

RIPPING RABBI

HOW A MELBOURNE RABBI IS PRAISING THE BOARD FOR KEEPING HIM CONTENT

WORDS BY OLIVER PELLING

Dovid Tsap is a rabbi, a scholar, an author, a lecturer, a husband, a father, and most recently, a born-again skateboarder. He has studied the Torah (the Old Testament and all its various elements) for over 18 years. That's not something to be sniffed at. He's a pillar of his religious community. Called upon by other rabbinical figures that have queries and questions for him. "That's my place," he says with his skateboard by his side. "I'm a sort of consultant in the field of mysticism and Kabbalah." Kabbalah is the more spiritual dimension of Dovid's work, in which he explores God's relationship with the universe and the physical world around us. Try getting your head around that with a hangover.

Despite Dovid's unwavering commitment to his work, his study and his religion, he reached a point in his life where he felt something was missing. "In my community everybody my age is so preoccupied with family affairs and the domestics," he says. "Plus all the religious rituals – praying three times a day. There can be incredible isolation. It can be lonely." As well as feeling isolated, Dovid knew that he needed to find a way to get more exercise and he was feeling frustrated by long-running projects (study, writing books) and the toll such endeavours took on his psyche. "One book I've written was a 10-year project," he says. "It can take a long time to feel the fruits of your labour and you can end up feeling pretty low and despondent in the interim."

He craved some instant gratification, which he found in skateboarding after his friend, Raph Brous, reintroduced him to his board. "With skating," he says, "I find that every time I land a new trick after some struggle there's an incredible sense of accomplishment – almost like a triumph. That's something that keeps my self-esteem high, and makes me feel like I'm achieving something." Dovid says that in the wake of such triumphs, he even occasionally finds himself bowing before God. "It's definitely something that brings out a lot of thankfulness," he says.

Skateboarders' capacity for brotherhood, as Dovid puts it, is another reason he can't get enough of the skate culture. "There's an incredible sense of camaraderie," he says. "You go to the skatepark and it doesn't matter how different the people are, all of the differences just mellow out and shift to the sideline, find their way into the peripheral. I just love that. I guess, although it sounds dramatic, that deep inside I was yearning for it."

Dovid used to skate when he was a kid, so it didn't take long for him to get back into it. He admits that when he first stepped back on his skateboard he felt a sense of rebellion towards the confines of his religion, but that as the days rolled by he began to see more and more parallels between the two. "I began to realise how constructive it is," he says. "Not only for me personally, but also in terms of my ability to have an influence on other people. When my clergy saw some of the articles from *The Age*, the *Herald Sun* and some of the other local media, many of them approached me and said, 'That is a real sanctification of God's



Dovid Tsap learnt frontside rocks on the day this picture was taken, when Andrew Mapstone, Scott Standley and Reece Warren had a shred with the ripping rabbi on his backyard mini ramp in Melbourne. Mapstone

name'. There is so much bad rap about the religious community, the Jewish community," he continues, "And here was something much more lightweight, that's enjoyable, that puts religion in a positive light." In retrospect, Dovid is completely at ease with his skateboarding and the newfound links it has with his religion. "I don't feel like I'm rebelling at all now," he says. "On the contrary, I feel like I'm fully in harmony with what I'm supposed to be doing. There are so many benefits that I derive from it that I feel like I'm heading in the right direction."

Although Dovid appreciates that his rekindled love for skateboarding means young people relate to him more than they do other religious figures, he contests the idea that he started skateboarding for that reason. "I'm not skateboarding in order to reach out to kids – that's definitely not me," he says. "I love skateboarding, and the opportunities to talk to the kids just happened to be there."

He's approached by kids who have questions for him on a regular basis and Dovid is always happy to help. Some kids ask about his clothes, some ask for advice, some ask about circumcision, and some need a helping hand. The night before our interview took place he was approached by a kid that was renting a room in a house with an abusive, sometimes violent landlord. "This kid didn't have anywhere to sleep," says Dovid. "He ended up sleeping in my Tarago last night. I spent an hour and a half driving around St Kilda trying to find a hostel for him, but they were all booked out."

Apparently even some local Melbourne heads have been curious enough to ask questions about Judaism. "Raph Brous skates with the Pooners and funny enough they often ask him about it," says Dovid with a chuckle. "It's so surprising. They call him, interested to know more about it, and he calls me for answers to their questions. So he's named me the 'Poon Rabbi' – although I don't think they call me that. There's definitely a lot of interest in who I am and what I do."

Among the five (yeah, five) books he's currently writing, Dovid is most excited about one he's called *The Kabbalah Scholar, his Skateboard, and his Diary*. "The book discusses my own personal journey through skateboarding, the incredible enriching experiences I've had at all different skateparks, and with people from all different aspects of skateboarding," he says excitedly. "I've been having a lot of fun writing it. I'm not drawing on texts or abstract information. I'm actually going out into the world, watching people skate, experimenting for myself, then jotting down thoughts from philosophy or psychology that relate to various aspects of skateboarding."

Dovid's intentions with his writing, his skateboarding and his lecturing (he's invited to speak all over the world) is to enlighten people. In his eyes, people are so fixated on superficial forms of beauty that they neglect the beauty that really matters. "Not only the beauty that's apparent in art, song or philosophy," he says, "but a richer form of beauty, the beauty of morality – an act of kindness – the beauty of being truthful and honest. It's a very subtle form of beauty that is obscured by the more superficial things in this world."

He illustrates his point by asking why skateboarders spend money on decks with such beautiful graphics, only to deface them in just a few hours of skating. "I think there are two levels of beauty," he says. "There's the beauty of the artwork, but then there's the beauty of skateboarding, the creativity, landing a trick with finesse, the movement, it's like a dance. I think skaters are ready to sacrifice the more physical form of beauty – the graphics – for the more sublime form of beauty."

Whether you're religiously inclined or a flat-out atheist, it's hard not to be inspired by Dovid's quest for enlightenment and his search for true beauty. And while his religion and spirituality have given him a firm grounding for his work, it's Dovid's love affair with his skateboard that, for now at least, is keeping him moving forward. ●