

Shalom Institute lashes out at “bigotry”

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THE Shalom Institute has been criticised for having hired out its premises to organisers of the Mardi Gras Shabbat service and dinner earlier this month.

A member of the Jewish community has also asked Institute chief executive officer Dr Hilton Immerman to appear before the Sydney Beth Din for a *Din Torah* (Torah judgment).

Speaking to the *Australian Jewish News*, Shalom Institute president John Glass expressed concern at “the level of bigotry in the community”.

The Shalom Institute board “unanimously feels that any Jew or Jewish group wishing to affiliate to the community should be given the opportunity to do so, rather than repeatedly having doors slammed in their faces, as unfortunately has happened to the gay and lesbian Jewish community,” he said. “It was a simple question for us: a group of Jews wanted to have a kosher Shabbat meal and came along to us as paying customers. We afforded them the opportunity. What more legitimately Jewish activity can you have than to celebrate Shabbat with a Friday night dinner? We facilitated the celebration of Shabbat, not of homosexuality.”

Last year, The Shalom Institute’s board unanimously passed a resolution noting “its commitment to fostering pluralistic learning communities” and reaffirming “its outreach and support in the form of advice and use of its facilities to all sections of the Jewish community”.

This policy was unanimously re-endorsed at a board meeting last week, Mr Glass said. “In light of our pluralistic, inclusive agenda, we decided this was the only ethical position to take.”

The dinner was conducted under the auspices of the NSW Kashrut Authority, with a *mashgiach* (kashrut supervisor) present throughout the function, he stressed. “The group held a Shabbat



Shalom Institute president John Glass

service in our courtyard, followed by dinner in our common-room, while our residents eat in the dining-room, so it didn’t impact on them in any way.”

Both The Shalom Institute and Mr Glass had received more than a dozen protest calls from rabbis and members of the community, calling for the event to be cancelled, he said. “While most of the calls were rational, a few were bizarre and a couple were abusive and full of vilification. People who subscribe to such a bigoted view are demanding rights for themselves, while denying those same rights to people with an alternative view. They demand that everyone conform with their views on homosexuality, but by demanding that we cancel that event, they are not giving the

same rights to the gay and lesbian Jewish community to express its unity with Judaism.”

NSW University Chancellor Dr John Yu also received a letter of complaint from a member of the Jewish community, asking him to intervene and cancel the event.

Mr Glass: “Making a public issue out of an intra-community dispute is tantamount to *chillul Hashem* [defaming God’s name].”

NSW University Registrar Crystal Condous: “As a university, we need to uphold the principles of free speech and tolerance.” The university “couldn’t interfere with commercial activities approved of, and conducted, by Shalom Institute unless they contravened Commonwealth or state law, and in this case we didn’t believe they did”, she told the *AJN*.

In a letter to Dr Immerman, Sydney Beth Din Registrar Rabbi Raymond Apple wrote that a member of the community had requested a *Din Torah* “for the hearing of matters in dispute between you ... we would appreciate it if you could nominate a Thursday in April when you could be available.”

Mr Glass wrote in reply: “Dr Immerman is an employee of The Shalom Institute and thus cannot speak on behalf of the board unless specifically authorised. In order to assist our board in its deliberations, it would be appreciated if you would detail for us the issues on which a *Din Torah* is being sought.”

Such clarification has not been forthcoming, Mr Glass said. “We’re only assuming that the *Din Torah* relates to the Mardi Gras Shabbat service and dinner, but it could be anything.”

Rabbi Apple told the *AJN*, however, that “if a meeting were arranged between The Shalom Institute and the Sydney Beth Din, it would certainly be an appropriate forum where such an event could be discussed”.

Mr Glass: “I mean no disrespect to the Sydney Beth Din, but until such time as they specify what the issues are, we can’t accede to their request. If we do, we may well seek legal representation at the hearing because a Beth Din is a court of law, and so to achieve a reasonable Torah judgment, we’d need to be represented by a Torah and legal expert.”

The entire community owes “an enormous debt of gratitude” to the Dayenu Association and

its co-ordinator, Dawn Cohen, for the “Stars of David Come Out” Mardi Gras float, Mr Glass added. “Like some of us, I remember being forced to wear the Star of David as a badge of shame, while they wore it as one of pride and were cheered by crowds as they did. It was an enormous emotional experience for me, which typifies the inclusive, egalitarian nature of Australia.”

In a “thank-you” letter to The Shalom Institute, Ms Cohen wrote: “You have provided us with more than shelter for our Shabbat: you have provided us with a sense of shelter and safety as Jews that we are not used to getting ... We like to think that in fighting for our right to be, you make it a safer, richer, more inclusive community for all Jews.”

Speaking to the *AJN*, Ms Cohen said “the lack of resources and agencies in the Jewish community for gay and lesbian Jews, that affirm who they are and value their right to be Jews, is causing Jewish drug abuse and Jewish alienation, and in the worst-case scenario, Jewish suicides.

“I remember being forced to wear the Star of David as a badge of shame. They wore it as one of pride. It typifies the inclusive, egalitarian nature of Australia.”

“Nobody can discriminate against another group of people and not take responsibility for the damage to human lives that result. The Orthodox rabbinate must think about the consequences of its active attempts to stop us from making it possible for Jewish gay people to get spiritual, emotional and social sustenance from the community. I understand their dilemma. I understand the difficulties with *Halacha*. The answer is not to bully us so that we go away, and then everybody can go back to pretending there is no such thing as gay and lesbian Jews. We are not going to go away. Not now, not ever. The answer is to get together with us and talk. Let us work together out of mutual respect to find ways in which the quality of all Jewish lives can be improved.”