

Farewell to Dayenu

After a decade of association with Sydney's Jewish gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex group, former president **Roy Freeman** looks back on the last 10 years as he sets off for a new life in Israel.

AS I pack my belongings to make aliyah at the end of this month, I can't help but look back at my move to Sydney just over a decade ago. When I moved here from London in 2001, I was still mostly in the closet. I was out to some of my friends, but had not told my parents I was gay. I knew back then that I wasn't ready to tell them and that they weren't ready to hear it, let alone accept it.

In reality, I led two lives, one with my partner and friends, and one for my family and job. Moving to Sydney, I knew nobody here aside from my partner. We wanted to meet people and I suggested we try and meet other gay and lesbian Jews. I had been involved in the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group (JGLG) in London, where I had made some very good friends, so I searched and found Dayenu. On the night I arrived, we went to our first Dayenu event – a farewell party for one of the group's organisers who was moving overseas.

The following Mardi Gras, I marched with Dayenu's float in the parade. It was the third time Dayenu had participated. What an amazing experience it was! To this day, I have a photo on my shelf of me and my partner taken during that parade and it still puts a smile on face.

After that magical night I marched every year with Dayenu and was very disappointed in 2006 when no one stepped up to organise a float. Rather than march that year, I watched the parade for the first time, feeling a bit sad that there was no Jewish contingent. At the start of 2007, a friend sent an email around looking for people to help organise a float and I jumped at the chance.

Together with a group of guys, all called David, we built a float, designed and printed T-shirts and proudly marched up Oxford Street again with around 40 people. It was an amazing feeling to have actually helped organise the float and to see how many people were willing to come along and show their support. I have kept a copy of the article published in *The AJN* that year, and I remember how unnerving I found it at the time to have my name and face published. I still wasn't completely at ease with my sexuality back then, although I had come out to my parents.



Roy Freeman (right) at last year's Mardi Gras.

Photo: Lara Hotz

They hadn't taken the news well, so I sent them a copy of the article, hoping that they could understand how proud I was.

It was from there that I started organising regular Dayenu events. At first,

Shabbat services and dinners at Emanuel Synagogue, which have filled the hall to capacity. The number of people joining us in the parade has grown consistently each year, now reaching more than 100.

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monthly Shabbat dinners that started small, but over the years grew to 20-25 people each month. We also started to celebrate the major yamin tovim as a group, holding annual seders, Chanukah parties, Rosh Hashanah meals etc. Many Dayenu members are not native Sydney-siders and do not have any nearby family to go to for the yamim tovim, so Dayenu has become their adopted family.

In the years since 2007, we have started a Dayenu Facebook group and have attracted more than 200 members, and our Yahoo mailing list includes over 150 people. We held our first AGM in October 2010, and have had a series of very successful annual Mardi Gras

Dayenu has become more visible, both in the GLBTI (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex) community and within the Jewish community. Since it began in 2000, it has shown the wider community that GLBTI Jews exist, and that we are proud of our religion and our sexuality. We have also worked hard to better integrate GLBTI Jews into the wider Jewish community, and make it a more accepting and welcoming place for us.

At this month's Mardi Gras dinner, I was incredibly touched by the number of people who told me how Dayenu had been instrumental in their coming out. Meeting other GLBTI Jews gave them the strength to accept their sexuality, to come

out to their family and friends and to live the life that they wanted to live. It takes considerable strength to come out to family when you know that they may be shocked by the news. It is well documented how rejection by family can have a devastating effect on young gay and lesbian people: tragically, some attempt suicide. It can take years for some families to accept their son or daughter's sexuality, but thankfully most families, like mine, eventually realise that our lives and relationships can be equally as rewarding as heterosexual ones.

Dayenu has inspired me so much and I have met so many amazing and inspiring people. Many Dayenu members have shared their incredible stories with me; stories which all too often include rejection, hardship and abuse. Many explained how Dayenu brought hope and strength to their lives.

So it is with a heavy heart that I now step down as president of Dayenu as part of my move to Israel. I am hopeful that others will step forward to ensure that Dayenu continues to be a beacon of hope for GLBTI Jews.