

Bridging Understanding | Leah's story

In the *Bridging Understanding* series, McMaster students who have experienced global crisis, war or conflict share their experiences in their own words. For more on the series, please visit the [McMaster news website](#).

Warning: The topics covered by the interview subjects include grief, loss, trauma, sexual assault, aggression and sexual and gender-based violence. The content of the interviews may be triggering for some. All interview subjects reviewed and approved the material prior to publishing. Views expressed are strictly those of individual participants and are not endorsed by McMaster University. For support, please see the university's [resources page](#).

Interviewer: Tell us about your connection to Israel.

Leah: I was born in Israel. I grew up there. My family is still there, both my grandparents and most of my aunts and uncles and cousins are still there.

Specifically in this conflict: From a family side, I have a cousin that's older than me. And so, I remember when it started.

Obviously, whenever there is some tension that starts in Israel, there are sirens. It's called a code red. That lets everybody know to go into a bomb shelter when there are rockets going back and forth.

So usually when that starts up, we get a little text in the group chat, just making sure everybody's in a safe area, like making sure everyone is OK. So I remember getting that text out at my friend's birthday party. Always kind of dampens the mood. I was like, it's OK, I just, obviously I follow my cousins on Instagram, and I just saw he was at a party, so I was like, OK, he's gonna be fine.

And I remember waking up the next morning and actually opening the news and seeing what happened. And it was right at the beginning of Reading Week, it was a Saturday. So I drove home. I got home and the news is on, the

whole family is sitting glued to the TV, and obviously they're talking about the Nova Festival, the Supernova Music Festival.

And I remember, I looked at my parents. And I looked at them and I go, "He's there."

"He" being my cousin. And I showed my mom the photo that he posted on his story. And she goes, "No." She's like, "He's partying in India or in South America." She's like, "He's not in the country."

And I was like, "No, he's there."

She's like, "If he was there, they would have told us, somebody would have told us."

And I remember waking up the next morning, 24 hours later. And my mom looks at me and she goes, "He was there. He's in the hospital. He's OK." Three sentences. So that was the easy one: OK, he's OK.

And I thought that was behind me, and as usual, it's going to get resolved within a couple of days. It's a hard couple of days, but it will be OK.

And another 24 hours go by. And I wake up and it's the next morning, the morning of the 9th. I wake up, I didn't even put my glasses on and I open Instagram. I randomly see a couple of my friends from back home, like, as the first couple of stories and I opened it. And it was the first 20 names of soldiers that fell in rescuing ... So when it first started, there was a couple of towns that terrorists went into. And it took the army obviously a couple hours to get there and it was just specialized units.

So on the morning of the 9th, they released the first 20 names. And all I open is just this big photo. And it was ... I can't say the name ... this kid I went to school with, was in my class for six years. But the town I grew up in there are a couple of hundred families of us so there were 100 of us in my grade. Everybody kind of knew each other, everyone grew up together.

And I remember I walked into my mom's room. Still no glasses, couldn't find my glasses. And I'm blind. I walked into my mom's room and she was on the phone. She hangs up the phone. She just looks at me. I just, I blurb out, I remember blurbing out a name, his name. And I just started bawling.

And that's. That was the beginning.

Since then? There's one more kid that was in our class, that has also passed. They're now buried next to each other. Unfortunately, I have not had the pleasure of going to see it. But at least now they're next to each other.

That's ... a little bit of my ties to this.

My cousin's best friend passed away three months ago yesterday. Also because of all this.

It's ... a tough thing to wake up one day and realize that you can say the sentence "However many people I know have been murdered in the past year." For me it was four.

It gets easier to say it. You get used to saying it. You say it, and then you think about what you just said. And how old you are. And you understand that people triple your age will still never be able to say something like that.

I remember, growing up, especially in Israel, there's this thing where everybody knew somebody. The whole nature of like growing up in a country that's obviously involved in conflict a lot of the time — everybody goes to the army. By the time you're at a certain age, if you live there your whole life, every single person knew somebody who had passed because of one conflict or another.

And I remember when I moved here, I realized that here there's a certain dissonance. There's like a middleman. So here people knew somebody — or people know somebody that knew somebody. There's like a middleman there. And I remember after everything, a week later, I was on the phone with my aunt. And she was just like "Now you're one of us." Because she had a friend who passed while she was serving.

So it was a weird realization. Even talking to people here, even like my friends, people that understood the situation. Where they're like, the people that try to comfort — it's like "Oh, my cousin's friend was at the party." Or it's "my ... third cousin" or something. So it was kind of, the understanding that I no longer have a middleman or I have become someone else's middleman.

How did you find your way to where you are now at McMaster?

My dad's uncle lived in Canada.

And obviously the situation in Israel is not something that's necessarily new, like it started in the past year. Whether it's conflicts with surrounding countries or disagreements within the people that live there and the government, there's a lot of politics in life all the time there.

My parents kind of saw it as an opportunity, for lack of better terms, to get us out.

The idea was so we wouldn't have to deal with a situation like this. Or at least in a situation like this that we are removed from it. At least as much as they could.

So, we made the move. And kind of started fresh here. And it's — not erasing past life, but it's kind of starting a new one.

Which is ... it works. See, I'm the oldest child. You see the difference in the reaction to the things that have happened. Not to say that my siblings don't feel the empathy, because they do, and that they don't feel the pain that comes with all of it, because they do.

It's like a different level. Seeing my sibling, who doesn't still have friends there or anything. So it's just knowing that they will never be that middleman.

It's a comforting thought. One of the first things my mom told me before we found out about everything was "Thank God that we're not there." And after, it was "Sorry I didn't get you out soon enough." Like, "Sorry I was too late." And I don't think she was, but that's how I ended up here.

Is there something you wish that your fellow students knew about you or your experiences?

It's... that's a tough one. Obviously, I wish I could speak about things like this a little more freely. In a sense, I've learned very quickly when I left the house that it's not something that I can necessarily talk about openly.

I'm proud of who I am, I'm proud of where I come from. Proud of my history and my heritage. Very quickly after ... even when I moved here, I grew up... my parents live in a pretty Jewish area so we never really saw any of it, but kind of

coming out of that bubble, I learned very quickly that there are certain times and situations where there's a difference between being proud and learning to... it's not hide, but not necessarily tell everybody everything.

I don't think people mean it in an Antisemitic or in a racist way, but there is almost always the two possible reactions you get from people when you tell them that you're Jewish or you're from Israel.

There's the nice positive one where people start naming you all the Jews that they know. It's quite funny. They start asking you if you know people and I think the funniest part is most of the time you do. We call it Jewish geography. Somehow somebody is always connected. And that's the part that I knew, coming from a Jewish area.

And coming to an area where obviously you're a lot more of a minority, I realized that there's also a second option. And that's when people don't necessarily agree with everything, and I could say that dealing with Antisemitic comments or saying when I say I'm Jewish or when I say I'm from Israel, that's... things I've had to deal with.

So. Unfortunately, I don't know if I would say that that's something that I wish everybody knew all the time. I'm still... still proud of it. But maybe I wish that sometimes people understood that their reaction sometimes has a little more of an effect than we think.

I wish that sometimes people understood that me coming from a certain country doesn't necessarily mean that I agree with everything that goes on there. Obviously, in conflicts like this, I don't think that winners exist. I don't think there's a side that is inherently right in everything they do. I don't think that a political leader speaks for an entire nation, that's something that everybody can agree with. But that's the way of the world. So. If anything, then that's that.

I wish that people understood that the fact that I come from a country and I hold a certain viewpoint on that country's right to exist does not mean that I necessarily inherently agree with everything that goes on in politics and behind scenes.

I don't think... like in every conflict, if you ask civilians, most of them would do everything completely different if they were in power, but unfortunately, we

are not the ones in power. So. I wish people knew that so that I would be able to say that I wish everyone knew where I came from.

Is there any support that you've found helpful or that you wish you had in your time here at McMaster?

Umm. I will speak from my personal experience because I'm sure everybody... everybody has had different experiences. I know for myself, my first reaction to everything. So coming back from reading week, I remember — you know, it doesn't do much but posting on social media when my friend passed. And I remember... crickets. From every classmate. From group mates. I did not hear anything from anybody for a whole week. At least not... at least not a lot of people I met here.

Obviously, coming from a pretty Jewish area, I saw everybody else I went to high school with posting and people from there reached out because obviously they knew my friends were serving, my friends were there. So, my friends were at Nova, my cousins, but ... unfortunately, from McMaster, I had two people reach out. And one of them is my neighbour back home. So strictly from McMaster it was only one.

And I remember walking into class. And it was like, everybody knew. And nobody knew what to say. It's actually a lie: I had one more person that did reach out. The photo I ended up posting had my friend in military uniform because that was the official photo they used. And without reading what I said at the top, or without reading what the post said, I had a classmate send me an entire paragraph about the type of person I would have to be to support something like that.

