



**OPINION**

# Back Into Perspective

The same-sex marriage debate is turning more hostile with opponents increasingly referencing historical atrocities like the Holocaust. It's time we brought some decorum and respect back into the conversation. By Kim Gotlieb.

While I am (acting) President of Dayenu – Sydney’s Jewish GLBTI Group – I cannot begin to speak for the diversity of views held by our members. I can only speak as a religiously observant Jewish gay man, who is committed to the Jewish principle of *Tikkun Olam*, which means to “repair of the world”. I find myself asking, “Who is driving this debate?” It appears to be about same-sex marriage, but it is *not* about same-sex marriage. It has to be about something bigger, something related to how we define what is acceptable within the culture.

When I was in the US last year, I was amazed to experience the nonchalant security of a gay man who had been ‘legally

married for several years, referring to his ‘husband’. There was a palpable difference in the atmosphere in the room, compared with a subtle tittering, not-quite-ridicule, which is more evident in this country. Same-sex marriage laws which have existed in various states in America for some time, have clearly brought with them a sense of ‘grounded value’ and validity not only for gay couples, but also for the place which gay culture finds itself within the fabric of society.

The protagonist in this case, seems to be the Christian lobby, since I have not noticed Muslim, Jewish, or other religious groups entering into the conversation. It is curious to note that the structure of the rhetoric has changed. We used to hear, “It’s about Adam

and Eve, not Adam and Steve”. It used to be against homosexuality and it was based on a fundamentalist reading of the Bible.

We are now presented with a new description of marriage being about “a man and a woman and a child”. The introduction of children is a strategic organising of information, which can appear to legitimise their argument, because of the inevitable conclusion that same-sex couples can be excluded from this model. If it is to be upheld, then the discussion should include issues like divorce, sole parenting, adoption, infertility, and post-menopausal marriage.

I am comforted by belonging to Emanuel Synagogue in which Progressive, Conservative and Renewal denominations of Judaism are practised. They are all fully supportive of same-sex marriage, only awaiting the shift in the legal system to allow them to officiate. However, more traditional Jewish congregations maintain their negative stance.

It concerns me that ideological debate can often overlook the reality of countless painful anecdotes from same-sex couples working to develop loving, caring, and supportive relationships, which enhance and enrich the diversity and value of our communities. Their stories reflect the distress caused by

“I would like to just say that I think this whole campaign would do great credit to Joseph Goebbels” ...During a debate on same-sex marriage on *Sunrise*, the Australian Christian Lobby’s Jim Wallace invokes Joseph Goebbels, one of the most notorious Nazi figures of the Holocaust.

acts of exclusion, derision, shame, and other situations which equate to “less than”. It hurts and something must be done about it.

I am alarmed whenever the *Shoah* is co-opted to strengthen a point of discussion. We use this Hebrew word which means “calamity” or “disgusting”, rather than Holocaust, which is a Greek derivative relating to a “burnt sacrificial offering”.

The Shoah was the greatest atrocity of human history. When it is used, I believe we have two questions to ask. Whoever is doing so must feel extremely vulnerable to need to call forth such a heavy and emotionally-loaded ally. I note with compassion that the Australian Christian Lobby’s Jim Wallace has a sense of being marginalised in his role as a “demonised Christian” in the *Sunrise* debate on gay marriage. I also find myself wondering how one develops the sheer gall to bring in this comparison. Often we find that such people are accustomed to continuous privilege in certain areas, which can unwittingly blinker their awareness of the power they exercise.

I am disappointed that media powerbrokers choose to bring together people from opposing views to “fight it out” in a context which is inflammatory and escalating as each tries to outwit the other – finding methods to organise information in ways which will support their disparate points of view. While there is merit in hearing these, I would be greatly relieved to hear from people who were able to value the humanity behind diverse views, as well as showing some interest and respect for “otherness”.

Everyone who realised they were gay, knows what it feels like to be “other”. Maybe this is an area where we can make a significant contribution to the process of change, by modelling more compassion and respect for diverse viewpoints. A hint of curiosity and a modicum of heartfulness can go a long way.



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