

Report to the President

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

2017-19

May 24, 2019

The Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (or IDAC) was created as an ad hoc committee in September, 2017, at the initiative of then JRC Rabbi Larry Bach and then JRC President Steve Simon to support the congregation's Israel Discourse Policy by fostering civil and respectful communication in Israel-related programming and other Israel-related matters concerning Judea Reform Congregation. Past President Norm Loewenthal was asked to chair the committee, which consists of nine respected members of the congregation reflecting a wide range of perspectives on issues relating to Israel and Palestine; the rabbi and president are ex-officio members of the committee. Cognizant of both the difficulty and the importance of encouraging constructive conversations on these matters within JRC, which had proven to be challenging and somewhat elusive in previous years, Norm agreed to serve in this capacity for a period of time. Through a charge from the president, the committee was established on an ad hoc basis for an initial period of 18 months, which was extended by the Board of Trustees in March, 2019, for a further 18 months, after which the Board will make a determination about IDAC's continuation, status, role, and structure (including its possible transformation to a standing committee).

The committee has met on an approximately monthly basis since September, 2017. Although its major activities and accomplishments are summarized below, the nature of its task is inherently complex and nuanced; for a complete understanding of its work interested congregants are encouraged to read the monthly reports to the Board of Trustees filed by IDAC and posted on the IDAC webpage of the JRC website. That page is also the source of detailed information on the Israel Discourse Policy, the charge to the committee, the committee's membership, and the procedures it follows.

Though its role is not limited to Israel-related programming, the committee's focus has largely been on this area, and has consisted of the following:

- Reviewing programming ideas proposed by entities of the congregation and evaluating them in terms of adherence to the Israel Discourse Policy, including its guidance as to subject matter and spirit of communication. IDAC makes judgments as to 1) whether proposed programs are educationally sound (i.e., based on a reputable body of knowledge or information), are to be presented under qualified leadership, are to be conducted in a manner that is respectful of all points of view on the subject, and are likely to stimulate constructive dialogue among attendees, and 2) whether all proposed programs, taken together, will provide an overall breadth of programming to the congregation on Israel-related subjects.
- Considering opportunities to co-sponsor Israel-related programs offered by other entities in the community.
- Providing ideas for program initiatives to fill gaps in programming and to achieve overall breadth of programming, and to stimulate the development of these programs by appropriate entities in the congregation.

Against this background, the current year has been notable in terms of the quality and extent of Israel-related programming and the opportunities these events have provided for thoughtful interaction. It has included:

- Judea Reform's participation as a co-sponsor in the well-regarded Federation-run offering of “Jewish Values and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” employing excellent materials from the Shalom Hartman Institute, and featuring thought-provoking discussions led by Rabbi Daniel Greyber of Beth El Synagogue.
- Presentations by JRC congregant and Duke professor Bruce Jentleson to a congregational gathering under rabbinical auspices and, later, to Next Dor, the synagogue's 20's-30's group, drawing on Bruce's expertise and personal experience with the Middle East peace process, with interaction at the congregational event guided by a trained facilitator.
- An evening of interaction with Durham Mayor Steve Schewel, at the invitation of the synagogue's lay leadership, during which both the mayor and congregants were able to air views in a civil environment on the Durham police training matter (it should be noted that while minds were not necessarily changed at this event that was neither the intent nor the expectation of the program).
- A full weekend of stimulating discussions of the works of notable Israeli poets led by Israeli scholar and author Rachel Korazim within the rubric of the Levin Moscovitz Lecture series.
- The upcoming visit of Torat Tzedek (Torah of Justice) founder Rabbi Arik Ascherman as a guest of Rabbi Franken.

It is with gratitude that the central role of Rabbi Franken in Israel-related programming during the past year is acknowledged. His interest and involvement have been paramount in providing administrative avenues that were not otherwise available for key programs and in using his professional connections to bring outstanding speakers to the congregation. His particularly thoughtful comments about engagement with Israel in his Yom Kippur sermon in many ways set the stage for thought and discussion regarding Israel during the year.

