

## Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

### Report to Board of Trustees

January 22, 2019

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee met on December 19, 2018, a meeting postponed from November 29 when that date was needed to schedule a congregational “meet and greet” with senior rabbi candidate Matthew Soffer.

Rabbi Franken opened the meeting with a prayer, a description of his upcoming trip to Israel, and distribution of a thoughtful article by Rabbi Jordie Gerson on the difficult moment in which American Jewry finds itself, entitled “A Rabbi on Our 'Moral Emergency,’” which develops the theme that “To be a Jew in America today – particularly a non-Orthodox, acculturated Jew – is to vacillate between a sense of belonging and otherness,” in disturbing and ominous ways.

The committee discussed the respects in which a record of Mayor Steve Schewel's comments during his October visit with the congregation had become part of a draft report of a subcommittee of the Durham Human Relations Commission calling for the removal of the word “Israel” from the City Council's statement on the Durham police training matter. The draft report, in turn, has been endorsed by the JRC leadership pending consideration of the report by the full Human Relations Commission in January. These developments illustrated that although the purpose of the mayor's visit from IDAC's perspective was to foster an airing of views on the matter rather than to endorse a particular policy position, such dialogue is not divorced from the process by which policy positions are adopted.

However, concern was expressed at the meeting about the manner in which the letter indicating the JRC Board's “official” position was developed, that is, it was felt that there had not been sufficient opportunity for input from the congregation, and that the Board's position inappropriately implied a monolithic perspective about the matter on the part of the congregation as a whole. Illustrative of the concern is the way in which the JRC position has appeared in a statement of gratitude by Voice for Israel, suggesting that the full congregation was in agreement with that position. This “leveraging of the congregation” in a collective sense was seen as having a parallel with the issue IDAC had previously addressed about the inappropriateness of individual JRC members allowing their political statements to be seen as representative of the congregation writ large. The general sense of the meeting was that both forms of leveraging are inappropriate or even provocative.

IDAC Chair Norm Loewenthal indicated that he had had an opportunity to provide input on the Board letter, and had suggested that it include wording to the effect that the “prevailing” or “predominant” view was that the word “Israel” should be removed from the City Council statement, the point being that that view was not universally shared within the congregation. That suggestion was not reflected in the final version of the letter. Norm indicated that he continues to feel that wording along the lines of his suggestion should appear in any statement of a Board or congregational position when there is in fact a multiplicity of views on the subject in question within the congregation.

Rabbi Franken then described in some detail plans for Israeli scholar Rachel Korazim to be the congregation's “scholar in residence” in a visit to JRC scheduled for Friday and Saturday, May 10-11

under the rubric of the annual Levin-Moscovitz Lecture. Based on the rabbi's comments and the online material about Dr. Korazim there was general agreement that her visit promises to be a lively and enlightening experience for the congregation. In response to the rabbi's request for suggestions of a particular topic or topics, it became clear that there are many solid possibilities from which to choose but a recurring theme that appeared to resonate with the committee is the value of drawing on Israeli literature to help us to better “know” the land and people of Israel. Committee members were encouraged to continue to review the material that accompanied the agenda and to make suggestions to the rabbi for topics; the rabbi indicated that Dr. Korazim is receptive to the committee's wishes for this event. In a meeting earlier in the day with the rabbi and Norm Loewenthal, Chip Carnathan, the co-chair of the Adult Education Committee with responsibility for Israel-related programming, had indicated that he will seek the involvement of his committee in Dr. Korazim's visit.

Reviewing the recent presentation by Bruce Jentleson on “Why no Israeli-Palestinian Peace?” and the facilitated discussion that followed under the guidance of Peg Carlson, the committee agreed that this rabbi-hosted event had been an important and successful experience in Israel-related discourse for the congregation. There was agreement, too, that there is a strong basis for a sequel to the event, as originally envisioned by Bruce, but that efforts should be made to reach a younger audience, perhaps by scheduling a presentation within the religious school or by involving DRTY and/or teenage congregants who have traveled to Israel. A presentation to the 20-30's group was seen as another possibility. It was suggested that Bruce be consulted about his thoughts and preferences about a follow-up event, including his ideas for specific topics or themes (drawing on the many questions that were raised but not answered in the earlier event). The manner in which discussion is facilitated might also be fine-tuned, such as through the designation of facilitators at each table. The possible involvement of the Adult Education Committee in this event, as with Rachel Korazim's visit, had been addressed in the meeting earlier in the day with the rabbi, Norm Loewenthal and Chip Carnathan.

A further idea for programming later in the year, presented by the rabbi, related to the organization Kids4Peace, which has ties to North Carolina and with which the rabbi has connections. Following generally favorable discussion of the idea, the rabbi indicated that he will invite Father Josh Thomas, the Executive Director of K4P, to visit our congregation in the spring.

The revised schedule of classes in the Federation course on “Jewish Values and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” of which JRC is a co-sponsor, was noted. As a participant in the course, Norm Loewenthal indicated that it has proven to be another valuable opportunity for thoughtful discourse on this subject and that Rabbi Daniel Greyber has been skillful in leading the course and fostering discussion. In response to a question, Norm shared his view that Rabbi Greyber, whatever his personal views on the conflict may be, has been entirely fair and balanced in his treatment of the subject.

At the behest of Ziva Raney, the committee initiated discussion of the status of IDAC as it approaches the end of its initial 18 months of existence as an ad hoc synagogue entity. The strongly predominant view of the group was that IDAC had shown itself to be a useful and important force in congregational life (though it could stand to become better known within the congregation), that it has sought with some success to model within the committee the kind of culture it seeks to establish in the congregation as a whole, and that participation in IDAC has been a meaningful and even inspiring experience for its members. The committee looks forward to continuing the discussion in upcoming meetings as it explores, with congregational leadership and eventually the congregation's new rabbi, the role and configuration that would be most appropriate for IDAC in the future.

The committee is scheduled to meet next on January 17, and a report of that meeting will be provided

for the February meeting of the Board of Trustees.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair