



Israel

by Tina Gianoulis

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The state of Israel is a young and very complex nation. It is a religious state with a conservative majority, yet queer activists have managed to gain a legal status and a degree of protection under the law that is equaled in only the most progressive countries. However, as elsewhere, Israeli glbtq communities struggle with divisions within their own ranks, as well as with anti-gay prejudice in the society as a whole.

A Place of Contradiction

Since its inception, the state of Israel has been a place of intense contradiction, a complex, and often volatile, mix of different races, religions, cultures, classes, and degrees of privilege.

Established in 1948 as a Jewish nation and a homeland for all Jews, Israel became a refuge for Jews fleeing worldwide anti-Semitism. However, as tens of thousands of European and American Jews immigrated to the tiny Middle Eastern nation, it also became a symbol of Western aggression, both to the Palestinian people who had inhabited the land for generations, and to their Arab neighbors.

In little more than half a century, the new nation has developed a representative government and a distinct culture, including a vibrant modern Hebrew language created from the ancient Jewish tongue. With the help of allies--principally the United States-- Israel has also built one of the most powerful military forces in the world.

The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) is employed not only to fend off enemies from the outside, but also to suppress the Palestinian population within its borders and in the highly contested Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza that Israel has occupied since 1967.

Some social analysts believe that it is Israel's embattled state that has prompted government officials toward liberality on some social issues, including gay and lesbian rights. They argue that the Israeli government, viewed as an oppressor nation in many parts of the world, is anxious to demonstrate an enlightened generosity where possible.

Despite the official liberalism, however, lesbians and gays are still stigmatized in many areas of Israeli society, and conservative religious courts still have a great deal of control over family issues, such as marriage, divorce, and child custody.

Gay Liberation

Gay liberation came to Israel, as it did to much of the Western world, during the 1970s. In 1975, activists came together to form the Society for the Protection of Personal Rights. The SPPR was a support



Top: Israel and neighboring countries.
Above: Marchers at the Tel Aviv Pride Parade in 2004.

Image of the Tel Aviv Pride Parade appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

organization that worked to improve conditions for gay men and lesbians. Its name was intentionally vague, as public use of the word *homosexual* was deemed too controversial in an Israel that still had sodomy laws on the books.

Later the SPPR changed its name to the Agudah, the Association of Gay Men, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transgender in Israel. The Agudah continues to work for equality for Israeli queers through political lobbying and education. In 1996, the organization began to produce a weekly glbtq television magazine program called *Gayim L'hatzig* (*Gays Proud to Present*).

Though some women worked in SPPR, many Israeli lesbians found a more comfortable place in feminist groups. In 1987, some Israeli lesbian feminists banded together to form CLAF, the Community of Lesbians and Feminists, which works to develop the lesbian community and to fight for lesbian rights, especially in the areas of child bearing, child custody, and partnership benefits. In 2003, CLAF began publishing Israel's only lesbian magazine, *Pandora*.

Successes

Although gay men and lesbians began working together during the 1970s, efforts to change the legal status of Israeli queers did not begin bearing fruit until the late 1980s.

In 1988, the Knesset (Parliament) repealed the sodomy law, in effect decriminalizing homosexuality, and in 1992 a law was passed forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Feminist Knesset member Yael Dayan became a strong supporter of lesbian and gay rights, and in 1993, she supported the creation of a Knesset sub-committee focusing on lesbian and gay issues.

That same year, a well-known professor and major in the IDF, Uzi Even, came out as a gay man and worked to institute an anti-discrimination policy within the IDF. Even with such a policy in place however, queer soldiers must still be reported and are subjected to special security checks.

In 1994, the Israeli Supreme Court issued a decision with far-reaching consequences for gay men and lesbians, when it upheld a lower court decision to force El Al Airlines to grant spousal benefits to the partner of a gay flight attendant. In 1995, the protection became even broader as Yael Dayan and the Agudah worked to get laws passed granting rights to same-sex couples.

In 1997, Dana International (Sharon Cohen), an Israeli transwoman, won first place in the Eurovision Song Contest, bringing transgender issues into the Israeli mainstream for the first time.

In 1998, Michal Eden was elected to the Tel Aviv City Council, becoming the first openly lesbian public official.

In 2000, the Israeli government began to allow foreign partners of Israeli gay men and lesbians to immigrate.

In 2002, Uzi Even became the first openly gay member of the Knesset.

Opposition

Though gay men and lesbians have been very successful in obtaining legal protections, there is still much conservative opposition to queer liberation.

A 1994 international gay and lesbian conference was marred when right-wing protesters disrupted a ceremonial wreath-laying at the Jerusalem Holocaust Memorial.

In 1998, an annual Tel Aviv drag festival called Wigstock was disrupted when police tried to shut the program down at the beginning of the Sabbath on Saturday evening. Angry gay protesters blocked traffic for several hours.

In June of 2005, Jerusalem's gay pride parade was obstructed by a large demonstration by Orthodox Jews, who hurled bottles of urine and bags containing feces at the marchers. One of their number stabbed three marchers.

Internal Divisions

In addition to the opposition from without, the glbtq movement has also had to struggle with internal divisions.

As frequently occurs in diverse communities, a split developed between more conservative (and often more privileged) gay men and lesbians, whose focus is on gay rights alone, and members of the radical left, who tend to see gay liberation as part of a much larger social movement. Radical queers often insist that the struggle for gay rights must go hand-in-hand with fighting for other social improvements, such as racial and class equality.

This split has been especially divisive in Israel, which not only has distinct and often harsh class and ethnic divisions within its Jewish population, but also has been conducting a military occupation of neighboring lands for over three decades. Many queers began to feel that they could no longer work simply to gain rights within a system they find militaristic and oppressive.

Lesbians have continued to be a strong presence in feminist groups, taking leadership roles in peace groups such as Women in Black, Bat Shalom (Daughter of Peace), and the Women's Coalition for Peace, which work to publicize and change the difficult conditions created for Palestinians by the Occupation.

In 1997 Jerusalem Open House, "a glbt community center advancing the cause of social tolerance," was founded. The philosophy of the center is expressed by its executive director, Hagai El-Ad, "The struggle for our rights is worthless if it's indifferent to what's happening to people a kilometer from here."

Kvisa Sh'chora, or Black Laundry, an anarchist queer group that opposes the Occupation, was founded during the 2001 Tel Aviv Pride March. The group formed a "No Pride in Occupation" contingent, carrying signs that challenged Israeli government policies.

One organizer, Dalit Baum, described the mood that led to the formation of Black Laundry: "It felt impossible to celebrate our civil rights in a carnival atmosphere when we knew what was being done in the occupied territories just a short distance away." Black Laundry has continued to work to support Palestinian struggles for independence and often uses biting humor to shock more mainstream gay men and lesbians out of their complacency.

Israeli Palestinians

Gay men and lesbians who are Palestinian citizens of Israel have their own specific issues. At a time when Palestinian unity is considered all-important, it can be hard for Palestinian queers to assert their own identities and needs. Though there is some support from straight Palestinians, there is also a great deal of opposition to homosexuality from others, especially from conservative groups.

During the early 2000s, a group of Palestinian lesbians formed ASWAT, a support group intended to create

safe space for Palestinian gay women both inside and outside Israel's borders to explore their sexual identities and their community. ASWAT means "voices" in Arabic and the group's members describe themselves as "a courageous and dynamic group of women who have decided to organize to challenge the status quo and to improve our own lives, and to hopefully secure equal rights for ourselves and for those who come after us."

Conclusion

Over the past twenty years, Israeli gay men and lesbians have moved from the margins of Israeli society toward the mainstream. Influenced by immigrants from the United States and Western Europe, they have organized a movement for equality.

Despite the successes of the Israeli glbtq movement, however, opposition from religious Jews remains, and the movement itself is fractured by internal divisions. Nevertheless, there is reason to hope that glbtq individuals will continue to expand their legal rights and protections.

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