

NINA MOINI: Israel has opened a new front with Iran, but the war in Gaza is still raging on. The latest there-- the Israeli military said it recovered the remains of three hostages over the weekend. Overall, more than half the hostages have been returned in ceasefire agreements or other deals. Eight have been rescued alive. And Israeli forces have recovered dozens of bodies.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 55,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. Here in the US, tensions surrounding the Israel-Hamas war have often centered at universities, with continuous protests on campuses. In response, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas have created a new role. Rabbi Jill Avrin will be the organization's first director of Campus Affairs. Rabbi Avrin started the job this month and joins me on the line now. Rabbi, thank you so much for your time this afternoon.

JILL AVRIN: Yeah, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate you inviting me to be on the show. I just want to start by acknowledging that right now, the Jewish community finds itself in this really heightened emotional state, as we're in day 626 of this war and just following these preemptive strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities.

I just want to name that we are in this heightened emotional state, feeling both hopeful for a brighter future, for peace, gratitude for those who have put themselves in harm's way, fear for family and friends, and just uncertainty about where this will go. So I just wanted to start by naming that emotion as I enter this conversation with you.

NINA MOINI: Thank you.

JILL AVRIN: So yeah. So my interest in this position has grown over the last few months. I've had the really amazing opportunity to serve on the Board of Minnesota Hillel the last three years, which is a Jewish student group on campus. And as part of that experience, I've gotten to see both the vibrancy of Jewish life on campus, and I've also gotten to see the challenges that students have faced these last few years.

And I happened to have the opportunity to be with the students on October 7 of 2024, this last year, to help lead a memorial service honoring the one-year anniversary. And unfortunately, at that service, there were protesters who came on site at Hillel, protesting that we were gathering together to remember the victims of those who have been lost. And it was a prayer service.

And being in that space of seeing Jewish students having a prayer service disrupted and not being able to gather together and really feeling fear and being scared in their own sacred space really inspired me to do more and to be more involved. And so when this opportunity arose, I decided that this might be a great way for me to give back in an even deeper way to Jewish students and to help them to have a really positive and vibrant life on campus, where they don't need to fear that they have to hide their Jewish identity. And so that experience really played a very significant role in inspiring me to take on this position.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, Rabbi. If you would just share more about what you were hearing from Jewish students. I have in my notes here that you said people feel like they're losing relationships, which is quite sad. What are you doing to address those interpersonal or social things that are sometimes not as tangible?

JILL AVRIN: Yeah, exactly. I think so many people go straight to thinking about anti-Semitism through the lens of physical violence or something really extreme. And one of the things that we have learned is that what's actually happening on campuses are that students are feeling socially ostracized, that they can't fully show up in social spaces who they are, that they're feeling more of a need to hide their Jewish identity, and feeling nervous that if they were to admit that they are Zionists, that they would lose friends, that they wouldn't be accepted in their peer groups or that they may even be penalized in a classroom setting.

And so we're seeing a lot of those types of feelings where it might not be the type of stories that you see in the news. But day to day, the experience of students are feeling like they're having a difficult time expressing the fullness of who they are, out of fear that other students won't accept them.

NINA MOINI: So right now is-- obviously, it's summer break, so not as crowded on campus. How are you researching, perhaps, or talking to folks or gearing up for when everybody does come back to campus in the fall and hopefully really hit the ground running?

JILL AVRIN: Yeah. I feel very grateful to have started this position over the summer, to have a little bit of that time to do the research and to have the conversations with all the folks who have been doing this work for years. And so that includes, of course, the student groups, the faculty, the Jewish faculty, and the administration. And we're just so grateful that President Cunningham has extended an open door to Jewish students and is taking all of the right steps to ensure that the campus climate is improved for not only Jewish students but all students on campus.

And so I've been spending my time setting up meetings with those in the administration, faculty, and student groups. And I also just want to add that this role is not specifically focused to the University of Minnesota. So I've also been working to build those connections and do that research around what's been going on at all of the colleges and universities across the state of Minnesota and the Dakotas as well.

NINA MOINI: Good reminder. Yes, thank you. But the University of Minnesota is currently under investigation by the Department of Justice for anti-Semitism. Will you have any role in working with federal officials? Or if you don't work with them, how do you engage with the university officials?

JILL AVRIN: Yeah. So to date, the JCRC has not yet had any involvement in any of the investigations. Of course, if we were requested, we would have, of course, participate. And yeah, our goal is to support the university, to support Jewish students, faculty, and ensure that the campus climate is appropriate for all students. And so to the extent to which we would be asked, we would, of course, cooperate and be involved. But that has not happened yet.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And obviously, like with any group or with any issue, there's a wide spectrum of perspectives on the war, of course among Jewish people. How will you work with students with differing viewpoints within the community?

JILL AVRIN: Yeah. It is such an important point to make. People often say, two Jews, three opinions. And so we recognize that there's a wide range of diversity within the Jewish community and, of course, the student body as a whole. And our hope is to increase dialogue and to hear those multiple perspectives and to engage in good-faith dialogue with those who share multiple perspectives.

And in many ways, that work has already been happening. And I know that that is one of the goals, particularly at the University of Minnesota, to engage in work that increases dialogue and that lifts up rigor and academic rigor. That's what should happen at a university.

NINA MOINI: And you've actually-- to your point about of building bridges, you've been featured on MPR News before for your workshops with Palestinian activists. How does the work that you've done translate into this moment and into this role? Why is it important to be focused on, yes, prevention and protection but also building bridges and expanding networks?

JILL AVRIN: It's so critical. I really believe in dialogue and that in order for us to have a climate that is safe for all people, whether it be the world as a whole but specifically on campus in this position, we need to bring people together. We need to be able to see each other's humanity. And we need to be able to-- we need to see each other as people and to listen and to be in dialogue.

And so I'm really hoping that some of the work that I've done in the past, to lift up dialogue, I can also bring that type of work to the university setting and to support those who are interested in seeing each other as human and bringing forward intellectual debate in safe settings.

NINA MOINI: Thank you, Rabbi. Is there anything else that you just want to leave folks with or any words that you maybe want to share?

JILL AVRIN: Yeah. I just want to make sure that folks know that this work that we're doing requires partnerships across the community and that one of my hopes is that I can bring together all of the different constituencies who have been doing this work. The many Jewish families across the state who have deep connections not only at the University of Minnesota but others as well. And I just want folks to know that we have an open door and that we're really encouraged by the direction that things are going.

And we know we have a lot of work to do. There are a lot of challenges. But we really believe that through dialogue and through partnership, we'll be able to make a safer and healthier and more vibrant campus for all students. And so I look forward to all efforts to do that.

NINA MOINI: Rabbi Jill Avrin, the new Director of Campus Affairs with the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas.