

The Jewish-gay issue: The debate continues

Disservice

IT pains me to read the *Australian Jewish News'* reply regarding the criticism of its coverage of the Jewish float at the Mardi Gras.

We, the people who gave the world the Ten Commandments, who taught morality to the world, who lost millions of our brethren murdered to uphold this morality, should not be publicising events that destroy this sacred traditions of our people.

It is tragic that there are people who deviate from Torah law, and we must treat them as part of our Jewish people. But this does not mean we must promote this lifestyle. By using journalistic licence to publicise such events, the *AJN* is doing a disservice to the Jewish family and the Jewish people.

Herman Roszler
Los Angeles, California

No room

I LEARNED about the controversy over your coverage of the Mardi Gras through the internet edition of the *Jerusalem Post*. I totally support your position and beg you not to give in to the pressures of the Orthodox and related groups. There is no room for censorship. Please continue your coverage of non-Orthodox and alternative lifestyle groups within the Australian Jewish community.

G Schneider
Zurich, Switzerland

Many voices

OVER the past few weeks, there has been genuine attempt by parts of the wider Jewish community to express its position with regard to the participation of Jews in the Mardi Gras and with the *Australian Jewish News'* ability (or requirement) to accurately record it.

I venture to suggest that the number of letters and articles on this issue is probably more than for almost any other event (except maybe the Maccabiah bridge disaster) of recent vintage. In fact, the fact that the *AJN* was prepared to devote so much space in letters, articles and editorials shows how deeply it felt about exploring where the Jewish community stood on the issue. From a journalistic point of view, the *AJN* has certainly taken a stand on this issue, and on its right to publicise it.

What concerns me is that the Jewish community appears to be so divided and fragmented into so many different attitudes and approaches to the problems highlighted. These divisions would no doubt be reflected on other similar issues affecting the community in particular and the wider community in general.

What is clearly apparent is that no one communal identity or organisation can now speak legitimately on behalf of the Jewish community with any claim to being the voice of the Jewish community on any social, moral, religious or ethical issue. That is a cost, which might yet come back to haunt the Jewish community when such a voice is needed.

David Freedman
Bondi, NSW

Best interests

MY main reason for entering into this debate is to affirm my support for the basic proposition of freedom for the press to report and comment on contemporary events, regardless of whether they are controversial or not. The editor's excellent article (*AJN* 31/3/00) effectively and clearly outlines this position. It merits a high level of commendation and is in the best interests of the community.

Bernard Rosen
Strathfield, NSW

Vibrant newspaper

I WAS intrigued by the Beth Din's suggestion that Jewish journalistic ethics should somehow be different from any other journalistic ethics. Why should this be so? Journalism is journalism.

The *Jewish News* is an independent newspaper catering to the needs of the Jewish community. It is therefore bound by the Journalist Code of Ethics promulgated by the Australian

Journalistic Community, not by the Beth Din. As far as I can see, the Beth Din has no jurisdiction and should have said so.

It is one thing to look for reasons to set up a competition paper to the *Jewish News*, but to bring up the topic under the guise of *Halacha* is disingenuous.

The Sydney Jewish community should be proud to have a vibrant newspaper whose editor and publisher are willing to stand up and be counted for all members of the community. Well done and continue to do a good job.

Elizabeth Ban
Sydney, NSW

The Australian Jewish News wishes to make it known that it has published all the letters it received which took a critical position on the Jewish-gay issue and which criticised its coverage.
- Editor

Barricades

IT looks as though we have to man the barricades — and we thought they were down.

J Bruhl
Willoughby, NSW

Hang together

WITH regard to the reports on the Mardi Gras, I wish to fully support the stand taken by Vic Alhadeff and his extremely well-presented comments. Also, the letter from Bryan Conyer and articles by Alan Gold and Rabbi Shmuley Boteach were particularly relevant and well-put. Is it any wonder that so many people, especially the young, are no longer thinking of religious Judaism as it is being practised or preached as being relevant to them?

Something else I feel is of great relevance is that Orthodox rabbis will not share the same platform with non-Orthodox rabbis at the commemoration of Yom Hashoah. What do they fear? Do we share the same God? While going into the gas chambers and the execution pits, there was not the luxury of different interpretations of God. Orthodox rabbis will pray for them when dead, but not *with* them when alive. Let us not be our own worst enemy. How would the *Moshiach* feel if he were to observe this modern Tower of Babel?

I was raised in ultra-Orthodoxy, but fail to see its observance in today's society, or that the non-Orthodox are treated with the respect which the Orthodox wish to have accorded to them. With assimilation and marrying out, this community cannot afford the luxury over issues of conscience that individuals must resolve for themselves.

How true the adage — If we cannot hang together, we will hang separately.

Ron Sinclair
St Huberts Island, NSW

Kaleidoscope

I REFER to the numerous articles and letters relating to Jewish gays in the community and their participation at the Mardi Gras. I have been impressed by the diversity of opinions expressed both by those for and those against, as well as those who want a bit each way.

■ The rabbis who claim it is wrong, those who come together collectively to endorse its practice and claim it is right, those who claim it is only partially wrong and there are remedies, and those who point out that there are another 600 odd commandments which can be viewed with either greater or lesser intensity of emotion when broken.

■ The "communal leaders" who claim all the above and berate anyone who dares to disagree, ignoring the fact that among themselves there is no unanimity or accord.

■ Those who claim that free expression is more important than anything or everything else.

■ The average Jew who expresses his/her opinion and finds that it is repudiated by the above categories.

■ Those who praise/criticise the *AJN* for permitting the variety of arguments to be presented to the community.

■ And those praise/condemn the *AJN* for its stand regarding the Beth Din.

Such a kaleidoscope of views, and all so sincerely expressed by such a wide diversity of Jews from all walks of life and all strata of society. There is only one conclusion to be drawn. The NSW Jewish Board of Deputies can't speak on behalf of NSW Jewry. It can't validly claim to be representative of so many divergent opinions all in one breath.

R Goodman
Double Bay, NSW

Flawed findings

RABBI Benzion Milecki's full-page article on homosexuality makes an extraordinary statement — that the world's psychiatrists are flawed in their removal of homosexuality from the catalogue of mental or psychiatric disorders.

Rabbi Milecki says they are "flawed" in this conclusion. The United States psychiatric societies led the way some 30 years ago and the rest of the world has followed. This has left the religious world with a very supportive mat suddenly pulled from under them. However, Rabbi Milecki is in good company as the Vatican, Dr George Pell, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, and many others in the religious conservative world ignore the psychiatric community and continue to declare homosexuality a disordered mental condition.

The scientific world is moving in favour of the psychiatrists. Geneticists say they are close to identifying a gene causal factor of homosexual orientation. Should that happen, and it seems only a matter of time before it does, will that discovery also be declared "flawed" by Rabbi Milecki and those who hold such views?

I am prompted to write also in the light of the Position Statement (*AJN* 24/3/00) signed by so many prominent professional Jews on the homosexual condition. None of them even hints at any psychiatric or mental condition as a result of homosexual orientation. Indeed, they take the same attitude as High Court Justice Michael Kirby, that homosexual people are, with one exception, the same as everyone else. As Kirby says about himself: "I think I am quite a good man". I think so too, and most fair-minded Australians do also. But Justice Kirby must be a terrible thorn in side of those who hold to the mental disordered theory of homosexuals.

Rabbi Milecki must surely have some professional scholastic basis for declaring the world psychiatric community flawed in their findings. The *AJN* should extend to him an invitation to present his case for this extraordinary claim.

T F Green
Dee Why, NSW

Pink triangles

WE recently went to Canberra to see the opening night of a play with which we had been involved in the collection of material. The author had placed an advertisement in gay and lesbian newspapers, seeking information as to whether there were any survivors of Nazi Germany's death camps living in Australia who had been either gay or lesbian, or who had information about people who had been in those camps who were gay or lesbian.

We contacted the author and put him in touch with Kitty Fischer, a child Holocaust survivor from Auschwitz with whom we had been friends for 10 years.

Of the four people the author contacted, three did not give permission for their names to be used in the play. The fourth was Kitty Fischer, who gave permission for her name to be used.

We first saw the play as a work-in-progress in Canberra in 1995, and were very impressed with what the playwright was doing. When the play had its second work-in-progress performance in 1997, we were unable to go to Canberra to see it. The play has been completed and we received an invitation to attend the opening night of Pink Triangles at The Street Theatre, adjacent to the Australian National University in Canberra.

The play was extremely powerful and moving, and included the story of Kitty Fischer and her sister Eva who, when their parents had been removed from them in Auschwitz and been killed in the death chambers, were taken under the wing of a man with a pink triangle, who smug-

gled food to them and helped save their lives when the Nazis were looking for workers to go to a factory.

The man with the pink triangle told Kitty she must go to the factory as it would get her out of Auschwitz, and she should take her sister with her. Kitty replied that she had never done the work which she would be required to do in the factory, but the man said she must say she had done it in her home town in Czechoslovakia.

This Kitty did, thus saving her own and her sister's lives, Kitty asked the man why he wore a pink triangle and not a yellow star, and he said he was a homosexual. Kitty nearly died because of discrimination and bigotry. She left the camp with her sister and never found out what happened to the man with the pink triangle.

Other men with pink triangles who survived the death camps were not allowed to go free because the Allied forces which liberated the camps handed them over to the German authorities for incarceration because the notorious paragraph of the German penal code was still in force, and they were locked up as criminals.

The Jewish people have suffered murder and incarceration for 2000 years. Homosexuals have also suffered murder and bashing and incarceration during that time and are still suffering because of the bigotry of the religious right of all religions in our communities. It is time that some of these bigots realised that "some of their best friends are gay or lesbian" and that some of their closest relatives may be too.

Congratulations to the editor and the *AJN* for running the items on the Mardi Gras and the related events, and congratulations to the groups involved in setting up the Jewish float.

The only reason that we still take part in the parade after all these years is to add numbers to those taking part and to oppose the bigotry of those who would like to see us all dead and/or pretend that we don't exist.

Mazel tov and thank-you for your lead in this matter. Human rights apply to all human beings — gay, lesbian, straight, trans-gender, black, white, Jewish, other religions and any others omitted from this list.

Mannie De Saxe and Kendall Lovett
Belmore, NSW

Abomination

THE Beth Din stated that "a Jewish activity is one which relates to Jewish belief, tradition, ethics, history, culture or destiny". In that light, we can consider the revolt of the Maccabees. They resisted the Hellenisation promoted by the Greek Seleucid occupation.

To quote Roth's *History of the Jews*: "A gymnasium was established in the shadow of the citadel, in which — an abomination in Jewish eyes — young men exercised naked."

They were exercising naked to take part in Olympiads or Greek-style athletic games. Now we have the Maccabiah Games. These are an imitation of a Greek abomination. It is an added betrayal to name the Games after those who fought the abomination. The Games promote neither Jewish belief, tradition, ethics, history, culture nor destiny. I trust the Beth Din will take immediate action against this abomination.

M D Fisher
Cashmere, Qld

Real world

MY objection demonstrates how archaic I consider the criticism to be of the *AJN* for reporting an event in the real world that is not rabbinically, Halachically or biblically compatible (the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras).

I do object, however, to your report about a Melbourne Jewish family allegedly involved in a \$24m tax fraud. It appears that the family is of Orthodox persuasion, and it is alleged that some members may have received social security payments. The young marrieds in my family are disenchanted by this event and it has eroded my case that they move towards a more religious attitude. I therefore ask that you do not publish this type of report so that my family is not exposed to this behaviour.

I don't expect that you will publish this letter, but writing it relieves some of my frustration when I read about the editor being summoned to appear in front of the Beth Din.

Max Lees
Vaucluse, NSW

Offensive

WHILE refraining from rubbishing the whole letter from Joe Newman (*AN* 7/4/00), I simply wish to make the following point:

In recent times there has been, among those outside the Jewish community, a tendency to compare current events with the Holocaust in an attempt to increase the horror of those events. In every case, the Jewish community has been quick to point out that such comparisons simply denigrate the Shoah. To see a letter penned by a fellow-Jew which suggests that support for homosexual activities is "rebuilding the gas chambers of the Holocaust" is as offensive as it is absurd.

Ilona Lee

Rushcutters Bay, NSW

Beth Din's authority

RABBI Raymond Apple wrote a very interesting article on the power of the Beth Din (*AN* 7/4/00). He notes that the Beth Din's authority depends on the community's autonomy. Since we are part of the general community, the Beth Din's powers are limited to the degree that Jews accept it.

The *Australian Jewish News* is not a synagogue publication, but a commercial organisation serving the Jewish community. Shalom College is a part of the University of NSW. The NSW Jewish Board of Deputies is a representative body, unlike the Beth Din, which excludes Reform rabbis.

When an ecclesiastical court summons people to appear before it, with-

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out the charges being made public, it is acting like the Inquisition. When one of the complainants belongs to the same group of rabbis who intends to sit in judgement, there is at least the appearance of bias.

Before summoning anyone, the Beth Din should have had the complaints investigated to find out they had any merit. A mere upset by a person is not something that rabbis need or should arbitrate or adjudicate.

The *Jewish News* provided the community with a valuable service in reporting the participation in the Mardi Gras of our homosexual sisters and brothers. It is within the purview of a communal newspaper to report on activities undertaken by Jews. Those who value the freedom of the pulpit should be foremost in defending the freedoms of the press, speech and conscience.

Recent events at the Board of Deputies indicate that the brouhaha over Jewish homosexuals is but one aspect of the push by fundamentalists to hijack the community. The tensions within Israel where autonomous *Batei Din* are attempting to put themselves above the law gives the clearest indication that this attack on our community must be repelled.

**Paul Winter
Chatswood, NSW**