

# Being lesbian & Jewish

Margaret Safran

MELBOURNE'S Jewish lesbian group, which came out publicly for the first time at a Jewish function at this year's Concert in the Park, is determined to keep alive the discussion of Jews and sexuality.

"We are here, there are lots of us, we are politically motivated and active and have a lot to do with the Jewish community and do a lot of work for the Jewish community," one of the group's members, Julie, says. "Let's keep thinking about it because we are not going away and your aunty or niece might be one."

Another member, Sara, adds: "Or your grandmother. That seems to terrify people the most."

The Jewish lesbian group, which formed about three years ago, has approximately 40 members in Melbourne aged in their 20s to 60s. The women come from a wide range of backgrounds and professions including teaching, social work, journalism and the police force, with many taking a very active role in the wider Jewish and/or lesbian communities. Despite the greater acceptance of homosexuality in today's society, the vast majority do not wish to be identified, fearing for their families and/or jobs.

At least one member of the group is convinced she would be sacked if her work colleagues knew she was a lesbian ("although that wouldn't be the reason given," she adds). Others, especially those in the public service, are less worried for their jobs, but do not want to draw attention to their families or partners who may not have "come out".

Nonetheless, the group managed to find half a dozen women willing to staff its stall at

Concert in the Park. Sara says the group would also love to publicly debate 'That Jewish lesbians are kosher' with an Orthodox rabbi and/or some of the authors of letters published in the *Australian Jewish News* critical of their group. She says while some of the letters were quite hurtful, even the nasty ones led to other people thinking about the issue.

One of their members, counsellor psychologist Vera Ray, will speak to the National Council of Jewish Women's Status of Women group on July 17 (see separate story, box).

The Jewish lesbian group meets monthly with every second meeting open to non-Jewish partners and friends. Julie says the group is like any other Jewish group — "we turn up late, eat and gossip" — but also provides a "safe place" for a "minority within a minority".

Miriam, who lives in "the other ghetto" (Brunswick), says there is antisemitism in some parts of the lesbian community. The women agree that coming out as a Jew in the lesbian community is often as big an issue as coming out as a lesbian in the Jewish community.

Miriam says coming to the Jewish lesbian group is very relaxing because she does not have to worry about who sees her or what they think.

The group sometimes goes out socially, but there is often an "internalised homophobia" and fear about being seen together, according to Sara.

Sara, who was born in Israel and migrated to Australia in the 1960s, says she had very little to do with the Jewish community before the group started. Active in the lesbian community, she helped form the Jewish group three years ago for a multicultural lesbian festival.

"It's my way of being Jewish," she says.

Another member, Eva, who had great difficulty admitting to herself that she was a lesbian, only joined the group because it was Jewish.

"A friend wanted me to ring Lesbian Line but I didn't want to. I'm very Jewish so I had to find a Jewish group," she says.

"When I really think about it, I should have known (I was a lesbian) when I was 12 or 13, but people tell you this can't be, so you go off and get married and do the right thing."

Many of the group members have been (or are) married and have children. But even one gay woman and man who underwent a marriage of convenience for their families found the pretence too difficult to keep up.

"Younger lesbians find it much easier," says Sara, who is in her 40s. "We always felt isolated and that we were the only ones."

Leah, who is in her 60s, adds: "I grew up in an era where there were no Jewish lesbians that I knew of, but I knew they must be lurking somewhere as I was."

Most women have "come out" to a greater or lesser extent to their families. Some, such as Sara who has taken lovers to meet her family in Israel, have had very positive experiences. But other members' parents and/or relatives have been more distressed, often because they believe they won't have grandchildren which is a big issue in the Jewish community, according to Julie.

"But even when I was going out with blokes I knew I wasn't going to have children with them," she adds.

According to Leah: "The first meeting I attended my initial question and I think everyone's initial question is 'What did your mother say?'"

One member who came from a very traditional home once asked her mother if she preferred if she came home with a Jewish woman or a non-Jewish man. The mother instantly responded: 'a Jewish woman'.

Others, such as Miriam, have not discussed their sexuality with their relatives or other friends in the Jewish community.

"My family would suspect, but it's not something I really discuss because I don't think it is relevant. My children don't know, they just know I'm not a normal mother and I'm pretty outrageous anyway," she says.

Many of the women went to see Saltpillar Theatre's musical *Falsettos*, which is based around a Jewish man who leaves his wife for another man.

"The timing (of the show) was unbelievable. It touched on so many points," Julie says.

