

# Jewish gays: Readers respond to AJN coverage

## A mitzvah

I THANK you from the bottom of my heart for the wonderful coverage in the *Australian Jewish News* of this year's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (10/3/00). Only when newspapers such as yours have the courage and intelligence to write with such a positive attitude can we be heard, and can the many people within our group who are struggling to come to terms with their inner turmoil move on. So many non-gay mothers from my daughter's school and friends in the community have given me positive feedback that I feel that you have done so many of us a *mitzvah*.

**Sandra Schneiderman**  
Sydney, NSW

## Room for me

I WANT to thank you for your great coverage of the "Stars of David" entry in the Mardi Gras. I am a single mother, and I was particularly pleased to read about David Gellman's descriptions of alternative families. When the full spectrum of Jewish families is made visible, rather than hidden behind the myth that all of us fit the stereotype, it gives me hope as a synagogue congregant and a member of the community that there is room for me too.

**Jenny van Procter**  
Balmain, NSW

## Silent majority

MAZEL tov to the *Jewish News* for its articles on lesbian and gay Jews. We have lived in Australia for over 20 years, but as South African migrants, feel as passionately as when we left that country that discrimination in all its forms is abhorrent. We marched in the Mardi Gras Jewish entry both to support our daughter and daughter-in-law and to express our hope for a Jewish community that is inclusive of all its members. We found it a wonderful experience, all the more pleasurable because we had family with us. We know there are many who increasingly have a preference for a Jewish community that can reflect diversity and tolerance for difference. The *Jewish News* speaks for that usually silent majority.

**Dr George and Vivian Cohen**  
Vaucluse, NSW

## Learn a thing

I WAS delighted to read about the "Stars of David's" success. I saw them on Channel Ten, thought they were fabulous and so did the non-Jewish, non-gay friends I was with. They are the biggest open Jewish participation in a community festival that I have seen in Sydney, and they made Jews look good. Those of us who are not gay could learn a thing or two — about Jewish pride and *chutzpah*. Now that I know the *Jewish News* covers more than a predictable corner of eastern suburbs and north shore life, I will buy it more often.

**Simon Levy**  
Leichhardt, NSW

## Equally worthy

IT will no doubt come as a surprise to Rabbi Moshe Gutnick that as a young Jewish lesbian, "marital" fidelity and living my life according to the morals that I have learned from my family and community are paramount to my life.

Many gay men and lesbians share these goals. For 364 days of the year, most of us live "modestly" as we go about our domestic and professional lives. One day of the year, we have a party — Mardi Gras — whose aim is not, as Rabbi Gutnick claims (*AJN* 10/3/00), to "desensitize us to promiscuity and immorality", but rather to celebrate our survival in a hostile world and to show our pride in who we are. We also celebrate our shared history and our incredible diversity as people.

Equate it with Pesach, our celebration of survival, or Purim, a time of partying and "dress-ups", which sometimes overwhelms the seriousness of the traditional story.

Many do not understand that being gay is not about lifestyle, how we look or our parties, but rather an intrinsic and unchangeable element of ourselves. Ultimately, it is about whom we love

— our partners, families and friends.

It is uncomfortable for Rabbi Gutnick, and Orthodoxy in general, to confront the existence of gay men and lesbians in the Jewish community, but how dare anyone have the arrogance to think themselves more worthy of a place in the Jewish community than anyone else? God created us all, and I have no doubt that a young lesbian is no less worthy in His eyes than a male rabbi.

**V Redd**  
Sydney, NSW

## Full coverage

I WAS gratified to see that the *Jewish News* supports the right of the Jewish community to full and frank coverage of events which affect it, regardless of whether those events please or displease some readers. Congratulations on reporting the Jewish participation in the Mardi Gras and in particular, for not distorting it. Jews have enough experience of suppression and misrepresentation; God help us if we subject a minority within our own community to similar treatment.

**John Acton**  
Darlinghurst, NSW

## Responsible attitude

LET me strongly congratulate you on your coverage of the first-time Jewish presence in the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. For too long the Jewish press has shied away from a responsibility to face up to the serious social issues in our community.

