



REPORT OF THE GLBT REFERENCE GROUP

OCTOBER 2011

Preamble

1. Upon assuming the presidency of the JCCV in November 2008, John Searle stated that his aims, amongst other things, were to identify disaffiliated Jewish people, to try and bring them more 'within the tent of the Jewish community', and to look at issues, including prejudice, within our own community. In the last three years, the JCCV has tackled these and many other issues. A GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) Reference Group ("the reference group") was established to look at issues pertaining to GLBT Jews in Melbourne. This report deals with the scope, work, and subsequent findings of the GLBT Reference Group and concludes with some recommendations.
2. The report is significant in itself as it is the first time the peak body of our community has put such a report to the community. We have done so in the hope there can be open, honest and hopefully educational dialogue within our community on issues impacting upon members of our GLBT community.
3. The aims of the reference group were clearly enunciated when the reference group was formed. These were;
 - To investigate the occurrence of vilification and discrimination against Jewish GLBT people;
 - To identify whether mental health issues are more prevalent among the Jewish GLBT community;
 - To recommend strategies to minimise vilification and discrimination and:
 - To recommend strategies to be adopted within the community to reduce the incidence of mental health issues among Jewish GLBT people.

It was formed in the belief that there are episodes of discrimination and vilification against GLBT Jews within our community and these events

impact upon the mental health issues already facing members of the GLBT community.

4. The reference group recognised that Jewish Halacha prohibits gay sexual behaviour and, according to orthodox rabbinic interpretation, lesbian sexual behaviour. The reference group recognised that it does not have the power to change Halacha and therefore confined itself to issues involving discrimination, vilification and mental health issues. It was hoped in this way the reference group could produce a useful report for the community.
5. It should also be stated at the outset that the reference group comprised representatives from the JCCV Executive, Jewish people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, and also included representatives from the Australian Jewish Psychologists and from Jewish Care. Significantly, the members of the GLBT community were all introduced to the JCCV by a third party and subsequently volunteered to form the reference group.

Introduction

6. The reference group set about informing itself of relevant facts by arranging for presentations, representations, forums and discussion groups with:
 - Representatives from the Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University;
 - Health professionals, academics and other specialists specifically working in this area;
 - Police representatives working in this area;
 - Principals from the majority of our Jewish day schools;
 - Orthodox and Progressive Rabbis;
 - Student leaders;

- Representatives of Jewish burial societies;
 - Members of our community by way of a call for submissions.
7. Each representative with whom the reference group met or alternatively spoke was advised that the purpose of the discussions was to inform the reference group in relation to its objectives with a view to compiling a report that would be distributed to the Jewish (and possibly wider) community. It was confirmed that the issue of Halacha was outside of the terms of reference.
 8. In this context, it is pleasing to note that the principals of each Jewish day school that we approached, Orthodox and Progressive, saw fit to meet with us, as did representatives of both the Orthodox and Progressive Rabbinate.
 9. The reference group was, frankly, disappointed with the small number of submissions received from community members. The call for submissions was placed in the community newspaper, electronic media, through student sources and mention was also made via some specific gay media outlets. It was also stated that submissions would be received on a confidential basis. Nevertheless, only a few submissions were received. It would be comforting to think that so few submissions were received due to the fact that issues of vilification, discrimination and consequent mental health issues are not that prevalent within Jewish GLBT community members. However, this seems exceedingly unlikely. The reference group must recognise that an alternate explanation for the lack of submissions may be because people were not confident that their submissions would lead to any change or, perhaps, because they were uncomfortable forwarding submissions to the JCCV. It is worthwhile noting that attempts to have submissions received by an independent third party were not successful.

FINDINGS

10. Clearly, the two most critical aspects of this Report are the findings and then the recommendations.

Finding No.1

11. As recently as 1960, the prevailing medical/psychiatric opinion in relation to homosexuality was that it was some kind of treatable condition.
12. Worse still, homosexuality was seen to be associated with other perversions such as exhibitionism, sadism, and was felt to be socially important as it may involve or lead to other offences such as blackmail and, occasionally, murder. Indeed, it was not until 1973 that homosexuality and bisexuality were removed from the DSM ii (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) and were no longer regarded as psychiatric conditions to treat.
13. Unfortunately, it would seem there are still remnants of this type of thinking in our community, possibly more prevalent among members of the Orthodox community.

Finding No.2.

14. All experts accept that approximately 10% of teenagers will wrestle with their sexual identity. Whilst not all of these teenagers will discover that they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, nevertheless the discovery process itself is often traumatic and can lead to mental health issues which, if unchecked, can become severe.

