

Why I had to be true to myself

VIEWPOINT

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"HEVENU Shalom Aleichem. Peace be with you." These are the words we sang, danced to and marched to during the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade.

I was in the parade. I was one of the dancers, in the front row. My photo appeared in the *Australian Jewish News*, outing me to many who did not know of my sexual preference. I regret neither.

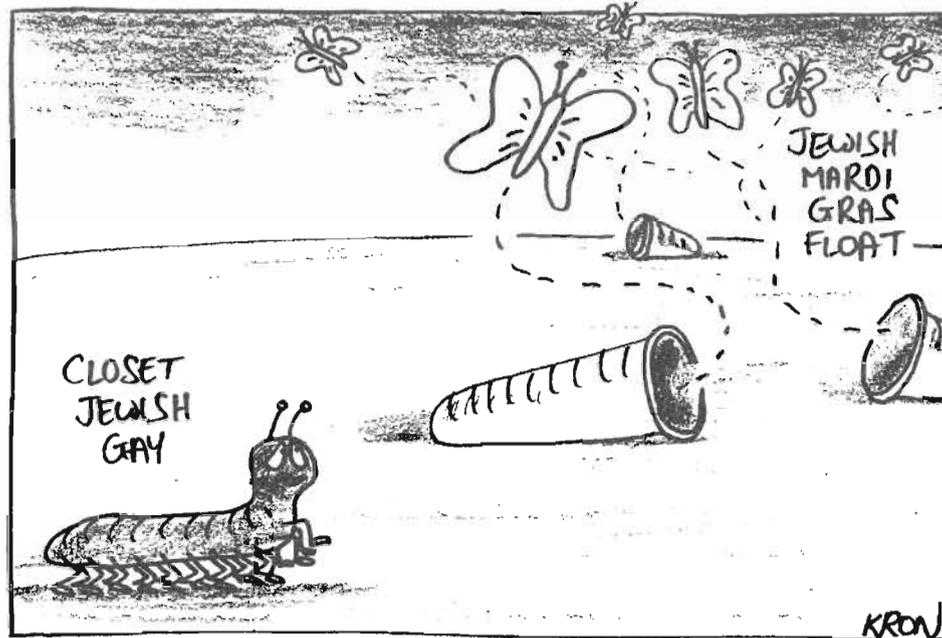
I had never felt the urge to join the parade. In fact, I always saw it as a superficial extravaganza which had deviated from its original purpose — to be a protest march and a demonstration of gay pride. However, when I heard about the Jewish float, I knew I had to be part of it.

My purpose was simple. I wanted to help get the issue of homosexuality discussed in the Jewish community. I wanted to help the Jewish kids who have homosexual feelings understand that they are not lepers to be cast out of society, but valuable human beings. Being Jewish in a predominantly Christian society is hard enough; being gay and Jewish is a tough combination.

I believed that only when we brought the issue to the surface, and stopped acting as though it was something that did not affect our community, could the young people have a chance of not experiencing the pain that I and many others of my generation have gone through.

I am 47. I had my first homosexual experience at the age of 41. I knew I was attracted to men before my barmitzvah, but never did anything about it. All my life, I lived with shame and guilt, believing the feelings I had were unnatural. They were wrong on religious grounds, moral grounds, and until not long ago, legal grounds. Yet the feelings were there. I couldn't make them go away, no matter how hard I tried or prayed. Nor how many psychologists I saw. However, I had the strength to resist the urges and didn't act on them. I did what many of our religious leaders believe all gay people should do — resist the temptation.

I went out with girls and even got engaged. I pretended I was like everyone else. I could have married, had children and acted like everything



was normal. However, the feeling would never have gone, and I would have hurt many people in the process. So I curbed my feelings and never performed what was "an abomination to God".

As a result, at 41, I had not had the privilege of sharing my life with a partner. I had not experienced the pleasure of loving a soulmate; sharing joy and sorrow with someone who would share my emotions with me. Who would laugh and cry with me with the intimacy that only a partner

that no-one should bear. It is impossible to explain the feelings you have when you reject yourself because you perceive your sexual orientation to be a major flaw in your character. The feeling of being a failure, a disappointment, a freak of nature, the fear of being rejected, is so intense that it leads many young people to contemplate and commit suicide. Even Jewish kids.

At 41 I realised that, with God's blessing, I was only halfway through my life. Would I live the

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could. This normal gift that we take for granted was something I was not allowed to have, and never would. Family and friends were there, but something was missing. Though I had friends, I was alone. I was carrying a terrible burden of guilt and shame. I felt guilty that I had these tendencies, and I was determined not to bring shame onto myself, my parents and the family name. So I lived a life of denial, lies and pain.

To hide part of your identity from yourself and others, and to carry the burden alone, is a weight

next 41 years deceiving myself and those who cared for me? Would I live the next 41 years with no-one to love and share my life? Was I to end up a sad, lonely old man? It was then that I decided that no matter how painful coming out to myself and others was going to be, the option of not coming out was far worse.

My parents, who are in their 80s, loved me when I was born, and have loved me and been supportive throughout my life. Were they happy when I told them I was gay? Of course not. But

they accepted it as something that I did not choose. That's how God made me. Am I happy that I'm gay? Definitely not. Would I prefer to be straight? You bet. But that is not to be. So I must learn to accept myself. Having kept myself in the closet for so long, and having rejected myself for so long, makes it a slow and painful process. However, it is a pain I accept. It is a pain that I pray the next generation will never experience.

That is why the Mardi Gras was important. I am delighted that there has been so much debate. It is so positive that people are arguing about the religious, moral and ethical consequences of the parade, the Jewish involvement, the position taken by the *Australian Jewish News* and homosexuality in general. It is only natural that there are those who believe homosexuality should not be accepted. Their values, beliefs and upbringing direct them to think that way. And they have every right to hold that opinion. It is also right that there are those who claim that homosexuality is a reality. The time has come to stop pretending that it doesn't exist, and to say we must accept it as a legitimate way that some people share their love.

For those who have homosexual feelings and are in the closet, think carefully about the cost of foregoing your right to love and be loved. In my experience, the loss of the ability to partake in this wonderful experience is too great a price to pay.

I realise that by having this article published, my parents will have been "outed" to their friends. This may cause them embarrassment and perhaps even shame. I am sorry if that is the case, but I feel it is my moral obligation to make this statement. I hope that I will witness the day when parents are not ashamed of their children because of their sexual preference. I hope to see the day when sexual preference is not used as a means of segregating and denigrating a group within our society.

I am not just a homosexual, as most reading this article are not just heterosexuals. I am a son, brother, friend, partner, soulmate, boss and businessman. I am a Russian-born, Polish-descended, Aussie and a Jew. I am a 47-year-old, healthy, physically active man who is going grey. I am stubborn, impatient, conceited, loving, caring, honest, loyal and compassionate. I am a chocoholic. I am all this plus more. That's who I am. *Hevenu Shalom Aleichem. Peace be with you.*

■ Alan Kuczynski is managing director of a Sydney training company.