

# Jewish, gay and comfortable

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras will take place this weekend amid the usual fanfare and publicity. How comfortable will gay Jews be to participate? And how comfortable do they feel as members of the Jewish community? This report by Sharon Labi.

WHEN Zac told his parents that he was gay ten years ago — with AIDS hysteria rife — his mother was distressed. "Why are you doing this to me?" she asked in despair. "Who made you like this?"

His father had guessed that Zac (not his real name) was gay. His mother sought counselling and sent him to a psychologist. Now, at 27, Zac regularly invites his boyfriend to Shabbat dinner at his parents' home.

Zac described his "coming out" as traumatic. "Coming out was absolutely soul-destroying, but I had to do it for my own sanity," he told the *Australian Jewish News*. "To lose the support of your parents is very difficult. You start to question your entire world. Until then, you're given unconditional support and love, and all of a sudden, you become a stranger."

"It took me a long time to adjust to it. I was 17, so it took me about four years to just grow up and deal with the crisis of finding out who I really was."

Zac grew up in an Orthodox-cum-Reform home and attended a "very brutal — in an emotional sense — private boys' school". But it wasn't just brutal emotionally; he was the victim of gay bashing and the constant butt of gay jokes.

His experiences at school were compounded by those at a Sydney Orthodox synagogue, where he was on the receiving end of "virulently homophobic comments".

"I found myself completely alienated from the religion. If it weren't for Temple Emanuel Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins, I wouldn't be part of this religion at all. I still feel a lot of anger about growing up in the Jewish community."

Sadly, Zac feels he cannot continue to live a gay and Jewish life in Australia. While "it's comfortable" to be gay in Sydney, where there is a substantial gay population, he believes the Jewish community is intolerant. "I guess the answer would be to relinquish my Jewishness or go and live in America, where I could comfortably live as both."

Mikhael Misner knew he was gay at age 11, but didn't feel the need to "come out" until he was in his 20s. He was raised in the country.

When he sat his parents on the couch to tell them of his homosexuality, his mother looked at him understandingly, with love, and quietly said "yes, I know". His father experienced denial and blame at the time, but has since come around.

"When I came out," says Mikhael, "my

mother had done so much homework. She'd done a lot of reading and knew a lot about the issue. The thing I enjoy today is the amount of honesty coming from my father. He feels he lost many years of his son's life because he never wanted to talk about it. He'd never want to meet my partners. Now, at least he's interested."

Mikhael's teenage years were fraught with self-persecution. "I essentially lost my puberty years. I couldn't be expressive; I suppressed my feelings and I persecuted myself. Finally, I decided to say 'I'm sick of protecting everyone.'"

Now he takes his Jewish boyfriend to Temple Emanuel on Shabbat, feels comfortable holding his hand there and greeting him with a kiss. He says fellow-congregants are warm and welcoming. The couple, who have been together for three months, keep a kosher home.

Mikhael and Zac are just two of an unknown number of gays in the Jewish community, many of whom feel so alienated that they have stopped identifying as Jewish. Others have left their Orthodox roots in favour of the more liberal Progressive attitudes.

Psychologist Dawn Cohen, a member of the gay and lesbian community, says "there is no room at all for homosexuals in Orthodox synagogues, though the Progressives make room".

Orthodox rabbis challenge this. They point out that while they cannot condone homosexuality, they do not discriminate against homosexuals, who are welcome to pray in their synagogues.

Kehillat Masada Rabbi David Freedman: "Judaism is fervently against homosexuality, not against the homosexual".

Mizrachi Synagogue Rabbi Moshe Gutnick concurs: "There's a distinction between judging people and judging their practices. I cannot in any way condone homosexual practices, the same as I can't condone adultery, premarital sex or breaking Shabbat."



"If I'm against homosexuality, it's because it's one of the prohibitions of the Torah. I can understand that two men have fallen in love, but the consummation of that love remains prohibited by Jewish law."

