

SHABBATTOGETHER

Are we succeeding at being inclusive?

RABBI
DANIEL RABIN

ONE year ago I wrote an op-ed in *The Australian Jewish News* for the ShabbaTTogether weekend – a global campaign whereby communities around the world would be participating in a Shabbat of disability inclusion and mental health awareness.

The article was entitled “Beyond the wheelchair ramp” and I explored the need for communities to recognise that disability inclusion went far beyond the construction of a wheelchair ramp or accessible bathroom facilities. It was in fact a change in mindset that was crucial to ensuring a true sense of inclusion. Given that we all have preconceived ideas and implicit biases, which often shape the way in which we view others who may seem different to us, it was (and still is) vital for us to challenge and confront those perceptions. And so the ShabbaTTogether weekend was not designed to be a one-off project or initiative but rather to create an ongoing new way of thinking and behaving.

At the time it was encouraging and inspiring to see so many shules and community organisations rally behind the concept and numerous events and talks were held over the weekend.

A year has since passed.

This coming Shabbat we will once again be joining with hundreds of other communities around the world for the global Shabbat of disability inclusion and mental health awareness.

The question which needs to be asked is, “How did we do?”

How much closer are we to a changed mindset? Are we in fact being inclusive? Are those with disabilities being empow-



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ered? Are they included in the discussions and decision-making processes when it comes to their needs? Did the Shabbat, designed to be a catalyst, bring about the change needed for communities to become more inclusive? Have we been able to truly absorb a fundamental Jewish teaching of the basic premise that we are all created in God’s image?

The truth is every community and every individual needs to answer these questions.

Communities and individuals need to take an honest assessment both on an external and internal level. Externally, to audit whether the physical changes needed to be more accommodating were made or at least plans put in place; internally, to ask whether we are still defining people by what they cannot do rather than by what they can.

Perhaps there is no better yardstick than asking those living with a disability if they have felt included and are being

treated as equal members of the community. I have personally heard numerous encouraging stories and anecdotes that show there has been much positive change in the mindset of communities and individuals.

Unfortunately there is still a way to go. Just recently I was told about a group of teenage classmates who had organised to meet at a particular time and place to walk to an event together. One of the classmates had a physical disability which would not allow him to walk at the same pace as his peers. Without much thought given to his needs they had asked him to miss out on this one. Instead of meeting earlier or considering other ways to accommodate him, they chose to exclude. I don’t for one minute believe it was intentional or intended to cause hurt. But hurt it did.

So with the 2020 ShabbaTTogether soon upon us, what is our commitment going forward? What can we do to con-

tinue creating positive change and breaking down barriers? How do we ensure we can all live, work and socialise in an accessible world?

I would like to suggest just one practical idea inspired by an article published by Disability Advocacy Victoria Inc. Their paper, “How to be disability inclusive”, featured a section entitled “Imagine yourself”.

One example read: “Imagine that you walk into a community centre for an information night about the impending bushfires. The room is full of people speaking a foreign language. You only know a little of this language, but they are speaking so quickly and fluently that you have no idea what they are saying. They look at you and ask you a question but you don’t know what the question is. You only know that they are standing there waiting for an answer. You indicate that you can’t understand them and they sigh and brush you off, telling you not to worry about it.”

The question that followed was “What would you need to make this work for you?”

I think this highlights a very powerful and important step in continuing to make the positive change we are trying to implement.

By considering how you might feel in a particular situation or circumstance will allow you to listen, respect and appreciate the other person’s perspective.

If the teenagers in the above story had “imagined themselves” they would have no doubt done things differently to make things work. “Imagine yourself” will help to assist in creating an environment in which everyone can feel comfortable, included and welcome!

For more information visit the Rabbinical Council of Victoria’s Facebook page. Rabbi Daniel Rabin is rabbi of South Caulfield Hebrew Congregation.

SUPPORT AND LOVE

How does Progressive Jewry stand with Israel?

DAVID KNOLL &
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ALTHOUGH Zionist activity took root in Australia in the 1920s, the Australian Jewish community as it stood during World War II was fundamentally British in origin and British in outlook.

When most leading rabbis in Australia were opposed to Zionism, Temple Beth Israel’s Rabbi Sanger (along with Rabbi Falk of the Great Synagogue) were actively Zionist. The term “Zionism” was coined in 1890 by Nathan Birnbaum. Zionism is the movement which asserts that the Jewish people, like other peoples on earth, has a right to self-determination in their own homeland.

From inception, Zionism has been neither left-wing nor right-wing. Jews of all persuasions – left, right, religious and secular – have long worked together towards its goals, albeit not always harmoniously. The debates have been vigorous, and regrettably, not always respectful. Since at least 1937, the Progressive movement has been openly Zionist.

That the Jewish people are entitled to their right of self-determination in their ancestral homeland transcends which party is governing Israel. It is a fundamental right, a fulcrum of Zionism, enshrined in Israel’s Declaration of Independence.

But how do we express our support at a time when many in our community have some angst at some of Israel’s current policies, whether issues of peace-making and security, corruption and undermining the rule of law, lack of gender equality and racism emanating from parts of Israeli society, the failure to honour agreements relating to the Kotel, or the ever worsening sore over the failure to extradite Malka Leifer? That we are concerned about such issues shows that we think about them and we care about them.

The Union for Progressive Judaism is a Zionist organisation. Support and love for Israel is at the heart of 21st century Progressive Judaism. We are active in the Zionist Federation of Australia through ARZA. Our vision for Israel is a pluralistic state, where all religious practices are treated fairly and equally and where the rights of minorities are protected. We express our support for these ideals through support for our institutions in Israel, such as the Israel Religious

Action Centre and the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism.

We work hard to ensure that Israel is a home for all Jews, and have succeeded, for example, in ending gender discrimination on public transport, so that no longer can there be any requirement that women sit in the back of public buses or have to give up their seats on El Al flights.

On the last day of 2019 we received wonderful news that for the first time in Israeli history, the Israeli government will fund Progressive and Conservative rabbis in cities and metropolitan areas, albeit for now at reduced rates and without acknowledging them as rabbis. A petition to the Supreme Court seeking equal treatment is pending.

We want all Jews to have a place to pray, learn and build their communities, a right far from given in Israel. Just recently, after many years of delay, the local council in Shoham finally allocated a building to the local Progressive congregation! The Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Shoham had advocated against the community for years, preventing them from getting a permanent building.

The need is growing. In 2018, the Jewish Peoplehood Policy Institute revealed that today 13 per cent of Israelis

identify as Progressive or Conservative Jews – more than double in comparison to a decade ago. The vast majority of these are Israeli-born “Sabras”. More and more Israelis recognise that there is more than one way to be Jewish.

And we encourage healthy, respectful conversation about what is best for Israel, decrying anti-Zionist rhetoric from the outside and expressions of racism and lack of respect for the different streams of Judaism from within.

Encouraging our members to learn about the issues that Israel faces, both externally and internally is essential to enabling a positive conversation about the kind of state that we want Israel to be. It is only when we are educated about the issues that it is possible to engage in constructive discussions about the future.

The conversations that take place in our schools, through our youth movement, Netzer, and in our congregations, and ARZA are founded in a concern for the welfare of the state and a desire to see it continue to fulfil the prophetic vision to be a “light unto the nations”.

David Knoll and Brian Samuel are co-presidents of the Union for Progressive Judaism.