

Israel Discourse Advisory Committee

Final Report

June 28, 2020

This report, which concludes the work of the Israel Discourse Advisory Committee (IDAC) during the three years of its existence as an ad hoc committee, 2017-2020, consists of the following sections: the highlights of IDAC's activity during 2019-20, an assessment by IDAC's members of the value and effectiveness of the committee's work, and recommendations to the leadership of the congregation as to how to address the issue of Israel/Palestine-related discourse within JRC going forward.

For a complete picture of IDAC's work and performance, it is suggested that this report be read in tandem with the "IDAC Report to the President for 2017-19" and the reports that have been submitted to the Board of Trustees and posted on the JRC website following each meeting of the committee during the past three years.

Highlights of IDAC's Activity During 2019-20

While IDAC continued to grapple in its deliberations during the past year with the difficult issues concerning Israel/Palestine-related discourse, those deliberations were not always reflected in concrete actions. The tangible matters it sought to address are indicated below. It needs to be recognized that activity in all realms of congregational life during the 2019-20 organizational year was curtailed to some extent by the coronavirus pandemic and that IDAC did not meet as frequently as usual after the synagogue closed on March 12. However, Israel/Palestine-related activity, like all other aspects of congregational life, did continue as fully as possible, as did IDAC's decisions regarding it. The highlights of the organizational year are these:

- Offering by Federation of the Shalom Hartman iEngage course, "Engaging Israel: Foundations for a New Relationship," previously approved for JRC co-sponsorship by IDAC; the course was a significant opportunity for thoughtful learning and discourse about Israel/Palestine by members of the Jewish community, including JRC congregants, and other interested persons.
- Approval of co-sponsorship by JRC of "Together and Apart: The Future of Jewish Peoplehood," a Shalom Hartman iEngage course, including a number of units concerning Israel, to be offered by Federation in 2020-21.
- Approval of co-sponsorship by JRC of the presentation by Representative David Price on "What's Next for Mid-East Diplomacy?" sponsored by Federation and J Street and conducted virtually on May 3.
- Offering of the presentation by Avi Jorisch entitled "Thou Shalt Innovate," regarding technological innovation in Israel, at the JCC on Nov. 13 by Federation, having previously received IDAC approval for co-sponsorship by JRC (as it had from other area synagogues).
- Approval for an illustrated presentation in our building by Shirel Horovitz on February 11 on "Identity Politics in Israel," as part of her Federation-sponsored Israeli Artist in Residence series.

- Consideration of a request to approve JRC co-sponsorship of a talk on June 28 by Dan Pollak entitled “What Congress Doesn’t Know about Judea and Samaria,” sponsored by the North Carolina Coalition for Israel; co-sponsorship was not approved due to committee concerns about compliance with the Israel Discourse Policy.
- Clarification of how decisions regarding requests for JRC co-sponsorship of Israel/Palestine-related programs are to be made, both where financial support is requested and where it is not.
- Discussion with Jill Madsen, Executive-Director of the Federation about decision-making within the Federation and the Israel Center regarding the offering of Israel-related programs for which JRC co-sponsorship may be requested.
- Approval of a proposal from the Adult Education Committee for a course to be offered in 2020-21 on “Conflict and National Identity: Israeli and Palestinian Literature,” to be taught by Professor Beverly Bailis.
- Approval in concept, and development of suggestions for its improvement and refinement, of a proposal from the Adult Education Committee for a book discussion series on Israel/Palestine.
- Tacit approval for an initiative from the Adult Education Committee for “Adult Education Committee Suggests,” which provides information to the congregation on a weekly basis about online educational and cultural opportunities of interest, some of them pertaining to Israel.
- Recommendation that a presentation be offered by an appropriate entity within the congregation in 2020-21 on Israel/Palestine in the context of the pandemic, including opportunities for discussion.
- Development of suggested questions for discussion so that viewing of the film “Heading Home,” proposed by Rena Fraade, Director of Congregational Learning, could be offered in an instructional context.
- Clarification of the use of the Community News section of JRC's eNotices to publicize Israel/Palestine-related programs that are not sponsored or endorsed by JRC.
- Support for the visit of Rabbi Josh Weinberg, Vice-President of Israel and Reform Zionism of the Union for Reform Judaism on November 19, concerned primarily with the election to the World Zionist Congress and the reorganization of Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) within URJ.
- Expression of encouragement for JRC members to cast votes in the election to the World Zionist Congress.
- Expression of support for additional explanatory wording about ARZA on the JRC membership application in connection with the ARZA dues opt-in item.
- Discussion of aspects of the 2019 URJ Biennial that related to the work of IDAC

- Tacit approval of the offering of lectures on “Telling a Feminist History of Jerusalem” and “Jerusalem's Ancient Queens: Gender, Power, and Erasure” by Professor Sarit Kattan Gribetz as the annual Levin-Moscovitz speaker, June 19 and 25. (IDAC was not consulted in the planning of this series, the topic of which was viewed as non-controversial, but was informed of it in advance; IDAC members expressed approval of the series as bolstering overall learning on Israel-related subjects).

IDAC Self-Assessment

While the effectiveness of IDAC in achieving its goals is largely a matter for the leadership of the synagogue and the congregation at large to determine, it seems useful for the committee to provide its own candid assessment of its success, or lack of it. The comments that follow reflect the input of all members of the committee, including its two ex-officio members, that is, the senior rabbi and congregation president. An overriding suggestion that has emerged from committee input is for a congregation-wide survey to address member perceptions regarding the issues discussed in the remainder of this report.

Over a three-year period, IDAC has worked diligently in responding to, and adhering to, its charge. In general, committee members view IDAC's work as having been modestly successful, but in ways that are difficult to articulate with precision. It is felt that the very existence of IDAC (as an apparently unique entity within the Reform movement), along with that of the Israel Discourse Policy, may have served to some extent as a moderating influence on the tone of Israel/Palestine-related discussion in the congregation.

Some observations about IDAC from one quarter within the committee are that it has helped to raise the level of conversation about Israel/Palestine, that it has enabled the community to fully dignify the many perspectives in the congregation on this subject, and that it has made Judea Reform a place of greater healing than was previously the case.

The committee has made a range of decisions on specific, potentially polarizing Israel/Palestine-related matters requiring thoughtful judgment, thereby sparing the Board and/or Executive Committee from the difficulty and time that would have been required for adjudication on their part. Significantly, it has served as a model in microcosm of civil interaction among those with differing opinions on Israel/Palestine, the kind of interaction that one would hope to see in the full congregation. The “safe space” that has characterized IDAC's deliberations have allowed it to address more broadly the question of how to assure that such space is present inside and outside synagogue walls with respect to the free expression of ideas on Israel/Palestine; hopefully, that would include freedom from denigration or recrimination potentially resulting from that expression.

In the area of programming, IDAC, through its careful consideration, has endorsed a number of meritorious proposals for program development or co-sponsorship of programs; it has rejected others as lacking in merit, being inadequately described or not being in keeping with the Israel Discourse Policy, and has suggested ways that proposals might be strengthened or refined. Additionally, the committee has made recommendations about the kinds of program initiatives that might be undertaken to foster constructive dialogue on Israel/Palestine or to provide greater overall balance in programming; to the extent possible within the confines of its charge, it has actively encouraged development of programs on particular topics. It is to IDAC's credit that programming on Israel/Palestine, so long stalled in our

congregation, moved forward somewhat during the past several years (most visibly in the 2018-19 organizational year).

