

How a community got hijacked

VIEWPOINT

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WHAT a sad and sorry state of affairs!

First, a group of Jewish gays and lesbians decided to proclaim their identity by having a float in the Mardi Gras — nothing lewd or lascivious, mind you, just some singing and dancing in modest dress.

Then the *Australian Jewish News*, believing that its role is to report on things of interest, featured the event. The coverage, while sympathetic to the pain of ostracism many Jewish gays and lesbians have suffered, at no time defended or advocated acts of homosexuality. This coverage produced an enormous response — some angry and condemnatory, but mostly positive and supportive of acceptance of our “otherwise inclined” brothers and sisters as Jews, regardless of their sexuality. Even the respected *rabbonim* of the Beth Din drew this distinction.

If that had been all, then two or three weeks of letters and commentary in the *AJN* would have seen a full airing of the range of opinions, and we could all have moved on. Sadly, this was not to be.

The *AJN* is a communal newspaper. It is *not* a synagogue journal. There is no *Halachic* or rabbinic standard that it needs to apply to determine what is newsworthy. It reports on a wide range of matters, some Jewish, some by Jews, some by non-Jews that affect Jews. It is not required to report only

on those things that bring us *yichus*. The members of the Beth Din know this. They themselves used the pages of the newspaper to make clear that it is acts of homosexuality that are *Halachically* viewed as an “abomination”, not people with homosexual leanings. The main thrust of the *AJN* coverage was not at odds with this. Rather, the issue has been predominantly about whether to include or ostracise homosexual Jews communally. Despite this, the Beth Din summoned the editor of the *AJN* to appear before it.

At the same time, one individual was so outraged that our community is not, by and large, prepared to treat our gay and lesbian members as anathema that she petitioned the Beth Din for a *Din Torah* on her behalf with the president of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies and the head of Shalom College. The Beth Din duly also “invited” them to appear before it.

Perhaps the wisest course would be to put a full-stop to this sorry chapter, allow our communal bodies to get on with their business and give the Beth Din a chance to do some damage control

Their “crimes”, as I understand them were: the Board of Deputies for not supporting the complainant’s proposed constitutional amendment, which would have excluded not just any homosexual group from affiliating with the Board, but many others, including Reform Jewry; Shalom College for hiring out its facilities for a Shabbat dinner.

The NSW Jewish Board of Deputies

is the peak body of organised Jewry in this State. Its constituents range from the religiously Orthodox to the secular. It is democratic — sometimes frustratingly so — but ultimately, beneficially for our communal harmony and well-being. Deputies voted overwhelmingly against the awkwardly phrased, divisive and exclusionary motion put by the Beth Din’s complainant. Even some deputies who don’t want a Jewish gay and lesbian organisation to become a Board affiliate took the view that they could vote against accepting such a group if and when an application is received, rather than voting for such an ugly constitutional amendment. The Board’s president does not have the power to overrule the plenum’s vote.

Shalom College allowed a group of Jews to hold a Shabbat dinner on its premises. It does not and in fact, cannot by law, refuse to rent its premises on the basis of sexual orientation. This was not an orgy, mind you, but

from all reports, a respectful celebration of Shabbat.

The learned members of the Beth Din knew all this; after all, their shules are mostly Board affiliates. They also have sufficient legal training. I have no doubt that the Beth Din has had mediation requests which its members have believed to be baseless, trivial or improperly motivated and have, quite properly, chosen not to proceed -



beyond, perhaps, counselling the complainant.

It is astonishing that in this case, it decided to go for it when it was blindingly obvious that the three communal identities summoned would have no option but to decline the invitation to attend for “a little chat”.

The tragedy is that the Beth Din allowed itself to be set up by one angry, self-righteous individual, and its own lack of foresight for a huge loss of face. Perhaps the wisest course of action now would be to put a full-stop to this sorry chapter, allow our communal bodies to get on with

their business and give the Beth Din a chance to do some serious damage control.

I don’t expect to be killed in the stampede by members of our community to adopt a homosexual lifestyle, but I do hope to see some growth of kindness and humanity. Doubtless, the angry individual who started part of this mess will stay angry, but hopefully without being allowed to cause any more damage.

■ Anna Berger is vice-president of the NSW Jewish National Fund, but this was written in her private capacity.