

The Mardi Gras: View from Jerusalem

VIEWPOINT

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THE surrealistic debate in the *Jewish News* over the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras even reached the *Jerusalem Post*, encouraging me to obtain copies of the relevant issues.

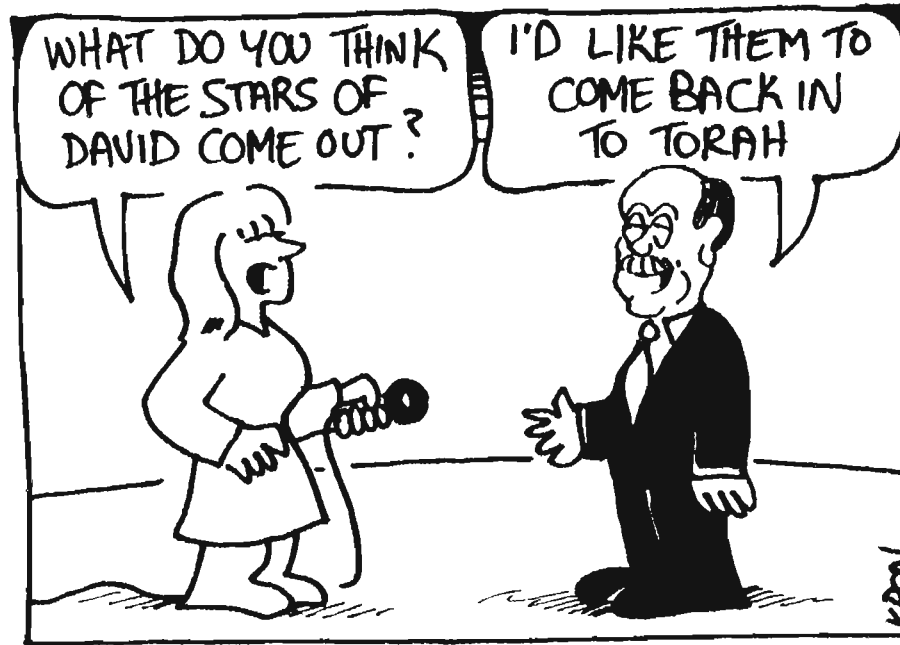
Even allowing for the fact that Sydney is considered one of the principle gay capitals of the world, the front page photograph of a Jewish group participating in the Mardi Gras was somewhat sensationalist. I doubt whether any other communal newspaper in the world would give such prominence to a Jewish gay demonstration - especially if a large proportion of its readers are traditional Jews.

The coverage obviously destabilised the Sydney Beth Din which foolishly summoned the editor of the *AJN* to receive a reprimand. Rather than trying to wave an ecclesiastical club, a wiser reaction would have been to provide a reasoned rabbinical response to the issue, and also complain that the lurid front page exposure of the issue would have offended many of their religiously observant readers.

Over a series of *AJN* issues a number of articles appeared, including a moving contribution by Diane Armstrong describing how she coped with the issue in her family, and an appropriate religious response by Rabbi Milecki. There was a lightweight criticism of the Beth Din by Alan Gold. And *AJN* editor Vic Alhadeff gave a logical explanation why he rejected the Beth Din summons, noting that the *AJN* is not an Orthodox organ, must maintain its independence, and is obliged to provide a forum for all Jewish issues "ranging from the peace process to Jewish homosexuals".

But overall, one could hardly describe the debate which ensued as an intelligent or constructive contribution to the issue of homosexuality in the community. Most contributors simply castigated the Beth Din and condemned homophobia - in a manner suggesting that all critics of homosexuality were homophobic.

Indeed, the avalanche of letters, few of which appear to have been "spontaneous", overwhelmingly amounted to divisive clichés and abuse. There is praise for the "ordeal" and "courage" of the *AJN*, repeated condemnations of traditional Jewish attitudes towards homosexuality, and rabbis are accused of intolerance and bigotry. We are informed that critics of homosexuality reflect similar approaches to anti-



semites, the Inquisition and the Holocaust; we are urged to enlighten young Jews to appreciate that there is nothing wrong with having same sex relations; and one correspondent even praises the benefits of children being reared by gay couples.

Everyone is entitled to his or her views, but these emotional and abusive outbursts are hardly constructive contributions to a serious and sensitive societal problem.

I consider the paid advertisement by 28 "prominent Australian Jews", including three former ECAJ presidents, even more disconcerting than the letter writers. The statement endorses the *AJN* policy and makes the profound observation that homosexuality is part of the human condition. It also informs us that prejudice is bad. But the main thrust of the statement is an insidious implication that until now the Jewish community has been promoting prejudiced and intolerant views and has in effect been homophobic. An outrageous and utterly false slur! Unless, of course, one maintains that same-sex relations should be recognised as an equally legitimate alternative lifestyle to conventional marriage, and that those who reject this approach are all latent or active homophobes.

Now, it is gratifying that over the past two decades, society has progressed to a point in which homophobia is discredited and recognised as socially abhorrent. But that does not mean that traditional Jews are going to abandon

halacha and their religious values. Are rabbis expected to change their attitudes to the Torah because homosexuality is now recognised as part of the human condition?

In the Torah and in *Halacha*, homosexuality is regarded as an abomination. There is no shirking that unpleasant term "abomination". And traditional heterosexual Jews recoil from the concept of homosexuality in the same way as they recoil from eating pork.

That is not to deny that from time immemorial, a small minority of human beings have been inclined towards homosexuality. The problem transcends ideology and there is no suggestion that Orthodox families are biologically different from other human beings. However, traditional Judaism and *Halacha* proscribes many inclinations which could be said to be part of the human condition. Mr Gold notes that the ancient Greeks accepted and even encouraged homosexuality. But that was one of the major divisions in the struggle between Judaism and Hellenism which culminated in the revolt of the Maccabees.

The rejection of homosexuality as an abomination does not mean Orthodox Jews are bigoted, intolerant, or lack compassion. Today, most recognise that homophobia is evil and can lead to violence. There is also a clear consensus that homosexuals should not be persecuted, discriminated against or denied the human rights applicable to all human beings.

Did any of the rabbis in their sermons demand that homosexuals and lesbians be discriminated against? Punished? Denied the same rights as other Jews? Excluded from participating in synagogues or other areas of Jewish religious life?

On the contrary, all enlightened rabbis recognise the obligation to be compassionate and to treat gays in the same way as others who deviate from traditional Jewish practice. To encourage them to be observant Jews, but not to provide a seal of approval to behaviour which is indisputably prohibited. The reality is that an Orthodox Jew with homosexual inclinations who manages to overcome such inclinations would be considered a great *tzaddik* (righteous person).

Having said that, it is important for traditional Jews to be aware that a concentrated campaign by a small minority which makes a loud noise, does not invalidate the reality that the vast majority of Jews - not only observant Jews - are strongly opposed to the active promotion of a gay lifestyle. That majority must resist being bludgeoned into silence, or remaining on the sidelines. They must speak up in an enlightened and compassionate manner, but make it clear that radical minorities will not intimidate them. They must repudiate the exhortations from the gay lobby to recognise same-sex relations as a legitimate alternative to conventional marriage with children.

There are already demands that Jewish schools reject "fundamentalism" and promote a liberal outlook in which homosexuality is recognised as acceptable sexual behaviour. There are even those who support religious sanctification of same-sex relations, as is the case in the United States.

Tolerance does not require legitimisation of a lifestyle that is counter to one's religious beliefs, and if the silent majority remains silent on these issues it does so at its peril.

In addition to constructively reviewing issues relating to the gay community, there is a need for further serious discussion on traditional Jewish values. Viewpoints should be solicited from moderate rabbis and religious laymen who can explain Jewish attitudes in a compassionate context, recognising that in this as in other areas of religious observance, those who deviate from halacha should continue to be respected as human beings *betzelem elokim*. But none of this should be construed as suggesting that Jewish tradition can accept or give a *hechsher* (certificate of approval) to same-sex relations.

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