

MAKING TRADITION MEANINGFUL AND RELEVANT

A clarion call for Progressive Judaism

DAVID KNOLL,
BRIAN SAMUEL, &
RABBI DAVID KUNIN



We know from Gen17 (and Gen08) that the largest segment of Australian Jewry self-describes as “traditional” rather than Orthodox, Masorti or Progressive. They seek authentic Jewish culture, tradition and spirituality. However, the words: “Progressive”, “Masorti”, “Reconstructionist”, “Orthodox” are not how many of these Jews, who self-describe as “traditional”, connect.

Many Australian Jews perceive labels as sectarian. Yet, each stream of Judaism has something valuable to offer. Each stream seeks to strengthen connection and continuity.

And each has its own clarion call. Progressive Judaism seeks to bring into the world some of the greatest teachings and values of Judaism; a Judaism that dares, dreams, encourages learning and informed choice, is willing to understand the wisdom of our ancestors, and then to shape the kind of Judaism of which we want to be a part and one in which we all have a role to play.

We take tradition and make it meaningful and relevant in a 21st century world. Inspired by Ron Wolfson’s *Relational Judaism*, the Union for Progressive Judaism has begun the journey towards

keeping and attracting people who want to be Jewish in an environment which is egalitarian, in which they are comfortable, and which they perceive as inclusive and authentic.

We acknowledge that Jews in Australia, New Zealand and Asia, communities which we serve, want places to connect through education opportunities, cultural activities, friendship groups, and social justice activities, as well as, not in place of, prayer.

We recognise that being actively Jewish is no longer a given for most Jews in open democracies. How many of us observe our Judaism varies, with most individuals picking and choosing what they will observe, participate in, and espouse. We have to communicate that Progressive Judaism is freedom to, not freedom from.

We offer a Judaism that is meaningful to the way Jews live their lives today; that is why we describe it as “Living Judaism”. At the same time, we are a people that values our traditions and we do not hesitate to emphasise our commitment to Torah as being at the heart of any Jewish experience of the world.

And we will remain respectful of the place of other streams of Judaism in our communities.

That said, Progressive Judaism engages with the big issues of our time. We see Jewish values as a crucial contributor to improving the society in which we live.

As the late Professor Julius Stone taught, a society in which the questionings of justice cease to be a constant prod



UPJ's Shir Chadash music conference at the Geelong Conference Centre in July.

and perplexity would not be human in any sense that matters. It is not enough that one should treat each of one's neighbours with an equal amount of respect if one does not accord to all of those neighbours that element of dignity for which human beings seeking a “just” society clamour.

For example, as Australian Jews, do we do enough to speak up with, rather than for, Indigenous Australians, our neighbours who are one of the most incarcerated peoples on the planet? William Cooper spoke up for us; how can we not take to heart the Uluru Statement from the Heart?

Do we accept that a Jewish community can speak up to ensure that we have a

planet where diverse species, including humans, can thrive? Many rabbis, from different streams of Judaism, included climate change issues in their sermons at the commencement of this very Jewish year. It is an issue to which Jewish values speak. But we as a community must do so responsibly. The wellbeing of future generations deserves thoughtful, principled action.

We look forward to playing our part in unfolding our shared future.

David Knoll and Brian Samuel are co-presidents of the Union for Progressive Judaism. Rabbi David Kunin is rabbi of the Jewish community of Japan and chairperson of the Council of Progressive Rabbis (Moetzah).