

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Report to Board of Trustees

October 23, 2018

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee met on October 2 with all members present. Given the current elevated level of activity in Israel-related discourse within the congregation and community, it seemed useful to enumerate recent and upcoming events. These include:

- The rabbi's Yom Kippur sermon. Though not within the direct purview of the committee, the rabbi's decision to deliver a major sermon on the subject of Israel has greatly furthered IDAC's goal of stimulating thoughtful discussion. The rabbi shared that he had perceived this subject to be one of great interest at JRC, that reaction to the sermon has been overwhelmingly positive, and that it has “set up the year” as one of discourse on Israel.

- The upcoming visit of Mayor Steve Schewel to the congregation on October 4 to discuss thoughts and concerns related to the City Council's statement on police training and related matters, with IDAC leadership heavily involved in planning and coordination (more on this event below).

- The Federation-directed course on “Jewish Values and the Israel-Palestine Conflict,” co-sponsored by JRC (with IDAC's approval) and other congregations. The course had its inaugural session last week, is heavily enrolled, including many Judea members, and promises to be a very positive approach to deepening an understanding of the issues within the framework of Jewish principles. The initial session included guidelines that may be useful to IDAC in the form of a Brit Lashon Hatov, a Covenant for Communicating in a Holy Community.

- A presentation by Duke Professor and JRC Congregant Bruce Jentleson that takes a broad, historical view of the Israel-Palestine conflict and prospects for peace, to be hosted by the rabbi as approved by IDAC at its last meeting. The event, for which the working title is “Why no Israel Peace? An Insider's Perspective,” is scheduled for Sunday morning, November 18 from 9:45 to 11:45 in the social hall. Although the date conflicts with one of the sessions of the Jewish Values course at the JCC, the timing was unavoidable because of other scheduling issues and the problem can be addressed to some extent through streaming and recording of events.

- A presentation by Lesley Sachs, Director of Women of the Wall, on October 27, under the auspices of JRC Director of Congregational Learning Rena Fraade, as approved by IDAC at its last meeting.

- A lecture to be given by UNC professor Jodi Magness on Sunday, October 21 entitled “More than Just Mosaics: The Ancient Synagogue at Huqoq in Israel's Galilee,” offered by the Adult Education Committee. This was given preliminary approval by IDAC at last month's meeting and final approval at the current meeting.

- In addition, JRC has been helping to publicize a program entitled “Untold Stories of IDF Soldiers,” sponsored by StandWithUs Southeast, to be offered at Meredith College in Raleigh on October 14. The committee declined a request that JRC co-partner with the programs' sponsors (and has indicated that

publicizing the program does not imply endorsement of it). The JRC proponent of a co-partnering arrangement has chosen not to provide the additional information requested by IDAC on program content or assurance of adherence to the Israel Discourse Policy, but did have a useful conversation about his perspectives with JRC President Ziva Raney.

Planning for the mayor's visit on Thursday was summarized. Key points were that the mayor has expressed a preference to take questions directly, that the event will be held in the sanctuary rather than the social hall since the former is more suitable for the numbers now anticipated and the setting should help foster a calm atmosphere, and that the fact that the event is intended specifically for Judea members will be underscored in various ways as will the importance of maintaining a respectful character in the posing of questions. It was announced that the rabbi would open the session with a blessing, President Ziva Raney would provide welcoming remarks, and Immediate Past-President Steve Simon would preside, and that the mayor was expected to make brief opening remarks before taking questions. IDAC members would provide logistical support (including time-keeping by IDAC Chair Norm Loewenthal and staffing of a welcoming table), and in general were asked to help encourage a polite climate.

Steve Simon's plans for managing questions were outlined: it basically was to have employed an alphabetical lottery to establish an order of questions unless it appeared that fewer than 20 congregants wished to ask a question [a somewhat different method was actually employed at the event]. Questions were to be limited to one minute in length and were required to be in the form of questions not simply statements. Follow-up questions were to be permitted only after all who wished had an opportunity to ask a question. The mayor had also been encouraged to keep his responses brief. Although the event was scheduled to run from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. it was anticipated that it might last somewhat longer if there were questions remaining and if the mayor were willing to field them. Arrangements have been made for security to be present and to remain until the conclusion of the meeting. Plans were in place for the meeting to be recorded but a decision had not been made as of the time of the meeting about the possibility of its being streamed.

IDAC and the Board of Trustees are to be provided with related material that was provided by some congregants in connection with this event before the format was changed to the direct taking of questions as the mayor requested.

It was decided that print copies of the Council's resolution would be provided at the meeting. There was discussion about the possibility of also providing the full memorandum of the Durham Chief of Police but it was felt that this would lead to a multiplicity of other related documents being requested. Instead, it was suggested that those interested in the matter of the full police memo could pose a question about it directly to the mayor.

It was noted that an article about the Durham police topic, including the scheduling of the mayor's JRC visit, had appeared in local media during the day. However, it was felt that this would not alter plans for Thursday's event or the character of the occasion.

Discussion turned to the proposal to have JRC refrain from co-sponsoring or lending its name to outside programming by any organization primarily devoted to Israel-Palestine political issues (with certain exceptions). Although it was felt that such a policy would provide the congregation (and IDAC) with a straightforward way to avoid awkward decisions and potentially uncomfortable relationships when faced with co-sponsorship proposals, the prevailing view was that it is best to retain flexibility by approaching each such proposal on its merits in terms of both content and the organizations involved.

However, it was felt that in proceeding in this way, IDAC should ask the principal sponsor not only which other organizations have agreed to be co-sponsors but which have been approached to do so. It was reaffirmed that JRC could continue to help publicize events offered by other organizations in the wider Jewish community while providing a disclaimer that doing so does not imply endorsement of the event or the sponsor.

Regarding the concern of a congregant that the ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America) opt-in item on the membership application might make “non-Zionist” congregants uncomfortable, Rabbi Franken provided background information related to past efforts to support Reform Judaism in Israel. Among the points made in a wide-ranging discussion were that ARZA might be more aptly re-named to indicate support of the Reform Movement in Israel without using the term “Zionism”; that ARZA has not been a particularly effective organization recently and that it should be subject to accountability; that there are many other subgroups of URJ that might have equal or stronger claims to the use of the membership application for raising funds; and that in deciding not to include ARZA or other URJ entities in our application we should be careful not to become “isolationist” relative to the Reform Movement. It was felt that the topic merited further consideration, either by IDAC or the Board, which had already assigned a task force to review the membership application (possibly with a view toward simplifying it). Additional information will be sought about the extent to which JRC members currently opt-in for an ARZA donation and how much money is raised, practices at other Reform synagogues, and information from URJ on other entities that might merit being supported in this way.

The committee will next meet on October 30.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair