

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Report to Board of Trustees

July 16 , 2019

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) held its the final meeting of the 2018-19 organizational year on June 11, at a significant moment of rabbinical transition. In Rabbi Franken's absence, Committee Chair Norm Loewenthal expressed appreciation to the rabbi for his important contributions to the committee's work during the year. The committee looked forward to the arrival of Rabbi Soffer in July and to his being with IDAC for its first meeting of 2019-20 in August. Rabbi Soffer has expressed great interest in IDAC and Norm has kept him informed of the committee's work.

IDAC members who attended the recent talk by Rabbi Arik Ascherman of Torah Tzedek and/or the dinner that preceded it shared their impressions of those events, which were described as being of value. Although some of the questions following the talk were characterized as challenging, a respectful and civil tone was maintained throughout Rabbi Ascherman's visit.

Norm Loewenthal discussed the oral report about IDAC that he had presented to the Board of Trustees on May 28, which was accompanied by a written summary of the committee's work covering the first two organizational years of its existence. Given the limited time available at the Board meeting, Norm had decided that it would be best to use the opportunity to highlight key points in the written report, a document that seemed useful to create at this stage of IDAC's work in any case. At the Board meeting, one of the points Norm underscored was IDAC's role in encouraging and supporting constructive Israel-related programming, demonstrated by the number of significant programs that have occurred in the past year. That record served to dispel any impression that in fulfilling its responsibility of reviewing programming ideas the committee might have become a stumbling block to such opportunities. The few comments following Norm's talk to the Board were of a positive nature.

Preceding the Board meeting, Ziva Raney and Norm had had a constructive meeting with leaders of Voice4Israel at their request, regarding IDAC's earlier decision not to co-sponsor a V4I-hosted event because of the perception of a number of IDAC members that V4I appeared excessively combative in its tone. As they had at previous meetings with V4I leadership, Ziva and Norm again clarified that IDAC had not characterized V4I in any way but, rather, had simply reported on the fact that, given those perceptions, IDAC had not been able to reach a consensus on the co-sponsorship proposal. They indicated that while they could not alter the perceptions that individuals hold, it would be useful for any advocacy group to monitor its own communications carefully. They suggested that there would be value for any advocacy group to focus on the strength of its own message rather than to denigrate other points of view, to avoid incendiary or hyperbolic language, and, especially, not to engage in personalized attacks on individuals expressing different opinions.

Following up a recent email clarification to IDAC, Norm reminded the committee that the Adult Education Committee had in fact decided to give consideration to the request by the Federation that JRC co-sponsor, and provide financial support for, Avi Jorisch's presentation "Thou Shalt Innovate" in November. The AEC was scheduled to include this topic in its meeting of June 18, and Norm indicated that he would let IDAC know the outcome of their discussion. If the AEC were to decide to recommend

co-sponsorship, IDAC would consider that recommendation via email. [The Adult Education Committee at its June 18 meeting determined that the co-sponsorship request had been directed toward the congregation as a whole and not specifically to the AEC and that the request should therefore be considered by the Board of Trustees. The position of IDAC is that in the absence of a recommendation from the Adult Education Committee it does not have before it a matter on which to apply the Israel Discourse Policy. IDAC has asked Ziva Raney to consider whether the co-sponsorship request might be taken up by the Board.]

Following up an item from its last meeting, Norm provided clarification on how, without IDAC's approval, JRC had been shown as co-sponsoring the Federation's community-wide observances of Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtzmaut as part of the Israel Festival on May 19. Information provided by Interim Executive Director Emily Young indicated that this had come about through communications from Rabbi Franken, which she had passed along to the Federation in the belief that this was a matter of freedom of the pulpit. Although it is recognized that all concerned had acted with the best of intentions and that co-sponsorship of such events was assumed to be non-controversial, there was agreement at the IDAC meeting that decisions about co-sponsorship in such instances in fact fall within IDAC's purview and are not a matter solely for the rabbi's discretion. Norm indicated that he would plan to include this point in his conversations with Rabbi Soffer.

Further discussion then centered around whether IDAC should give a kind of "blanket" approval for co-sponsorship of all such yearly observances going forward or should be considered year by year. Some felt strongly that these holidays are so central to the guiding tenet of love of Israel in the Israel Discourse Policy that, regardless of one's political views on Israeli-Palestinian matters, support of such celebrations should be given (in a manner akin to celebration of the Fourth of July here). Others felt strongly that because, in the view of some, Israel's independence holds negative connotations in terms of Palestinian rights and issues of social justice (and because the nature of the observance might change from year to year), approval of co-sponsorship of these celebrations should not be "automatic" but should receive careful consideration in each instance. Since the issue was not resolved and since it was not something that required immediate resolution, the matter was left for further consideration in the coming year.

Norm then took note of the information regarding ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America) that he had sent out with the agenda, indicating some kind of change in ARZA's institutional status along with a renewed emphasis on support of the Reform movement in Israel. Because that information appeared to require considerable clarification and because this topic is understood to be of interest to Ziva and Rabbi Soffer, the committee deferred discussion until a later meeting. One suggestion, with regard to the ARZA opt-in on our membership application, was that options might be provided to contribute not just to ARZA but also to other organizations doing important work in Israel.

The committee briefly noted the discussion it had had at its previous meeting about ways to encourage appropriate behavior towards individuals who express points of view about Israel-Palestine, or, stated differently, to discourage behaviors which may make individuals feel fearful of verbal attacks or intimidation. Norm indicated that he had made this a point of emphasis in his report to the Board, and expressed his hope to the committee that it would be able to be attentive to this matter in the coming year. As was stated at the meeting, the freedom to express, and to be open to, a multiplicity of views on Israel-Palestine lies at the heart of IDAC's founding document, the Israel Discourse Policy.

IDAC will next meet on Tuesday, August 20 and Thursday, September 26 in the Bossen Library.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair