

UPJ BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

Meeting challenges, building relationships

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SINGING, Torah study, and discussions on Jewish diversity in Israel, were part of a four-day encounter at the Union for Progressive Judaism's (UPJ's) biennial conference in Sydney.

Since pandemic restrictions ended, the November 17-20 conference was the first opportunity for an in-person event spanning the UPJ's 26 congregations, schools, youth groups and communal organisations across Australia, New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region.

A Beatles-inspired theme, Progressing Judaism Eight Days A Week, emphasised the universality of Progressive Jewish living. Congregation building in the post-pandemic age was a recurring topic, embracing a "relational" mindset fostered by US Jewish educator Dr Ron Wolfson, which places one-on-one outreach ahead of shule programs.

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David Knoll, UPJ co-president

“We know what we currently do – every one of our congregations and schools can answer that question,” UPJ co-president David Knoll told a session. “[But] do we know what our members and our potential members find inspirational?”

Successful congregations have grown “because they prosper not by measuring attendance at a program [but] by building those relationships”, he said. “If we lay the foundation stones of Progressive, relational Judaism, we can have growing communities.”



Rabbi Sergio Bergman, WUPJ president, and Carole Sterling, WUPJ chair. Photo: Peter Kohn

Threats to non-Orthodox Jewish streams in Israel after the change of government were a focal point, with Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism chair Yair Lootsteen addressing a session. Interviewed by *The AJN*, he urged Progressive Jews to make their voice heard through the UPJ on thorny challenges if ultra-nationalists Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich join Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

Between them, the two hardliners are calling for Jews converted by non-Orthodox rabbis to be ineligible for aliyah. And there is a demand to end the Law of Return's "grandchild clause", which defines Jewish status for relocating to Israel and citizenship as having a Jewish matrilineal or patrilineal grandparent.

Branding these “a threat to democracy”, Lootsteen noted the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) and the US Union for Reform Judaism have issued condemnations. (Earlier, UPJ and the Australian Reform Zionist Association stated that “Ben Gvir and Smotrich are

plainly corrosive forces ... We pray that their impact on Jewish pluralism, egalitarianism can be kept to a minimum. The strength of a democracy is measured by how it treats its minorities.”)

Looking to the future, the conference heard from Netzer federal mazkirah Noa Abrahams and sganit (vice-chairperson) Ashira Chait about challenges to Progressive Jewish youth.

In an *AJN* interview, WUPJ president Rabbi Sergio Bergman spoke about reinvigorating synagogue life after the pandemic. “We don't really want to have a Jewish Netflix where people are in their living rooms watching services; that way, we won't be building communities. And on the other hand, if you cannot attend, or you want to have a thorough classroom lesson, or you can bring together Jewish people globally, it's amazing to meet by Zoom.”

WUPJ chair Carole Sterling said the aim is “how to find the balance between the use of technology and the energy of meeting in person”.

She voiced concern for smaller congregations in the UPJ region, in Southeast Asia and China. “In some of these areas, it's much harder for people to lead meaningful, Progressive Jewish lives.”

Attendees sang their way towards Shabbat in a session with TBI cantor Michel Laloum and choir directors Andrea Catzel of Emanuel Synagogue and Judy Campbell of North Shore Temple Emanuel.

Participants enjoyed a Shabbat dinner, a Shabbat shacharit service and an educational beach walk. A musical production, *One Of A Kind*, about an Egyptian Jewish family in Australian suburbia in the 1950s, co-written by Aaron Robuck and Judy Campbell, provided a post-Shabbat treat.

The Assembly of Rabbis and Cantors of Australia, New Zealand and Asia serving the UPJ elected Rabbi Allison Conyer of Etz Chayim in Melbourne as its new president, succeeding Rabbi Nicole Roberts of North Shore Temple Emanuel.

In Melbourne on November 23, Progressive Judaism Victoria and the UPJ hosted Rabbi Bergman and WUPJ chair Sterling at a forum at TBI on outreach to Jews impacted by the Ukraine war.

