

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Report to the Board of Trustees

November 21, 2019

Convening on October 29, the Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) opened its meeting with a stirring and thoughtful prayer for Israel and all those who inhabit the land of Zion by Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, then turned to two of this year's most significant opportunities for learning and discussion of Israel-related issues: the Federation/Shalom Hartman course "Engaging Israel," of which JRC is a co-sponsor, and the visit of Rabbi Josh Weinberg of the Union for Reform Judaism (whose URJ title is Vice-President of Israel and Reform Zionism), scheduled for November 19, a visit for which IDAC gave its go-ahead at the August meeting..

"Engaging Israel" had been scheduled to start on Sunday, October 27, with a second class meeting scheduled for Thursday, October 31, and six other sessions to follow. However, the recent shoulder surgery of the course leader, Rabbi Daniel Greyber, delayed the first class meeting until Sunday, November 3. At the time of the meeting, 34 people had enrolled. It is somewhat disappointing that only five of those enrollees were JRC members. The course continued to be publicized through Judea's eNotices and it was hoped that there would be additional enrollments prior to the delayed start of the course. The Brit Lashon Hatov, or Covenant for Communicating in a Holy Community, that has been provided to course participants and that was distributed with the IDAC agenda, demonstrates the potential of this course to foster respectful dialogue on difficult issues.

Rabbi Weinberg's Nov. 19 visit was planned in such a way as to encompass a full day of activity, including a breakfast at 8 a.m. with IDAC members (at a location to be determined), a brown bag "lunch and learn" at noon for all interested persons (also at a location to be determined), a dinner with the JRC Board and, at 7:30 p.m., a learning session for the congregation, probably in the sanctuary. During the course of the day, Rabbi Weinberg plans to address a range of topics, including the history of the Reform Movement's relationship with Israel; the evolving role, organizational status and financial structure of ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America) within the rubric of URJ; the elections in 2020 of delegates to the World Zionist Congress, or WZC, and the opportunity those elections present for North American Jews to influence issues of social justice and Reform Judaism in Israel; and other matters of interest within the Reform movement not necessarily related to Israel.

At the IDAC meeting, discussion focused largely on ARZA and the opt-in item on Judea's membership application to donate to that organization. It was pointed out that the

opt-in could include other worthwhile organizations relating to the Reform movement and its values, perhaps including some not concerned with Israel or Zionism, and that congregants might be given an opportunity to contribute to more than one. Concern was expressed that ideas along these lines, advocated by a group of interested congregants some time ago, had not received a response from synagogue leadership. Hopefully, stimulated by the upcoming ARZA discussion, those ideas will be part of the conversation going forward.

It was also noted that the noontime lunch and learn session with Rabbi Weinberg and the congregational meeting with him in the evening would be particularly significant opportunities for interaction and dialogue on Israel-related matters and that it would be important for these events to be managed thoughtfully. The committee encouraged the organizers of these events to consider how best to accomplish this, including the possible engagement of a trained facilitator.

During the course of the discussion about Rabbi Weinberg's visit, it was learned that URJ also has a position called "Director of Israel Engagement," headed by Rabbi Reuben Greenvald. This is viewed as another useful resource of which our congregation might avail itself in the future.

Turning to other matters, the committee expressed approval, in terms of program substance, for the lecture entitled "Look at Me – Identity Politics in Israel," by the artist Shirel Horovitz, as part of the Federation's Artist in Residence Program, proposed as an offering to be held in the synagogue on February 11. This approval is of course contingent on approval by synagogue leadership and staff for the use of the building.

The committee discussed at length the proposal from Director of Congregational Learning Rena Fraade to air the film "Heading Home," concerning the Israeli national baseball team (an event that would apparently be funded through the Religious School, with the possibility of co-sponsorship with the JCC). It was felt that although such an offering is not inconsistent with the Israel Discourse Policy, it is important to consider in what way such an airing would constitute an educational experience and whether it would occur within a framework for critical thinking and discussion. It was noted that these questions would similarly pertain to all proposed programs based on documentary films, which the committee has increasingly received in connection with co-sponsorship possibilities, and that such film productions often include viewer's guides and other materials that can augment the educational use of the film. In connection with the "Heading Home" proposal, committee chair Norm Loewenthal indicated that he would pursue with Rena the issues raised at our meeting and report back to the committee. [Norm has since been in communication with Rena and as of this writing awaits further information from her].

