

Uproar in Australia over coverage of Jewish float in gay parade

By Elli Wohlgelemerter

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(April 3) - A Jewish float that paraded in the recent Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney - and coverage of that float by the Australian Jewish News - has split the Australian Jewish community, resulting in the editor of the newspaper refusing a request to attend a meeting of the New South Wales Rabbinical Council and the Sydney Bet Din.

At issue is the AJN's front-page coverage last month of the float, which featured 160 gay Jews waving a banner and wearing pink Stars of David. The float included Jews from Israel, South Africa, the United States, Britain, Germany, Sweden and New Zealand, and was led by the US lesbian rabbi Ariel Friedlander, author Diane Armstrong, and Susie Wise, a Holocaust survivor.

Rabbi Moshe Gutnick, president of the NSW Rabbinical Council, told the AJN that the Council "felt that coverage of the Mardi Gras did not fit with traditional Jewish values and our expectations of a Jewish family newspaper."

The Sydney Bet Din issued a statement regarding the newspaper's coverage of the Mardi Gras, saying "the issue is not whether homosexuality is approved or disapproved by Judaism. On this the answer is that it is prohibited by the Torah, and no halachic authority has ever said otherwise. The issue is not whether there are some Jews who follow a homosexual lifestyle. The fact is that there are, and no one has the right to persecute them, despite the fact that Judaism cannot condone homosexual acts.

"The issue is not whether the Mardi Gras is part of the Sydney scene. The answer is that it seems to have become so, despite its immodesty and vulgarity. The issue is how a Jewish newspaper should handle some Jewish people's participation in the Mardi Gras. It is thus a question of Jewish journalistic ethics..."

"A Jewish newspaper has to have standards, and one of them has to be receptivity and sensitivity to the voice of Torah."

The statement was signed by Beth Din judges rabbis Raymond Apple, Selwyn Franklin, Moshe Gutnick, David Rogut and Yoram Ulman, as well as by Gutnick in his capacity as president of the NSW Rabbinical Council and Franklin as president of the Organization of Rabbis of Australasia.

Vic Alhadeff, editor of the Sydney edition of the AJN, defended his paper's coverage of the event, and his decision not to appear before the Bet Din.

"The Australian Jewish News does not take a position regarding matters of Jewish law (Halacha). Nor do we sit in judgment on individuals who may have transgressed Halacha," he wrote in a column. "That is not our task. We make no claim to be an authority on Jewish law, or indeed to present only activities which fall within the ambit of Orthodox Jewish law. Maccabi sport is played on Shabbat, for example; is the suggestion that we should cease reporting it because by doing so, we encourage desecration of Jewish law? The Reform sector of the community by definition falls outside what is considered Halachically Jewish. Are we also to desist from coverage of Reform activities so as to avoid encouraging violation of Orthodox Jewish law?"

"Our task is to reflect, and cater for, the entire spectrum of the Jewish community. That means every Jewish individual - Orthodox, Reform, republican, monarchist, heterosexual, homosexual, left-handed, right-handed.

"And that means covering Jewish news as it pertains to, and reflects, the entire Jewish community.

"The criticism is that by giving coverage to activities such as Jewish participation in the Mardi Gras, the Australian Jewish News disqualifies itself from being described as a family newspaper. Our response is that it depends on the definition of 'family'. Does a family comprise only a father, mother, son and daughter all of whom are heterosexual? Should one of them discover that he or she is gay, does that nuclear unit automatically lose the right to call itself a family?"

Alhadeff then goes on to cite the 60 letters he received in support of his coverage, from places as diverse as Nepal, Singapore, San Francisco, London and the Blue Mountains, as well as an ad placed in his paper and signed by 28 prominent members of the community, including eight professors, three judges, two authors and three former presidents of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

"Homosexuality is part of the human condition and exists within our community," the signatories wrote in the ad. "The conspiracy of silence and denial which has surrounded this issue has caused anguish to many ... Our community newspaper is the logical forum for the discussion of important social matters, and the editor is to be applauded for taking the lead in airing this important issue, open discussion of which is long overdue."

A number of rabbis dealt with the issue in their Shabbat sermons. Central Synagogue Rabbi Selwyn Franklin and Melbourne mining magnate Rabbi Joseph Gutnick - also speaking from the Central pulpit - castigated the AJN.

Franklin said the paper had overstepped the mark. "There has to be mature judgment, and I feel that it's totally out of order the way that it was covered," he told the paper, reiterating remarks he made from the pulpit. He emphasized that Judaism differentiates between the person and the deed, and that as everyone was created in the image of God, they should be accepted unconditionally. "But I said the issue was not the Mardi Gras any more or the question of homosexual inclination, the issue was the question of the responsibility of a Jewish newspaper."

The Australian Jewish News contributed to this report.