

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Report to the Board of Trustees

June 23, 2020

Against the background of both the pandemic and the current turmoil in the nation following the killing of George Floyd, the Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) held its final meeting of the organizational year – and its final meeting under its current ad hoc status – via Zoom on June 4. It was noted that while Rabbi Soffer was not in attendance to provide opening comments as planned, he was in fact commenting eloquently on behalf of racial justice by his presence at a vigil in downtown Durham. Observing that IDAC had not met since March 12, the day the synagogue closed, committee members expressed gratitude for the strength shown by the rabbi, lay leadership, staff, and the congregation as a whole – exemplified by the recent annual meeting – in maintaining the life of the congregation and moving it forward, undaunted, in the face of considerable challenges. Committee members expressed determination to conduct the meeting in the same spirit.

Congratulations were extended to Arnie Lerman for his recognition as a JRC Volunteer of the Year (an accolade that included reference to his service on IDAC) and to Emily Katz for her election to the Board of Trustees and appointment as chair of the Adult Education Committee in the new organizational year. All agreed that her appointment is a very promising development in the vein of constructive Israel/Palestine-related learning and discourse.

Updating a variety of matters in the months since the last IDAC meeting, Committee Chair Norm Loewenthal noted that this year's Federation-sponsored offering in the Shalom Hartman iEngage series, “Engaging Israel: Foundations for a New Relationship,” co-sponsored by JRC, had successfully held its final three sessions via Zoom with only a small adjustment in scheduling. He indicated that like last year's offering, “Jewish Values and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” (also co-sponsored by JRC), the course was an outstanding opportunity for thoughtful learning and discussion of difficult Israel/Palestine-related issues; the only disappointment in both courses was

the limited participation by members of our congregation. He pointed out that at its March meeting IDAC had approved JRC's co-sponsorship of next year's Shalom Hartman course, "Together and Apart: The Future of Jewish Peoplehood," a number of sessions of which will concern Israel, and he expressed the hope that, perhaps with increased efforts at promotion, the participation of JRC members can be increased.

Norm noted that in the lead-up to the March 12 meeting, IDAC had used email to approve JRC's co-sponsorship of the presentation by Representative David Price, entitled, "What's Next for Mid-East Diplomacy?," sponsored by Federation and J Street. Originally scheduled for April 19 at the JCC, the event took place online on May 3. Norm shared his view that this had been a thoughtful and informative presentation by an exceptionally well-qualified observer of the diplomatic scene, free of advocacy for, or aspersions against, any particular point of view. Norm felt it necessary to correct a misimpression that Congressman Price was himself a representative of J Street and that his appearance needed to be "balanced" by an opposing political position.

Reporting on the election to the World Zionist Congress, the voting for which was concluded at the time of our last meeting, Ziva Raney stated that although Reform Jewish turnout in North America increased by 50 per cent over the last election, the Reform slate did not do well in comparison with religious Zionists and more orthodox parties (and that Rabbi Soffer had not been elected as a delegate). More positively, important alliances were formed with other progressive groups and there is hope for the building of coalitions in support of social justice and religious pluralism in Israel going forward.

Concerning the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) and the ARZA dues opt-in on Judea's membership application, it had been reported at IDAC's March meeting that an outcome of the work of the Membership Task Force, in response to IDAC concerns, was that explanatory wording about ARZA would be added to the application. The addition of that wording is still pending. [It should be noted, however, that the membership section of JRC's website does include a sentence which may be helpful in framing wording for the application: "The Association of Reform Zionists of America, ARZA, supports the Reform movement in Israel, through advocacy, organizing,

education, and travel experiences.”]

Norm reported that he was not aware of further developments concerning two other items at the March 12 meeting: a proposal from the Adult Education Committee for a book discussion series (to which IDAC had responded favorably while providing suggestions for improvement) and a proposal from Rena Fraade, Director of Congregational Learning, for a program based on the film “Heading Home” (for which the committee had suggested discussion questions through which the film could be placed in an instructional context). It was noted that the book discussion series might relate to the next item on the agenda.

Concerning that item, Emily Katz, as incoming chair of the Adult Education Committee, elaborated on the proposal for a course entitled, “Conflict and National Identity: Israeli and Palestinian Literature,” of which a description had been distributed prior to the meeting. Points of emphasis were that although the idea is still at a preliminary stage for the Adult Education Committee (which has expressed early enthusiasm about it), the course is in fact a fully-formed, 3-part seminar that is “ready to go”; that it would be taught by a highly qualified colleague of Emily's, Brooklyn College Professor of Judaic Studies Beverly Bailis (who would be compensated through AEC funds); and that, as a literary rather than a historical or political treatment of its topic, it would provide a fresh perspective on difficult issues.

The response of IDAC members to the proposal was strongly favorable. Among the strengths of the proposal are that it would bring outside expertise to the subject (avoiding the difficulties of a lay-led offering); that, despite its title, it would deal with Israel-Palestine topics broadly and not just the “conflict”; and that, rather than eclipsing the book discussion series (which Emily had described as a separate project) it could bolster that series by leading to suggestions for books to include in it. The committee gave Emily a clear “go ahead” for the Conflict and National Identity course.

Emily then briefed the committee on an initiative of the Adult Education Committee, in tandem with Rena Fraade and the office of Congregational Learning, that is already under way. Entitled, “Adult Education Committee Suggests,” it provides information to the congregation on a weekly basis

about online educational and cultural opportunities of interest, some of them pertaining to Israel, and seeks to do so in a way that is enticing to the congregation, stimulating and balanced.

The committee then returned to a discussion that had begun via email about a request to approve JRC co-sponsorship of a talk on June 28 by Dan Pollak entitled “What Congress Doesn't Know about Judea and Samaria,” sponsored by the North Carolina Coalition for Israel. [Additional information about the request was pending at the time of the meeting but has since been provided. In further email communication the committee determined that it could not approve the co-sponsorship request due to concerns about compliance with the Israel Discourse Policy.]

The committee also continued a conversation that had begun in a different email thread, one concerned with the idea of some sort of presentation to the congregation, including an opportunity for discussion, on Israel/Palestine in the context of the pandemic. Committee members had exchanged a variety of online material (print, audio, video) on this topic and had been intrigued by the opportunity that seems to be presented by the pandemic to examine Israel/Palestine matters in a new light, one with both positive and negative connotations. Participating in such an experience also seemed to hold promise as a constructive use of congregants' time during this period of isolation. Discussion at the meeting reaffirmed the value of this idea, though it was pointed out that a program along these lines should not limit itself to the conflict; rather it should be concerned more broadly about Israeli/Palestinian life in a time of pandemic. It was also noted that, apart from relations between Israelis and Palestinians there are dimensions of Israeli society itself, including fissures within it, that might be examined against the background of the pandemic.

As committee members had discussed online, since IDAC is not a programming unit (and is now concluding its work in any case), it would need to look elsewhere in the congregation for an organizational entity to take on such a project. The Adult Education Committee under its new leadership might be one possibility but there are others as well. For the present, it seemed best for the committee to limit itself to a general recommendation that this programming possibility be explored in the new

organizational year.

In the remaining minutes of the meeting, the committee began a discussion about how to assess the work of IDAC over the three years of its existence and what kind of recommendations it might make about an approach to Israel/Palestine-related discourse going forward, making use of the suggested questions about these matters that Committee Chair Norm Loewenthal had sent to members prior to the meeting. In very broad terms, with much more to be said on these topics, the committee appeared to agree that the whole matter of Israel/Palestine discourse in the congregation continues to be a problem requiring attention; that having an Israel discourse policy of some sort – perhaps revising and reaffirming the one we have now – is of value; and that there appears to be a need for some sort of entity or process to carry on at least some of the functions currently handled by IDAC. Committee members were encouraged to make use of the suggested questions for thought and discussion and to share their responses with the group as a whole through email. Norm indicated that he would then attempt to compile the responses in an orderly way, retaining the diversity of views they are expected to reflect, and submit that to the leadership for its consideration. Committee members may also choose to express themselves to the leadership on an individual basis, and, if they wish, to use the suggested questions toward that end.

The meeting concluded with expressions of camaraderie, solidarity, and gratitude on the part of committee members for having had the opportunity to undertake this important work together over a period of years and with the shared hope of being together physically within the walls of the synagogue when it is safe for that to happen.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair