

## **A Note From Rabbi Laurie**

### **December 13, 2023**

Dear Friends:

Last month a friend of a friend invited me to talk to a high school in Vermont about the Israel-Hamas war. It forced me to think carefully about how to broach the subject during such an impossibly polarized time. I asked my students to climb into the minds of different people engaged in or affected by the war. I gave them three reasons for doing this:

1. It will make us better thinkers – Our own arguments will be stronger if we consider multiple viewpoints and can respond to a wide range of concerns. Listening carefully to the experiences of others can give us a more complete understanding of current and historical events. It forces us to sort through conflicting ideas and refuse to take intellectual shortcuts.
2. It will make us better activists – Perspective-taking makes us aware of how our words are perceived by others. Before picking up a protest sign, it's worth thinking not just about our intentions and beliefs, but also about the impact of our words. How will others perceive what we're doing? Is our messaging consistent with our values?
3. It will make us better human beings – People on all sides are terrified and experiencing trauma. We can feel compassion, even empathy, for others even if we disagree with their beliefs and actions. The only way to really do this is by listening with an open heart—even if it makes us uncomfortable.

Perspective-taking does not mean we need to agree with others or find middle ground. It also does not mean listening so that we can score a point. Climbing into the mind of someone else requires curiosity: being truly interested in why someone holds positions so different from our own.

It also requires active engagement with another person's ideas. How have their experiences shaped their ideas? Which arguments do they find most compelling? Why did they draw one conclusion but not another?

The war is tearing apart our relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. I cannot count how many conversations I have had with people who are baffled, discouraged, and sometimes furious that the people they trusted to act in one way have acted quite differently than they would have thought. I myself have experienced this numerous

times, and it is really painful. If we have any hope of preserving or mending our relationships, we need to find a little empathy.

Yesterday I met a Palestinian woman who is a graduate student at the university. She felt badly that so few professors and classmates had reached out to her. "Only one person—a Jewish professor, actually—came up to me and asked me how I was doing," she told me. The kindness that this professor showed her matters. In the midst of polarization, grief, and terrifying violence, authentic relationships make a difference.

My insistence on curiosity and empathy is not a call for neutrality. Rather, it is the foundation for taking principled positions. I believe deeply that only a political solution based on dignity, democracy, and equality will bring peace and safety for all people in the region. Two peoples share one land, and the continued flattening of Gaza will not change that. That is why **I gave remarks** at the Madison Common Council last week in support of a ceasefire in Gaza. I was also pleased to have the opportunity to work with Israeli, American Jewish, and Palestinian scholars on a statement called "**Biden, stop the assault on Gaza.**"

As Chanukah begins to draw to a close, I send warm greetings to our members and extended community.

Chanukah sameach, Rabbi Laurie