

# Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

## Report to Board of Trustees

August 27, 2019

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) began its work for the 2019-20 organizational year at its meeting on August 20 with a sense both of new beginnings and a determination to build on what has been learned and accomplished during the first two years of its existence (with the fortunate circumstance of an intact and excellent committee membership the whole of that time). Following introductions for Rabbi Soffer's benefit and a thoughtful d'var by him, the committee embarked on a general sharing of perspectives on IDAC and the challenges and opportunities presented by the current landscape in the congregation.

The many helpful ideas that were aired included the following:

- The need to develop a better understanding of why it is so difficult for congregants to talk about Israel in a calm manner, free of the anger that is so often present in these conversations.
- The need to find ways through IDAC's work to stimulate positive action on shared concerns (but in a way that is consistent with its role as an advisory rather than a programming entity).
- The need, where appropriate and useful, to look to outside resources that may assist in developing guidelines and “rules” for civil conversation.
- The need to foster within the congregation a spirit of curiosity about points of view on Israel-related matters other than one's own.
- The need not only to model civil discourse within the committee but to find ways to extend and illustrate that model more broadly within the congregation.
- The need to strengthen the sense of the congregation as a “big tent” within which a wide range of ideas and perspectives are welcomed.
- The need to affirm the notion of balance in all decisions pertaining to Israel-related programming.
- The need to talk more effectively and more widely about IDAC within the congregation, as part of an effort to make the Israel Discourse Policy truly part of the “fabric” of congregational life.
- The need to understand that for some congregants there is a fundamental tension between Judaism and Zionism, and to find ways to address that tension.

An overriding imperative is that of creating a climate – whether inside or outside formal

programming events – in which congregants will feel safe in expressing points of view on Israel-Palestine, free of fears of intimidation or demonization. IDAC will resume consideration of this topic on a priority basis early in the new organizational year.

In terms of Israel-related programming, an encouraging development appears to be renewed attention to this area by synagogue leadership, no longer distracted by the disruptions of the past year. This may include a more “nimble,” action-oriented approach to program development, less constrained by committee structures (accompanied by a re-examination of committee roles, in line with strategic plan recommendations). It may include an orientation to programming about Israel that is not limited to the political sphere. And it may include resumption of the idea, endorsed by IDAC last year, of a “sister synagogue” relationship with a Reform synagogue in Israel.

A concrete step toward this kind of robust programming – and very much in keeping with the use of outside resources discussed earlier – is the prospect of a visit to Judea by Rabbi Josh Weinberg, the Vice-President of Israel and Reform Zionism in the Union for Reform Judaism (with apparent responsibility to head the Association of Reform Zionists of American – ARZA – in URJ's new organizational structure). Ziva Raney has already reached out to Rabbi Weinberg about such a visit, the principal purpose of which would be to explain URJ's position on Israel-Palestine (and, presumably, to clarify the new URJ-ARZA relationship). The prospect of an invitation to Rabbi Weinberg met with IDAC's approval, with the understanding that the specifics of his visit would need to be fleshed out and that it would not be a fund-raising effort, and with the expectation that the visit would largely be funded by URJ.

Among the ideas expressed in relation to Rabbi Weinberg's potential visit were the possibility of using it as a framework for guided discussion (in the manner of Bruce Jentleson's presentation last year), the possibility of scheduling a number of events during the visit (in the manner of Rachel Korazim's time with the congregation as scholar in residence), the idea of placing Rabbi Weinberg's presentation within the larger context of a discussion of Zionism, and the prospect of considering (probably after the visit) the ARZA check-off item on the Judea membership application. In connection with the latter, it was suggested that consideration might be given to including “opt-in” items for other appropriate entities in addition to ARZA.

On a different matter, note was taken of the recent decision to co-sponsor (and provide financial support for) the Federation's November presentation of “Thou Shalt Innovate” and the fact that the process to do so, involving IDAC, the Adult Education Committee, and the Board of Trustees, appeared unduly cumbersome. In an effort to seek clarity and a more streamlined process, the committee reaffirmed that co-sponsorship proposals that do not include funding requests fall firmly within IDAC's purview. This has been IDAC's practice to date and is clearly supported by IDAC's charge to “assure

compliance with the Israel Discourse Policy in all Israel-related programming conducted by Judea Reform Congregation and in other Israel-related matters that may come before the Congregation.” [emphasis added.] In exercising its judgment on these matters, IDAC reaffirmed that it can and should take into consideration – and has taken into consideration in the past – adherence to the Israel Discourse Policy, the desirability of achieving overall balance in programming, and other matters of concern to IDAC members, such as the source of the request.

The situation with co-sponsorship requests that do include a funding component is less clear-cut, but only because IDAC lacks a budget. A relatively straightforward approach that appears to meet with general approval is for IDAC to make a recommendation with regard to the request and, if favorable, to refer the matter to synagogue leadership to find funding (if funding is to be found). It was also noted that there appears to be a need to streamline JRC's processes in general with respect to outside requests and that some sort of “rapid response team” might be considered.

In the course of the meeting, note was taken of the fact that IDAC's extended status as an ad hoc committee will “expire” at the end of the current organizational year, at which time the Board will consider whether and in what form to continue this activity. The importance of maintaining confidentiality in all of IDAC's deliberations was also underscored.

The committee will meet next on Thursday, September 26, at 7:30 p.m., in the Bossen Library.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair