Three Pillars of Inclusive Orthodox Rabbinical Leadership

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"Inclusive Orthodoxy" was Rabbi 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 10 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 backward. 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 10 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 toward 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 modeling 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 halakha, 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 toward greater religious observance and where 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.