

Gay Jews prepare for mardi gras

The controversy surrounding the first-ever Jewish float at last year's mardi gras may have boosted support for this year's event. **Chantal Abitbol** reports.

SYDNEY — A year after the first Jewish float participated in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade, the "Stars of David" are ready to come out again — and this time they anticipate double the turnout, with more than 300 people expected to take part.

The Jewish entry in last year's parade was 160 strong and caused controversy in the community when the Beth Din responded to the *Australian Jewish News'* coverage by requesting the editor, Vic Alhadeff, to attend a meeting to discuss it. The editor declined the invitation; the *AJN* received more than 200 letters in support and the issue found its way onto the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Geraldine Doogue's *Compass* program on ABC TV.

"Last year's march was a proud, public moment," Dayenu Association for Jewish Gays and Lesbians co-convenor Judy Kell told the *AJN* this week. "People are now aware and more comfortable to talk about the Jewish gay and lesbian community." Apart from a few negative responses, "the majority of the community has been very supportive," she added.

Celebrating both its one-year anniversary and the upcoming march, Dayenu will hold a Shabbat service and Shabbat dinner at Temple Emanuel, Woollahra, Sydney, on Friday evening, 2 March.

The following evening, donning rainbow-coloured *kipot* and T-shirts with a Star of David emblazoned on the front, they will take to the streets, parading alongside a menorah-decked float called "The Stars of David Come Out Again".

Ms Kell: "It's critical that this should not be an exclusive gay and lesbian event. For us as Jews, we're part of a bigger community, and because our message is about tolerance and inclusion we've been actively working to get members of the broader Jewish community involved. The more people know gays and lesbians, the more understanding they become."

A significant development to emerge from last year's march and the endorsement it received from members of the community is a noticeable return to Judaism within the Jewish gay and lesbian community, Ms Kell said. "Because we now see that the Jewish community is accepting of our lifestyle, people who once moved away from Judaism are now going to shule and getting involved in Jewish activities. One man said to me 'I came out as a gay man years ago — now I'm coming out as a Jew.'"

This Jewish float began after activists spent many years trying to put the issue onto the communal agenda. Ms Kell said. In previous years, they participated in the Mardi Gras by walking in small contingents with a handful of colleagues; then in late 1999, they decided to place an advertisement in the gay press, inviting people to discuss creating a Jewish float.

Following the successful response, Ms Kell, Mr Davidowitz and founding convenor Dawn Cohen helped to establish Dayenu, which has since doubled its membership to 80 within a year.

Dayenu is also involved in organising a conference entitled "The Religious Roots of Homophobia" to be held in Sydney on 25-26 February.



Controversial cover: the Sydney *AJN*, which led to the Beth Din asking editor Vic Alhadeff to discuss the paper's coverage of the Mardi Gras.



From Melbourne to mardi gras

Alana Rosenbaum

AFTER last year's Mardi Gras parade, Raymond Rich changed out of his costume but deliberately left on his black T-shirt, with a big, hot pink Magen David emblazoned on the front.



Raymond Rich

"I wanted people to know that I had been part of that group. It paid off so to speak. During the night other party-goers specifically came up to me and made supportive comments," he said.

Earlier that day, as he had followed the "Stars of David come out" float down the streets of Sydney, onlookers shouted words like *shalom* and *mazel tov* — probably the only Hebrew or Yiddish they knew — in a show of solidarity.

And at Friday's launch of the Mardi Gras festival, Mardi Gras president Julie Regan made special mention of the parade's Jewish contingent.

"They experienced a tirade of hatred from their own community. Our Jewish friends found support from others in their community who recognised the cold hard face of discrimination, those who realised that this issue is bigger than sexual preference," Ms Regan said.

Raymond, 55, will return this year to the Mardi Gras and dance to an upbeat version of *hava nagillah* aside the new Jewish float, "The Stars of David come out again". The choreographer has sent him a video of the steps, which he will learn in advance and he plans to get to Sydney early so that he can take part in the rehearsals.

Raymond does not feel nervous about the parade — tipped to draw 750,000 spectators — only keen and excited. "It's such a buzz," he said, especially the hours just before the parade as people rush around decorating the float and making last minute alterations to costumes. "To observe that happening right around you from inside the barriers leading up to the actual start is almost better than the parade itself," he said.

Raymond said that the community continues to deny that there are gay Jews just as it denies that there is a drug problem.