

**It's a first!
In what's being
hailed by Sydney's
Jewish lesbian and
gay community as
a big coming out
celebration, this
year's Mardi Gras
will be welcoming
a lesbian rabbi
from the US.
Kath Duncan
reports on why
this is such a
historic occasion.**



Rabbi Ariel Friedlander

Rabbi Ariel Friedlander is a 36 year old dynamo. She says she "went into the family business", because her father is a rabbi, but there's no doubt that becoming a rabbi is not the usual choice of profession for young Jewish girls. There are only two female rabbis in Australia, and even in America it's not a common job for women.

For Australia's Jewish lesbian and gay community, the visit of Rabbi Friedlander will be the first time ever an out lesbian rabbi will be conducting the sacred Shabbat service in this country. Dawn Cohen is one of the organisers of the Dayenu float for Mardi Gras - the first motorised presence of Jews in the parade. Dawn told *LOTL* that Jews "will be moved to tears" by the rabbi's presence at Shabbat, which she describes as a big "Bat Mitzvah, or coming of age celebration for all of us! We're all coming out and we're not going back!"

Ariel describes her own coming out while a student at rabbinical school: "As soon as I knew it myself, I told my family and friends. Coming out felt relatively safe at the time - it was no secret at the school - I suspect I was almost the last one to know!" Her family was 3000 miles away and she says they're "cool now, although I think it was pretty hard for them at the beginning. I was too busy being caught up in my own reaction to be able to

deal with theirs. Now, although they were all a bit worried that my path is bound to be more difficult, they have every confidence that I will make my way."

Ariel believes that "coming out is a continual process for me - both in terms of each new person/situation that I encounter...and as I learn more about myself".

She serves two small Reform congregations 25 miles apart in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, which she describes as "John-Boy Walton country". She leads services at each one on alternate Shabbats, as well as teaching at a joint Religion School. Because she's the only rabbi for a 50 mile radius from her home, she also spends a lot of her time representing the Jewish community in the wider Christian community. Both synagogues in which she works are general community synagogues without a specific gay focus.

In Jewish synagogues the local congregation itself interviews you for the job, unlike the Christian system where the Church hierarchy appoints you.

In Ariel's case she came out to each congregation during the interview process, a move Dawn Cohen says shows "extraordinary courage, because there you are, in front of a group of committed synagogue goers, asking you questions with the power to hire or fire you - they must have loved her a lot!"

Ariel believes her sexuality "is common knowledge, but not really the main subject of conversation in my work". She says, "the only caveat mentioned to my face is not to be in people's faces at interfaith events as some of the more traditional Christians would not tolerate me. I've only been here 18 months - my hope is that the more we

come to know each other, the less of a problem it will be."

The congregation obviously is keen for Ariel to come to Australia because their president has given his blessing to join in with the Dayenu float at the parade, called 'The Stars of David Come Out'. "He said it was an honour that the Australian Jewish gays and lesbians had asked me. I feel the same way", says Ariel, who'll be sitting on the truck "as our special prize", says Dawn. The float, designed by Sydney based lesbian artist Larri, will have a two metre 3D Star of David mounted behind her. "It will be illuminated from within so that you'll see this enormous Star of David from miles away, going down Oxford Street", says Dawn. Pumping to a disco version of *Hava Nagilah*, there'll be 20 dancers and more than 80 walkers, all wearing black t-shirts, with fluoro-pink Magen Davids on the front.

The big event on the calendar will be the Shabbat, where Ariel will be one of three rabbis leading the service, with another in attendance and a Cantor, a spiritual singer. "It's the first time heterosexual rabbis have stood beside a lesbian rabbi and conducted a service specifically for the gay and lesbian community," says Dawn. It's also the first time that a Jewish spiritual celebration, the Shabbat dinner, is an official Mardi Gras community event.

Ariel says she finds gay pride marches "to be one of the most inspirational events for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folk, and I'm honoured that the Sydney

group are going to all this trouble to include me in their celebrations". She's also looking forward to "enjoying the parade and having a great time exploring the city!" But her girlfriend won't be coming along. Together for the last two and a half years, Ariel says she's "one of the wisest women I know, and gives me great support - knowing when to listen and when to give advice in a way I can hear it. I adore her".

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The Shabbat dinner is already sold out and the organisers are expecting people from around Australia and overseas. Perth-based clinical psychologist Dr Vivienne Cass will be there. "Having been in gay synagogues overseas, I know it makes a difference", she says. "Tears come to my eyes, which is kind of weird, because any time I like I can go to my local synagogue, but it feels like something's missing. With the Rabbi coming here, I feel like it's the thing that's been missing. On a non-intellectual level, it's something I really need". For more information on either the Dayenu group or The Stars of David Come Out Mardi Gras float, call Dawn Cohen on (02) 9810-2948.



The Dayenu Group put the finishing touches to The Stars Of David Mardi Gras float