

Proposal to Form a Committee for Palestinian Justice

As many of you know, the Havurah Shalom Steering Committee recently considered a proposal to form a Committee for Palestinian Justice. Supported by a dedicated group of members, the proposal focused on organizing advocacy work on this issue within and beyond the Havurah community. After a lengthy process of consultation and review, the Steering Committee recently voted against approving the proposal.

We know that this process has been difficult for many at Havurah. Under such circumstances, it is especially important to make our community aware of the context, processes, and considerations that informed the deliberations of the Steering Committee and its present decision.

The plight of Palestinians has been the focus of increased attention within Havurah. This attention builds on the work of our Israel/Palestine Committee, whose educational work within the Limud cluster has foregrounded a Jewish sense of responsibility towards both Israelis and Palestinians while recognizing a diversity of affinities and political perspectives within our community. Earlier this year, a group of Havurah members explored creating the proposed Committee for Palestinian Justice (within the Tikkun Olam cluster) to advocate more actively on behalf of Palestinians living under Israeli rule.

The proposed formation of this committee with its draft charter became impossible to disentangle from the attacks in Israel on October 7 and the ensuing military assault in Gaza. On the one hand, our capacity to mourn collectively over the devastating loss of life in Israel and Gaza is an extension of our refusal to value some lives more than others, to hold dear the Jewish principle that all lives are created in the divine image. On the other hand, the ongoing tragedy has evoked a range of responses within our community about the most principled and effective ways to bring our Jewish values to bear in working for peace and justice, advocating for Palestinians, and honoring attachments to Israel that permeate our community. Needless to say, as a Jewish community we are not alone in navigating this fraught terrain. What makes Havurah distinctive, before and after October 7, has been our position that deep connection with Israel, repudiation of Israeli policies and actions, and a commitment to justice for Palestinians can all be voiced within a single synagogue community.

The proposal to form a Committee for Palestinian Justice (CPJ) reflected a perspective that highlights advocacy for Palestinian justice. This past summer, the Steering Committee began to consider the emerging effort and engage in a process of community consultation. The CPJ project was announced in Hakol and publicized in the Tikkun Olam displays during the High Holidays. We encouraged and received input from staff and representatives of standing committees, including the Gesher, Transparency and Inclusivity, and Israel/Palestine committees. We also heard from many individual members who shared their concerns about and support for the formation of the proposed committee. A final draft of a proposed committee charter was submitted to the Steering Committee at the December 2023 meeting, after which we continued to receive feedback from committees and dozens of individual members. Heeding the preponderance of recommendations received from committees and members, the Steering

Committee voted at the January 2024 meeting not to approve the committee charter, with nine votes against and two abstentions.

Honoring our participatory and inclusive values, the Steering Committee recognized the concerted efforts of dedicated members as we processed their request to form this committee. Given our congregational emphasis on social justice, we acknowledged a possible place for the proposed committee within the Tikkun Olam cluster. For these reasons, we gave extended consideration to the CPJ proposal.

At the same time, the Steering Committee struggled with a variety of substantive and procedural questions that emerged through deep consideration of the proposal and the wide range of feedback received: To what extent would external forms of advocacy proposed by the committee be mistakenly understood to represent the views of the Havurah community as a whole? Given the diversity of impassioned convictions around Israel and Palestine in our community, how would this committee help or hinder our efforts to dialogue across difference or seek common ground? How do we deal with calls for collective political advocacy on issues that spark disagreement around aims, rhetoric, or strategies?

Our program staff and Steering Committee agreed that these questions raised enough concern to indicate that a committee focused on political advocacy, in the terms articulated in the proposed charter, does not presently have wide enough support within Havurah. Another outcome of deliberations has been a recommitment to examine these questions both with respect to our engagement with this specific issue and, more broadly, to governance structures, policies and practices within Havurah. Building on our recent *Panim al Panim* gatherings, we will continue to provide opportunities for community listening and dialogue. Working with the CPJ proposal advocates, we will continue to explore how best to support those within Havurah who share their vision. Caring for our entire community, we will seek ways to support and reconcile those who have been hurt by this process. Examining the place of external advocacy, sponsorship and public statements by Havurah committees, we will work to clarify policies and promote processes that empower members while considering our diverse community.

In turn, we are grateful for the trust you have placed in our Steering Committee and staff as we strive to support our community and the diverse perspectives within it. As always, we welcome your feedback. Please contact us at oren@havurahshalom.org with any questions you have about this process and any input into how we can continue to create, in the words of our mission statement, “a vibrant, diverse, participatory Jewish community steeped in spirituality, learning, and acts of social responsibility.”

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