

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Report to Board of Trustees

July 17, 2018

Meeting on June 20, the Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) discussed the recent visit of Rabbi John Franken as a candidate for the interim rabbi position. The committee was pleased to note that the perspectives Rabbi Franken expressed regarding Israel discourse were on the whole consonant with the approach represented by the Israel Discourse Policy and IDAC. [Note: Rabbi Franken has since been offered and accepted the position of interim rabbi and is now an ex-officio member of the committee.]

The committee approved the co-sponsorship by JRC of the Federation course on “Jewish Values and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict.” While being appreciative to Beth El Rabbi Daniel Grayber for his willingness to teach the entire course, the committee felt that, in light of the original plan for instruction to be shared by Rabbi Grayber and Rabbi Bach, the new interim rabbi should be given an opportunity to teach a portion of the course if he or she wishes, though should not feel obligated to do so. Alternatively, Rabbi Grayber might, if he wishes, draw on others in JRC having expertise in the subject matter. The Adult Education Committee and the Interim Education Director should be apprised of plans for the course.

The committee discussed Steve Simon's invitation to Mayor Steve Schewel and members of the Durham City Council to visit the congregation to discuss concerns and perspectives regarding the Council's resolution on “rejecting the militarization of our police force.” It is felt that this visit will be an important instance of “Israel-related discourse” and, accordingly, that IDAC should play a role in deciding how it is conducted; this may also be an occasion for IDAC to become better known to the congregation. However, in order to plan effectively more needs to be known about the intentions and expectations for the visit on the part of both congregational leadership and Mayor Schewel. It is particularly important for the purpose of the visit to be clearly articulated in advance of the event and in introductory remarks at the event.

Key roles at the event itself will be those of moderator, a separate facilitator to guide the process of fielding questions by congregants, and perhaps other assistants. Given the nature of the event, there are arguments in favor of either allowing oral questions, with time limits, or requiring that questions be submitted in written form, or some combination of the two. It should be recognized that discussion will of necessity extend beyond the Council's resolution to other, related matters such as those addressed in Steve Simon's letter to the Mayor, i.e., anti-Semitism and boycotts of Israel, and perhaps other Israel-related concerns. Organizers of the event will therefore need to be prepared for a wide-ranging conversation. As of the June 20 IDAC meeting, the mayor's visit was expected to occur during the week of July 15. Some committee members expressed concern that there may not be adequate time for planning or that a mid-summer date may result in poor attendance. [Note: the mayor's visit has since been rescheduled to the first week in August or later].

The committee was briefed on discussions between the Adult Education Committee and Duke Professor Bruce Jentleson, a congregant, about his offering a “learning and reconciliation session” on

Israel-Palestine issues sometime this fall. The committee responded enthusiastically to this prospect, in light of Dr. Jentleson's considerable expertise in this area and the fact that the offering would be designed to embrace a broad segment of the political spectrum, much as the committee has been recommending. The committee encouraged the Adult Education Committee to continue to plan this offering with Dr. Jentleson and looks forward to receiving a formal prospectus.

The committee learned that the Board of Trustees did not take action at the previous night's meeting on IDAC's recommendation concerning members' identifying their affiliations with JRC in public documents and settings. However, Steve Simon has indicated that he will convey the sense of that recommendation in a message to the congregation, which will be a helpful step at a time when there continues to be a need for such guidance.

It was noted that a number of ideas have recently been brought forward by officers and Board members that may bear on IDAC's work in the coming year. These include a new avenue through which members might express themselves on matters of interest, including Israel, and the possibility of a “day of listening” about Israel-related matters. In a preliminary discussion a variety of views on these matters were expressed, with further consideration deferred until future meetings.

In light of the topics that appear to be pending for IDAC's consideration, the committee plans to meet as now scheduled on July 16 and August 28.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair