

Who speaks for us?

THE correspondents to the *Australian Jewish News* who have questioned "who speaks for us" have hit the nail on the head. It seems to me that much harm has been done by those who insist on speaking for the whole community and then have the *chutzpah* to shoot the messenger (the *AJN*) when it offers others the right to express themselves too.

A few such zealous — and unforgivably, humourless — ideologues have already ended up with mud on their face after throwing so much of it into the wind.

But Isi Leibler's column ("Mardi Gras — the view from Jerusalem", *AJN* 14/4/00) takes the *kugel* for *chutzpah*. Currently residing in Israel, he feels it his duty to tell us the story so far, criticise "the poor quality of debate" and ultimately chastise the "vocal minority" who have misguidedly been defending freedom of speech and freedom of conscience.

However, juxtapose this with the following:

■ The *AJN* editor notes that *all* letters critical of the *AJN* have been published (although presumably, not all the supportive ones);

■ Opinion on the letters page is currently running at 86-8 in favour of the *AJN*'s coverage of the Jewish gay/lesbian issue.

We must conclude that either:

■ Mr Leibler's silent majority are illiterate; or

■ Mr Leibler's silent majority don't subscribe to the *AJN* (in which case what's all the fuss about?); or

■ Mr Leibler's silent majority don't exist.

Fortunately for Mr Leibler, the beauty of a silent majority is that it is, by definition, silent. Clearly, the silence of this silent majority is its best weapon — and an effective camouflage. However, I am curious about the methodology of such "census takers" invoking a silent legion that apparently stands (on tip-toe) behind them. In the case of King Isi of Melbourne (via Jerusalem), I'd call them Straw Poles.

Geoff Sirmal
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90% just don't exist

RABBI Chaim Ingram writes that 90 percent of Sydney Jews are Orthodox, and the *AJN* letters columns do not represent this majority (*AJN* 7/4/00). He has drifted from *pilpul* to leg-pull. Does he seriously believe that?

The commonly accepted figure is that 75 percent of Sydney Jews are Orthodox and 25 percent are

Reform/Conservative in terms of religious affiliation — but this number represents less than half of the total number of affiliated Jews in NSW, the majority being totally unaffiliated to any Jewish religious organisation of any sort.

Judging by the letters in the *AJN* over the past few weeks, my estimate is that only a small number fully "accept the jurisdiction of Orthodox rabbis", as he claims. Reference to the approximately 10 percent who eat kosher is a closer indication of the actual percentage of Orthodox. It follows that 90 percent are non-Orthodox, by Rabbi Ingram's own definition.

Rabbi Ingram raises the issue of continuity, and therein lies the paradox: are the actions of the Orthodox increasing or decreasing the total number of Jews? His assertion that "our history should have taught us that Jewish continuity without Torah is, and has been proven, impossible" is a flight of fantasy. It will be very interesting to read Rabbi Ingram's mathematical proof of that assertion without using the same sort of mathematics that proves that the six days it took to create the world are equal to a few billion years.

The voices of the 90 percent Orthodox have not been heard in the letters columns of the *AJN* because they do not exist.

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Indefensible

MAYBE the reason that Rabbi Chaim Ingram's putative silent majority lack the courage to write to newspapers to support his position on homosexuality is because, unlike him, they realise that to justify the biblical verses from Leviticus is not only politically incorrect, it is also morally indefensible.

Like him, they too may have their personal preferences and prejudices. However, they are savvy enough to appreciate that it is precisely this aspect of human nature — its tendency to ostracise the "other" who is not like oneself — which makes it imperative that we go beyond sacred texts which have done this in the past, and try to find a position today which is more ethical, because we are more informed.

There are several ironies in the Orthodox rabbinical position, apart from their obvious selectiveness in condemning some religiously incorrect behaviours while leaving other equally important ones under the carpet.

The most obvious is that we as a people have been celebrating for over 3000 years our liberation from slavery in Egypt, not to mention our liberation from Haman at Purim. Yet those who condemn Jews who are homosexual singularly fail to realise the equivalent sense of liberation they have felt as civil society has in recent years acknowledged its former persecution and moved on to legislate a tolerance which has in turn influenced people's perceptions and behaviour.

So why shouldn't they want to parade through the streets to express their joy at this liberation? It is certainly a lot less harmful than some of the biblical injunctions to kill all the enemy, including the women and children, and no more intrusive than public celebrations of religious festivals.

The second irony is that the Orthodox interpreters of the Torah singularly fail to acknowledge that those very verses in Leviticus, together with others which advocate differential treatment and status of women, dwarfs or similar non-mainstream males, have helped to shape the prejudices of generations of Jews, not to mention Christians and Muslims.

Instead of continuing to justify "God's word" as immutable, perhaps they could instead take a more evidence-based approach and consider the outcomes of people accepting their teachings.

How ironic that a people who has suffered historically by being oppressed for being different has still been unable to sort out those of its sacred teachings which are life-enhancing and discard those which are life-threatening. And I'm not talking about quantity — the number of Jewish children born to add to the number of future generations; I'm talking about the human dignity of those who are already here.

Human beings have increased in numbers since the beginning of time, and they will continue to do so because the majority are breeders. That is not to say that everyone has to be, nor that those who are homosexual should feel any guilt because they are not contributing.

Imagine, Rabbi Ingram, being made to feel that your intrinsic nature is a "mistake"; don't you think that such an individual might then also think of him or herself as a mistake and try to end his or her life? We know only too well the statistics which tell us that that is precisely what young people have been doing because of their rejection.

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