Finding No.3

15. As recently as 2005, 67%¹ of members of GLBT Australian community modified their daily activities because of fear of prejudice or discrimination. The modification of daily activities was more common for younger participants and people in rural areas. We consider that many members of the GLBT Jewish community in Melbourne would similarly

¹ Private Lives- a report on the health and wellbeing of GLBTI Australians – 2005, La Trobe University

feel the need to modify their daily activities. Whilst we could not obtain direct evidence on this point, it is suspected that modification of daily activities may be more prevalent within Orthodox communities where there appears to be less understanding and less acceptance.

Finding No.4

16. As recently as 2005, 85% of Australian GLBT community members surveyed² indicated they had experienced violence or harassment of some type. Of those surveyed 30% had experienced violence or harassment on the street, 13% at home and 10% at work. More significantly, 70% of those surveyed did not report their most recent experience to police and 60% did not report their experience to anybody. So far as transgender people are concerned, 50% reported social forms of stigma such as verbal abuse and social exclusion whilst 30% had been threatened with violence, 25% had been refused services and 19% had been physically attacked³. Again, there was no direct evidence but the feeling of the reference group is that Jewish GLBT people will have similar experiences, even if it is not all related to the fact they are Jewish.

Finding No.5

17. There is a clear relationship between discrimination/vilification and mental health issues. For example, in a report issued by the La Trobe University,⁴ approximately 75% of all GLBT people reported some experience of depression. 49% of men and 44% of women had a major depressive episode, whilst 16% indicated suicidal thoughts. Of significance was the fact that tobacco use and drug use was significantly higher within the GLBT communities. To supplement these figures, it can be demonstrated that the national average figure for depression is

² Private Lives- a report on the health and wellbeing of GLBTI Australians – 2005, La Trobe University

³ “Tranznation” – A report on the health and wellbeing of transgendered people in Australia and New Zealand- La Trobe University, Couch et al.

⁴ Private Lives- a report on the health and wellbeing of GLBTI Australians – 2005, La Trobe University

6.8% whereas the figure for gay men and lesbians rises to 24.4% and to 36.2% for transgender. Again, whilst there are no specific figures for our community, the survey statistics are likely to be applicable for the Jewish community.

Finding No.6

18. The Suicide Prevention Australia Position Paper produced in 2009 indicated that rates of suicide amongst GLBT people are between 3.5% and 14% higher than the general population. Whilst we have not been able to obtain figures for the Jewish Community, we were advised by relevant professionals of the Jewish burial societies that they were not aware of any suicides in our community related to these factors. Of course, it could be that Jewish GLBT people who have succumbed to the stresses have not been buried within our community structures or families of the deceased have not revealed the underlying issues.

Of concern was the data provided by Hatzolah that indicates approximately one person under the age of 25 and one person over that age within the Jewish community attempts self harm or suicide per month. It was stated that it is hard to distinguish between genuine attempts at suicide, attempted suicide as a call for help and accidental infliction of injury, for example by accidental overdose. However, Hatzolah reported that approximately one person per month in our community takes or attempts to take their own life. This is, in itself, a very disturbing figure. There is no evidence to indicate the percentage of these people whose suicide or attempted suicide was related to GLBT issues. We assume that additional pressures and burdens placed on Jewish GLBT people will lead to an increased likelihood of suicide. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that figures applicable to the Victorian population generally do not apply to the Jewish community.

Finding No.7

19. There are protective factors that will assist members of the GLBT community from suffering mentally. Clearly, reducing vilification and discrimination are essential in this regard. Other factors include:
- Being in a relationship
 - Community connectedness
 - Social support (friends, peers, family)
 - Institutional support (Government, schools, work)

Finding No.8

20. It is probably harder to 'come out' in the Jewish community than in other communities. In this regard, some of the respondents did not draw a distinction between the Orthodox community and the Progressive community. The GLBT Reference Group found this interesting and despite the feedback feels that it is probably more difficult to 'come out' in the Orthodox community, particularly the strictly Ultra Orthodox community where there is less acceptance of GLBT people and stronger adherence to Halachic principles.

Finding No.9 – Schools

21. At the outset, it is worth noting that the GLBT Reference Group was gratified that each school principal invited to attend discussions did so.
22. Each principal was aware that a percentage of teenagers 'wrestled with their sexuality'. It did however seem that the principals of the more Orthodox schools felt the percentage of teenagers struggling with these issues at their schools may be lower than the estimated 10%. There is no reason to believe there should be any significant discrepancy between the orthodox and other communities, and this belief may indicate that the environment is not conducive to "coming out".
23. Our community's schools employ counsellors and psychologists. There was a cross section of male and female counsellors/psychologists, both

Jewish and non Jewish. It was clear that all schools, including the Orthodox schools, were certainly prepared to employ non-Jewish people in these roles. The view generally expressed by the principals was that students would feel comfortable approaching the counsellors/psychologists to discuss all issues, even issues concerning their sexuality. The principals all conceded that students would possibly not feel comfortable coming to them to discuss issues of sexuality although such approaches have occurred. All principals assured the reference group that discussions between students and counsellors/psychologists remain entirely confidential unless the student was deemed to 'be at risk' in which case appropriate action, which may involve bringing in the parents, would be initiated. Again, the reference group was informed by each of the principals, Orthodox and Progressive, that counselling, administered to the students would be based on the welfare of the student and not Halacha.

24. Significantly, each of the principals indicated that whilst bullying does occur in the school environment, bullying on any basis is unacceptable. In this regard, they all stated categorically that bullying on the grounds of sexual orientation would not be tolerated. Interestingly, one of the principals of a more Orthodox school indicated his school has the 'Kids Matter' program operating, which is designed to address issues of concern to this sub-committee.
25. All principals indicated they had teacher/staff training to ensure the school would 'pick up on' a student exhibiting signs of stress/anxiety or depression. Again, all principals were confident that the number of contact hours with students and the procedures in place would ensure troubled students were detected.
26. Another interesting observation made by the principals was that the student populations are generally very protective and supportive of one another and accordingly it was felt that students would generally support one of their peers who had 'come out'. As a result of all the conversations we had, the reference group concluded that the levels of

support from students is more likely to be greater in the less observant or non-Orthodox schools, yet even in the Orthodox schools, the reports were encouraging. For example our community Progressive school is the only school that has a gay/straight alliance group of students but, as its principal conceded, it is easier for them as they are not under the Orthodox framework.

27. All of the schools have sex education programs operating and all of the principals report that discussions with students, particularly in the senior years, cover such topics as sexuality, homosexuality, discrimination and the like. However, it was clear that the more Orthodox of the schools framed these discussions from an Halachic viewpoint and in those circumstances the reference group believes it would be more difficult to make a student feel at ease in 'coming out'. Nevertheless, the principals of even the most Orthodox of schools stated categorically that whilst they would not compromise Torah values, they would ensure that any child, including a child 'coming out', would be safe and secure and that they would ensure that the school did everything in its power to ensure the child was not bullied, vilified or discriminated against in any way.
28. Of disappointment was the view expressed by the principal of one of the more Orthodox schools that 'homosexuality is a disorder' for which a person could be referred to a doctor or a psychologist. Clearly, this is an outdated and incorrect belief which would further stigmatise GLBT students and discourage them from coming out in the school environment.

Finding No. 10 – Attitude of Rabbis

29. The Rabbinical Council of Victoria, comprising Orthodox pulpit Rabbis was not surprised by the estimated percentage of teenagers wrestling with their sexuality. Pulpit Rabbis advised that they deal with these issues in the context of their congregants regularly. It was stated that whilst the perception is that Rabbis who look and dress differently are therefore not in touch with these issues, it is not so.

30. The RCV has a professional development program and although they have not yet had a training session in relation to GLBT issues, such issues have come up in the counselling course that they recently undertook.
31. We were advised that it would now be extremely rare for an Orthodox Rabbi to refer someone discussing an issue of sexual identity to a doctor, psychiatrist or psychologist for treatment, or for aversion therapy. Rabbis in this day and age, and particularly the younger Rabbis, realise the reality of life. Accordingly, the majority of RCV Rabbis discussing such an issue would not suggest to that person that they try and change.

The view of the RCV is that there should be no discrimination or vilification because of somebody's sexual orientation. Accordingly, a gay man should still receive an aliya in the Synagogue in the same way as a man who is not shomer Shabbat would. To do otherwise would be discriminatory.

By contrast, given the different interpretation of Halacha, which promotes a more accepting attitude, the Progressive Rabbis report fewer instances of congregants wishing to discuss these issues with them.

Finding No.11 – Student attitudes

32. The view was expressed that there do not seem to be any issues of vilification or discrimination on university campuses and GLBT people could and do comfortably attend social events, often with a partner, and no social issues arise.

Finding No.12 – Results of Submissions

33. There was significant discrimination and abuse levelled at organisers of a community event when those organisers decided to allow for the first time the Jewish Lesbian Group of Victoria and, two years later, Aleph, a Jewish Gay Support Group, to set up community stalls at the event – the “In One Voice” festival. This discrimination occurred fifteen years ago and the discrimination was properly described as vilification. Hope was expressed in the submission that attitudes have changed in the

meantime but nevertheless it was poignantly observed that members of the Jewish GLBT community who grew up at that time would have suffered formative, frightening experiences.

- 34 Excluding GLBT members of the Jewish community imposes a stigma on such people such that they begin to doubt their worth within our society.
- 35 There is pressure upon teenage gays to repress their identity and the repression has an ongoing negative effect on their self confidence.
- 36 Discrimination against and vilification of Jewish members of the GLBT community will exclude or marginalise those people from our community and this causes needless loss of members and deprivation of talent from the Jewish community. In addition it was reported that as a result of 'coming out', longstanding friends of the parents of the person who 'came out' severed all contact with the family and a Rabbi had refused to shake his hand because he was gay. By contrast, many younger members of Melbourne's Jewish community find the homophobia of previous generations antiquated and unacceptable.

Recommendations

For Schools

1. All schools could increase the level of education within the school so that students are aware that same sex attraction, bisexuality and transgender are not 'conditions to be cured'.
2. Independent assessments should be made of the school environment to ensure a student wishing to discuss a sexual issue feels entirely comfortable, in terms of environment, location and personality of counsellors/teachers to do so.
3. Schools should review their bullying policies to ensure they explicitly encompass discriminatory and vilifying behaviour of

people based on sexual orientation and gender identity and then ensure the policies are strictly enforced.

4. Schools need to ensure they provide a safe haven for all students.
5. Schools can participate in the “Pridentity” or “Safe Schools” program.
6. Schools develop and implement discussion programs, or supplement existing ones to ensure acceptance of differences of all types, including sexuality and gender identity.
7. Schools should maintain contact with educational institutions and educators here and around the world (both Jewish and non-Jewish) to ensure they are kept abreast of the research, developments and programs in these areas.
8. School libraries should incorporate texts, DVDs and other resource material relevant to Jewish GLBT and gender identity issues to ensure there are sufficient resources for students who are seeking education or appropriate reading/viewing material in this area.

Rabbis

1. All Rabbis should participate in professional development programs, preferably under the auspices of their Rabbinical Association, relating to these issues. The programs would not only ensure they are factually informed but will also ensure they are able to appropriately counsel their members.
2. The Rabbis, individually and collectively, must be prepared to speak out against vilification and discrimination of people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.
3. Consideration should be given by the Rabbinical Associations to issuing a statement akin to the one recently issued by the Rabbinical Council of America – Appendix 1 attached hereto.

4. Rabbis individually and the Rabbinical Association should maintain contact with Rabbinical Associations, educational institutions and educators here and around the world (both Jewish and non Jewish) to ensure they are kept abreast of the research, developments and programs in these areas.

Community and Community Organisations generally

1. All community organisations should adopt a policy prohibiting discrimination and vilification based on a person's sexual orientation and gender identity.
2. Community Organisations should provide training for their staff and facilitate education for their members and volunteers relating to these issues.
3. Jewish Community Libraries should incorporate texts, DVDs and other resource material relevant to Jewish GLBT and gender identity issues to ensure there are sufficient resources for members of the community who are seeking education or appropriate reading/viewing material in this area.
4. Community organisations, particularly synagogues and/or rabbinical associations could facilitate trips to Australia by Rabbis or educators who can speak on the issues facing members of our GLBT community, particularly those in the Orthodox community.
5. Community support organisations ensure they are kept up to date with the latest research and developments and have in place adequate support services for the Jewish GLBT community. It is also necessary that members of the Jewish GLBT community are made fully aware of these services.

Conclusions

1. There is no doubt that an enormous amount of needless suffering is caused by thoughtless and cruel behaviour that is manifested because of homophobic prejudice and prejudice towards members of the GLBT Jewish community.
2. It is clear that Jewish members of the GLBT community are subjected to discrimination, harassment and abuse because of their sexuality. There is a significant relationship between young people having been abused and negative health outcomes such as drug abuse, self-harm, depression and suicide. GLBT issues per se, that is the fact that a person is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, will not lead to mental health issues. If there were no episodes of discrimination, or fear of discrimination and no vilification there would not be GLBT mental health issues in the GLBT community. These mental health issues, which may manifest themselves in depression, suicidal tendencies, attempts at self-harm or suicide, need to be addressed in a positive, mature fashion by our community which is, in large part, ill-educated and unaware of the impacts of discrimination.
3. There is undoubtedly a greater challenge for the Orthodox community who must reconcile the Halachic rulings with the need to ensure that all people are treated humanely, compassionately and accepted for who they are.
4. In the final analysis, there is absolutely no place for discrimination or vilification on the basis of a person's sexuality or gender identity.

Acknowledgements

1. The members of the JCCV GLBT Reference Group are to be thanked and commended for the time, effort and sacrifice they have all made in performing the background work to enable the preparation of this report.

2. The aim of the JCCV is to distribute this report as widely within our community as possible. It will also be made available outside our community. Hopefully leaders of organisations, members of governing committees, individuals and anyone else who reads this report will gain some valuable insight and can also play a role in ensuring that discrimination and vilification is eradicated.
3. It is strongly recommended that a review be performed within 3 years to ascertain the extent to which the recommendations contained in this report have been adopted and the impact that has been affected within our community.

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