Since my involvement in the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, I found little support for a role by the Jewish community for confronting a disease and lifestyle related to aspects of homosexuality and injecting drug use, as if it did not exist nor would affect us. Yet death, disease and social marginalisation have occurred in a community well aware of the tragic consequences of discrimination.

In fact, efforts on my part to provide school-based educational input to address such issues were met with resistance and denial by teachers, religious leaders and the like. In fact, we as Jews live in a remarkably tolerant society, protected by some of the best laws against discrimination, victimisation and racial vilification through, in no small way, the efforts of the Australian gay and lesbian community.

Our community deserves better of our leaders and press, and this initial role of the *AJN* to open social issues such as homophobia, injecting drug use and domestic violence especially to women and children, to name a few, deserves an equal or greater place than photos of the most recent social or other event.

We have swept social issues that we do not want to confront under the carpet. Thank you for this vital new socially responsible attitude. A majority of us working in this area, I am sure, join me in applauding you, 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.

Keep up your commitment to the minorities of a minority community.

**Professor Ron Penny AO**  
Centre for Immunology  
St Vincent's Hospital  
and University of NSW

## Heartwarming

IT was incredibly heartwarming to read your articles regarding the Shalom College dinner and Mardi Gras. It is lovely to be part of a community where people are accepted and supported.

**Karen Small**  
Sydney, NSW

## Honest coverage

I WOULD like to express my appreciation for the honest and excellent coverage of the Mardi Gras in last week's *Jewish News*. Having newly immigrated from New York, where I am used to reading superb media coverage of all events, I found last week's *Jewish News* a ray of sunshine. I have

no leaning towards homosexuality, but believe that all human beings have a right to *be*. As Jews, we should all understand this statement. Perhaps the horrors of the Holocaust left us with an empathy and understanding of all minorities. I hope so.

**Jennifer Shames**  
Sydney, NSW

## Debate has begun

WE are writing to applaud your positive coverage of the Mardi Gras Parade and in particular, the Jewish float. We have already written to Diane Armstrong to congratulate her on her insightful piece published in your paper last week.

The following is a quote from the Sydney Jewish Museum: "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing" (Edmund Burke) — a wake-up call to anyone in our community who wishes to silence good men and women from exposing prejudice and fighting for the rights of others who live within our society. Sadly, there are still too many narrow-minded and bigoted Australians who would have any positive press silenced on the issue of same-sex relationships. The Jewish community has survived centuries of persecution and marginalisation through unity, not divisiveness. The other essential ingredient has been debate, not stifling of discussion.

The lessons of history are there. The debate has begun. The challenge for the Jewish community now is how to acknowledge and accept the minority group within. Let's hope the debate progresses in a spirit of inclusiveness and acceptance of diversity.

In 1998 we were "outed" in the press, and we then decided to give interviews on the subject of same-sex relationships so that parents of gay kids, and in some cases gay parents, could know that to be visible and happy was indeed possible. The incredible number of letters we received from all over Australia commending us for what we had done and thanking us for the difference we had made to so many lives, was astounding. We continue to work in areas of discrimination against same sex couples and to fight against prejudice and bigotry wherever we find it.

It is only in the media that these issues get widely read and discussed, so thank you once again for playing your part.

**Jackie Stricker and Dr Kerryn Phelps**  
Sydney, NSW

## Courage

I WANT to congratulate you on the last edition of the *Jewish News*. The superb and enlightening articles on the "Star of David" float and the David Gellman interview were balanced, informative and long-overdue.

I have a large medical practice in the eastern suburbs, and I can't tell you how many of my patients, old and young, Reform and Orthodox, and mostly "straight", were thrilled with the honesty, compassion and new awareness of the difficulties that so many of our young congregation are facing, brought finally to light by your bravery in publishing this edition.

It's time all of us Jews joined together in combatting persecution in any form. Do we never learn from history? Your courage has opened the eyes of many in our congregation. Once again, my heartiest congratulations.

**Dr Michael Armstrong**  
Sydney, NSW

## Something wonderful

LAST week, I saw something wonderful. Something I would never have guessed possible: the joy and celebration of Mardi Gras on the front page of the *Australian Jewish News*.

Ten years ago, I came out to my mother and father as a lesbian, then to my grandparents, family and friends. The love and support they gave me was extraordinary. Nevertheless, this was not enough for me to overcome the fear that my community would reject me. So I chose to live outside of the Jewish community here in Sydney. Instead, I devoted my time, energy, pride and commitment to another community to which I belong. Two years ago, I had the honour to be elected to the board of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (SGLMG). I hold the position

of secretary, as well as Fair Day Director. I work with a board of 13 others, the staff of SGLMG and thousands of volunteers to put on a festival of over 130 different events, the parade and parties. Each year I am filled with a sense of wonder and pride as I see lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, young, old, from every conceivable background celebrate who they are and refusing to live in fear.

To be in the parade as a Jew and as a lesbian or gay man is to take a bold step — one that publicly rejects homophobia and antisemitism. I honour every lesbian and gay man in the float for their courage and pride. I thank their friends and families who were there to share their support. You all inspire and encourage me.

I also thank the *Australian Jewish News* for your courage to give the proud marchers, the Dayenu Association, the float in Mardi Gras, Rabbi Ariel Friedlander and Congregation Sha'ar Zahav the recognition they deserve. With warmth and honesty, you have shown that as lesbians and gay men we are proud to be Jews. In return, we seek and expect the same acceptance and respect from both of our communities.

**Ilana Kaplin**  
Secretary, Board of Directors  
Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras

## Long struggle

I WANTED to commend you on your coverage of Jewish gay and lesbian issues and specifically, the involvement of members of our community in the Mardi Gras. I know that it has been a long hard struggle for many within our community, challenged by conservative institutions which excluded them as openly homosexual.

Since the first open discussion about this issue as part of Jewish Free University almost a decade ago, there has been a real change in the expressed attitudes of many of our institutions towards acceptance of diversity. It is good to see this change reflected in your newspaper and the initiatives of many community groups, such as the recent Shalom Institute Shabbat dinner.

I look forward to a time when all our synagogues acknowledge the legitimacy of the different sexual preferences of their congregants.

**Nick Seemann**  
Lumanti Support Group for Shelter  
Katmandu, Nepal

## Contribution

AS a Jewish businessman who travels around the region, I was delighted to find coverage of the Mardi Gras in the *Australian Jewish News*. Several of my close friends marched in the Jewish contingent, and I feel it is important to acknowledge their tremendous contribution to the Jewish community. Please keep up this coverage.

**Fred Litwin**  
Marketing Manager  
Intel Corporation  
Singapore

## Not so different

I AM a heterosexual mother of two sons and one daughter. I live and work in the Jewish community. After hearing Dawn Cohen speak about being gay and Jewish, I invited her to address my Wizo group. I thought that not only would it be of interest to our group of Jewish mothers, but it would give us a better understanding and tolerance of a way of life which I had thought was so very different from our own. What I discovered was that, apart from sexual preference, our lives were not very different at all, especially when explained by such an eloquent, open and honest speaker.

I felt strongly enough about supporting the group and their right to free expression that I decided to join them in the Mardi Gras as a supporter. I have never done anything like this before ... and what a night it was! I was proud to be Jewish and proud that I stood up for something I believed in. My husband, children and friends were very proud of me too, and the cheers and support from the 600,000-strong crowd was phenomenal.

I applaud the *Jewish News* for its excellent coverage of the Mardi Gras.

**Wendy Churnin (Milston)**  
Sydney, NSW

## We are here

TO those who despise me and other gay Jews for showing that we exist:

I am appalled at the attitude of some in the Jewish community who show hatred and prejudice towards the gay Jewish community. As a young Jewish gay male, I am subjected to hatred not only for being Jewish, but from within my own community.

Being gay isn't a choice; if it was, I wouldn't choose it. My gayness has been with me from birth. I grew up in an Orthodox house, had Orthodox values, attended Yeshiva. And I turned out gay.

I always knew I was different from my male counterparts. Even from a very young age. Do you think it's fun being gay? Do you think someone would want to choose a lifestyle where he/she will be hated? I think not. *Hashem* created us, gave us our own personalities. He gave me my gayness. *Hashem* says in *Bereshit*: "He saw everything He had made, and it was good" — including Gentiles and gay Jews. I keep Shabbat, I keep kosher, I keep the holidays and I attend shule often.

I can show my partner of two-and-a-half years the same love, if not more, than a man can show his wife and family. Also, I do not practise sodomy.

It's time the Jewish community woke up and lifted the blindfolds. Gay Jews are everywhere. They attend Orthodox *yeshivot* in Israel; the homosexual activity I saw there amazed me.

Do not judge us, for you could be judging a family member, your best friend, your son and daughter — even your husband and wife. Gays come in all shapes and sizes. One could be sitting right next to you right now. Wake up, gay Jews exist, we are here.

Name supplied, but withheld

## Full support

AS a member of the Jewish Lesbian Group of Victoria, I was delighted that you had given such positive coverage to the Mardi Gras and Shabbes dinner. It is imperative for the community at large that such coverage continues, so that it can learn to be encompassing, rather than exclusive — and recognise its diversity and wealth. Of all communities, surely Jews should be aware of the futility and waste of discrimination and prejudice. I wish to give you full support for the coverage you gave to such an empowering event.

**Michelle Fink**  
Staff Radiologist  
Royal Children's Hospital  
Melbourne

## All groups

GOOD on you! We need your reports on all social groups, including the feisty Jewish gays and lesbians in Mardi Gras.

**Sylvia Tai**  
Sydney, NSW

## Dismayed

I CANNOT adequately express my shock and dismay at the negative reaction from some members of Australia's Jewish community following your coverage of the extraordinary participation of 160 gay and lesbian Jews in Mardi Gras.

As an American, with a passion for freedom of the press, I am appalled that any intelligent person would seek to silence publication of truth. As a Jew, I am saddened by the emergence of bigotry. Bigotry and hate cannot survive in the daylight; it grows only in darkness. The exposure of the intolerance of certain members of our community to the reality of the existence of Jews of varying sexual orientations will, I hope, ultimately lead to the elimination of bigotry from the hearts of all Jews. You have my support.

**David Gellman,**  
President  
Congregation Sha'ar Zahav  
San Francisco, USA

## Irrefutable

MY sincerest congratulations for making gay and lesbian Jews front-page news. It was a refreshing and courageous move, one which was bound to provoke criticism. However, the *Australian Jewish News* is precisely that — a newspaper — and as such, must reflect the views of all its readership and inform those members of the com-

munity about what other members are doing.

It is a fact that there are gay and lesbian Jews in Australia and every other Jewish community. It's also a fact that there are liberal and conservative Jews. Orthodox rabbis might not like it, but these are irrefutable facts. And given this, it is both important and necessary that the *AJN* informs all members of the community of what's happening. At first, I was surprised that Jews were in the Mardi Gras; but when you see a contingent of gay police, gay politicians, gay actors, gay media, gay Christians, then a gay Jewish float is both appropriate and acceptable. Indeed, if there was no gay Jewish float, people might wonder what we've got to hide. It is also more evidence that Jews are a normal community, with its own gay and lesbian and bisexual members, in which we can all take pride. Again, my congratulations on your courage and honesty.

**Jonathan Gold (aged 15)**  
St Ives, NSW

## Hypocrisy

I WAS disgusted and sickened to read the letter headlined "Disgusted" (*AJN* 17/3/00).

To think that one of our "brethren" can be so incredibly intolerant as well as grossly hypocritical leaves me in a very saddened state of mind. His intolerance is exceeded only by his total lack of knowledge regarding homosexuality. Yet he cares "unconditionally for all my fellow-Jews". I presume that in his closeted mind, a homosexual *homo sapiens* cannot be born of Jewish parents! If he admits to the fact that there are Jewish born homosexuals, then his "caring" statement is total hypocrisy. What ever happened to the Torah's statement of "love thy neighbour"?

Furthermore, regarding the "Jewish paper", if I want to read the Torah, I will read the Torah, but if I want news concerning Judaism and Jewish activities, I will read the *Jewish News*. Long may it continue!

**Gerald Wolff**  
Wentworth Falls, NSW

## Loneliness

I HAVEN'T been able to tell my family that I am gay, because of their difficulty in dealing with this issue. Also, the community will not take kindly to my opinion. Of course, they all think it is a choice — but what person would choose a life of lies, estrangement and loneliness? Therefore, I can't give my name because by doing so, I will cause a lot of pain to my family, as well as myself.

Name supplied but withheld

## Insight

RABBI Benzion Milecki's article (*AJN* 17/3/00) was notable for, on the one hand, being so very 21st-century in promoting his website, but then being dark-age in stating that homosexuals will hopefully "develop the insight to understand the error of their actions and the strength to overcome them". Isn't that the sort of thing that was said about Jews in Europe for many centuries?

**Bob Ronai**  
St Ives, NSW

## Encouragement

I WOULD like to congratulate the *Jewish News* for recognising that Jewish gays and lesbians do exist, and do (or would like to be given a chance to) care about their Judaism. Your coverage of the Mardi Gras, including the Jewish floats and the Shabbat dinner at Shalom College, will perhaps serve as support and encouragement for those among us whose homosexuality is as unavoidable and blameless as their Judaism. To those who think we should disappear or remain celibate, closeted or some other psychologically disastrous option, how can they, as Jews who ought to understand bigotry, prejudice and persecution, do this to anyone, let alone to fellow-Jews?"

**Dr Laurance Splitter**  
South Yarra, Vic

## Use it equally

I AM concerned about our community's reaction to homosexuality. I understand that according to the *Mishnah*, the punishment is *karet* (cutting

off). I am aware that there are also 36 other transgressions that carry the same penalty. Included in these are desecrating the Sabbath, eating *chametz* during Pesach, eating or working on Yom Kippur and eating pig. I am sure there are many in our community who say they are *Shomer Shabbat* and have perhaps driven, spent money, used electricity, made or taken a telephone call or carried on Shabbat. There may even be some who have eaten *chametz* during Pesach or who fancy Chinese restaurants and have tasted delicacies that include pork or have eaten or worked on Yom Kippur.

Do we hound these people? Do we discuss these transgressions? Do we ask before they enter our synagogues or homes? If we are to take homosexuality and discuss this and make gay people feel unwelcome in our community, should not the same be done to those who commit any of the 36 transgressions? Admittedly, it would diminish our community immensely. If one wishes to use Torah and Jewish law, then let us use it fairly, equally and justly.

**Annamarie Cohen**  
Bondi Junction, NSW

## Far behind?

WITH the Pope apologising for the past sins of his Church, can the Orthodox rabbinate be far behind in its treatment of gays and lesbians (and editors of the *Jewish News*)?

**Professor Ben Selinger**  
Canberra, ACT

## Compassionate

I FULLY support the gay and lesbian coverage in the paper. I thought the articles written were done in a tasteful and compassionate manner.

**Michele Marco**  
Sydney, NSW

## It's time

AS an organiser of the "Stars of David Come Out" float, I thank you for the support and coverage the *Jewish News* gave us on this historic occasion. As a proud gay Jew, it is time for the Jewish community to take their heads out of the sand and accept a very important part of the community. As a nation that has always been persecuted, it is time for the community to be more tolerant. There have been times when I thought the Jewish community wanted to kick me out because of my sexual preferences, but there is nothing it can do to take away my rights as a born Jew. So once again, thank-you for enlightening the Jewish community.

**Malcolm Davidowitz**  
Sydney, NSW

## Accepted

THANK-you for the great coverage of the gay and lesbian events. It's great to see that we are accepted in the community.

**Alex Nissen**  
Sydney, NSW

## Be aware

THIS letter is in support of *AJN* editor Vic Alhadeff and the newspaper's coverage of gay and lesbian matters throughout the year, but specifically the Mardi Gras and the Jewish activities surrounding it. We need to hear and be aware of the events happening around us and to bring public awareness to a higher level. It is important to us all.

**Corinne Markov, Hallie Fernandez**  
Bega, NSW

## Constructive

I AM writing to thank the *AJN* for its responsible, constructive and informative coverage of the Jewish participation in the Mardi Gras. The ensuing debate will most likely centre on the question of whether or not it is appropriate for a Jewish organ to approach lesbian-gay issues from an objective perspective.

I note, as I have learned from my rabbinic teachers, that the Levitical text containing the edict that states a man must not lie with a man as he would with a woman also contains the following commandments: "You must not oppress

your neighbour" [19:13]; "You must not go about slandering your kin" [19:16]; "You may not stand by idly when your neighbour's blood is being shed" [19:16]; "You shall not hate your brother or sister in your heart" [19:17]; "You must not seek vengeance, nor bear a grudge against the children of your people" [19:18]; "You shall love your neighbour as you love yourself" [19:18]; "You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt" [19:34].

I consider the leadership shown by the *AJN* editor and staff in the coverage of the events to be a tangible example of the spirit of Jewish ethics as Leviticus teaches us.

**Rabbi Ariel Friedlander**  
Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA

## We should know

BEFORE throwing brickbats and abuse at the *AJN*, which, fortunately, is done by only a few: The *Australian Jewish News* was very objective and evenhanded in its coverage of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Why is it that some elements in our community only want their point of view put forward? Is this fair or realistic? The *AJN* has done a wonderful job in the past and now, doing what it is supposed to do — report.

Barbara Glover and Diane Armstrong have the love, strength and dignity to support their daughters (*AJN* 17/3/00). I wonder how many of us would have done the same. Making their daughters feel guilty and asking them to "rectify" their way of life — these ideas are, fortunately, concepts of the past. Helen Bersten's letter covers my sentiments in this matter, while Penelope Toltz's covers the sensitivity of the issues.

Discrimination against homosexuals, gypsies and, most of all, Jews led to the concentration camps, where we have suffered most. Therefore, we Jews should know better than anyone and make every effort to ensure that discrimination doesn't happen to anyone, anywhere.

**Ernie Friedlander**  
Randwick, NSW

## Vital instrument

I FULLY support your decision to publish stories relating to gay/lesbian matters, with particular reference to the recent "Stars of David Come Out" Mardi Gras float and associated stories. As a gay man and a Jew, I understand what it feels like to be oppressed. Newspapers are a vital instrument to combat this oppression, whether it be from within or without.

**Michael Barnett**  
Former Aleph Melbourne president

## Impressed

I WOULD like to express my support for the work that the *Jewish News* has done in raising community awareness of gay and lesbian issues in Australia. As a British Jew, I am very impressed by the contribution that the Jewish gay and lesbian community makes to the general Jewish community here in Australia. I give my full support for ongoing publicity of these very important issues and will be encouraging the *Jewish Chronicle* in London to do the same.

**Robert Stevens**  
London, England

## Fear, ignorance

I WAS delighted to read the positive coverage of Jewish involvement in Mardi Gras. We live in an age where homophobia affects many gay men and lesbians. It is a destructive force based on fear and ignorance which hurts people and destroys lives. To read such positive coverage of Jewish gay men and lesbians, their friends and families, can only go towards breaking down stereotypes and hatred. Diane Armstrong's decision to talk openly about her dilemma was portrayed with admirable bravery and truth, and will hopefully resonate with readers who may be coming to terms with their children's sexuality. A photocopy of Ms Armstrong's story is on its way to my Irish Catholic mother, who made her decision to "come out" some years ago.

Congratulations and peace to you all.

**Catherine James**  
Editor, *Lesbians On The Loose*

LETTERS to the Editor should be emailed to: [valhadeff@jewishnews.net.au](mailto:valhadeff@jewishnews.net.au) or faxed to: 9332 4207.