

## 2020 VISION

## UPJ conference discusses a post-COVID world

PETER KOHN

A MIDRASHIC story about a traveller and a palace in flames set the tone of 2020 Vision, the Union for Progressive Judaism's (UPJ) all-day online conference this month.

The November 8 event drew 27 constituent congregations, Zionist organisations and schools from across Australia, New Zealand and Asia to their screens for sessions ranging from pandemic responses to Jewish music.

Introduced by UPJ co-president Brian Samuel, US Rabbi Sharon Brous of innovative Los Angeles congregation Ikar gave a keynote address, in which she related the story from the Midrash – whose origins are linked to the wanderings of Abram (later Abraham).

As she explained, the rabbis taught that Abram had asked who the caretaker of the burning palace was, and was told it was owned by the Creator. Moreover it was now Abram's obligation to become the caretaker and extinguish the flames.

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David Knoll, UPJ co-president

"The world is burning and Abram asks God 'What are you doing about it?' and God responds, 'What are *you* doing about it?'" said Rabbi Brous. "That, according to our tradition, is the birth of the Covenant. Together they go and put out the fire."

It serves as a cautionary tale about the 2020 world, racked with instability and pandemic, and the obligations of Jews, who, in Rabbi Brous' words, are "the bearers of holy chutzpah in this world", tasked to help revive it.

Expounding on the concept of relational Judaism developed by US Professor Ron



Judi Hall (left) and Eve Altman discuss how to grow communities.

Photo: Screenshot

Wolfson, a focus on grassroots engagement, UPJ co-president David Knoll told the conference, "We have begun training of congregational leaders in relational Judaism skills. And we asked communal leaders who participated in the first of our relational Judaism feedback sessions earlier this year about what inspired them. Some were inspired by their parents and grandparents to become committed Jews. Others were inspired by their grandchildren. Family is clearly very important."

"A Jewish community where busy people feel cared for and can connect with others with whom they share common values and interests is a community that will grow. Another important point of inspiration came from small communities who are inspired by their volunteer base. We are learning that people step up, even when you might not expect them to. And when they step up, they inspire others to do so."

A workshop on how Progressive congregations have coped under the pandemic heard the experiences of several leaders around the region. Judi Hall of Emanuel Synagogue spoke of outreach sessions with Muslim women. Elyse Silverberg of the

United Hebrew Congregation of Hong Kong related the Congregational Care Initiative, in which shule volunteers regularly contact congregants to see how they are faring with the pandemic and with civil unrest. Jane Figgis of Temple David in Perth described small chavurot that enable friendships between people who know each other mostly from shule services. Rabbi Shoshana Kaminsky of Beit Shalom in Adelaide spoke of "deep listening" sessions that brought people closer.

World Union of Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) chair Carole Sterling of Canada conveyed the international movement's support at this critical time in the Asia-Pacific region, and WUPJ president Rabbi Sergio Bergman of Argentina spoke of "the use of modernity and technology to continue values of study, of Torah".

With the past High Holy Days seeing the embrace of online worship – Melbourne's Temple Beth Israel (TBI) alone had more than 24,000 views from 25 countries during its High Holy Days services – a session on the digital future discussed worship choices in the post-COVID world. Online participation,

which the pandemic has demonstrated as a viable new option, was credited for its ability to help worshippers who are geographically remote or unable to physically take part for health reasons. But undeniably the online experience appealed to a broader group, with 70 per cent of those surveyed saying they would like to incorporate elements of it into their regular shule habits. However, the centrality of physical attendance – with its human contact and closeness to a Sefer Torah – continued to hold universal appeal.

UPJ Vatik (leadership) awards were presented to Ron Hoenig of Beit Shalom Adelaide and Frank Moore of Etz Chayim Melbourne, and Presidents' Awards went to Roger Mendelson of TBI and Sharon Davis of North Shore Temple Emanuel. Twelve Ner Tamid awards were conferred.

The conference observed a pause of silence to commemorate the passing of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, with UPJ biennial chair Susan Kadar describing him as "a gadol, a giant".

The UPJ biennial conference, a face-to-face event, is now being planned for October 2021.