

UPJ CONFERENCE

Optimism and seeking a way forward

PETER KOHN



In deeply troubled times, 170 delegates, representing Progressive Jewish communities from Australia, New Zealand and Asia, met in Canberra at the November 7-10 Union for Progressive Judaism (UPJ) biennial conference. They had 13 months of war in Israel to digest, and a seismic upheaval in US politics and its far-reaching consequences.

Throughout the four-day event, the 101 still-missing hostages, abducted during the Hamas pogrom of October 7, 2023, were silent companions. Their names adorned empty chairs during Shabbat services at the ACT Jewish Community Centre, and they were paired with aliyot to the Torah. Their cruel absence from loved ones was an abiding talking point.

But the gathering sought out optimism. The inclusion of madrichim from the UPJ's young adults movement Netzer showed the way forward, particu-



Netzer madrichim at the UPJ conference.

larly in a session on what young people are seeking from the region's Progressive movement.

Conference co-chairs – former federal Labor MP Dr Mike Kelly and Sarah Greenbaum, from Berowra Liberal MP Julian Leeser's staff – joined UPJ co-presidents Danny Hochberg and Dr Larry Lockshin, together with indefatigable UPJ executive manager Jocelyn Robuck, to organise a stimulating program.

Israel ambassador Amir Maimon was a special guest, as was Australian Phyllis Dorey, chair of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

In a session on Israel policy, Shadow Foreign Minister Simon Birmingham lamented, "We as a nation, a Parliament and a party tried to stand together, but at times it has fractured ... We on the Liberal side have tried to stand precisely where we've always been – in support of

Israel." Birmingham pointedly described the Australian Greens and their anti-Israel posture as "a fundamental risk and at so many levels".

Leeser condemned the explosion of antisemitism, the trashing of ALP col-

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Nova Peris

league and conference guest Josh Burns' Melbourne electoral office and the attack on a Jewish-owned Sydney bakery.

In a video message, antisemitism envoy Jillian Segal foreshadowed an evaluation of her office in three years' time. "I'm hopeful we will be able to make an impact on this scourge."

Burns, who was in Israel last

December, recalled, "It shakes you." Danny Hochberg urged attendees to join solidarity missions such as the UPJ's, which tremendously boost the morale of Israelis.

Convening 24 hours after the US election, there was foreboding on the conference sidelines about the Donald Trump victory, particularly but not exclusively from a cohort of US emigres.

Their concern was about Trump's repeated use of offensive, racist and violent language, and his public attacks on American Jews who traditionally vote Democrat. In a workshop, some expressed fears for the survival of the world's only superpower as a democracy.

In an *AJN* interview, Bruce Wolpe, a senior fellow at the US Study Centre, expressed hope that with Trump, "you can stay true to your values as you engage ... to draw out the best decisions from him, for Israel, for the Jewish community." Jews need to hope that "he acts closer to our standards than his".

And Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism chair Yair Lootsteen told *The AJN* any early Trump breakthrough in the Middle East would be "a remarkable achievement, perhaps his first as president".

Every conference has a moment remembered long afterwards. For this writer, it was a rousing Shabbat dinner address by Nova Peris, Indigenous former senator and impassioned friend of Jewish Australians and Israel.

"Your story, your resilience, serves as an inspiration to Indigenous people worldwide," she said, "as you embody the right to self-determination and the freedom to live in the land of your forefathers."

The UPJ conferred its Ner Tamid, Vatik and President's Awards during the conference. For a list of awards, visit upj.org.au



At the UPJ conference, from left: co-president Danny Hochberg, Israel ambassador Amir Maimon, conference co-chair and former MP Mike Kelly, and co-president Dr Larry Lockshin. Photo: Peter Kohn

THE PARASHA: תולדות

Parenting in the aftermath of trauma

We are now living through a period of turmoil and upheaval for the Jewish people, the likes of which have not been experienced since the Holocaust. Antisemitic violence is rife in the Diaspora and Israel is under daily assault.

Testimonies of our losses, of damage and destruction fill our news feeds and conversations. Against this backdrop, how do we preserve and nurture our relationships so that they are not completely tarnished by this trauma?

The relationship between Rivkah and Yitzchak recounted in this week's parasha of Toldot offers some insight into the far-reaching negative consequences of reacting with a trauma lens rather than responding with a trauma informed approach.

Both Yitzchak and Rivkah experience trauma. Yitzchak is bound by his father on an altar, knife clean and cold on his neck, his father's tortured face looks down on him before he is released at the last moment. The midrash says that the tears of Avraham fell in Yitzchak's eyes and this is the cause for his cloudy vision at the end of his life. Perhaps what the midrash is trying to teach us is that these tears formed the trauma lens Yitzchak adopts to inter-

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pret the world. This trauma lens eventually wears away his ability to see clearly.

Rivkah experiences trauma too. As a young girl, she is almost too enthusiastic in her desire to leave her father's house. Our Rabbis pick up on this incongruence and hint at the sexual violence and devious behaviour of her male relatives that she must have witnessed. Rivkah literally has a flight response to the dangerous situation she finds herself in. She tries to distance herself from the sinister influence by aligning herself with Avraham's household.

Yitzchak's trauma response is silence. His foreboding question to his father about sourcing the animal for the sacrifice is the last time we hear his direct voice until much later in his life. He marries, falls in love, buries his father, sows and reaps crops, prays for his wife to conceive and raises children all without the text recording his utterance of a single word. We don't hear his response to these life events. Yitzchak epitomises the attribute of "gevurah" – restraint. He holds everything inside.

Yitzchak's stoicism hampers his ability to connect to his wife and forms a chasm in their approach to parenting their children. They each pray separately when challenged by infertility. When Rivkah experiences challenges with her pregnancy and receives an oracle, she does not confide in her husband. When Yitzchak decides to give a blessing to his son, he does not inform or consult with Rivkah. Neither Yitzchak nor Rivkah disclose their traumatic experiences to each other, nor recognise the influence of the trauma on their parenting. They parent their children as they prayed – each in their own separate corner.

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Their trauma impacts their parenting in other ways too. Almost as an antidote, they each favour the child that represents the antithesis of their trauma response. Yitzchak, silent and passive, is drawn to

Esav who is described in the text as "ruddy" and "a man who knows how to hunt and trap". Perhaps at a primal level, Yitzchak feels the safety from Esav of one who can always provide the animal for the sacrifice.

Rivkah, based on her experiences in her father's house, fears the darker side of human nature. She is drawn to the pure boy who "dwelt in tents". The midrash interprets this to mean the "study tents of Shem and Ever" – Yaakov was cerebral and domestic.

Despite their best intentions to secure a blessing for their chosen child, we end the parsha with the family torn apart. Yaakov flees back to the very place that Rivkah escaped from.

Yitzchak and Rivkah's experience of parenting in the aftermath of trauma serves as a lesson to us about the need to acknowledge and process trauma and the devastating consequences that can shatter families apart when trauma is not addressed. Their story reminds us we can't ignore the trauma we experience but that we do not need to let it define us or the decisions we make about how we love.

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