At the UPJ AGM on Tuesday, the organisation's annual awards were announced. Ner Tamid Awards went to Rosie Block (Emanuel Synagogue), Noreen Elijah (Jewish Religious Union, Mumbai), Robbie Ventura (Temple Shalom, Gold Coast) and Lisa Sylvan (Leo Baeck Centre, Melbourne). Vatik Awards were conferred on David Bloom (Etz Chayim, Melbourne), Roger Mendelson (TBI) and Michael Taft (Leo Baeck Centre). UPJ President's Awards went to Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black (Leo Baeck Centre), who is retiring, and Michael Shnukal (Temple Shalom, Gold Coast).

Peter Kohn is the *AJN* senior journalist. He was in Sydney for the UPJ biennial conference.

THE PARASHA: וַיְצַו

The Divine experience of Jacob

CONSUMED with fear and self-preservation after his elaborate deception to obtain his father's final blessing in place of his older brother, Jacob fled his home in search of a new life. Overcome with exhaustion, Jacob found a certain place to sleep for the night.

With his makeshift stone pillow, he dreamt of angels going up and down a ladder reaching from the ground to the sky. God was standing beside him, reiterating the covenantal message God gave to Abraham saying, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Gen. 28:13-15).

Jacob awoke, awed by his encounter, or awareness of the Divine, and said: “The Lord was in this place, and I, I did not

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know.” He anointed the stone upon which his head had laid, and called the place Bethel, meaning house of God.

Jacob then made a vow, saying, “If God remains with me, protecting me on this journey that I am making, and giving me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I return safe to my father's house the Lord shall be my God ...” (Bereshit 28:20-21).

Wow! What a truly awesome experience. To see the connection between the physical and spiritual is to be the place where human and Divine meet. Not to merely be in the place of meeting, but to actually be the place of human-Divine convergence. As soon as Jacob became aware of this connection, he awoke. His awareness of this Divine encounter was what separated himself from the Divine, leaving him with the need to ritualise and memorialise the experience. In his article “A Divine Moment When Heaven and Earth Touch”, Rabbi Dan Moskowitz likens Jacob's dream to Martin Buber's

concept of an I-Thou connection, the connection to something that transcends the self. Rabbi Moskowitz used an analogy of a song being more than the sum of its collected parts, or a painting more than “a collection of lines”. As soon as we deconstruct an experience, we diminish the whole. As soon as we define the experience, we step outside of it.

Rabbi Moskowitz suggests that Jacob's dream was his “understanding of himself as inseparable from the divinity that is all round him and within him”. He dreamt that God stood beside him and spoke to him. God was separate from him. And yet, this message was delivered within him, in a dream. As soon as he awoke, it was as if the music stopped. So, he memorialised the experience (by anointing the rock and naming the place Bethel) as an attempt to hold on to the encounter.

Herein lies the power of ritual. Ritual is our attempt to memorialise a Divine encounter, and, if we're lucky, ritual can help us access the Divine around and within us. Like Jacob, sometimes we are struck by a profound insight, experience, or encounter that awakens us, that changes the way we see ourselves, others, or the world around us. We might be

tempted to dismiss these experiences as fleeting moments. However, in this parasha, Jacob understood that something significant happened there, in that place. How do we capture these transformative moments? What rituals do we create to mark our transformative experiences or Divine insights?

Why might Jacob have anointed the rock and named the spot where his Divine encounter occurred? Perhaps to remind himself, or others who happen to be in that place, that something extraordinary occurred there. Perhaps that reminder could enable others to experience something extraordinary in that place. Thus, just as important as marking transformative experiences is allowing existing rituals to transcend our current understandings and be a pathway to the Divine, like a ladder from us to Heaven. Parashat Vayetzai encourages us to consider how our current rituals can provide us with the opportunity to be the place of Divine-human convergence.

Allison RH Conyer is rabbi of Etz Chayim Progressive Synagogue, and is the new president of the Assembly of Rabbis and Cantors of Australia, New Zealand and Asia.