In terms of specific program-related actions and achievements readers are directed to the section of this report entitled “Highlights of IDAC's Activity During 2019-20” and to the previous report entitled “IDAC Report to the President for 2017-19.” The most notable of the committee's programming accomplishments occurred during the 2018-19 year when it helped to provide a forum for Mayor Steve Schewel to meet with the congregation for a dialogue on the Durham police matter and when, under auspices provided by Rabbi John Franken, it supported a presentation by Professor Bruce Jentleson on the Middle East Peace Process, followed by guided discussion. Also of particular note is IDAC's approval of Judea Reform's co-sponsorship of three courses in the Shalom Hartman iEngage series pertaining to Israel and offered by the Federation; these courses exemplify the opportunities for in-depth teaching and respectful discourse that IDAC has sought to encourage within the congregation. Additionally, IDAC has made important decisions and clarifications regarding the process for considering co-sponsorship proposals and for publicizing in JRC's eNotices Israel/Palestine-related events occurring in the wider community.

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In terms of disappointments and shortcomings, committee members generally felt that more Israel/Palestine-related programming could have been offered during the period of IDAC's existence, especially in its first and third years. Frustration was expressed both about the committee's inability to stimulate more activity on the part of programming entities in the congregation, such as the Adult Education Committee, and, for some but not all IDAC members, about the fact that IDAC lacks the authority (as well as the budget and staffing) to undertake programming itself. A related matter is the fact that by virtue of its role as an entity holding the power of approval for proposed programs IDAC is seen by some as stifling creativity by “nitpicking” or even “censoring,” a view that perhaps fails to appreciate the nature of IDAC's deliberative process or the respects in which it has sought to strengthen proposed programs.

Alongside disappointment with the extent of programming is a concern about low participation in the opportunities that have been offered, a case in point being the small number of Judea congregants taking part in the outstanding Shalom Hartman offerings at the JCC. With respect both to programming decisions and to the character of discourse, the committee has at times found it difficult to convey to program developers the importance of balance in the overall range of programming of a political nature and the respects in which some types of discourse, however they may be intended, can be perceived as derogatory or hurtful.

Perhaps the most meaningful, albeit elusive, measure of the committee's effectiveness relates to the ongoing quality of Israel/Palestine-related discourse in the congregation. A key question is whether this problem has remained at the level that led to the creation of IDAC three years ago. The consensus of the committee is that while Israel/Palestine-related discussion may seem less sharp than in the past, discordant communication continues to smolder and is prone to flaring up from time to time. For all of IDAC's earnest efforts and the activity enumerated here, there is little evidence that IDAC has significantly altered the character of Israel/Palestine-related interaction in the congregation. The depth and persistence of the problem was underscored by Rabbi Soffer's sermon on February 21, in which, with the benefit of his fresh perspective and clear-eyed perception, the rabbi spoke of the painful reality

that he has observed in the congregation with respect to political matters having to do with Israel and Palestine.

Another dimension of analysis about IDAC's performance concerns its strengths and weaknesses as an organizational entity, that is, the way it is authorized, structured and constituted and the way it functions. There is strong agreement within the committee that in most ways IDAC has benefited from its ad hoc status. That status has allowed it to function on its own schedule, away from the "limelight," without Board-related responsibilities, and to work in a careful, deliberative manner on the difficult issues before it while enjoying the support (and participation) of the rabbi and president of the congregation. Committee members are unanimous in their belief that confidentiality in IDAC's proceedings as to the comments of individual members and the closed nature of meetings have been essential to its work (while at the same time endorsing the regular and complete reporting of the content of its deliberations to the Board and congregation, as has occurred throughout IDAC's existence).

Of predominant importance has been the careful composition of the committee by thoughtful, well-respected congregants representing a range of positions on Israel/Palestine and committed to civil – and candid – interaction with one another, to upholding the tenets of the Israel Discourse Policy and to remaining steadfast even when the mission has become especially challenging. Also of importance have been the relatively small size of the committee and the presence on it of the rabbi and president of the congregation as ex-officio members. So, too, have been the opportunity to meet on a relatively regular basis and to supplement meetings, as needed, with digital communication.

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But a strength of the committee, in the view of some members, has also been a weakness. IDAC's ad hoc status – i.e., the lack of clarity as to where it "fits" within JRC's organizational structure – is seen as somewhat "dis-empowering," in that the committee may be viewed as less important or less relevant than a standing committee of the Board. Its ad hoc standing may have contributed to its failure to develop stronger ties with programming and other important entities of the congregation. IDAC's ability as an ad hoc committee to work carefully and quietly away from the limelight may also have had the effect of making the committee less visible, less well-understood, and less impactful and, on some occasions, led to its being overlooked entirely.

Additionally, IDAC, by virtue of its charge, has been faced with a number of significant ambiguities and inconsistencies which it has not fully addressed or overcome. It is considered to be an "advisory" body yet is given authority to make "binding determinations" about compliance with the Israel Discourse Policy. With specific respect to programming, its essentially passive advisory role in receiving program proposals may be seen as inconsistent with its ability to "initiate discussion" of possible programs it feels are needed. But because that aspect of its work stops short of the authority, the budget and the staffing to actually plan and conduct programs itself, the prevailing (though not unanimous) view of IDAC members is that it has been stymied by this limitation in truly fulfilling its mission. (IDAC's own initial ambivalence on this matter, and the push-back from committee members having the capacity to influence programming in other spheres of congregational life, should not be overlooked.)

That frustration has been felt most strongly in connection with the Adult Education Committee (the

AEC), the organizational unit most directly charged with educational programming. During much of the period of IDAC's tenure the AEC did not appear to place a high priority on Israel/Palestine-related programming, and it proved difficult to encourage the AEC in that direction. To the extent that the AEC pursued programmings related to Israel/Palestine it appeared to be motivated more by ideology than by an interest in offering a balance of perspectives. In general, the AEC appeared to have difficulty accepting – and may have felt deterred by – IDAC's advisory role and/or its advice about specific proposed programs.

A point of particular concern from IDAC's point of view was the decision of the Adult Education Committee not to pursue specific programming possibilities viewed by IDAC as being of compelling importance. A case in point was the AEC's initial willingness to pursue, and subsequent rejection of, the offering of Bruce Jentleson's pivotal presentation on the Middle East Peace process, despite that program's promise of providing unique expertise and a rich opportunity for thoughtful discussion of issues. The offering reached fruition only through Rabbi Franken's use of the auspices of his office.

In a different vein, though it has had a strong and largely consistent composition of dedicated congregants, IDAC has had to adapt to the fact that during the three years of its existence the congregation has had three different senior rabbis, each with his own perspective and style of providing rabbinical guidance and occupying a crucial ex-officio position on the committee..

In its internal workings, the committee tried hard to adhere to its charge to function through consensus decision-making, based on the concept of its members jointly arriving at, and agreeing to support, judgments in the best interest of the congregation. In reality, as a matter of expediency, decision-making sometimes took the form of the prevailing view being treated as the committee's “consensus,” with a minority view being noted in committee reports. In some instances, it was simply not possible for the committee to reach a decision which could be agreed upon, a circumstance that was frustrating and that fell short of hopes for the committee's work.

Notwithstanding the genuine camaraderie that developed within the group – overcoming widely differing perspectives on Israel/Palestine – and notwithstanding the group's commitment to consensus-building, the process at times left some members feeling marginalized, disaffected or inhibited about expressing themselves fully. Ultimately, and unfortunately, there were departures from a committee whose membership had remained remarkably stable over a period of several years. Those departures created a philosophical imbalance that was not fully restored when only one of two vacancies was filled; that, in turn, may have exacerbated the reluctance of some committee members to advance their ideas forcefully.

Looking Ahead

Because Israel is a topic of such fundamental importance to members of Judea Reform Congregation and because discourse on Israel/Palestine, as noted above, remains problematic, it is clear that ways must be found to continue the work initiated by IDAC. That work, in the view of several members of the committee – distinguishing the discourse that has occurred within the committee from what has occurred outside it – has scarcely begun.

One perspective on this matter within the committee is that neither “proud Zionists” nor “non-Zionists” in the congregation feel comfortable with the political climate in JRC, but that the latter group feels less

reluctant to express themselves. An illustrative comment about the climate of discourse in the local Jewish community is that the mere utterance of the term “Palestine” can result in angry confrontations (a point of which this writer is not unaware in choosing to employ the term “Israel/Palestine” throughout this report). Within our congregation, it is noted, Jewish values tend to be held and expressed in more divergent ways than in other Reform congregations, particularly with respect to Israel/Palestine. The results can be both stimulating and discordant.

A positive first step in moving forward appears to be revisiting the Israel Discourse Policy. That policy has served as a vital touchstone for the committee and the congregation. However, three tumultuous years after its approval, it seems wise now to review the policy and its wording to make sure that it says exactly what our congregation and its leadership feel it should say.

More than anything, however, a reaffirmation of the central tenets of the policy appears to be in order at this time in the life of the congregation.

As to its possible revision, some committee members feel that the Israel Discourse Policy has been invaluable in its present form and does not need changes. Others have suggested have a variety of modifications, or approaches to making modifications, that are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that are well worth consideration by congregational leadership. They include the following recommendations:

- Undertake a congregation-wide initiative to examine and critique the policy with a view toward its possible alteration.
- Frame the policy in a way that does not limit perspectives on Israel and Palestine to the conflict between them.
- Introduce wording into the policy that more strongly affirms the legitimacy of Israel and the rejection of anti-Semitism
- Strengthen JRC's identity as a Reform congregation and, within the context of the Reform Movement, more strongly articulate its relationship with the land, nation and people of Israel.
- Position the principle of “civil and respectful discourse” more centrally within the policy.
- Create wording in the policy that celebrates an attitude of curiosity about Israel/Palestine and various perspectives on the subject rather than the familiar posture of needing to persuade others of the correctness of one's own point of view.

Regarding the question of how best to carry on the work of IDAC, and to support a reaffirmed Israel Discourse Policy, the committee is strongly of the view that an entity much like itself should be present in the congregation. Committee members are divided, or have no strong opinion, as to whether that entity should be an ad hoc body or a standing committee of the Board. It is felt that either could be effective if properly conceived and implemented. There is some tension between the concept of an entity capable of doing research on the Board's behalf and and making decisions “quickly” and one that functions in a more “deliberative” way – and whether a standing or an ad hoc committee is best suited

for each of those approaches.

But under either organizational status, what is of paramount importance is that the entity begin its life with the following characteristics:

- A clear charge as to its purposes, authority, and responsibilities.
- Composition by a carefully selected group of respected congregants reflecting a broad range of responsible positions on Israel/Palestine and committed to civil discourse; committee membership must be comprised on the basis of thoughtful selection by congregational leadership and not on the basis of volunteering to serve.
- Active support and involvement by the president of the congregation and rabbi.
- Decision-making through consensus.
- Confidentiality in its proceedings, both in person and online.
- The holding of meetings in closed session, combined with full transparency as to the content of deliberations and regular reporting to the Board and congregation.

The present committee envisions its possible successor as having a mandate much like its own, that is, covering all matters within the purview of the congregation having to do with Israel/Palestine, both program-related and otherwise. In all cases, the governing consideration guiding its work should be that of upholding the spirit and intent of the Israel Discourse Policy.

Based on its own experience, the committee recommends that the new entity, in its charge, have the benefit of clarification as to whether its essential nature is that of an advisory body or one having the authority to take actions and make binding decisions.

Central to that issue is the question of whether the new entity should have the capability – and the budget – to undertake Israel/Palestine-related programming itself. On that question, the strongly prevailing view of the committee is that it should, but with certain restraints. It should not usurp the role of the congregation's programming units but should involve itself in programming only in instances where it perceives a genuine need for a program to support constructive discourse and where programming units have declined to undertake such an activity.

A minority position within the committee is that the role of the new entity should remain advisory with respect to programming, relying on the various units within the congregation – Adult Education, Social Action, Religious School, Engagement, Congregational Learning – having programming responsibility and capabilities. A related view is that the new entity should, more actively than at present, proactively consult with these units to bring about needed programs.

A hopeful view regarding programming is that the Adult Education Committee, under its new leadership, may take the sort of vigorous and balanced approach to Israel/Palestine-related programming that would obviate the need for IDAC's successor to adopt this role. Indeed, that

rejuvenation of the Adult Education is already evident. An even more sanguine outlook in this regard is the possibility that the discourse component of IDAC's work might find a home within a revamped Adult Education Committee rather than in a new entity to replace IDAC. (There would still apparently be a need for a process or structure to address some non-programming matters concerning Israel/Palestine that, inevitably, can be expected to arise).

As to the character of programming that might be undertaken in the coming years, committee members stressed not only adherence to the Israel Discourse Policy with respect to proposed programs but the guidance of the policy's intent when the committee seeks to discern gaps in learning and discourse opportunities. The work of all units of the synagogue, not just IDAC's successor, should be guided by the policy. Given the centrality of Israel in the minds and hearts of congregants, committee members have emphasized the value of events that provide “structured conversation” or “facilitated discussion” about life in Israel/Palestine, including, but certainly not limited to, the ongoing conflict.

Other ideas regarding programming include these:

- Coordinate the work of all programming entities with a broad, integrated plan for all learning at Judea Reform.
- Hold events that showcase IDAC, or its successor, as a model of the kind of civil discourse that might be replicated more widely within the congregation.
- Celebrate events and individuals that demonstrate the value of curiosity about differing points of view on Israel/Palestine, and the importance of careful listening to what is said about those points of view.
- Remain attentive to the importance of overall balance of programming in terms of views on Israel/Palestine. In that context, the committee must be alert to the dichotomy that exists between JRC's perceived character as a largely “progressive” congregation and the importance of a balanced presentation of a full range of perspectives along the political spectrum.
- Create a posture of learning based on presentation of new ideas and examination of perspectives that may run counter to preconceived notions; in that vein foster activities (including within the committee itself) based on exercises requiring individuals to advocate for ideas they oppose, thereby helping them to gain a better understanding of those ideas.

Several other thoughts of interest, not specifically related to programming, emerged from the comments of committee members. Although IDAC has only very tangentially been concerned with the Religious School, several committee members suggested that it would be appropriate for a successor entity to be concerned in at least a general way with the matter of the curriculum of the Religious School. The thrust of these suggestions is to help assure that, along with fostering a love of and knowledge about Israel, students are equipped (in an age-appropriate and grade-appropriate way) with tools for a critical understanding of issues related to hopes for peace and social justice in the Middle East.

In a rather different vein one committee member has proposed that along with the Israel Discourse

Policy the successor to IDAC should have the benefit of a clear JRC “Israel Policy,” articulating the idea of the Zionist dream of a Jewish State, to guide its deliberations.

A further perspective, beyond an advisory or programming role for an IDAC successor but building upon those roles, is that what is needed at this time is the development of an engagement-oriented and action-oriented approach. The heart of this concept is that study properly leads to action and that, with respect to Israel and Palestine, action should take the form of critical advocacy and relationship-building with Israel, its people and its neighbors.

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All of the ideas outlined above have been presented in a constructive spirit by a committee that is united in its hopes for a climate of Israel/Palestine discourse that lives up to the highest ideals of Judea Reform Congregation. Committee members have worked conscientiously toward this goal over the past three years, and now look to the leadership of the congregation to remain attentive to the issues discussed in this report as plans are made going forward. We conclude our tenure in camaraderie and in gratitude for having had the opportunity to be of service in support of this vital work.

Submitted by Norm Loewenthal, Committee Chair