

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Report to Board of Trustees

June 19, 2018

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) did not meet as scheduled on April 24, the day Rabbi Bach's resignation was announced to the congregation. Subsequently, however, the committee used email communication to consider a request by the Board of Trustees for a recommendation about members' references to JRC affiliation in public settings and documents. Significant progress was made toward a draft that could be endorsed by the committee.

The committee did meet as scheduled on May 22, a meeting that was heartening in several respects. It was learned that the existence of the committee, as described at a panel at the recent J Street Conference by committee member Emily Katz and Rabbi Bach, is viewed in the wider Jewish community as both unique and appealing, serving as a potential model for other Jewish entities hungering for positive ways to foster dialogue on Israel-related matters. And the committee received affirmation of its work from incoming JRC President Ziva Raney, who will become an ex-officio member on July 1 and who will participate with the committee in taking stock of its status at the conclusion of its initial 18 months as an ad hoc committee at the end of calendar year. Ziva also briefed the committee on the searches for both an interim and permanent rabbi, processes that will apparently include opportunities for candidates to learn about IDAC and the emphasis placed on constructive Israel-related discourse by our congregation.

Turning to substantive matters, the committee agreed on a formulation to conclude its email deliberations on how best to respond to the Board's request for a recommendation about members' references to JRC affiliation. It is as follows:

“The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) hereby responds to the request of the Board of Trustees that we recommend a guideline as to whether it is appropriate for members of the congregation to indicate their affiliation with JRC when making public statements relating to Israel and Palestine. It should be noted that, in the view of some members of our committee, the requested guideline should be a subset of a more general guideline on the appropriateness of congregants indicating their Judea affiliation when publicly expressing themselves on any matter, not just those concerning Israel and Palestine.”

“IDAC affirms the right of any member, as a matter of free expression, to indicate publicly his or her affiliation with Judea Reform Congregation. At the same time, the committee would encourage members to consider carefully whether doing so appropriately serves his or her purposes and whether it might lead to an erroneous perception that he or she is representing the congregation. If the latter appears likely to be the case the member should be encouraged to provide a clarifying disclaimer.”

“The committee also notes that its recommendation pertains to general members of the congregation. The public responsibilities and rights of members of the Board of Trustees are addressed by the Brit that they sign, those of staff members by the personnel manual and those of the rabbi by his or her contract, documents which supersede this recommendation.”

After careful consideration at this meeting, as at its meeting in March, the committee determined that it was unable to reach a consensus on a recommendation to be made to the Board regarding offers from several congregants of gifts of Israeli and American flags to be displayed in or at the synagogue. In other words, IDAC recommends neither acceptance nor rejection of these offers, though the committee believes that in any event the congregants who have made these offers should receive an expression of appreciation from the congregation. These conclusions have subsequently been conveyed to JRC President Steve Simon. Elaborating, the committee wishes the Board to know that a strong current within the committee holds that there is an absence of a compelling reason to alter the long-standing tradition at JRC of not displaying flags, and that doing so in the current climate would be divisive. However, some on the committee feel that displaying the Israeli flag would be appropriate as an affirmation of our cultural and other connections to Israel and as a way of honoring the ideals it represents. It should also be noted that one of the congregants who offered the gift of flags did so as an expression of pride at being Jewish and an American. Among the possible approaches toward a middle ground the committee discussed were to place the flags in an educational context by displaying them in the library or education building; to routinely read at services the prayer in Mishkan Tefilah for the State of Israel (as an alternative to displaying its flag); or to accept at least the gift of the American flag in honor of those who have served in our military. The committee requested that these ideas be passed along to the Board for its consideration. The committee also conveyed to the Board the perspectives it had received from Rabbi John Friedman, concerning the rationale and background of JRC's long-standing practice of not displaying flags.

Regarding Israel-related programming by the Adult Education Committee, the Israel Discourse Advisory Committee learned that, in response to its requests during the current year, a point of emphasis in the next organizational year will be to present programming that reflects a broader perspective on Israel and Palestine issues. The addition of several new members to the Adult Education Committee, providing both diversity and effectiveness to the group, will enhance its ability to achieve this. The Adult Education Committee will also pursue co-sponsorship of Israel-related programs with other Jewish entities, but, in line with the recommendation made previously by IDAC, will not rely exclusively on this approach as a means of broadening programming.

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee will next meet on June 20. It is understood that this may be an occasion to meet a candidate or candidates for the interim rabbi position, a prospect welcomed by the committee.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair