

"Stars of David" come out at Mardi Gras

Shira Sebban

AN illuminated three-dimensional *Magen David*, two metres in height, will form the centrepiece of "Stars of David Come Out" — the first Jewish gay and lesbian motorised float to participate in the Sydney Mardi Gras.

About 150 Jewish gays, lesbians and supporters from Australia and abroad will join the float in the Mardi Gras procession on Saturday night.

They will include a troupe of 20 dancers wearing black T-shirts emblazoned with fluorescent pink Stars of David, performing a choreographed routine to an upbeat version of *Hava Nagila* and *Haveinu Shalom Aleichem*; three giant walking Stars of David; people carrying replicas of bagels and Stars of David on sticks; and a mini-bus filled with supporters.

Among the participants will be American lesbian Rabbi Ariel Friedlander, David Gellman, president of what is billed as "the world's largest gay synagogue" — Sha'ar Za'av in San Francisco — Perth clinical psychologist and researcher on homosexuality Dr Vivienne Cass and World Congress of Jewish Gay and Lesbian Organisations treasurer Michael Kook of Britain.

The float will involve "the largest visible gathering of Jewish lesbians and gays in the world outside the United States", organiser Dawn

Cohen told the *Australian Jewish News*. "Unlike the way we're portrayed by some in the community as having nothing to offer, we're a treasure that should be cherished by both the gay and Jewish communities. We're so committed to the Jewish community that we refuse to go away, even when it tries to push us to give up on our Jewishness."

Fellow-organiser Malcolm Davidovitz agreed: "We're proud of our sexuality and our religion, and we're not going to disappear. As Jews, we're taught to be tolerant of other people. Now it's time for the Jewish community to practise what it preaches and show tolerance of its lesbian and gay members."

While Jewish people had participated in the Mardi Gras for many years and had long been involved in gay liberation, few had identified as Jews until recently, Ms Cohen said. "It has taken us time to make a place for ourselves in the Australian Jewish community. Ten years ago, it was hard to get the community to talk about gay issues. When your community doesn't let you speak about who you are and is not interested in who you're in a relationship with, it's hard to feel relaxed and open and develop both sides of your identity.

"You either have to merge into the gay community and have less validation of, and focus on, your



Malcolm Davidovitz, Dawn Cohen.

Jewish self — which can mean that you leave the Jewish community — or you stay in the Jewish community and are forced to suppress your gay or lesbian identity."

Gay Jews who work in the Orthodox Jewish community "live in terror of losing their jobs because of Orthodox homophobia", Ms Cohen charged. "Until our rabbinate stops perpetuating the

erosexual Jew feel if they were told to leave their partner metaphorically outside the door?"

For the last two years, small Jewish groups have marched in the Mardi Gras parade. "It was life-changing for me to march as a Jewish lesbian and have three quarters of a million people cheer in support, some yelling out 'shalom' and 'mazel tov', and some

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myth that what they are doing is not homophobic, they will not be able to take responsibility for the terror and despair their attitudes are creating. It is homophobic to say 'you are welcome as an individual in our synagogue, but we will not recognise or value your spouse as your spouse'. How would a het-

Jewish faces in the crowd streaming with tears." Ms Cohen said. "I had an emotional experience of wholeness that I've never had before."

Mr Davidovitz: "I felt that I actually do count, that I'm someone at last."

Having immigrated to Australia from South Africa five years ago, he

believes that Sydney Jewry is "far more tolerant" than its counterparts in Cape Town and, especially, Johannesburg. "I can honestly say that I haven't been looked down on by any Jewish people here, whereas in South Africa I was suppressed. Being gay is not accepted or spoken about by the Jewish community there."

Last year, Mr Davidovitz founded a support and social group called Jewish Australian Gays. At about the same time, Ms Cohen, together with Jewish lesbian artist Lorraine Larri, established the Dayenu Foundation for Community Inclusion of Jewish Lesbian and Gays. Having worked on the float together, the two groups have united as the Dayenu Association.

As float treasurer, Mr Davidovitz has focused on fundraising for the project, sending 80 letters to Jewish organisations, synagogues and businesses. "The response wasn't good," he said, "until the Satellite Group [a national media and investment house which focuses on the homosexual community] came to our rescue and gave us a generous donation."

Meanwhile, Ms Cohen promoted the float around Australia and overseas, making a "passionate request" on the Internet and contacting 70 gay Jewish groups around the world. "At least 20 people are coming from outside Sydney, including about ten from overseas. Moreover, there will be 20 Jewish heterosexuals, from atheist to Orthodox, who are passionately committed to social justice and to expressing that they are at one with us."

In another first, a Mardi Gras Shabbat dinner will be held on Friday night at Shalom College, attended by 75 people, including Rabbi Friedlander, Temple Emanuel Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio and North Shore Temple Emanuel Rabbi Allison Conyer. Tickets sold out "within days", Ms Cohen said — indicative of "the depth of need in the community for a space where gay people, their families and partners can celebrate Shabbat without fear of being seen as second-class"

■ No place for gays in Defence Force, book launch