

Gay supporters called to face Jewish court

By BEN HILLS

The editor of Australia's national Jewish newspaper has been asked to appear before Judaism's highest ecclesiastical court over his coverage of the "Stars of David", the first Jewish float in Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

Two other Sydney Jewish leaders have also been invited to front the five senior rabbis who form the Beth Din — literally the "house of judgment" — in a dispute over the acceptance of homosexuality, which has split the community.

On one side are conservative rabbis who believe homosexuality is a sin. On the other are a who's who of community leaders, including three judges and eight university professors, who have come out in public support of a more tolerant, inclusive policy.

The views of Orthodox Jews, who form about 10 per cent of Australia's 120,000-strong Jewish community, were expressed in an article in last week's *Australian Jewish News* by Rabbi Benzion Milecki, the chief minister of South Head Synagogue.

"Homosexuality is not only forbidden according to Jewish law, it has the dubious distinction

of being one of the only things which the Torah [scriptures] refers to as toeva — an abomination, a word which is used to connote the idea of disgust," he wrote.

However, Reform Jews turned out in droves on March 4 to cheer on 160 gay and lesbian Jews and their supporters, waving a banner and wearing pink stars of David, who rode on a float along Oxford Street for the first time in the 23-year history of the Mardi Gras.

They included Jews from Israel, South Africa, the United States, Britain, Germany, Sweden and New Zealand and were led by US lesbian rabbi Ariel Friedlander, author Diane Armstrong, and Susie Wise, a Holocaust survivor. It was described as the biggest gay Jewish event in the world.

Vic Alhadeff, editor of the weekly *Jewish News*, splashed the picture on the front page of his next issue, aware it would cause controversy among his 60,000 readers.

"We thought long and hard about it because it is a very sensitive issue within the Jewish community," he said, "We decided our mandate was to reflect the entire community whether they are republican or monarchist, Orthodox or

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"It was newsworthy" . . . editor Vic Alhadeff defending his coverage of the Jewish float in the Mardi Gras. Photograph by ANDREW TAYLOR

Jewish court calls in gay supporters

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Reform, gay or straight. At the end of the day, it was newsworthy."

Mr Alhadeff said he was not altogether surprised when he was asked by Rabbi Moshe Gutnick, the president of the NSW Rabbinical Council, and brother of Melbourne gold-mining magnate Mr Joseph Gutnick, to appear before the Beth Din court.

One prominent member of the Jewish community had already complained about his coverage of gay issues. A member of the Board of Deputies, Ms Eliana Miller, confirmed she had written to Beth Din asking for an arbitration, but declined to say what the letter was about.

"Anyone can write to Beth Din asking them to make a judgment about something they find abhorrent," she said.

Although the court historically

had life and death power — it is descended from the biblical Sanhedrin — today, according to Mr Alhadeff, it is mainly used as a forum to arbitrate disputes such as divorce settlements and has no "coercive power".

Also asked to appear before Beth Din over complaints about their attitude to homosexuality are two prominent Sydney Jews, the chief executive of the Shalom Institute, which runs Shalom College at the University of NSW, Dr Hilton Immerman, and the president of the 200-strong NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, Mr Peter Wertheim. Beth Din's registrar, Rabbi Raymond Apple, denied anyone had been summonsed. They had been "invited to have a chat".

Dr Immerman said he believed the complaint related to Shalom College hiring out a function room to about 80 gay and lesbian Jews and their supporters the

night before the Mardi Gras. They shared a traditional candlelit Shabbat meal, with prayers led by Reform rabbis, at which some gay Jews ostracised by their families reportedly wept.

The complaint against Mr Wertheim is believed to relate to the defeat of a motion at a meeting of the Board of Deputies last year. The motion sought to change the board's constitution in a way which could have excluded gay organisations from becoming affiliated with it.

In an extraordinary display of support for gay Jews in the face of the Beth Din hearing, letters from about 30 readers around the world, and an advertisement signed by 28 of Sydney's most distinguished Jews, will appear in tomorrow's *Australian Jewish News*. They include Professor Ron Penny, a leading AIDS authority, who writes: "A majority of us working in this area, I am sure, join me in

applauding you [the *News*/as well as those in our community who, as Jews, are isolated because of ignorance, denial or prejudice, yet live in a community subjected for centuries to the same treatment from others."

The other signatories are: justices Mahla Pearlman, Chief Judge of the Land and Environment Court, Peter Rose (Family Court) and Ronald Solomon (District Court); and professors Colin Tatz (director of the Centre for Contemporary Genocide Studies and Professor of Politics at Macquarie University), Graham De Vahl Davis (engineering, University of NSW), Sol Encel (sociology, NSW), Peter Baume (former Federal health minister, Chancellor of Australian National University), Henry Brodarty (psychogeriatrics, NSW), David Cooper (medicine, NSW), and John Ziegler (Associate Professor of Pediatrics, NSW).