

Stars of

David



MICHELLE HESPE

speaks to lesbian

Rabbi, Ariel Friedlander.

On the fourth of March, 2000, the Star of David will light up Darlinghurst and beyond. For the first time in Mardi Gras history, a motorised Jewish float will be a part of Oxford Street celebrations. And flying in from Virginia, USA, to lead the float, will be Ariel Friedlander, one of the few lesbian Rabbis standing proud in the world.

Ariel Friedlander's excitement and pride is contagious. She can't believe that Sydney is buzzing with her name. She says it is her honour. I tell her no, the honour is all ours. She is the first gay Rabbi to set foot on Australian soil to officially represent both sides of Jewish identity. It is Sydney's honour to be doing some serious groundbreaking. Whatever the results of the controversy that will no doubt be stirred, Ariel hopes that her arrival here will open the doors of discussion encouraging Rabbis in Sydney to become involved in Jewish gay and lesbian issues.

Ariel is a member of Reformed Judaism in America (often labelled as Progressive Judaism in Australia). From the Beth El Synagogue in Harrisonberg and the Temple of the House of Israel in Stanton, she has received the blessing of her congregation to join in the "Stars of David Come Out" float in the Mardi Gras.

Orthodox Jews in both America and Australia have differing views to this relatively new movement when it comes to issues of homosexuality. Last May, for instance, "Aleph", a Melbourne gay men's group, lost its bid to become a member of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV), after intense lobbying from the powerful Victorian Rabbinic Council. The decision affects gay and lesbian Jews throughout the country, who can expect similar exclusions from the councils of their own states. There is however, always the hope of change, through both education and a reassessment of the ancient text, the Torah.

Orthodox Rabbi, Raymond Apple, of The Great Synagogue Sydney, offered me some statements on homosexuality according to Orthodox Judaism.

"Judaism cannot accept homosexuality as a religiously legitimate lifestyle, or sanction the marriage of homosexual partners." Yet all hope of change cannot be lost when this statement follows: "No-one can ignore the realities of society, nor can one justify persecuting the gay community or denying human rights to its members." Not exactly acceptance, but at least a far cry from condemnation.

For people to understand Judaism, and its impact upon issues of homosexuality, it is imperative to listen to Dawn Cohen, the co-convenor of the Dayenu Association, an active group of Gay Jews and their partners. "Being Jewish is not just belonging to a religion, or a faith. You are born into, or convert, to being Jewish, and one of the many facets of belonging to this people, is the Jewish faith. One of the most powerful Jewish traditions, as powerful as the religion itself, is a responsibility to social justice. It is an actual Jewish responsibility."

Many differences between the perspectives of Orthodox Jews and Progressive Jews are relative to the interpretation of the bible, the Torah. So where do we even begin when it comes down to a translation of what is right and wrong, in the eyes of God? Back to Ariel.

"Organised religion is something that people invented in order to help us deal with the big questions. As far as

I'm concerned, different religions are like different languages talking about the same thing. People made religion to help them, so I don't see why people can't change it, when they realise that what they once thought was true, isn't true anymore. It is something we invented to serve us, and if it does not serve us, then I believe we have not just a right, but a duty to evolve and change it. A biblical perspective on homosexuality was what they understood in those days, at that time. Other issues, not just issues of homosexuality, even the most Orthodox of Jews will admit, have changed over time. In biblical times, they believed that if you were left handed, there was something wrong with you. Now we know that's not true."

The question is, why can't the same reassessment of the text be applied to homosexuality? Ariel pauses, always waiting to be sure of her choice of words.

"If there have been changes in the past, then why not now? That's one of the reasons why I love being a Rabbi. If it is not our responsibility to work out these issues, then who's is it?"

I mention to Ariel that I've spent the past few days in Sydney attempting to get some discussion going with some Orthodox Jewish Rabbis about their thoughts on a lesbian Rabbi arriving in Sydney. I can almost see her smile. I've become accustomed to all sorts of responses. Lesbian rabbi? Excuse me? Did I hear you correctly? Can that be right? Is that a joke?

Although I didn't have much luck on the discussion front, Rabbi Apple did fax me some quotes from the Torah, along with some of his own comments. It can be found within the pages of the Torah that "lying with a man as if with a woman" is an "abomination" (Lev. 18:22, 20:17; Deut. 22:5, 23:18.). If we are to interpret that message precisely, it could be said that homosexuals are not being addressed here. For when does a gay man ever lie with a man as if with a woman, when he does not lie with women at all?

Considering that the exact translation of the Hebrew word in the Torah is not actually "abomination", but "error", it appears that there has already been some adjustments made by mortal men.

Ariel has no problems talking about whatever issues face herself and her people, acknowledging and appreciating the fact that she is a part of a movement that has made change, acceptance, and I presume honesty, more possible.

"I'm speaking from the liberal end of the spectrum," she says. "Put it this way, you have a text. A holy text. It is the legal code of our Jewish ancestors. It was the rules, the same as we have rules in any country. But if you look at what is written there, it was written for primitive people, who were often nomads. We just don't live like that anymore. The job of the Rabbi is to reinterpret those ancient texts so that they are still relevant to our lives and faith. Our religion says that this [text] is the centre of us as a people. How can you identify with something that was made for nomads in the desert?"

So again, who has the authority to make change? For an Orthodox Jew, only God has that authority. For a non-Orthodox Jew, an educated person does. A teacher. In other words, according to Progressive Judaism, a Rabbi has the authority to create change.

And what of those who may not be confident to come out, as both a Jew and as gay? Dawn Cohen says that young gay Jews in particular, can feel lost and isolated without a sense of community.

"The Australian gay community is generally friendly and welcoming of us as long as we blend in. If our differences show, we may find ourselves dealing with unintended anti-Semitic stereotypes, frequently born of ignorance rather than hostility. When gay Jews feel shut

out of the culture they were born into, and feel they must repress the other side of themselves to fit in the gay community, the response can be to give up either their gayness or their Jewishness," Dawn says. "The float is a message to gay and lesbian Jews, and to both communities, that we can and do celebrate and welcome both sides of our identity."

Ariel speaks with even greater certainty.

"If one believes that people are made in the image of God, then all of us are in God's image. God can exist in a multitude of images at the same time, in each one of us. We are all how we are supposed to be. For anybody to say that someone is worse than they are, or better than they are, is not for them to judge. Each one of us is human and we're all trying to do the best that we can.

"I believe that the bible is all about teaching us how to be in relationships. How we relate to each other, how we relate to ourselves, and how we relate to people we love, hate, work with, live with. It's about making the world as happy and as peaceful as we can."

Involvement in the Mardi Gras Parade is important, for with every new face that joins the thousands, encouragement is given to another. The Jewish float is a groundbreaking event. Of course, many Jews have previously been a part of the Mardi Gras, participating in other general floats. Now, for the first time, they will be coming out as Jews.

"It will be a reaffirming experience for them, as well as an opportunity for the gay and lesbian community to appreciate how much Jewish talent has contributed to it," Dawn Cohen says.

The float, designed by Jewish lesbian artist Lorraine Larri, and largely sponsored by Satellite Media, will be an enormous eight tonne truck spectacle based upon a Star of David theme. It will have the capacity to include every Jewish gay or lesbian, and every supporter who wants to participate. Along with Ariel, other participants in the float will include David Gellman, president of the Sha'ar Za'av; the world's largest gay synagogue. Perth based internationally acclaimed Clinical psychologist Dr Viv Cass, who pioneered affirmative research into gay stages of development, and treasurer of The World Congress of Jewish Gay and Lesbian Organisations, Michael Kook.

Another special event which will take place in Mardi Gras festivities is a Shabbat service, organised by The Dayenu Association. The Shabbat service, which is a Jewish tradition signifying the beginning of the day of rest, will be attended by two Sydney Rabbis; Jackie Ninio from Temple Emmanuel Woollahra, and Rabbi Alyson Conyer from Temple Emmanuel, Chatswood. While both of these ministers are heterosexual, they will be the first Sydney Rabbis to officially support the rights of lesbians and gays to hold a Shabbat service. The service, held the night before the parade, will also have Ariel Friedlander in attendance. Ariel will also be conducting a class on Judaism and homosexuality during her stay.

As I walked home from the office, having just spoken to Ariel Friedlander, I decided to visit Sydney's Jewish Museum. Upon the walls of the museum are the words of famous scribes throughout history, poetry, verse and proclamations from children and adults, expressing pride, loss, grief, sadness and above all, hope. Hope for the future. Hope for change.

There is a vein which joins the knowledge of the Holocaust, and any other abuse or denial of human rights. If people don't stand up and create change and acceptance, it will not happen. From the walls of the museum, in the words of Edmund Burke:

*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil,
Is for good men to do nothing.*