This proposal brought to the committee's attention the fact that IDAC has so far not concerned itself with the treatment of Israel-related matters within the Religious School curriculum. It was noted that the current strategic plan, now in development after a period of delay during the rabbinical transition, includes an examination of the curriculum and that information on the subject is being gathered. Presumably that information will become available to IDAC at a later date.

With respect to co-sponsorship proposals from the Federation, the committee expressed interest in learning more about how Federation-sponsored programs come about to begin with, in terms of Federation Board guidelines on Israel-related programming, the role of the Israel Center, the availability of budgeted resources, and other considerations. Norm Loewenthal indicated that he had initiated inquiries on these matters, and, in addition, the committee felt that it would be helpful to invite a representative of the Federation to join us at a future meeting. Norm indicated that he would pursue that possibility. [Norm has since been in touch with Jill Madsen, Federation Executive Director, and, responding to his invitation, she will attend the January 9 IDAC meeting.]

Also regarding IDAC's consideration of co-sponsorship opportunities, Norm reviewed the streamlined process that had been established at the previous meeting. The committee had affirmed at that meeting that Israel-related co-sponsorship proposals fall within IDAC's purview for consideration. If given a favorable determination and if funding is requested as part of co-sponsorship, the matter is referred to synagogue leadership to find funds. At the current meeting, it was suggested that a line in the JRC budget should be established for this purpose, since one does not now exist. It should also be noted that during the discussion an alternative to the current approach was suggested, by which co-sponsorship proposals would be directed initially to relevant JRC committees based on the content of the proposal, much as has been done in the past. The crux of the matter appears to be whether IDAC or a JRC committee is more capable of judging the merits of the proposal. Norm shared his view that making such judgments is central to IDAC's role and composition, though consultation with relevant committees should certainly be part of the process if appropriate.

Another dimension of the co-sponsorship discussion was an expression of concern that, while co-sponsoring programs may be of value, it should not be done as an alternative to programming developed within Judea itself and that relatively little of the latter appears to have occurred. Norm pointed out that in fact there has been an abundance of JRC-initiated programming in the past year though this has occurred largely under rabbinical auspices or at the initiative of synagogue leadership. It is the case that recently no programming proposals on Israel-related subjects have been put forward by JRC committees such as the Adult Education Committee, though Norm continues to maintain communication with Chip Carnathan, the AEC co-chair having responsibility for Israel-related programming.

The co-sponsorship discussion did not leave adequate time to consider the two specific Federation-initiated possibilities that have come to JRC, based on the films “When the Smoke Clears” and “Born in Jerusalem and Still Alive,” respectively; hopefully those can be addressed at a subsequent meeting. Note was taken, however, that the film “Thou Shalt Innovate,” hosted by its developer, Avi Jorisch, in a program co-sponsored by JRC with IDAC's approval, was to take place at the JCC on November 13 at 7 p.m.

On a different matter, reference was made to questions that have arisen about the inclusion, or lack of it, of Israel-related programs taking place in the wider community under the “Community News” section of eNotices (reserved for events of interest to the congregation that JRC does not sponsor or endorse). It is not possible to include in that section the myriad of programs, Israel-related and otherwise, that take place in the Triangle area. As a point of information, it was noted that JRC staff includes programs that are scheduled to occur in the near future and that appear to be of particular interest to the congregation or the inclusion of which is requested by a congregant, JRC committee, offering organization, or presenter. IDAC members were encouraged to let staff know of programs that they believe should be included in Community News. [It has since become apparent that because of the volume of requests it may be necessary to manage expectations as to whether all requests can be accommodated; although this is not specifically an IDAC issue, many requests do concern Israel-related programs and, accordingly, Norm is in communication with synagogue staff about the matter.]

IDAC's next two meetings have been scheduled for Tuesday, December 3, and Thursday, January 9, both at 7:30 p.m. in the Bossen Library.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair