

NOT WORDS BUT DEEDS

ARIEL FRIEDLANDER IS A LESBIAN RABBI FROM THE REFORMED JEWISH TRADITION. SHE IS VISITING AUSTRALIA FROM THE UNITED STATES TO TAKE PART IN THE SYDNEY GAY & LESBIAN MARDI GRAS PARADE. JILL JONES SPOKE TO HER ABOUT A RELIGIOUS TRADITION WITH A POSITIVE VIEW OF US.

The year 2000 marks the first time there has been an official Jewish gay and lesbian entry in the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade. Not content to do things by halves, Sydney's lesbian and gay Jewish community has invited a number of high profile gay and lesbian Jews to help them celebrate, including US lesbian rabbi, Ariel Friedlander.

In stark contrast to many Christian denominations, and other conservative religious faiths, Friedlander comes from a tradition which seems relatively comfortable with the contributions of women, and of lesbians.

She says the idea of women rabbis in the Progressive Jewish community, both in England (where she grew up) and the US (where she was born and later studied for the rabbinate), was generally accepted by the time she decided to enter rabbinical school.

Rabbi Sally Priesand was the first woman ordained in the US by the Reform movement in 1972. It was obviously a viable career path for Friedlander.

"My father is a rabbi," she says. "He tells me that when I was five I wanted to be the first-ever woman rabbi, but when he told me that it was too late I said 'well, forget it then'. I went on to become a professional sports photographer, working for a major London soccer team and national and international magazines

It is hard, she says, to estimate how many other lesbian rabbis there are in the US, partly because they are not necessarily all out and many do not necessarily wish to be labelled as such. There are currently three major movements in North American Judaism that ordain women. Within these, there are quite a few out lesbian rabbis in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements.

While the Conservative movement, she says, will not officially ordain out lesbians, a few women have come out after ordination. The Orthodox movement (the other major Jewish movement) does not ordain women at all.

Friedlander came to the realisation about her own sexual orientation slowly but a stint in Israel opened her eyes. "It had never occurred to me previously that I might be anything but heterosexual. Once I began my studies in Israel, however, I learned a lot more than Hebrew. A close friendship developed into love, and having recognised that, so many other things suddenly made sense. Once I had come out to myself, the first people I told were my parents, and siblings, and then my closest friends. It would appear that I was probably the last to know."

She sees herself as still learning the "trade" and isn't necessarily keen to locate any difficulties she has had with her sexual orientation alone. "There's a big gap between what one studies in rabbinical school, and the first years of working with real people. Presumably

She does acknowledge that some people have difficulties with her being a lesbian. "But I don't think it is appropriate to discuss the specifics publicly."

She works in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, USA which, she points out, is not far from the home of the 1970s fictional TV series, *The Waltons*. She serves two small congregations, 25 miles apart.

"Together they can afford the salary of one rabbi, and so they share me," she says.

Her congregations are supportive of her trip to Australia. She approached the presidents of both temples when the invitation was sent, and explained to them exactly what it was about. "Without hesitation they encouraged me to accept and

can know is how I have experienced things. But across the spectrum of Jewish observance, I see the support for, and inclusivity of, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews clearly located in the liberal Jewish arena. We are accepted as members of congregations, and in many cases as families. I know that the Reform movement has officially stated its support for our civil rights."

She points out that, at the end of March, the Reform rabbis are to debate and vote on a resolution regarding the religious nature of same-sex marriage ceremonies. This resolution will not be binding, "but the resulting vote will send a clear message to the Jewish com-



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and newspapers. But I was always interested in maintaining a connection to the Jewish community, and eventually, in 1991, decided to apply to rabbinical school. I think my father was rather pleased, actually, that I had decided to enter the family business, as it were."

some of the problems that have come up are because I'm inexperienced, some because I'm female, some because I'm a lesbian, but I would think that most of them were because I'm Ariel. That is, all that is me doing my best to serve the community and dealing with a variety of experiences."

permitted me to miss two Shabbat services. One of the congregations rents its social hall every week to the local (non-Jewish) gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender group, as well as for their monthly dances."

She is reluctant to make sweeping generalisations about the position of Jewish lesbians and gays in the US. "All I

community and the rest of the world".

And her reaction to the criticisms directed at the parade by some of Sydney's Christian religious leaders?

"My response to something like this is not through words but deeds. I will be marching in the parade. That is my answer."