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New top rabbi brings openness to the table

Rabbi Meir Shlomo Kluwgant. Photo: Joe Armao



Konrad Marshall

By the time the sun sets on Monday, the man sitting at this gleaming walnut dining table in St Kilda East will be the most prominent face in Australian Judaism. Rabbi Meir Shlomo Kluwgant, 45, is running unopposed as president for the Organisation of Rabbis of Australasia - the country's most senior rabbinical post. And the new voice of local Jewish leadership has pledged to be an open and responsive one. (He has

already delivered as much in his role as president of the Rabbinical Council of Victoria.) "Sometimes I get knocked on the head, and I get harsh emails, but it's important to have a real-time response - that's what this generation demands," he said. "There's nothing we shouldn't be speaking about. Let's talk about organ donation, let's talk about child protection, let's talk about reporting to the police, abortion, end-of-life issues." The goal for Rabbi Kluwgant

is clarity and unity. He takes a firm but humanitarian stance on asylum seekers, believing their experience is an echo of Jews being turned away from various ports after fleeing Europe. "I don't know what the answers are, but a hard and fast policy of 'You're not welcome here, get lost, we don't care what happens to you' - someone needed to say something." He points out that Melbourne has the highest per capita number of Holocaust survivors in the world

(outside Israel), including his own maternal grandparents. His paternal grandparents fled to Australia from the former Soviet Union. His parents were born overseas. "So from both sides, I guess, I'm a first-generation Aussie," he said. "I was born and bred in Melbourne ... I am a Carlton supporter, and I keep the faith that we will rise up the ladder and restore the glory." Once a school captain at Yeshivah College, he addresses the child sex abuse scandals there in no uncertain terms, including

the disclosure of abuse - a thorny issue in some parts of the Jewish community. "We have to unequivocally tell people - with a united voice, without any dissent - if you are a victim of child abuse, take it to the police. If you are a perpetrator, we hope you get caught and do your time, because that is unacceptable." A father of five sons, Rabbi Kluwgant has worked at the community support coalface for 25 years, with JewishCare, and is also a volunteer chaplain with Victoria Police.

In the course of the same 40-minute interview, he mentioned conversations with Matthew Guy and Bill Shorten, and dinners with a former state treasurer and the current Israeli ambassador. He listens as much as he talks. "It might be my voice out there, but when I speak I don't speak on my own," he said. "I consult with the community and the rabbinate, and I take them on a journey. And so far everybody has come along." konrad.marshall@fairfaxmedia.com.au