Palestinians only as victims – as Broderick routinely does on her social media feed - leads neither to constructive dialogue nor to the advancement of rigorous intellectual

understanding. Instead, it functions to demonize Israel and its supporters. Most recently, during the May conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, anti-Israel sentiment spilled into anti-Jewish violence in the U.S. and around the world, leaving many Jews feeling vulnerable and intimidated to express support for Israel. Violent attacks on Jews took place in cities such as Los Angeles and New York, and anti-Jewish hate surged, including acts of harassment, vandalism, and violence.

We are not asking that UNC students be shielded from views with which they disagree. We want students to be exposed to a wide range of scholarly opinions and perspectives. We are concerned, however, that students in Broderick's class who do not agree with this instructor's views will be unable to express their legitimate views and perspectives in the classroom without fear of intimidation or unfair evaluation.

We ask that UNC take steps to ensure the course - this semester and in the future - meets UNC's rigorous academic standards, that the classroom environment is free of fear and intimidation, and that students are evaluated on the quality of their work without penalty for disagreement with the instructor. We also encourage UNC leadership to publicly reaffirm support for the "Countering Hate Initiative" which was designed after the Gaza Conference two years ago to assure the safety and freedom of speech for all students at UNC, especially those who seek to learn about Israel, Islam, and Judaism. We look forward to a timely response to addressing these concerns.

B'virkat Shalom,

Rabbi Jen Feldman, Kehillah Synagogue
Rabbi Daniel Greyber, Beth El Synagogue
Rabbi Matthew Soffer, Judea Reform Congregation