There have also been programs this year and last offered by the Office on Congregational Learning or Adult Education Committee on the Women of the Wall, archaeology in Israel, and a perspective on Gaza, (along with a variety of proposals or co-sponsorship opportunities, largely from the Adult Education Committee, that did not progress beyond the preliminary stage after IDAC provided ideas for further consideration; or that raised concerns about the overall balance of programming; or that were approved by IDAC but encountered scheduling difficulties in terms of potential out-of-town presenters).

Apart from its role with respect to programming, IDAC has addressed a variety of other Israel-related matters since its inception. These have included:

- The appropriateness, or lack thereof, of the synagogue gift shop as a distribution point for controversial Israel-related products.
- Approval for proposed optional travel to the West Bank as part of the (since-canceled) rabbi-led trip to Israel.
- Approval for the idea of a sister-synagogue relationship with a Reform synagogue in Israel.

- Discussion of dropping the opt-in feature on the Judea membership application for a contribution to ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America).
- A recommendation for an appropriate way to publicize Jewish events in the community, including Israel-related events, in e-notices while disclaiming Judea's endorsement of them.
- Agreement that, except in the most extreme cases, speakers with controversial views on Israel-Palestine would not need IDAC approval to speak on topics unrelated to the Middle East.
- A recommendation concerning individual congregants identifying themselves as Judea members when expressing themselves in public settings and documents (IDAC essentially recommended that individuals clarify that they are not representing the congregation if that fact is likely to be misunderstood).
- A recommendation to the effect that minority opinions within the congregation should be acknowledged when the congregation or Board adopts a position on a public matter.
- Discussion, without resolution, of the appropriateness of displaying Israeli and American flags within the synagogue.
- Approval of the request of the Religious School 4th grade to make a tzedakah gift to the Jewish National Fund.
- Discussion of the community-wide “Call for Civility and Respectful Discourse” to address the problem of personalized attacks within the Jewish community relating to political positions on Israel-Palestine.
- Response to the request from Jewish Voice for Peace for JRC to be designated as a “welcoming synagogue” (viewed as unnecessary in view of the fact that that is accomplished by the Israel Discourse Policy).
- Discussion of the factors to be considered when opportunities for co-sponsorship of events with other entities in the community arise.
- Guidance on developing a less combative and personalized tone in the communications of Israel-related advocacy groups.
- Consideration of ways to make the work of IDAC better known, while maintaining the space needed for it to work in a thoughtful, deliberative fashion.
- Participation in the rabbi search process.

Looking ahead to the coming year, IDAC anticipates a high level of Israel-related activity, including a number of pending program ideas and co-sponsorship opportunities, the already approved co-sponsorship of the Federation/Shalom-Hartman course on “Engaging Israel – Foundations for a New Relationship,” and the involvement of Rabbi Soffer and the fresh perspectives he will bring to JRC and IDAC. Much still needs to be done to assure civil discourse in all its forms in this challenging area of synagogue life. A particular area of concern is that of assuring freedom of expression on matters relating to Israel (across the entire spectrum of political belief), free from fear of personalized assault or intimidation originating inside or outside the Jewish community.

Finally, as the Board begins to undertake consideration of IDAC's role and status going forward, I would offer the observation that the following have been fundamental and essential to the efforts of IDAC to date:

- The composition of the committee by carefully-selected congregants who a) reflect a broad spectrum of responsible opinions on Israel-Palestine, and b) approach their work in IDAC in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration.
- The establishment of a culture of respectful discourse within the committee (thereby modeling what we hope to see in the congregation) and a willingness to function by consensus.

– The opportunity to work in confidentiality with respect to individual comments; in closed session; in a careful, deliberative fashion; outside the spotlight.

It is my hope that these principles will continue to form the framework for IDAC, however it may be structured, as the work of this important feature of congregational life advances in the years ahead.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Chair
Israel Discourse Advisory Committee