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Coming Out for Israel



Feb. 11, 2004 -- With help from Manhattan's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah and UJA-Federation of New York, Jerusalem recently provided an alternative to gay and lesbian nightlife in Tel Aviv: the Friday evening service.

In a sign that religion and tradition belong to everyone, the congregation's members were among 120 gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Jews to pray at Jerusalem Open House, a community center and activist organization for gay and lesbian Israelis.

The Friday evening milestone capped a 10-day **Beth Simchat Torah** mission to Israel that brought 50 New Yorkers to the Jewish state and further strengthened the bonds between Manhattan's synagogue for gay and lesbian Jews and their counterparts at **Jerusalem Open House**. Since September, the two have been twinned by UJA-Federation and the Jewish Agency for Israel through **Partnership 2000 Jerusalem-New York** in a program that aims to strengthen Israel-Diaspora relations by bringing communities together to address shared needs.

One of the things that surprised most of us Israelis was just how moving the visit was," said Daniel Savitch of Open House. "An outstanding example was the Erev Shabbat in Jerusalem. It was probably the largest Friday night gay and lesbian service that has ever taken place in Israel. It brought home how much we have in common and how much we still have to learn about each other."

For Beth Simchat Torah members, the education began in the fall with classes and a four-part seminar series led by the congregation's rabbinical staff and guest speakers.

"We wanted to help people explore their spiritual and political relationship to Israel," explained Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum. "We also tried to deal with the complex issues of contemporary Israeli society and not hide them."

Kleinbaum, who led the congregation's mission with assistant Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, added that she felt the visit

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- Daniel Savitch, a member of
Jerusalem Open House



accomplished three goals: It brought a group of American Jews to Israel during a difficult time, instilled a connection with the Jewish state as a basic value of the congregation, and provided its members with an opportunity to form a relationship with Israel's gay and lesbian community.

While in Israel, the New Yorkers explored a wide range of social and political issues including meeting with local gay and lesbian activists, exploring gay themes in Israeli art and culture, meeting with rabbis to hear about ongoing work being done to promote religious pluralism in Israel, and meeting with Knesset members from opposite sides of the spectrum about Israel's relationship with the Palestinians and homosexual rights in Israel.

Partners With Pride

For Jerusalem Open House, being paired with a gay and lesbian congregation from New York has provided a model for their own efforts to strengthen homosexual life in one of Israel's most conservative cities.

"We take for granted our Jewishness and they have to work on theirs," said Savitch. "While they take for granted being part of a gay community, and that's something we still have to work on."

Open House director, Hagai El-Ad, added that the visit provided Open House with an opportunity to present their home, and Holy City, in "both its beauty and its challenges."


"Though tense and precarious, life in Jerusalem goes on," explained El-Ad, pointing to such recent developments as the opening of Shushan, Jerusalem's new gay and lesbian bar; Open House's plan to soon offer Israel's first free, anonymous HIV testing; and their hosting of Jerusalem WorldPride 2005, an international gay pride event that will likely include a parade, a concert, and conferences on religion and homosexuality.

Worldpride also underscores another important point of cooperation that has strengthened bonds between the two communities: securing equal rights and ending discrimination against gays and lesbians in both Israel and the United States.

For instance, in the fall, Israel's tourism minister announced he did not support Open House's decision to host WorldPride 2005, saying it might alienate religious pilgrims who form the bulk of the tourist industry. Kleinbaum wrote a letter protesting the decision and supporting Open House's efforts.

Another example, and trip highlight, came when two Beth Simchat congregants had a wedding ceremony at the King David Hotel with both New Yorkers and Open House members in attendance. (Rabbis Kleinbaum and Cohen, along with a gay cantorial student from Hebrew Union College's Jerusalem campus, presided over the ceremony, one of only a handful that have been held in Israel.)

"Rabbi Kleinbaum's observation at the outset that Israel is a complicated place, and that those complications should be embraced, was borne out by our experiences," said Beth Simchat Torah congregant Arthur Leonard. "We came away with questions as well as answers, delighted with the progress that is being made on gay issues, but concerned about ongoing tensions between Arabs and Jews over the ultimate fate of the land."

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