

Jewish gays in the *AJN*: The debate continues

Little did I know

I DON'T like the Mardi Gras. The combination of exhibitionism and voyeurism never appealed to me, particularly as I saw the original goal of "gay rights" having been achieved. Little did I know.

It is no real surprise to see how strongly prejudice and censorship thrive in certain sections of our community. It doesn't really shock me to hear them call homosexuals "abominations" and then qualify it by saying "nothing personal".

Perhaps I shouldn't be moved by the accusation that it is not only the gay people themselves who are heretical, but it is also anyone who allows them to participate in Jewish ritual, or even anyone who dares to report their activities, even though they are clearly newsworthy.

Knowing there are always people who see censorship as the way of addressing social issues prepared me for the outrageous words and behaviour of the few eccentric members of the community. Similarly, being aware of the conservatism of many of the *rabbonim*, I was not shocked to hear that they would lend some credibility to the views of others by agreeing to a *Din Torah* hearing.

So, if none of this shocked or surprised me, why am I writing this letter? We are fortunate to live in an open, tolerant society, where even the "lunatic fringe" should be heard. However, if we are to protect and maintain this society, we are obliged to challenge such intolerance and to reveal this "religious political correctness" for what it really is — fear and loathing of those who are different and don't conform to a certain code of behaviour.

Accordingly, I commend and endorse the actions of Vic Alhadeff, Hilton Immerman and Peter Wertheim, and all who seek to treat people equally, regardless of their race, religion, colour or sexual orientation. Further, in expressing my support for the rights of gay people to express their Jewishness and fully participate in the life of the community, I will now seriously consider marching alongside them in next year's parade.

(Please note that these are my personal views and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of any organisation with which I am associated.)

Steve Denenberg
Vaucluse, NSW

Include me too

LIKE all your supportive correspondents, I too "believe that all human beings have a right to be" and that "as Jews, we should all understand this statement".

I support the "rights of born Jews", but do not accept that all behaviours or choices constitute rights.

I agree that homosexuality is indeed a "very serious social issue", but disagree — based on Torah values — that it is a valid Jewish position. I do not believe that personal feelings or experiences equate with objective evaluation. I am at a loss to understand how disagreeing with the *AJN*'s rectitude in covering and giving such prominence to the Jewish presence at the Mardi Gras amounts to "bigotry and hate".

I am angry that because I am not wholly supportive of the *AJN*'s coverage, nor indeed of the public stance taken by Jewish homosexuals, I automatically qualify for the label homophobic; that because I disagree, I am to be deemed "intolerant".

I love and regard my homosexual friends the same as I do my heterosexual ones. This is indeed the first time I have had to make this distinction. I feel for any pain and anguish people have in their lives. I am, however, an observant Jew who takes the Torah in its entirety as my guideline for life, and I therefore abhor the homosexual act.

Accepting homosexual people, rejecting homosexuality. Does this make me an abomination in the eyes of your correspondents? They all applaud the "spirit of inclusiveness" and "acceptance of diversity". I am hoping that this does not exclude my views.

Jodi Kofsky
Dover Heights, NSW

Free press

WHOEVER it was who complained about your recent coverage of the gay Mardi Gras has done the gay community a great service. It was prob-

ably unintentional, but the responsible person has forced people in the community to think about the issue and decide where they stand. The free press has triumphed after all.

Bernie Tuch
Maroubra, NSW

Who is pure?

AFTER the persecution of our people in the last World War, I thought that at least the Jewish people would have learned not to fight among themselves.

It saddens me to see the intolerance of the Orthodox Jews. Surely we are allowed to practise what is right for us personally. Does it really make a Jewish person better if he keeps a kosher household, does not travel on the Sabbath or goes regularly to the synagogue? I have respect for all those who follow the laws of the Torah to the letter, but I find that a lot who raise their voices against the Liberal Jews keep only what suits their own lifestyle, and again I respect them if they feel comfortable with that. So why can't they respect those Jews who are different?

I love human beings for who they are, be they black, white, maimed, heterosexual, homosexual or with birth defects. We are all made in the image of God, so the rabbis tell us. Perhaps not all of us turned out the same, but each one deserves respect and love. Surely, we as Jews can accept this.

I do not sit in judgment of anyone who has acted contrary to the Ten Commandments, and there are many who have. But who of us is so pure as to condemn another?

Jutta Stricker
Darling Point, NSW

Un-Jewish

I TOTALLY agree with Binyamin Alexander and Resa Osher (*AJN* 17/3/00). Your articles on the Mardi Gras are both un-Jewish and not something your paper should be giving any credence to. I hope that in the future you will keep your "news" more Jewish.

Mike Marshall
Randwick, NSW

Encouraging

THE massive support for your stand and for tolerance in our community thrills me and makes me even more proud to belong to such people.

That we have an editor of our communal weekly of your integrity and courage and fairness is something I find very encouraging. You bring to mind Jacobo Timerman.

That we have people in our midst who are intolerant and effectively cruel is a sad fact of life. It would seem hard to deny that intolerance seems inherent in any fundamentalist faith, be it religious, political or whatever.

But I am disappointed that the Beth Din has not said very firmly that the matter is outside its jurisdiction. I am not privy to the forces and influences at play within the Beth Din, but it is a question which could be canvassed. I do believe the Beth Din lessens itself and the respect in which it is held by lending itself to the shabby machinations of a few intolerant Jews.

I think the basic issue is that a fundamentalist group is trying to buffalo the community into being obedient to its own particular and peculiar brand of Judaism. That is the issue we should honestly and courageously address.

There have been other occasions in Jewish history when we have allowed ourselves to be terribly and tragically misled. We have had false messiahs before. All who are zealous for Judaism should unite now — now, I repeat — to put a halt to the spiritual and societal aggression being pursued against our people. All Jews of goodwill should unite and say loudly and clearly — enough. This is not the way!

Ben Haneman
Double Bay, NSW

Any group?

RE: "Shalom Institute lashes out at 'bigotry' (*AJN* 24/3/00): I would like clarification on the fact that "The Shalom Institute board's unanimously feels

that any ... Jewish group wishing to affiliate to the community should be given the opportunity to do so". Including Jews for Jesus? Or for argument's sake, Jews for Holocaust revisionism, Jews for antisemitism?

Sue Heiman
Tamarama, NSW

Media responsibility

THE "Position Statement" by some academics, as quoted in last week's *Jewish News* (24/3/00), noted *inter alia* "it is time we all faced the fact that homosexuality is part of the human condition and that it exists within our community". Nobody is denying the fact that this conduct has seeped into our community. However, do the silent majority have to have this alternative sexual lifestyle thrown at them by the media again and again and again?

If a person chooses this lifestyle, that is his or her prerogative. Why does one have to "come out" and publicise his or her sexual preference? Who wants to know?

The *Jewish News*, by giving extensive coverage to the Mardi Gras, to the gay way of life, has given publicity, prominence and a fillip of encouragement to our young people to try yet another "in" activity. I know of young people who, in reaction to the popularising of this lifestyle, decided to try this latest "in" activity. They tried it not because it was "part of the human condition", but only as a result of the sensationalist propaganda, akin to that adopted by the *Jewish News*.

I feel it is irresponsible to promote and popularise a way of life that is anathema to the Torah in a way that is geared to attract vulnerable young people. Doesn't the *Jewish News* — the "Voice of Australian Jewry" — have a moral responsibility to our community, especially to our youth? Does it not have at least some responsibility in the promotion of Torah values?

In my view, the *Jewish News* has been remiss and irresponsible, and provided an enormous disservice to our community, which has the potential to have dire consequences for the future. Incidentally, what happened to concern for Jewish continuity?

Dr Sam Friedman
Kensington, NSW

Free expression

AS president of the Australian, Asian and New Zealand Union for Progressive Judaism, I am writing to express our dismay at the high-handed approach of the Sydney Beth Din and NSW Rabbinic Council in demanding the appearance of the editor of the *Australian Jewish News* before them to answer questions about reporting the Sydney Mardi Gras.

The dual issues of freedom of expression and freedom of the press have become one and the same here. As Progressive Jews, we uphold your right to report events of interest to the community without fear or favour. We also uphold the right of individuals to express their sexuality without fear of discrimination or harassment, so long as their actions are between consenting adults and cause no pain or injury to others.

As you address this ordeal, we offer our support to you.

Penny Jakobovits
President
Australian, Asian and New Zealand
Union for Progressive Judaism

Open debate

I COMMEND the *AJN* for the articles on the Jewish participation in the Mardi Gras and for the stance taken by editor Vic Alhadeff last week under the heading "Comment" (*AJN* 24/3/00).

I am amazed that the Beth Din feels it has any role to play in this matter in a democratic society. This is not a matter of religion. It's a matter of openly debating and taking stands on newsworthy subjects that involve members of our community — no matter what their sexual leanings or religious convictions.

The Beth Din feels it has a divine right to summon the *AJN* for "breaking the Covenant!" It's as though the *AJN* has a moral responsibility to

explain its stance. Why?

By all means let the Beth Din articulate its point of view, but to call for a number of prominent members of the community, who correctly treat all as equals, to appear before a court of judgment to explain is giving the Beth Din a position of authority and accountability that it does not own in this matter.

Gerald Abelsohn
St Ives, NSW

Taking a stand

IT has been a long time since I stood on a journalistic soapbox and stood up for truth and propriety. I cannot let the editor's comment in last week's issue of the *AJN* pass without lavishing the utmost praise for not just taking the stand he did, but also for the brilliant way in which he justified it.

Henry Benjamin
Sydney, NSW

Spark of God

WE, the Progressive rabbis of NSW, would like to express our gratitude and appreciation of the larger Jewish community's support of the Jewish gays and lesbians in our community.

In particular, we have been impressed with the *AJN*'s coverage of the gay and lesbian Shabbat service and dinner at Shalom College. We would also like to give credit to The Shalom Institute for recognising that all Jews, regardless of their sexual preference, are entitled to celebrate Shabbat and sit down together for a kosher Shabbat dinner.

The issue of homosexuality in Judaism is indeed a sensitive one. The Progressive rabbinate does not regard homosexuality as a disease or immoral behaviour, in and of itself, which must be suppressed. We recognise homosexuality as another expression of sexuality.

Unlike Christianity, Judaism does not see sexuality as a sin. Rather, sexuality, if expressed between people who love each other and are committed to each other, is celebrated and encouraged in Judaism. There are many gay and lesbian couples who have a deep love and commitment to one another. Many of these gay and lesbian couples affiliate with both Orthodox and Progressive congregations with and without our knowledge. They are committed Jews, honouring God, their fellow human beings and our Jewish tradition. We believe that to tell them they are immoral because of their sexual orientation is an abomination.

Ten years ago, the Council of Progressive Rabbis of Australia and New Zealand issued a proclamation which stated the following: "We, the rabbis of the Council of Progressive Rabbis of Australia and New Zealand, unequivocally affirm that all human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the Divine image). We regard sexual orientation as irrelevant to the human worth of a person. Hence, we recognise that all individuals must have equal civil rights and opportunities. We again state that all Jews are welcome to become full and equal members of our congregations." Let us begin by looking honestly at our Jewish gay and lesbian brothers and sisters and recognise the spark of God inside each of them, not to be suppressed, but to be appreciated and accepted.

Rabbi Richard Lampert,
Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins,
Rabbi Allison Conyer,
Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio

Eye-opening

CONGRATULATIONS! What a pleasure to see the *Jewish News* reflecting the diversity and evolving face of the Australian Jewish community.

Your article on the Star of David float was interesting, informative and no doubt, very significant to the members of the Jewish community involved. Diane Armstrong's views are no doubt breathtakingly eye-opening and supportive for other parents of gay children and the community at large. The Jewish community is broad. It's important that the *AJN* acknowledges and involves the group as a whole.

Tonia Port
Sydney, NSW

Disturbing

I WOULD like to congratulate the *Australian Jewish News* for its coverage of the Jewish group which marched in the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras this year. It is gratifying to see that one of the major voices of the Jewish community is willing to acknowledge and give a voice to a group which is usually neglected within the community. It is equally disturbing to see that some members of the community are too willing to denigrate members of the community whose only difference is sexual preference.

Jews know much about the negative aspects of intolerance, and we must not forget that homosexuals, gypsies and other groups were also targets of Nazi extermination policies.

Perhaps it is time for the Jewish community to take a lead and demonstrate that our experiences have made us more enlightened and more willing to understand and accept difference.

Rita Nash
Queens Park, NSW

Uncensored

I WANTED to congratulate you and thank you for your coverage of the Mardi Gras Jewish float, the interview with David Gellman and wonderful piece by Diane Armstrong.

Your stance in giving objective and full coverage to a newsworthy event and issue for the Jewish community is both laudable and brave.

No matter what one's level or religious observance or personal opinions about sexual identity may be, the fact remains that homosexuality exists as an issue in the community which affects many families. Understanding and acceptance is not a religious issue; it is a real family issue for parents, grandparents and children alike. To not report a public parade float which alerts our community to the issue would simply be a short-sighted act of sweeping under the carpet.

For members of the community who espouse tolerance, dignity and human rights to criticise a group made up of loving, proud, Jewish family members and friends (gay or straight) who march in a spirit of love and acceptance is both hypocritical and astounding. Congratulations to the *Jewish News* for once again demonstrating objectivity and non-censored reporting.

Scott Whitmont
Wollstonecraft, NSW

Freedom

WE support the *AJN's* decision to publish the articles regarding the Jewish gay and lesbian float at the Mardi Gras. It is an issue of freedom of speech and expression. Our freedom was taken from us in World War II, and we should be tolerant of all other minority groups, particularly those which have experienced prejudice.

Amber, Antonia and Marion Richmond
Sydney, NSW

Tolerance

PLEASE add my voice to those in the community who believe in tolerance and not the forces of prejudice and fundamentalism. Thank-you for your report on this issue.

Councillor George Newhouse
Waverley Council

Support

THE editor of the *AJN* should rest assured that he has great support from all over Australia.

Dr Philip Bliss
Melbourne, Vic

Double prejudice

I AM writing to congratulate you on your balanced, informative coverage of the Jewish presence in Mardi Gras. Jewish lesbians and gays, their families and supporters comprise a very significant proportion of our community.

It is clear from your articles that participating in the "Stars of David" float was a powerful, meaningful experience, not only for the many Jewish lesbians and gays, but also for the "straight" family members, friends and supporters who took part. It was also extremely validating for anyone who watched the parade, and for those who read your articles.

Lesbians and gays are an important part of

our community, who struggle against two prejudices: antisemitism and homophobia. These two prejudices are very closely aligned. Both are "informed" by ignorance, both stem from fear of difference. Both can be fatal. Let us not forget that only 50 years ago, Jews and gays shared a common fate in the camps and gas chambers. Let us not forget that for Jewish lesbians and gays, the danger was twice as great. The courage it takes to march in Mardi Gras as a Jew and a lesbian or gay man is also twice as great.

As a community, we should be applauding the brave "Stars of David", who by their presence in the Mardi Gras parade said loudly and clearly: "Hatred and prejudice did not succeed in destroying us. We are still here."

As a community, we should be sharing their pride in expressing their identity so openly and positively. And as a community, we should read about this in our community paper.

I look forward to our paper continuing to cover important news about Jewish lesbians and gays, alongside important news about other groups on our community. It is too easy to succumb to the pressure of prejudice. Thank-you for not doing so.

Hinde Ena Burstin
East Malvern, Vic

Blatant, not latent

I WANT to emphasise how important the coverage of gay and lesbian issues are in the *Jewish News*. It opens awareness on a topic that is often associated with shame and humiliation. It is essential that gay and lesbian issues (such as the Jewish Mardi Gras float) be fully reported so that all Jews, especially young Jewish adults, realise that there is nothing wrong with having same-sex attractions. Don't be intimidated by bigots.

Bigots belong in totalitarian regimes, not in multicultural Australia in the year 2000. It's better to be blatant than latent. Keep up the good work.

Shaun Miller
Sydney, NSW

Spinoza

I CAN'T believe it. Was it true or was it a Purim joke — that the editor of the *AJN* was to be carpeted by the Beth Din and *rabbonim* because he revealed that there are Jewish gays? I have no sympathy with homosexuality as such, but whatever happened to civil rights? The only consolation he will have is that he can now be compared to Baruch Spinoza.

Howard Freeman
Melbourne, Vic

About time

CONGRATULATIONS on your article ("Committed to the entire community", *AJN* 24/3/00). It's about time people opened their eyes and were accepting of all members of our community who need acceptance and support, not rejection.

Lesley Abelsohn
Gordon, NSW

Being different

Re: "Disgust" by Binyamin Alexander (*AJN* 17/3/00):

With due respect to the Torah and those like Mr Alexander who believe unconditionally in what it says, I find it difficult to accept the bigoted "Fred Nile-like" attitude towards homosexuality which Mr Alexander put forward in response to the *Jewish News'* front-page photograph of the Mardi Gras.

It made me angry and ashamed that a fellow Jew could show the ignorance and prejudice displayed by the Nazis over 50 years ago. Whilst this may seem a harsh comparison, we forget that this was how six million of our people were exterminated — through misconceptions, intolerance and prejudice.

We Jews have our own days where we wave flags and scream of the pride we have in our faith. We are quick to cry "Holocaust" and "Never again", but we forget that the homosexuals died alongside the Jews for the same reason. They were "different".

The pride displayed by these people at the Mardi Gras (not only gay pride, but Jewish pride) is something to admire, certainly not condemn. The Jews are a "light unto the nations". What example are we setting when we imply

that the differences in individuals of the Jewish faith shame or "disgust" us? Homosexuality is not a disease and certainly not a shameful choice of lifestyle. Gays do not choose to be gay.

During the Spanish Inquisition, Jews were murdered for not converting. Perhaps it implied that gays who cannot "change to the right team" should also be punished" accordingly. This lifestyle is who they are, and we need to learn to accept and embrace it if we wish to have any hope of justifying the prejudices suffered by our people for thousands of years — ie hypocrisy, ignorance, bigotry and the need to slander and destroy all that we fear because it is not familiar.

Esti Regos
Woollahra, NSW

Good to see

I AM writing to commend your paper for the prominent coverage given to the Jewish participation in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. It was good to see a minority group receiving recognition, and it is unfortunate that this recognition has uncovered some homophobia within the Jewish community. The media has a right and a duty to report on events of interest, even when these events may be controversial.

I was personally involved, as my bookshop sold tickets to the Gay and Lesbian Shabbat Dinner for the Dayenu Association, and through this contact I know how important the Mardi Gras events were to Jewish gays and lesbians and their friends and families.

Please do not be intimidated, continue to stand up for a society that is free from homophobia and all forms of discrimination.

Gail Hewison
The Feminist Bookshop

Retrograde step

NEWS that *AJN* editor Vic Alhadeff was to be hauled before the Beth Din and the NSW Rabbinical Council over the paper's coverage of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras sounded like a bad joke.

Did we just step out of the 20th or the 19th century? At a time when so much progress is being made at the margins of Orthodoxy — women and Torah, *aguna* and more — intimidation of the press is a retrograde step. This is not just a gay and lesbian issue, but an issue for all, Jewish or not. Journalist or not. It's a freedom of expression issue. We can hardly be a "light unto the nations" unless we can truly defend the light against those who prefer darkness.

Geoff Sirmai
Bronte, NSW

Changing ethics

THE moralists who try to divorce the words Jewish and homosexuality place themselves in an inconvenient bind. While our Torah clearly defines homosexuality as a *toeva* (abomination), for which the sentence is death (Leviticus 18:22), our tradition does not stop there.

The written Torah declares: "one who strikes his mother and father shall surely be put to death (Exodus 21:15)". It continues: "He who insults his mother and father should be put to death (Exodus 21:17)". When a man was caught gathering wood on Shabbat: "God said to Moses: 'The man shall be put to death. The whole community shall pelt him with stones outside the camp' (Numbers 15:35)." If a man comes upon a virgin and sleeps with her ... she shall be his wife. Because he has violated her, he can never have the right to divorce her (Deuteronomy 22:28-29)." In the situation of two men fighting, and one of their wives, in an attempt to support her husband, grabs the other man's genitals, "You shall cut off her hand; show her no pity (Deuteronomy 25:11)."

It is written in the Oral Torah: "For three transgressions a woman dies at childbirth: for negating the laws of menstruation, the laws of the *challah* Offering, and the Shabbat candles (Mishnah Shabbat 2.6)".

The ethical difficulties posed by each of these above verses motivated our sages of old to either explain most of these literal words in very metaphoric terms or to make their implementation a virtual impossibility in their and our times. No-one, especially our sages, condones a parent killing their own child for insolence. No-one would want a rape victim to be tied to her attacker for eternity. None of us would want to participate in the pelting of stones at a Shabbat breaker. No caring husband or human being would encourage the severing of a hand.

No rabbi or sensitive human being, aware of

modern advances in medicine, can claim that the cause of death for a woman who dies during childbirth is due to her negation of specific ritual behaviours.

Our ethical system, anchored by the Torah, continues to change. Thank God that it has. Modern experiences and knowledge demands this change. While our sages of old had no qualms reinterpreting or re-explaining these dubious moral notions, mentioned above, to allow them to be more reflective of their contemporary reality, why is it that we remain fettered by this one archaic notion: condemning the homosexual?

Rabbi Benzion Milecki (*AJN* 17/3/00) is right: "God is not so cruel as to give a person a challenge which he cannot surmount." We have been successful in overcoming the mistaken morals of the past, and we can surely achieve the same in the present. After all, it is this ability that has allowed Judaism to remain an ethical system, reflecting the will of God and teaching truths in every age.

Bryan Conyer
Sydney, NSW

Even-handed

RABBI Benzion Milecki's article shows once again the even-handed approach of the *AJN* by the paper devoting a full page to his point of view which may differ to that of the major part of the community.

The issue of Jewish homosexuals will not go away because some segments of the community want to silence media discussion and sweep it under the rug. Presenting various points of view on a contentious issue is the expression of a free-from-influence worthwhile publication. Repression of facts is the sign of a dictatorship. Those wishing to censor or down play certain facts should consider whether repression has ever or will ever work. It often has the opposite effect.

Rabbi Milecki says the Torah refers to homosexuality as an "abomination" (Oxford Dictionary definition: "Loathing; odious or degrading habit or act; an object of disgust"), and this seems to be at the heart of his well-presented case against homosexuality.

However, as Jonathan Armstrong so aptly puts it in his letter (*AJN* 17/03/00), "even those who adhere to the Scriptures no longer call for the stoning of adulterers or the removal of eyes as retribution ..." because "over the ages, original teachings have been expunged or reinterpreted ... in keeping with the more enlightened spirit of contemporary times".

Irwin Kurtz
Sydney, NSW

Independent voice

THE editor of the *Jewish News* should be commended for publishing a report on the participation of the gay Jews in the Mardi Gras. It is a sad day for Australia when a group, no matter how well intentioned and convinced of their correctness of its causes, seeks to censor a section of the media. The independent voice of the *Jewish News* is needed more than ever before.

Bruce Haigh
Sydney, NSW

Don't read it

THE *Australian Jewish News* is there to report on incidences and news that relates to all Jews. Readers of the newspaper do not have to agree with views or necessary like what they read. I do not like reading about murders, wars or famine, but they do exist and I cannot hide from that fact.

If there are some sections of the community that find the *Jewish News* offensive, they do not have to read it. They also have the option to start their own paper that only writes what they want to read. That, however, would not be news, but propaganda.

With regard to my previous letter (*AJN* 24/3/00), I was quoted incorrectly. I realise that there are people who are *Shomer Shabbat*, but there are also many who are not who may have driven, spent money or carried on Shabbat. I apologise to anyone who is *Shomer Shabbat* who may have been offended by this error.

Annamarie Cohen
Bondi Junction, NSW

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