

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Report to Board of Trustees

May 28, 2019

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) held its penultimate meeting of the 2018-2019 administrative year on May 16. Rabbi Franken was unable to attend, but IDAC chair Norm Loewenthal used the occasion to thank the rabbi in absentia for his great interest and active involvement in fostering thoughtful programming and discussion about Israel this year.

Apropos of the programming that has resulted from the rabbi's involvement, Norm noted the numerous outstanding sessions conducted on May 10 and 11 by Israeli scholar-in-residence Rachel Korazim under the auspices of the Levin-Moscovitz Lecture series. Dr. Korazim's interpretations of the works of notable Israeli poets provided unique and powerful insights into the character and texture of life in Israel, including the impact of the ongoing conflict. Norm also took note of the recent concluding session of the Federation's offering (with co-sponsorship by Judea and other synagogues) of the excellent Shalom Hartman Institute course "Jewish Values and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." The entire course, and especially the panel discussion in the final class, demonstrated that when this difficult topic is placed within the framework of core – and sometimes conflicting! – Jewish values (Peace, The Land, Justice, Self-Preservation, Compromise, and Jewish Exceptionalism) unexpected and useful perspectives, along with constructive dialogue, can result. Norm characterized poetry and values as two promising approaches to enhancing the congregation's understanding of a topic that can otherwise seem elusive and baffling.

Norm reported on another initiative of Rabbi Franken, i.e., his invitation to Rabbi Arik Ascherman, Founder of Torat Tzedek (Torah of Justice), to visit Judea as his guest on May 29, for an invitation-only dinner followed by a talk and reception in the Community Court. Norm stated that this event promises to be a stimulating opportunity for the congregation and an occasion for further helpful dialogue. He also indicated that it had been his judgment to regard this program as falling within the rabbi's freedom of the pulpit. But he acknowledged that the event raised the question of whether rabbinical invitations to speakers on Israel-related topics should be subject to IDAC's approval going forward. Consideration of this matter, he noted, should probably be included when IDAC's role and purview are re-assessed in the coming year.

On the subject of co-sponsorships, Norm reviewed the fact that plans have been finalized to co-sponsor next year's Federation offering of the Shalom Hartman Institute course "Engaging Israel – Foundations for a New Relationship." Based on the success of this year's offering of "Jewish Values," this is viewed as an attractive opportunity and it is hoped that more JRC members participate than was the case this year; the fact that the course will have eight, rather than twelve, sessions should be helpful in that regard.

Norm reported that he had had a productive meeting with Jill Madsen, Executive Director of the Federation, in which he suggested that Judea, through IDAC, would be more inclined to approve co-sponsorship of Israel-related programs if these were offered directly by Federation rather than by other entities. Norm had initiated that conversation following discussion at the last IDAC meeting about the

disinclination of a significant portion of the committee's membership to co-sponsor the Gil Hoffman talk on the Israeli elections because of its sponsorship by Voice4Israel, a group perceived by some on the committee as being excessively combative in its tone and inclined toward personalized rhetoric; it was in light of that perception that IDAC had been unable to achieve a consensus about co-sponsorship. It was emphasized that there had been no suggestion in the previous IDAC meeting or in Norm's meeting with Jill that Federation itself should avoid affiliating with Voice4Israel. Nor had there been any concern on IDAC's part about potential involvement with Gil Hoffman as a presenter or about his topic. Moreover, it was noted, Judea did help to publicize his appearance (though without endorsing it). As a further outcome of the Hoffman matter, Norm reported that he and Ziva Raney had had a number of productive conversations with Mike Ross, head of Voice4Israel, who had indicated concern about the perceptions of V4I and a wish to understand them better. Norm stated that he looked forward to continuing opportunities to meet and to sharpen mutual understandings of how communications in this challenging area might be developed – and perceived – more positively. A key point in these conversations, as brought out in the summary of IDAC's previous meeting, is that the crux of the matter is how V4I is perceived by some and why negative perceptions may exist, not on any characterization of V4I by IDAC itself or by its leadership

Regarding another co-sponsorship opportunity, this time with Federation itself, i.e., the Avi Jorisch program “Thou Shalt Innovate,” (for which the co-sponsorship deadline has been extended) Norm reported that, based on communications with the leadership of the Adult Education Committee, there did not appear to be interest within that committee to give further consideration to co-sponsorship and the companion request for financial support for the event. [However, subsequent to the IDAC meeting, Norm learned that the Adult Education Committee does in fact plan to consider the matter at its June meeting.]

Expanding the picture of Judea's positive response to co-sponsorship opportunities, it was noted that Judea is shown, through its logo, to be a co-sponsor of the upcoming community Israel Festival. However, it was pointed out that co-sponsorship of this event, had not actually been approved by IDAC as would have been expected for any Israel-related matter. Norm indicated that he would look into how this had come about and would report back to the committee but it appears that the use of the logo was simply a continuation of past practice for events of this kind.

Regarding Israel-related matters within the Adult Education Committee other than the Jorisch co-sponsorship opportunity, it was reported that the AEC is providing funds for an honorarium for Rabbi Ascherman's appearance (the financial aspect of that event may be a further argument for IDAC's oversight of rabbinical invitations to Israel-related speakers in the future). Norm also reported that Chip Carnathan, the AEC co-chair with responsibility for Israel-related programming, had indicated that he anticipates that the committee will be more active next year in generating Israel-related programs.

Norm also reported on his participation in a recent meeting of synagogue lay leadership with a group of congregants concerned about a number of matters relating to Israel (and who, because of the Israel aspect, requested that he take part). There were two main strands of the concerns of this group. One had to do with the importance of acknowledging a minority point of view when the Board or congregation as a whole expresses itself on an important public policy matter, including those relating to Israel. A case in point was the letter sent by the Board earlier this year to the Durham Human Relations Commission regarding the Durham police training matter, which, in the view of these congregants, did not sufficiently acknowledge a minority position. IDAC had previously addressed this concern, supporting the point made by the congregants.

The other strand of the meeting was the issue of Jewish individuals being verbally attacked or intimidated, harmed professionally or even labeled as “anti-Semitic” by other Jewish individuals because of their positions in connection with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is viewed as a most disturbing matter, especially when it occurs within the congregation. Norm stated that this should be of great concern to IDAC in its role of supporting civil discourse and the Israel Discourse Policy. He expressed the frustration that while IDAC has been somewhat successful in fostering respectful dialogue in the context of Israeli-related programming, it has not been able to address the matter of these verbal attacks. Norm indicated that at the meeting with the concerned citizens, a number of possible approaches to this sort of “bad behavior” were discussed, including the development of a code of ethics; the fashioning of a strong statement of the responsibilities and expectations of membership; moral suasion; and the holding of the behavior in question up to public scrutiny. In its meeting, IDAC had a useful, if inconclusive, discussion of these strategies, focusing on ways that the congregation as a collective entity might assert its moral force to discourage these behaviors. Congregants who are professionals in various fields, from facilitators to psychologists, might have a role to play, as might, of course, the rabbi. One intriguing suggestion was to create an “ombudsperson” position within the congregation for this and other purposes.

Two other points were made about this topic, one being that the meeting with the concerned congregants had itself been a very constructive event, well planned and organized, and characterized by the kind of respectful tone that should typify all interactions in the congregation. The other is that concerns about feeling personally attacked because of one's views about Israel-Palestine are not limited to any one part of the political spectrum but may pertain to individuals of any political persuasion. It is expected that IDAC will continue to discuss this issue in upcoming meetings.

Norm noted the concern that IDAC and its work do not seem to be well enough known within the congregation. He admitted to being somewhat mystified by this because of his frequent interactions with congregants about IDAC's work and because this work is so well documented on the JRC website in the form of IDAC's monthly reports to the Board. On the other hand, it was noted that in some ways IDAC does well to function somewhat out of the spotlight – deliberating carefully on the matters before it in a way that the Board itself cannot, in meetings that are not open to the public, and respecting the confidentiality of its members (as well as making decisions to the extent possible by consensus).

In any case, in an effort to direct more attention to its efforts, Norm indicated that Ziva Raney plans to include comments about IDAC in her presidential remarks to the congregation at the annual meeting on May 19, drawing on material that he has provided to her [this has since occurred]. Ziva will also note in a subsequent submission in e-notices that IDAC has been extended for 18 months as an ad hoc committee. In addition, Norm is tentatively scheduled to take part in Board meetings both on May 28 and on July 23 (Rabbi Soffer will be with us on the latter date).

Norm noted that, contrary to what IDAC had learned in an earlier discussion, ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America) has not ceased to exist as an independent organization and is still encouraging support through a "check-off" box in synagogue membership applications (JRC has been treating this as an opt-in feature of its application, and the earlier discussion had concerned whether this should continue). Ziva Raney had previously reported that ARZA has become a division of URJ, and she is now seeking clarification from URJ.

There was brief discussion of a presentation on anti-Semitism that had occurred at UNC the day before the IDAC meeting, an event attended by several members of the committee. The topic will certainly

continue to be a matter of great interest in connection with IDAC's work.

IDAC is scheduled to meet next on June 11. It was agreed that the committee would not meet in July because of vacation schedules and the need for Rabbi Soffer to settle in before beginning to take part in meetings of the committee.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair