Three Pillars of Inclusive Orthodox Rabbinical Leadership

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Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton has been the Senior Rabbi of The Great Synagogue in Sydney since 2015.

“Inclusive Orthodoxy” was Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ way of describing how the majority of Jewish

congregations operate in Britain and the Commonwealth. In these communities most

synagogues are run along Orthodox lines with an Orthodox Rabbi, and some

members who are observant. However, most congregants are more traditional than

strict in their religious practice. Nevertheless, they are part of an Orthodox

congregation, and when the model is working at its best, they feel at home there, are

actively welcomed and valued, and they may even grow in their religious

commitment. Beyond their commitment to maintaining Orthodox communal

standards, these congregations are not part of a dedicated ideological project of any

particular variety, but religious communities that seek to provide a home to as many

Jews as possible.

That is the model of the United Synagogue in London, similar congregations around

Britain, and in other countries including Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and my

own home in Australia. I have been the Rabbi of one such congregation, The Great

Synagogue of Sydney, for just over ten years now. In that time I have had to reflect

on how a Rabbi can and should lead an Inclusive Orthodox community. It is not

straightforward, and raises several quandaries. How can the Rabbi uphold Orthodox

standards while still welcoming everyone? How can he make everyone feel at home

even though they might have very different lifestyles to his own, and very different

from a halakhic ideal? How can he promote increased Jewish observance without

alienating his congregation?

I cannot claim to have all the answers to these questions, but I think that the bridge

that needs to be built may rest on three pillars: Embracing, Exemplifying and

Encouraging. Just as Rabbi Sacks argued that Inclusive Orthodoxy as a whole was

not an accommodation, but an ideal, certainly in the context of the modern world as it

actually exists, I submit that this rabbinic approach is not just a strategic choice, but

is also a religious imperative.

First comes Embracing. It is the job of the Rabbi of any congregation, and especially a congregation where the members are not uniform in their level of religious observance, to embrace each and every person. My young children have a board book called We Go To Shul (by Douglas Florian and Hannah Tolson), which includes the line “rabbi greets all those he meets”, which captures this responsibility perfectly. Everyone who wants to come to any activities of the congregation should be greeted, embraced, genuinely welcomed and valued, and they should feel that is the authentic disposition of the Rabbi. This is a different concept to being non-judgmental. Choosing not to be judgmental implies that I harbor an unexpressed judgement, and I am making the decision not to bring it out, but it exists and I could if I wanted. Embracing puts all that aside, and sees only a person who wants to connect, and celebrating and facilitating that desire. Although, as I will go on to argue, the Rabbi can and should be ambitious for each person’s religious growth, authentic embrace is not a tool to bring about that growth but a fundamental expression of Jewish values in its own right. When Maimonides codified the obligation to love another Jew in Hilkhot Deot 6:3 he did so without qualification: “Each person is commanded to love each and every one of Israel as themselves.” It is not dependent on the level, actual or prospective, of religious observance.

Sometimes this can be difficult, on a personal or a religious level. Some people are

difficult, they are prickly characters, or simply have a personality that does not click

with the Rabbi's. Sometimes the Rabbi may feel frustration or disappointment with a

congregant's religious observance. He might feel the congregant could do more, or

has even slipped backwards. He might feel that his hopes for that congregant have

not borne fruit, or that he has poured care and effort without experiencing reciprocity.

There are two ways for the Rabbi to address this, and they are both internal work.

The first is to try to set all these considerations aside, and return to the core values

of universal and unconditional embrace. If that is not immediately or always possible,

then it is worth remembering that religious-pastoral relationships play out over a long

time. What does not happen this year may happen next year, or in ten years.

Patience and persistence are the keys to both a happy and a successful rabbinate.

The second pillar is Exemplifying. Yelling at people to do more or do better probably

never worked well, and certainly cannot work today. A Rabbi makes clear their

standards not by demanding them of others but by living up to them, as much as

possible, himself. Again Maimonides points us towards this, when he advises

(Hilkhot Talmud Torah 4:1) that however wise a teacher may be, he should only be

followed if his behavior exemplifies proper conduct, because teaching ultimately

resides in actions more than words. The Rabbi must therefore be scrupulous in how

he speaks and what he eats, in timely and reliable attendance at services, visible

enthusiasm for the study of Torah, hospitality, generosity, acts of personal kindness.

As the Talmud states in Yoma 86a, he should prompt observers to say of him “how

pleasant are his ways, how proper are his deeds”.

This should not make the Rabbi appear angelic, because the Torah was not given to

the angels. He can thoughtfully give insight into his struggles, because questioning

and doubt are inevitable parts of the religious experience, and his congregants

should not be misled into believing they alone face these challenges. That would be

both dishonest and unhelpful. In a careful way, the Rabbi can share the practical

struggles of, say, raising a young family while also attending to religious and

communal obligations, or the theological struggles that come from seeing the

innocent suffer.

The Rabbi must also demonstrate palpable intellectual integrity and moral clarity. If

he feels the need to teach difficult lessons or transmit challenging ideas, he must do

so, but not in a way that demands agreement or compliance. The stance of the

Rabbi should be “you have asked me to be your teacher, and that gives me an

obligation to teach the truth as I see it. No one is obliged to agree with me, but you

have a right to know what I think, if I believe the circumstances call on me to tell you.”

That combination of courage and conviction with humility and openness is a contribution in itself and also makes even the hardest messages possible to give and receive without destabilizing relationships. They reveal a Rabbi who might be wrong, and knows he might be wrong, but who is not prepared to be a liar or a coward. Of course, knowing when not to speak, and how not to speak is just as important, and verbal recklessness is no more a quality in a Rabbi than it is in anyone else. What is true, is that with the growth of love and trust, more can be said.

Have I detailed impossibly high standards? Probably. Which means in turn there can be modelling of living with imperfection, honesty about falling short, the need for repair following rupture and a continual attempt to do better.

The final pillar is Encouraging. The challenge is to nudge without becoming a ‘noodge’. In an Inclusive Orthodox congregation the Rabbi cannot rely on a shared understanding of the practical binding force of Halacha, or on peer pressure and social expectations, but he still wants to see his congregants grow in their religious observance. He is not presiding over what is sometimes called a “kiruv shul”, a place where everyone is consciously and deliberately on a journey towards greater religious observance and they want the Rabbi to help them on that path. That is

probably not the project or the consensus of the membership of an Inclusive Orthodox community. What, then, can the Rabbi do? He can and should encourage.

He should engage with his congregants, as Maimonides counsels “patiently and Gently” (Hilkhot Deot 6:7). Suggesting to someone who rarely attends services to come, not just more often in general but on a specific occasion, whether Shabbat, Yom Tov, or weekday; offering to take time to learn Torah with them; not just laying tefillin for them, but teaching them how to put on tefillin; teaching them how to read a Haftarah, perhaps the Torah, or lead a service; giving them an active role in services as a shamash or gabbai. This is aside from a role in lay leadership, such as joining the synagogue board; it is about deepening specifically religious activity.

Not everyone will agree to try to do more, some will agree but not follow through, some will follow through for a while and then participation will tail off, but the more and the wider the Rabbi’s encouragement the greater will be the results. This encouragement has to be personal. I have not seen exhortations from the pulpit or appeals in emails have much effect. Success comes most often from personal invitations made in the context of personal relationships. The greatest success for the Rabbi is when, in the case of an individual, he no longer needs to encourage, because that person now attends and participates because of their own internal enthusiasm and not because of an external intervention. Of course, no longer making specific suggestions should never mean the relationship is allowed to

atrophy. Anyone can see when the Rabbi loses interest because their presence is taken for granted, is regarded as “in the bag”. Instead what starts out as drawing people in can become a warm, close and settled relationship of fellowship and appreciation. No one should feel looked down upon because they do less, but they should feel celebrated when they do more.

While these three pillars represent an ideal rather than a claim of personal achievement, they are perhaps parts of a vision to which an Inclusive Orthodox Rabbi can aspire and strive. They are a route to combining openness with integrity, breadth with growth, and authenticity with ambition. For a Rabbi called to this type of community and the challenges and opportunities it will bring, I submit these suggestions as an approach worth attempting.