And I remember I came back to class and the only thing I could think about is "How quickly can I go back home? How long do I have to stay here? Because nobody gets it." And that was my biggest thing for a couple of months, I would say, is nobody gets it. There's no point in trying to explain it to people. Because they don't understand and they could never understand.

I isolated myself until I realized that that can be true that they don't understand, they would never understand. But that doesn't mean that they

don't want to. Or even if they can't understand, it doesn't mean that they won't still be there to try and help.

I didn't really go to any groups. I was scared that because of my story, that's who I would be. I think it is a big part of me. It's a big part of who I ended up becoming in the past year.

But I don't, I don't think that's all of who I am and that's why I was scared to go to big groups and things like that. I found my peace in... I went home a lot. I visited friends from high school in different schools. I struggled a lot specifically here. Because obviously at McMaster, the Jewish population is not a very big one, at least compared to a lot of other schools.

And I remember [my] grandparents calling me in panic like "Don't wear your necklace and don't wear anything that's ... and don't speak Hebrew on campus" and their inherent fear for a really long time was kind of instilled in me like I can't wear anything that makes people even question. Because luckily, I can pass off as pretty Canadian.

But just having to go on campus and knowing that there was a rally like at least once a week and it's... I very much had an understanding that it's not against me and it's not against my friends. But at the time it felt that way. It's for the most, for most people that go and support that, I understand that what they support has nothing to do with being against me inherently and who I was.

It is just the ... sometimes it's hard to see. When it's hard to separate the two where being for one doesn't mean being against the other. And I knew that was the case because I knew that for me being for the right of Israel to be a country does not mean that I am against the Palestinian people, and I very much believe that everybody in the region should be able to live in peace and that nobody should be living and fearing for their lives. That's just not a way humans should be living.

But it's really easy to know that YOU can make the distinction. Obviously, you're not in other people's brains and you want to hope that they can make the distinction. But when you're just so down on yourself you don't really have... when things like that happen, you don't... you lose your faith in a lot of people.

I remember, whenever I would go on campus, I had a friend who lived pretty close to me, so I always walked to campus with them or walk back, and I remember, pretty quickly, my friends understood that I didn't like being left alone and they, the ones of them that got it that did a really really great job at — without me even noticing — kind of having shifts with me on campus. Like, if I was on campus. It wasn't even like a "OK. I have to go. I'll see you later." It was like, "Hey, I'm going to this place. Come, come join me." And it wasn't even like ... it was nice because I never had to say that I don't want to be alone. I never had to ask them to take me with. They pretty quickly caught on.

But that to me ... it was the small things like that that kept me comforted, is knowing that the people that really knew me, the people that really did care, did everything in their power to know that I was not left there alone. And that... that was the biggest thing that helped me. Kept me from going insane in my room. Yeah.

What's something you would say to other students who might be going through something similar?

I know that for me, at least for the first good chunk of the first couple of months, I just felt alone. I convinced myself that nobody knows what's going on and that they would never be able to relate and because they can't relate to convince myself that nobody can help. And because nobody can help, I convinced myself that the only person that can get me out of it was me.

And I think in some sense it's true. The only person that can get yourself out of a situation like that is yourself. But you also have to be open and to understand that people won't understand, and that's OK. And it's trying to see the good in that, that people don't understand.

It's a weird thing to say, but it's like, I see myself ... compared to my friends here and everyone's always like, "Oh you've been through so much, so much happened" and it's true, but then I look at my friends in Israel and my experience is nothing compared to what they saw.

And it's true that nobody... I am in a unique situation that nobody understands, but also for each person in here or each of my friends here or each of my

friends there, are also in a unique situation. Things like this don't affect everybody the same. Everybody gets affected a little bit differently. And sitting by yourself and isolating because of that, because you know that nobody knows exactly how you're feeling, it's not... it doesn't help. Not yourself, not anyone.

Days get hard. Some are more than others, and that's OK. You're allowed to have bad days. It's like a constant one step forward and then two million back.

You'll have a good day, and you'll get a lot of your work done. And then the next day, you wake up and you're like, what does that mean, "I got a lot of work done" when certain people aren't here anymore and it took me a lot of getting my work done, or writing an exam and then an hour later, sit in my room and cry because they will never write an exam.

And it's such a weird way to look at it, but it's ... in the ...loss, I got to understand that I, even though they won't get to do things, we are here to carry their legacy. And that helps with the loss.