At the theatre, they met up with the Jewish gay men's group for the first time. But the men are even more tentative in coming out in the Jewish community than the Jewish lesbian group.

The Melbourne women are now looking forward to a national conference next year in Adelaide, where there is a very small but active group, they say.

As for their group: "We don't teach people how to do it. We are not a sexual depravity group," Julie says.

Leah adds: "We don't proselytise — either as Jews or lesbians."

Miriam concludes: "Why should we be treated any differently? We're Jews and that's all that matters. We all have lives, jobs and families. Sexuality should not set us aside from the community."

The Melbourne Jewish Lesbian group can be contacted on 9849-9669.

## Facing up to the pain

COUNSELLOR, psychologist, Holocaust survivor and Jewish lesbian Vera Ray, 62, believes homophobia and antisemitism spring from the same source.

"Homophobia is based on this idea of the perfect person which is too close to the Nazi superman notion. We have this idea of what is the perfect human being is, and it's ridiculous, it's narrow, its confining, it brings a lot of unhappiness to people and it serves no purpose," she says.

According to Ms Ray, homosexuals who marry and try to suppress their desires are like European Jews who converted to Christianity during periods of virulent antisemitism.

"After the war a lot of the Christian Jews went back to being Jewish. As soon as the situation becomes relatively safe, we go back to where we are," she says.

"How can Jews not have compassion for those who do not fit within the model? As a psychologist I see young people who have been rejected by their parents, and parents who are tearing their hair out because their son or daughter is gay or lesbian. I don't think we can afford to oppress each other, particularly our children, with this kind of nonsense."

Ms Ray says it is as if the com-

munity had its own "thought police".

"Fear is the enemy. Parents are afraid of telling their friends they have a gay child. The child is afraid of telling their parents. Why are we so ashamed? Why are we so hung up on sex?" she asks.

Ms Ray believes the only reason Jewish lesbians may be slightly more tolerated than Jewish gay men in the community is that they are not valued as highly.

"If you are going to have such a low opinion of women that they don't even get an honourable mention then it doesn't really matter what they do. We are not only homophobic, but sexist."

Ms Ray says "half the battle would be won" if parents stopped worrying about having grandchildren.

"My daughter is a lesbian and she has a child. There are many good men out there who are happy to be donors. Your biological plumbing doesn't fall out just because you sexually and emotionally prefer the same sex," she says.

Ms Ray says she has very little to lose by coming out as a lesbian in the Jewish community.

"On the contrary, I'm hoping parents of gay and lesbian children and hidden gays and les-

sbians in the community will come and talk to me. I'm in the business of educating people and dealing with injustice," she says.

"About 80 per cent of my clients are gay. I also like to see parents of gays because they see a really truly live lesbian professional person hasn't grown a second head and is fairly lucid. I am sometimes able to help facilitate families getting together again who have been torn apart by homophobia.

"Parents sometimes mistakenly think they will hold the family together if they pressure the child, but it does the exact opposite. Children lose parents, but the parents also lose their children. Nobody wins."

Ms Ray would like to see parents and friends of Jewish lesbians and gays form their own group (there are already a number of similar non-Jewish organisations).

"There must be so many parents who would benefit by knowing they are not alone. They could get some support from one another," she says.

Ms Ray, who came out in her 40s and left her husband of 22 years for another woman, had terrible difficulty telling her mother she was a lesbian.

"I was 42 when I came out to my

mother. We struggled for two years.

Sometimes I thought 'It wasn't worth it, I shouldn't have told her, I'm just causing her pain and she's causing me pain'. Then I thought, 'I'm not causing her pain, homophobia is causing her pain'.

"My mother was so proud of me all my life. I told her I was a lesbian and all of a sudden she was ashamed of me."

But Ms Ray believes the struggle was worthwhile as her mother eventually reconciled herself to the idea and even, when she was nearly 80, joined a gay march.

"I never push anyone to come out to their parents. They'll do it when they're ready," she says.

Ms Ray has also been able to retain a good relationship with her husband, although at the time of the break-up there was a lot of distress on both sides.

"There was no information and no-one to talk to. I thought the world had come to an end," she says.



Vera Ray

Today she wishes there were more people like her willing and able to talk about homosexuality in the Jewish community. On Monday July 17 she will be speaking to the National Council of Jewish Women's Status of Women group at Shakahari Restaurant (for more information phone 9523-0535).

"I have seen so much injustice as both a child and an adult. But I am not a murderer. I am not a criminal. I'm a law-abiding citizen. I love my children, I love my dog. What more do they want?"

Vera Ray can be contacted on 9499-6901.