

A shule where everyone has a seat

Shira Sebban

A JEW should be able to “walk into a synagogue and be accepted as *mishpocha*” (family). After all, “Judaism is inclusive, rather than exclusive”.

David Gellman, president of Congregation Sha’ar Zahav — a “progressive Reform” synagogue in San Francisco for “people of all sexual identities” — was in Sydney last week to join the “Stars of David Come Out” Jewish lesbian and gay float in the Sydney Mardi Gras.

Established in 1977 by three gay Jews, Sha’ar Zahav set out to provide “a safe place to worship”, Mr Gellman, a lawyer, told the *Australian Jewish News* — “a place where the person sitting next to you would know that you’re gay and wouldn’t care. But we’ve evolved beyond that.”

The congregation has grown to 500 adult members from Reform, Conservative and

Orthodox backgrounds — and 140 children. “We welcome two babies every month, and have many *brit milot* and baby-naming ceremonies,” Mr Gellman said. “Some babies are born to, or adopted by, two lesbians or two gays; some have two lesbian mothers and a gay father who may or may not be involved in their upbringing”. Mr Gellman has a 14-year-old godson who has two lesbian mothers. “I’m involved principally in his education, both Jewish and secular.”

Almost ten percent of members are “straight” families, attracted principally by the congregation’s religious school, which offers an “egalitarian, non-sexist curriculum”. Another drawcard is the “inclusive liturgy” with its “neutral or balanced” translation — used by Progressive Jews around the world and available in the synagogue’s own prayer-book. First published in

1982, a draft of the third edition of the *Sha’ar Zahav Shabbat Evening Siddur* is being trialled “to see what changes we like and don’t like”.

The congregation is “more aware of some of the exclusivity built into Jewish worship — of being a chosen people, separate from other peoples and with a special place in God’s universe”, Mr Gellman said. “We don’t disagree with that, but what you do with it can be good or bad. If you use it to set yourself above others, that’s bad. There’s a difference between being apart and being better than.”

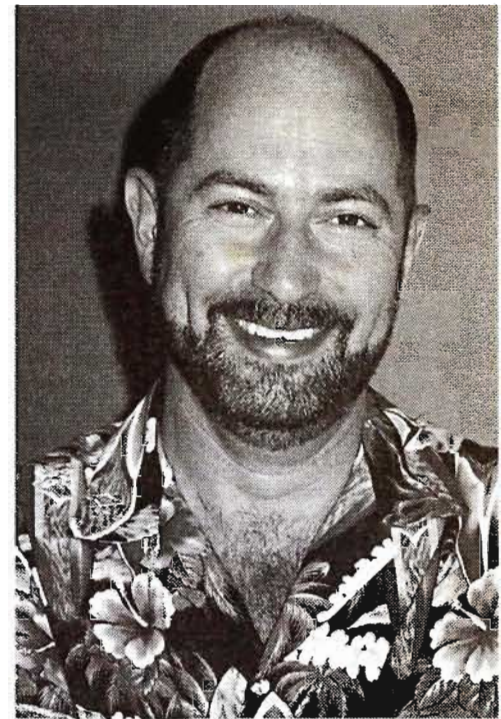
Sha’ar Zahav has not solved all “sexist language problems” in Hebrew prayers through translation. “We offer Hebrew alternatives designed to echo the intention of the original. In the daily prayer where you thank God for not making you a woman, you’re giving thanks for having a place in the universe and for having been created in a unique and wonderful fashion. It’s possible to pray that, without inadvertently or intentionally denigrating someone else.”

For the past 20 years, when praying in Hebrew, the congregation has sometimes alternated between masculine and feminine genders; “*hinei matovu manayim shevet achim gam yachad*” is followed by “*achot gam yachad*”, for example.

“We started on the edges so as to become comfortable with the concept that Hebrew and Hebrew liturgy are not unchangeable,” Mr Gellman said. “The creation of Israel opened the door to saying that Hebrew is a living language. Our ritual committee is taking tentative steps at dealing with major problematic elements of the service in Hebrew, which we’ve long dealt with in English.”

Sha’ar Zahav’s liturgy is not only “gender-inclusive”, but also “gay-positive”, incorporating excerpts from mainstream gay and lesbian English literature. Moreover, while the congregation welcomes Jews with non-Jewish partners, it runs a conversion program which “offers training, support and encouragement, rather than a back-door, hushed-up entry”. An effort is made to learn Ladino, as well as Yiddish, melodies because members with a Sephardi background “need the same place at the table as everyone else”.

Support is provided for members with HIV



David Gellman ... president of Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, a “progressive Reform” synagogue in San Francisco for “people of all sexual identities”.

and AIDS, but such outreach has “never been a primary focus because every community in San Francisco has been overwhelmingly supportive, making it unnecessary for us to take the lead”. The congregation buries its members and their partners, Jewish or not, in its own cemetery.

Sha’ar Zahav produces an “inordinately large” number of rabbinic students, Mr Gellman said. “We’ve also been a key force in successfully lobbying the Union of American Hebrew Congregations [roof-body of the US Reform movement] to end discrimination against openly gay and lesbian rabbis, and to sponsor a resolution supporting same-sex civil marriage.”

Nevertheless, such marriages are not yet legal in the US; nor has the American Reform movement taken a position on *Halachic* sanctification of same-sex marriage, leaving it to individual rabbis. “But our congregation does conduct commitment ceremonies between same-sex couples.”