

The Jewish-gay issue: The debate continues

Undermining

JUDAISM and the rabbinate do not criticise lifestyles, *per se*. What they and every true Jew criticise is the blatant attempt to undermine the fundamental beliefs of our religion.

By engaging in and supporting the flaunting of lifestyles which denigrate family values, those who openly support homosexual activities are rebuilding the gas chambers of the Holocaust, as potential future generations would not eventuate.

Some “members” — I dispute their right to be called Jews because of this — of the community have been deceived into joining a casual “feel good” lifestyle, which is renowned for being prone to immunity deficiencies. Those activities are akin to missionaries and other conversionary attempts, all undermining of Jewish communal values.

But the turn-up now comes from within the community with the open support of so-called community leaders”, many of whom have completely misunderstood the issues. Judaism always supports the underdog, but not when the underdog becomes a cancer or a disease — just as Jews supported nationalism until it started to attack them.

The above is not intended to criticise those who, for physical or chemical reasons, are attracted to same-sex relationships. It is intended to criticise those who either unthinkingly, or with intent, support and promote the blatant attempt to undermine our religions principles. Judaism is a whole-life religion, not a weekend belief.

Joe Newman
North Bondi, NSW

Democratic values

BRAVO to Vic Alhadeff and the *AJN* on their explanation for declining the Beth Din’s invitation to “have a chat” (*AJN* 31/3/00). The reasoning was impeccable. The Beth Din sought to exercise ecclesiastical muscle. Instead, it has been schooled in liberal democratic values.

Geoffrey Brahm Levey
Elizabeth Bay, NSW

My Jewish family

MY sincere congratulations for your coverage of the Jewish gay and lesbian float in the Mardi Gras. I have only previously bought one copy of the *Jewish News*, and since this event has raised its challenging head, I have bought all three.

As you will see by my signature, I carry a well-known Jewish name. My father was the descendant of generations of Cohens in Australia, the original one arriving here in the 1830s. He was the first in his family to marry out. He took that seriously, and while he continued to practise as a Jew, he and my mother’s five children were raised with almost no knowledge, understanding or respect for the Jewish religion and culture.

I grew up believing it must be a bad thing to be Jewish. In how many other mixed marriages would children not learn of the culture of both parents? Unfortunately, my father died when I was 16, so I missed out on the opportunity of learning from him later.

In adult life, while living in Adelaide, I became a member of a Jewish feminist lesbian group who accepted me for who I am and gave me the opportunity to learn and value my Jewish heritage. I still consider them my Jewish family and will be going to Adelaide to celebrate Pesach with them. I am not religious, but I am of Jewish heritage and I want to be proud of that. I have often felt more comfortable to be out as a lesbian than as a Jew.

The fact that during the Holocaust not only Jews were murdered, but also lesbian and gay Jews, makes me wonder would the voices who currently deny us the right to be part of the greater Jewish community have also not supported us then — even if we were their children, relatives or friends? Your courage is to be applauded. Thank-you for your support.

Dinah Cohen
Bondi, NSW

Digging trenches

ONE of the most visible casualties of the current civil war of *chochma* (wisdom) concerning the over-exposure of Mardi Gras madness is the

hopefully temporary blindness of the Jewish gay and lesbian militants over the openly declared attitude of the Orthodox rabbinate towards them as individual Jews, individual gays, individual lesbians.

One after the other, Rabbi Moshe Gutnick, Rabbi Benzion Milecki, Rabbi Raymond Apple, have insisted on their complete abhorrence of any type of exclusiveness from the Jewish fold of any Jewish individual. As the ongoing debate commanded, the qualified inclusion of Jewish gays and lesbians has been purposely contained by the rabbis within the concept of fundamental responsibility that every Jew must have for his fellow Jew.

We shouldn’t be digging trenches of hostility against strongly religiously dedicated fellow Jews.

The letter signed by 28 Jewish leaders and luminaries, while resembling a majestic statement on motherhood issued by an abortion clinic, is, in effect, a vituperation against the Orthodox institutions and their Judaic principles. It has served, perhaps unintentionally, to create rift and conflict, and aided the visible and audible efforts by incensed gay and lesbian activists in their irrational exercise of trying to demonise precisely those Jewish religious authorities who were earnestly facilitating acceptability within the Jewish fold for each individual who would seek comfort in the synagogue.

Time has come for the *AJN* and all those still entrenched in fighting the religious establishment to put an end to their aggressiveness and hear with clarity and without prejudice the message from the rabbis. Why not try to do it this Shabbat at your nearest Orthodox shule?

Otto Waldman
Killara, NSW

Made us cry

MY partner and I read Diane Armstrong’s column and it made us both cry. How extraordinary that it takes something like a gay and lesbian Mardi Gras for a Jewish person to be able to feel proud of being Jewish! Thank God for a bizarre world.

Margaret Joel
Marrickville, NSW

Disrepute

ALL these Jews flaunting the fact that they break the law, Leviticus Chapter 18 verse 22; and all these other people condoning, nay encouraging, them to flaunt it:

Would they be as eager to flaunt the fact they break, say, the law enjoined upon them in Exodus Chapter 20 verse 13 in the same way?

If they — the ones who break the Lev. 18 22 law so proudly — cannot help themselves, have not the strength of character to control the urge (or whatever it is) and live celibate lives, at least be modest and private about it — certainly not boastful. If only out of consideration for Judaism’s reputation of credibility, as giving the world a blueprint for living wholesome lives, and Jews as the Children of the Book; bringing Judaism into disrepute.

Louise Rosenberg
Castle Cove, NSW

Appalled

I READ with interest the editorials and articles written in the *Australian Jewish News* of 9/3/00, which I found to be highly balanced and interesting reporting of a news event, and I congratulate you for that.

Liked or not liked by the religious hierarchy in our society, the Mardi Gras has become one of the biggest events on the NSW calendar. It is the function of a newspaper to report openly and fairly on items of news and interest to sections of the population, and you do that well and regularly.

I read with equal interest the letter to the editor written by Rabbi Moshe Gutnick and others who seem to have adopted the usual stance on issues of homosexuality by levelling the hackneyed criticisms against the homosexuals in our society. They are out-of-date in Australian attitudes and thinking. Rabbi Gutnick agrees that “discrimination” against anyone (I assume that includes homosexuals) is “unacceptable”.

To me then, the question for Rabbi Gutnick is — what does he really want the approximately 10,000 Jewish gays and lesbians to do? Is it total abstinence, return to the closet, or what? Why does he not say clearly what he thinks? At least that way, people in the community will know where he stands and be able to react to him and his teachings appropriately.

I was appalled to hear that three members of the Jewish community in Sydney, including the editor of the *AJN*, had had complaints against them at the Beth Din and had been called to a *Din Torah*. As I understand the position, the complaints relate to the sympathetic manner in which the *AJN* and Shalom College approached the issue of gay and lesbian Jews and their involvement in the Mardi Gras. This is truly disturbing, since the Beth Din has never been given a mandate to control or gag the free press in Australia. Or does the Beth Din believe it is the self-appointed Sanhedrin?

Oscar Shub
Paddington, NSW

Staggering

THIS outpouring of letters is staggering, and the editor of the *AJN* should feel mighty proud of sticking to his principles on the Mardi Gras issue.

Dr Andrew Byrne
Redfern, NSW

Step outside

RABBI Chaim Ingram, in his letter in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week, seems to be trying to convince the non-Jewish readership that while the majority of Sydney Jewish population are not “Torah-observant”, they nevertheless without exception accept the jurisdiction of Orthodox rabbis.

Oh really? Rabbi, step outside synagogue on a Friday night or Saturday morning, and count the cars which your congregants (and those of the other Orthodox synagogues) drive to synagogue and maybe park around the corner so they appear to be walking to the service. Inquire how many of them are working on Saturday or partaking in sport. See how many of them choose to live a 21st-century life, instead of a 17th-century life. If your Orthodox congregants take so much notice of your jurisdiction that they break these basic “rules”, then they quite likely will also ignore your jurisdiction and decide for themselves, as mature thinking adults, how they should react to homosexuality.

Bob Ronai
St Ives, NSW

Thank-you

THANK-YOU you for covering the inclusion of Jewish gays and lesbians in the Mardi Gras parade. We are an integral part of the Jewish community.

Jerry Rosenblum
Los Angeles, USA

Congratulations

I WOULD like to congratulate you on the way you have handled the current controversy on the Mardi Gras and Jewish gays.

A G Stricker
Darling Point, NSW

An invitation

THE editor of the *Australian Jewish News* should have added one more reason (Comment, *AJN* 31/3/00) for declining the “invitation” to a meeting with the Sydney Beth Din and the NSW Rabbinical Council: justice. Why submit to a procedure where the prosecutors or plaintiffs (the NSW Rabbinical Council) and the judges (members of the Sydney Beth Din) are one and the same?

Let us also not be misled that the Beth Din is a “discussion forum” and that it issues “invitations to a meeting to discuss things”, The rabbis’ statement (*AJN* 31/3/00) spells out that it is a “Jewish Ecclesiastical Court” and the *dayanim* are judges. Has anyone ever received an invitation to come

to the Magistrate’s Court for a meeting to discuss his apparent wrongdoings?

Had the *rabbonim* just used the NSW Rabbinical Council as a body that wished to put its point of view to the *AJN*, a get-together might have been in order. But by waving the big stick of the Beth Din at the same time, they shot themselves in the foot.

Georges Teitler
Mosman Bay, NSW

Sanitised

THE response from the Beth Din to the *AJN*’s coverage comes down to the fact that a Jewish newspaper has no business reporting about activities in the community until they have been sanitised and checked for morals approval.

We do not have to include the whole Torah, just the Ten Commandments, as the moral precept to judge news by to know that the newspaper would practically cease to exist through lack of material. No news of killings in Israel, scandals in the political parties with bribery which is just a sophisticated form of stealing, corruption, false witness etc.

The Beth Din has no real idea of the purpose of a newspaper if they really believe in their statement. Do they seriously want the *AJN* reduced to a complete summary of rabbis’ sermons? The *AJN* is doing a good job and should continue reporting all the news that is fit to print.

Ian Bersten
Roseville, NSW

Protection

THE overwhelming community response in support of the rights of gay and lesbian Jews is welcome.

Whilst the Beth Din has the responsibility to rule on religious matters, my understanding of the Jewish approach is that we are also bound by the laws of the state in which we resides.

Each State and Territory of Australia has laws which outlaw discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. In NSW, it is also unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of transgender status and importantly, vilification of homosexuals and transgender people is also unlawful.

In *Daniels v Hunter Water Board* — the first case dealing with discrimination in the workplace on the basis of imputed homosexuality — as the judicial member, I stated in the judgment: “The Anti-Discrimination Act has been enacted in NSW to enable people to work and live in a harassment-free environment. In NSW in the 1990s, conduct which amounts to persecution of an individual on the basis of his homosexuality is unacceptable conduct. The parliament has enacted this legislation in what many regard as a pace-setting move to ensure that the rights of all citizens should not be prejudiced because of their sexuality and to enable persons to undertake their life activities free from harassment by others, including co-workers who for whatever reasons find themselves unable to accept that a person might ‘dare to be different’. In a free society, a person’s individuality and right to freedom of expression must be cherished. If the cost of freedom of expression is conformity and the price of non-conformity is harassment, society has accepted unacceptable restrictions. This is not the case in contemporary NSW.”

In the parliamentary debate, the homosexual vilification legislation was enacted, Premier Carr noted: “We recognise that there is a value in enacting a law on racial vilification. A civilised community ought to say that it is wrong to discriminate against, and to vilify, people because of their racial origins. A civilised community ought to say, through its legislation, it is wrong to vilify people because of their sexual orientation ... It is appropriate that we as the Parliament of NSW enact legislation that says ‘This violence, this vilification that lies behind it, is not on. We find it repugnant and we say to the community — there are now legal remedies available for you to use against this entirely intolerable vilification.’”

The Jewish community quite properly cherishes the protection that it receives from the legislation. It is essential that the community also support others who are victims of similar unacceptable and unlawful discrimination, especially when we come from within our ranks.

David Bitel
Sydney, NSW

Suicide risk

FOR all those who criticised the positive stance which the *Australian Jewish News* took in its coverage of the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras, there are a few facts that they should consider.

I work as a volunteer with gay youth. Australia has the highest rate of youth suicide rate of any developed countries. A large proportion of these suicides are committed by people who believe that it would be easier to take their own lives, rather than confront their family and friends with the truth that they are gay or lesbian.

It hurts me to think that leaders of our community would condemn this move by the *Jewish News* to print coverage of the Jewish participants in the Mardi Gras. By keeping this news silent, their fellows Jews will continually feel isolated and not part of the Jewish community.

I was brought up to believe that the Jewish community was about "togetherness" Where is the community spirit, when fellow Jews can be forced to live a life of lies, deception and frustration, which in some unfortunate cases, God forbid, may lead to suicide?

Name supplied, but withheld

I was impressed

I WAS distressed and disturbed to read that there are people in the Sydney Jewish community so threatened by the thought that a human rights movement deserves to have fair and decent coverage in your newspaper.

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I am especially disturbed that the editor was to bear the brunt of this insecurity and homophobia by being brought before the Beth Din — a religious tribunal which has its work cut out helping the community and encouraging it to take pride in its heritage and faith in an era when religion and community has become so sidelined in society.

It is sad to think that in the year 2000, a religion and culture that has contributed so much to the richness of thought and discovery — scientific, philosophical, sociological, medical, legal and artistic (with a number of those thinkers and artists homosexual) — can support a thought process that condemns a group of people for the gender of their lovers.

I am not a Jew, but I was impressed by the care, thought and creativity that went into the Stars of David float in the Mardi Gras. I was impressed that so many international Jewish gays and lesbians were honoured by the invitation to march, and that the two congregations under the leadership of Rabbi Ariel Friedlander viewed her invitation this way, encouraging her to come all the way to Sydney to participate.

I was moved by descriptions of the Shabbat dinner the night before the parade, where Jewish gays and lesbians ostracised from their families

went as they repeated those comforting and beautiful words and gestures that give continuity to families around the world. Above all, I was proud to write about these remarkable people in the *City Weekly* newspaper.

I do not presume to tell anyone what they should and should not do with their faith, beliefs and thoughts, but as a journalist in Australia, I believe in the freedom of the press and our right to report as truthfully as we can what is happening in the community for whom we write.

**Anna Cronin
Balmain, NSW**