

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Report to the Board of Trustees

March 24, 2020

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) convened as scheduled on Thursday, March 12, the day the synagogue closed, and did so via the Go To Meeting teleconferencing tool, supplemented by earlier email exchanges. The committee met in a spirit of solidarity, thoughtful adjustment to the realities of the Coronavirus situation, and determination to move forward, and worked its way effectively through its planned agenda.

Although Rabbi Soffer was not able to attend, note was taken of the important and powerful sermon he had given on February 21 concerning his perceptions of an unhealthy and contentious climate of Israel-related discourse in the congregation. The sermon is a significant statement of the issues IDAC is charged with addressing and remains available to the committee and the congregation in an archived videostreamed format, as well as in text form on the synagogue website.

Committee chair Norm Loewenthal noted the excellent presentation made at Judea on February 11 by the Federation's visiting Israeli Artist in Residence, Shirel Horovitz, on the topic of "Identity Politics in Israel," illustrated through various visual media; during her stay, Norm noted, Ms. Horovitz had made similarly outstanding presentations at Beth El on the "Land and People of Israel," and at the JCC on the artistic process. As the congregation experienced last year with respect to poetry when Rachel Korazim visited, the committee observed the power of an art form to approach and enrich discussion of Israel-related issues in refreshingly different and insightful ways. Although Ms. Horovitz's Judea session was not well attended, it is hoped that future, planned visits by Israeli artists in residence will attract more attention and may be conducted in a synagogue location allowing for video streaming.

It was noted that in the interval since its last meeting, IDAC had used email to approve Judea's co-sponsorship of a talk by Representative David Price, jointly sponsored by Federation and J Street, entitled "What's Next for Middle East Diplomacy?" The talk is scheduled for Sunday, April 19 at the JCC (though of course there is a possibility of its being canceled because of the Coronavirus situation). It had been pointed out that, in order to comply with IRS regulations, there remained a need to confirm that Rep. Price and

program conveners would not make mention of the current election campaign; that confirmation has now been received. Following Judea's lead, Beth El and the Kehillah have also become co-sponsors of the event.

The committee gave its enthusiastic approval to Judea's co-sponsorship of next year's offering by the Federation of the latest program in the Shalom Hartman iEngage Video Lecture Series, entitled "Together and Apart: The Future of Jewish Peoplehood." Committee members indicated that, like its two recent iEngage predecessors which JRC also co-sponsored, the new offering promises to provide a valuable framework within which members of the congregation and the wider Jewish community may engage in learning and thoughtful discourse on challenging Israel-related subjects. Although participation by Judea members in the last two iEngage courses has been disappointing, it is hoped that JRC involvement may increase if Rabbi Soffer plays a role in teaching the course, as is now under discussion. It would also be helpful for the course to be promoted more vigorously at Judea.

It was noted that the Executive Committee has accepted the report of the JRC Membership Task Force and that approval by the full Board of Trustees is anticipated. Among other recommendations, the report calls for descriptive information about the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) to be provided in connection with Judea's membership application, allowing for members to have a better understanding of the request for contributions to ARZA via an opt-in item on the application. This recommendation was the direct result of discussion about the ARZA opt-in at previous IDAC meetings. (The report also recommends a more simplified dues structure for the synagogue).

Note was taken that the previous day, March 11, was the final day for online voting in the World Zionist Congress elections. Those elections, and the opportunity they provided to move WZC in a progressive direction, had been a major subject during the visit last fall of Rabbi Josh Weinberg of URJ and also of Rabbi Soffer's Feb. 21 sermon. It is believed that voter turnout at Judea has been significant but information on turnout generally and at Judea specifically, as well as the results of the election, is not yet available. (Rabbi Soffer is a member of the URJ slate of potential delegates to the Congress).

The committee responded favorably to a proposal from the Adult Education Committee to organize and conduct a series of discussions during the next two years on books concerning Israel and Palestine. The proposal is viewed as promising and its further development is encouraged. At the same time it

was pointed out that the Adult Education Committee will be under new leadership next year and that its leader or leaders should have an opportunity to mold the project into its final form, guided by IDAC's suggestions.

Among the considerations to be kept in mind as the project takes shape is the overriding importance of creating an experience that will deepen and broaden congregants' understanding of Israel-Palestine issues rather than causing them to “dig in” to previously held positions and thereby exacerbate divisions in the congregation. Accomplishing this will require a careful selection of the books to be discussed, a commitment to serious involvement by participants, a format that encourages civil interaction, and, perhaps most important, skilled guidance by a subject matter expert or experts, or a trained facilitator, or possibly a combination of the two.

Regarding the nature of congregants' involvement, it has been suggested that potential participants be required to have read the books in question, and also that they not be permitted simply to “drop in” to particular sessions, as the proposal allows, rather than experiencing the full range of readings. Others on the committee indicated that they would not be as prescriptive on these points. There was general agreement that discussion would need to be thoughtfully guided – that some sort of ground rules and “guide rails” are needed – but also that discussion, in order to be fruitful, should not be too constrained.

An interesting part of the conversation had to do with the question of whether the book discussion series should attempt to address Israel-Palestine political issues in a more or less direct way or whether the readings should be essentially “literary,” nuanced, and inviting to non-political as well as political perspectives. It was felt that there may not actually be a clear distinction between the two approaches since politics permeates so much of the fabric of Israeli-Palestinian life but the question does have a bearing on the choice of the books to be read.

Regarding book choices, there was solid agreement on the committee about the importance of overall “balance” among the books to be read in the full program, but less agreement as to whether this is achieved through the books listed in the proposal. For example, while the committee supports serious attention to Palestinian perspectives, it was felt that to be truly productive the reading of the work of a leading Palestinian intellectual like Rashid Kalidi, author of the suggested *100 years' War On Palestine*, should occur within the context of a discussion of books representing current, progressive Zionist thinking – not the dated, hawkish Ze'ev Jabotinsky's *Iron Wall*. An

appropriate choice might be the revised, updated edition of Arthur Hertzberg's *The Zionist Idea*, which the committee has discussed previously as a possible basis for book discussion. Another suggestion is that the selection of books for the second year of the program might be deferred until all concerned have had the benefit of the initial year's experience.

More broadly, a key consideration with regard to book selection is to know whether the Adult Education Committee has articulated a clear set of criteria for the choice of books for this project, and, if so, what those criteria are. IDAC, in keeping with its role, might also usefully give thought to the development of appropriate criteria for this kind of activity.

It was also suggested that, as further consideration is given to this proposal, the Adult Education Committee should be represented in IDAC's discussions.

The committee gave its approval to a draft of potential discussion questions to be used in connection with a proposed educational program based on the film "Heading Home," about the Israeli national baseball team of several years ago and the fact that it was comprised entirely of Jewish American professional players. The film proposal had come to the committee at a previous meeting from Rena Fraade, Director of Congregational Learning, and the committee, in response, had indicated that the offering was lacking a framework for critical thinking and discussion. The discussion questions, which largely concern issues of Israeli identity and Israel-diaspora relations, would meet that need and will be provided to Rena for her consideration. (Based on email discussion before the meeting, the draft has been revised to better reflect the fact that Israeli citizenship, of both Jews and non-Jews, is an important element in the discussion of Israeli identity.)

The meeting concluded with a discussion of the effectiveness of virtual meeting tools such as Go To Meeting and Zoom in the current situation, as IDAC and other synagogue units seek to maintain the momentum of their work. The committee also lauded the efforts of the synagogue's staff, lay leadership and rabbi in addressing the current crisis in such a positive and comprehensive fashion. The spirit of dedication, teamwork and service that have been demonstrated during this time is inspiring and affirming of our most cherished values.

In light of the current situation it is not clear when the committee might next

meet, but Norm Loewenthal indicated that he would like to have the committee convene at least once more before the committee concludes its work this summer. He said he would plan to send a doodle to the committee soon to find a date on which it might meet either virtually or face to face later in the spring.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair