

Proud to come out — as gay and Jewish

Chantal Abitbol

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.

More than 300 people are expected to take part in the 2001 parade, which will take place on Saturday night, March 3.

The Jewish entry in last year's parade was 160 strong. The issue became a centre of controversy in the community when the Beth Din responded to the *Australian Jewish News'* coverage by requesting the editor to attend a meeting to discuss it. The editor declined the invitation, the *AJN* received more than 200 letters of support, and the issue found its way onto the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and onto 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 said. "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, on Friday evening, March 2.

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'."

Dayenu co-convenor Malcolm Davidowitz relates a similar story. "I received a letter from a gay Jewish man who was raised as a Roman Catholic, but always wondered about his Jewish roots. When he saw our float, it rekindled his willingness to find out more about his identity. This year he will be marching with us."

Numerous heterosexual supporters had shared a similar experience, Ms Kell said. "Many were Holocaust survivors who had never been comfortable about publicly showing their Judaism. But when they walked down Oxford Street with 500,000 people cheering us, they said they were proud to be on display as Jews supporting gays and lesbians within our community."

This evolution has occurred after she and other 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



Dayenu conveners Malcolm Davidowitz and Judy Kell.

Photo: Amelia Whitaker

gay press, inviting people to discuss creating a Jewish float.

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

"It's been a busy year, and we now have a core of people who are active in getting social events happening," Ms Kell said. "We hold regular Shabbat dinners, and we're setting up a support-and-outreach program linked with JewishCare for parents coming to grips with their children's homosexuality."

Last November, Dayenu met with Reform rabbis to discuss issues facing the Jewish gay and lesbian community, such as same-sex commitment ceremonies.

"The rabbis weren't sure if Australia was ready for it, but said they would review the law to see if they could get around it *Halachically*," Mr Davidowitz said. "But most were quite happy accepting gay and lesbians into the community and performing conversion courses for people in same-sex relationships."

Dayenu is also involved in organising a conference entitled "The Religious Roots of Homophobia", to be held in Sydney on February 25-26. The speakers will include Jewish comedian Jackie Loeb, David Marr, Dorothy McRae-McMahon and David Bromell.

"Along with 2000 years of anti-semitism, many recognise that the Judaeo-Christian belief system has also discriminated against gays and lesbians," Ms Kell said. "We have a right to be recognised and included, and we should not hide either part of our identity — neither our Jewish nor our gay and lesbian identity."

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