

A Visit from Rep. Mark Pocan

By Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman

I was slogging through email a couple days ago when the office phone rang. Sean called over to me that Mark Pocan was here for a visit. My first thought was that my office is such a mess. My second thought was that I had no idea he was coming; how will I cram everything I want to say into the three minutes he'll have for me?

We talked for half an hour. Rep. Pocan listened as if he had nothing else on his schedule. He explained that he was visiting Madison's synagogues and mosques to check in and ask what our members are feeling as rates of antisemitism and Islamophobia surge. I told him about my friend whose niece had been taken hostage. I described the grief our members are holding, some of whom have family and friends in Israel. He asked what our members think about the war. I told him that we hold diverse opinions. So many of us are floating from horror to confusion to protest. We are wading through fear, even as we find the courage to voice our opinions.

Rep. Pocan shared why he is calling for a cessation of hostilities towards civilians and the need for humanitarian aid in Gaza. He condemned Hamas' brutal and heinous attack on Israel, which killed 1,400 people. He also reminded me that Israel has already killed 8,000 Palestinians in Gaza, including 3,000 children. He described Israel's actions as a form of collective punishment on the people of Gaza, one that will not make Israel any safer. We talked about when he spoke at Shaarei Shamayim's fundraiser for water filtration systems in Gaza five years ago. Even at the time he had been appalled by Israel's blockade of Gaza, pointing out that the Gazan population had almost no clean water to drink. Just recently before the October 7 attack, the Israeli government had finally granted him permission to enter Gaza to see for himself. Clearly, that visit would be postponed.

Recently I had an exchange with a rabbi who was angry that I support a ceasefire. Why aren't I fighting for the Jewish people? I could have argued, as did Rep. Pocan, that Israel's actions will not make Israel or Jews any safer. But I insisted on the moral argument, that Palestinian life is just as precious as Jewish life. All people deserve to live in safety and with freedom and equality. One reason for international law is to prevent parties, even in times of despair and rage, from taking revenge on civilian populations. While I have far more conversations with Jews than with Palestinians, and I am far more familiar with Israeli culture than Palestinian culture, I try to immerse myself in Palestinian stories alongside Israeli stories. Today I listened to an opinion piece by [Hala Alyan](#). A few days ago I read an interview with [Etgar Keret](#). I have been looking at the

beautiful art of the Israeli artist, Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi, along with the Palestinian artist, Silman Mansour. One need not agree with everything to feel empathy.

Our discourse has become impossibly polarized. Some parts of the left have abandoned international law themselves, refusing to distinguish between a soldier and a civilian. We have a responsibility to rise above this toxic language and to talk without slogans or soundbites. I am pleased that Shaarei Shamayim will hold a dialogue on Saturday, November 11 as part of our Shabbat mini-retreat. This is an opportunity to listen to others in the congregation and to express our thoughts and feelings. While we are not advertising this widely, we welcome others from the Jewish community outside the congregation.

Looking forward to seeing the community this Saturday for a community havdalah and at the November 11 dialogue.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Laurie