Surround yourself with people that, even though they don't understand, they know that they don't. And they'll accept that, but they're willing to be there for whatever. I think that's what helped me through it, friends that understand that. Friends that are there to listen when you need to talk. And there to distract when you can't think about it anymore. And they won't do the opposite, you know, they don't distract when you're trying to talk about something and they don't try to talk when you've clearly had enough.

So yeah, the surrounding and having a really understanding surrounding definitely helps, but it all comes from yourself and trying to change the perspective of when you wake up in the morning and you feel like you can't do anything, it's you don't need to, you get to. You don't *need* to wake up in the morning, you *get* to wake up in the morning.

And if all you get to do today is sit in your bed and remember them and think about them, then you're a lucky person because you got to know them. And that's OK, that's not a wasted day. That's still a day well spent.

What do you look to for hope for the future, or for inspiration?

I think the weirdest part of it is ... well, the expectation is to say something like "finish my degree" or "I look up to my mom or my dad or my grandparents."

Kind of a weird one. I changed my perspective to look at them, look at the ones that aren't here anymore. We get to live our lives in memory of them. I think that now every accomplishment I have, obviously I go through with them in the back of my mind, people who won't have the chance to do that, and I think it drives me.

Because you... I... at the beginning I had a lot of guilt, call it survivor's guilt. I questioned why did we get out? Why was I the one to get out? Why am I not still there and deep in the trenches, and why, who decided that I was the one that gets to leave? And everybody tried to tell me I was lucky that I was the one that... I got out. I didn't really see it as luck, don't think it had anything to do with it. I think the best of us go too soon.

But... the lucky thing, I think for me is that I can use my voice. I moved far enough to a place that is disconnected from everything and obviously when you're in there and everybody — our whole grade talks about the two guys, it's very, you know, you're talking to an echo chamber because everybody's kind of saying the same thing. Here, that's not the case. And I get to take a voice out of that echo chamber and put it in a different room. And the big thing I keep telling myself, is I don't want to change anyone's mind.

But if my story helps humanize people a little bit more, then I did my part. I let their legacy live on for one more day. And that's I think the most that I can do. And that's what helps when you don't feel like doing anything else. I Just sometimes think about the people that can't do it, the people whose lives were cut too short to achieve it. And then it kind of lights a fire under you to do it for them.

And my mom, obviously. Because my mom is just the best person in the world.

Is there anything else you'd like to cover?

I think they're just ... everyone's trying to... There's very much a narrative pushed that you are on one side or another. And if you're on one side, you

support some things. If you're on the other side, you support other things, and it has to be that way.

I don't think that's a true way of looking at conflicts. I don't think there's a true way of looking at global politics. I think there is so much more nuance that we conveniently leave out, and obviously we conveniently leave it out because that complicates things, right?

I think it very much confuses people if I say that I am Israeli. And I think that every civilian life lost in the past year or so is one that should not have happened in the first place. And I think that, a lot of the time, throws people for a loop. If I say something, you know, from conventionally on one side of the conflict, and I will talk to somebody else who's on the other — I don't think they're sides, but I think they're both actually kind of the same, two sides of the same coin.

I will go and I will talk to somebody. And I've had people be so confused because, like you walk out of the conversation, like "I agree with every single word you say. But I still would not call myself on that side of the conflict." And I'm like that's OK because politics and everything and media try to tell us that if we believe this, this and this, that makes us on that side, and if we believe this, this and that, that puts us on the other side.

And that's why every time I start a conversation with somebody, my very first sentence is, "Can we agree that every civilian life lost in this conflict should not have happened?" And as long as that... honestly, if somebody tells me "Yes, but" then I will walk away. Because I don't think there is a "but" to "any civilian life lost is a life that should still be here."

But that's the reality of things for a lot of people. So I think if there's one thing to take away from it is that we need to remove that "but." And I think once we talk a lot about the technical and the politics and "Prime Minister said that" and "representatives said that" and "these people said this."

And I think at the end of it, we see that everyone's looking at two sides of the same coin. At the end of the day, people are hurting on both sides. I think it's very important that we just understand that people hurting are just that. It doesn't matter which side they come from; a person is hurting then that's... that's it. When a person's hurting, you can't justify their hurt because of this or

because of that. There's no buts, ifs or because. When a person is hurting and it's somebody that even if you're not friends and even if you don't know them, it affects them. And I don't think there should be an excuse for that.