"Judaism is intrinsically tolerant, but it can't be silent on issues that the Torah finds morally unacceptable."

Great Synagogue Rabbi Mendel Kastel says gay men are called to the Torah as are other Jewish men.

"We encourage a situation of tolerance at all levels. Rabbis are open-minded. We know it's something that exists. People who are gay sometimes need more support than others, and the rabbis are there for that. We don't condone or encourage homosexuality, but we're not out to judge."

Temple Emanuel Rabbi Brian Fox: "The Orthodox have to be true to the Torah, so it's up to the Progressive movement to ensure the gay community is not lost to Judaism."

"Orthodox rabbis say they're okay with it so long as gay people don't flaunt their sexuality. Why should they have to hide it? When Orthodox people walk down the street with their 14 kids, they are openly displaying their sexuality."

In Melbourne, St Kilda Shulie Rabbi Phillip Heilbrunn — who is president of the Association of Orthodox Rabbis and Ministers of

Australia and New Zealand — confirms that, from a *Halachic* point of view, the Orthodox synagogues take their lead from the Torah, which describes homosexuality as an "abomination".

But his own shulie, St Kilda, does not actively canvass the issue with existing or prospective congregants.

"We do not enter into the issue. Traditional Judaism has a view on homosexuality, but we do not investigate people's private lives. It is not a standard question and not relevant to us on a need-to-know basis," he said.

Temple Beth Israel's senior rabbi, Rabbi Fred Morgan, told the *AJN* that any Jew is welcome to join in the congregation's activities. The question was not about individuals, but rather about organised groups making specific requests for the use of facilities.

"If such a request was made, it would be discussed by the rabbis of the Victorian Union of Progressive Judaism and the Federal *Moetzah* (Council of Reform Rabbis of Australia and New Zealand), so that we have a common nationwide policy. So far, to the best of my knowledge the question has

never arisen."

Despite the pragmatism displayed by both Orthodox and Reform rabbis, attitudes towards homosexuals in the Jewish community appear to lag behind the rest of Australian society.

"There is an enormous pressure on young people to conform to their parents' fantasies, rather than who they really are," says Dawn Cohen.

"There is so much emphasis on marriage and producing grandchildren that the despair and depression for the homosexual in the family is enormous. I've had cases of Jewish kids suiciding because of parental and Jewish communal reaction. It's time the community started making room for them."

"There should be no shame in having a gay child. It is not an abnormality, psychologically or mentally. Kids aren't telling their parents they're gay to hurt them; they're telling them out of love."

"Parents then need to grieve for their child who was a fantasy child. There is real grief which has nothing to do with homophobia. Parents need to understand that they haven't lost their son or daughter; they've gained another one."

Ms Cohen attributes the painful experiences of young Jewish gays and lesbians in part to the "horrific level of homophobia in Jewish dayschools. The word 'gay' is used as an insult. 'Instead of school being a celebratory place, it becomes traumatic.'"

Some teens suffer a subtle homelessness, she said. They may not be "kicked out" for being gay, but they are told "don't tell me about your partner; don't expect me to validate your relationship", resulting in spiritual loneliness.

"The losses and trauma for Jewish children are enormous. It is harder for someone who hasn't come out to form a relationship. Research shows that support from the family correlates to a fulfilling, stable and happy relationship. The coming out process can sometimes bring a family closer together because it puts an end to the lies."

According to Ms Cohen's experience as a psychologist, parents take between five and ten years to accept their child's homosexuality fully and to be open with family and friends about it. Some join PFLAG — Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays — and it's high time that the Jewish community established its own support group, she noted.

Ms Cohen believes that it's time gay Jews got together and paraded at the Mardi Gras. "It's time that they were able to parade and claim their Jewishness."

● Victor Kleerekoper contributed to this report.

Aleph Australia is an outreach group for gay and lesbian Jews in Sydney, which offers support, activities and confidential chat lines. Contact: 9300 9700.