

Jews divided over gay tolerance



By BEN HILLS and CHLOE SALTAU
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Stars of David, the Jewish float that paraded in the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras this year, has opened up the divide in the Jewish community over gay tolerance.

In Sydney, the editor of a Jewish newspaper has been asked to appear before Judaism's highest ecclesiastical court over the paper's coverage of the gay float.

The former president of Melbourne's Jewish gay group Aleph Melbourne, Mr Michael Barnett, said last week the Melbourne Jewish community was polarised between conservative Jews who were "fairly fundamental and believe what's written in the Bible", and more progressive, tolerant Jews who were "active people wanting to make a difference".

Tension erupted in Melbourne last year when Aleph sought but failed to win affiliation with the umbrella Jewish organisation, the Jewish Community Council of Victoria.

"Judaism outlaws the male-to-male sex act. JCCV will collapse if Aleph is included," one rabbi arguing against the motion said at the time.

The controversy over the Stars of David float, and its coverage in the Jewish press, has not erupted in Melbourne but only because, according to Mr Barnett, no one is "pushing their (the conservative Jews') buttons".

The editor of the Sydney edition of The Australian Jewish News, Mr Vic Alhadeff, was invited to front the five senior rabbis who form the Beth Din - the Rabbinical Court - over his coverage of the float, which drove along Oxford Street carrying 160 gay Jews who were waving a banner and wearing pink stars of David.

It was the first motorised gay Jewish float to carry men and women in the 23-year history of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and included Jews from Israel, South Africa, the United States, Britain, Germany, Sweden and New Zealand. The float was led by the US lesbian rabbi Ariel Friedlander, author Diane Armstrong, and Susie Wise, a Holocaust survivor. It was described as the biggest gay Jewish event in the world.

The views of Orthodox Jews, about 10 per cent of Australia's estimated 100,000 Jews, were expressed in an article in Australian Jewish News by Rabbi Benzion Milecki, the chief minister of South Head Synagogue.

He wrote: "Homosexuality is not only forbidden according to Jewish law, it has the dubious distinction of being one of the only things which the Torah (scriptures) refers to as toeva- an abomination, a word which is used to connote the idea of disgust."

Mr Alhadeff put the picture on the front page, aware it would cause controversy among his readers.

"We decided our mandate was to reflect the entire community whether they are republican or monarchist, Orthodox or Reform, gay or straight. At the end of the day, it was newsworthy."

Mr Alhadeff said he was not surprised when he was asked to appear before the court.

Although the court historically had power of life and death, today, according to Mr Alhadeff, it is mainly used as a forum to arbitrate disputes such as divorce settlements and has no "coercive power".

Also asked to appear before the Beth Din over complaints about their attitude to homosexuality are two other prominent Sydney Jewish figures, Dr Hilton Immerman, the chief executive of the Shalom Institute, which runs Shalom College at the University of New South Wales, and Mr Peter Wertheim, the president of the 200-strong NSW Jewish Board of Deputies.

Dr Immerman said he believed the complaint related to Shalom College hiring out a function room to about 80 gay and lesbian Jews and their supporters the night before the Mardi Gras. The complaint against Mr Wertheim is believed to relate to the defeat of a board motion last year. The motion sought to change the board's constitution in a way that could have excluded gay organisations from becoming affiliated with it.

In a public display of support for gay Jews, letters from about 30 readers, and an advertisement signed by 28 of Sydney's most distinguished Jews were published in last week's News.



The stars: 160 gay Jewish men and women hold up their pink stars as they join this year's Mardi Gras.

Picture: MICHAEL BARNETT