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LOCAL NEWS

Jews', Palestinians' common cause

Jerusalem's gay youth visit New York City

By [Cyd Zeigler jr.](#)

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In our own private, gay-friendly corner of the world, it's hard to imagine a world where being gay flies in the face of the very fabric of your culture. It's hard to imagine, but there are still places where the battle isn't over whether you can marry, but whether you can even exist.

That is the reality today in Jerusalem, where a growing number of people are coming out of the closet and claiming their seat at the Seder dinner — and in the mosque.

Last week, 10 of the holy city's brightest young gay leaders came to New York City as part of an exchange program with New York's gay synagogue, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah.

The youth are all active in Open House, Jerusalem's gay community center.

Open House was founded in 1997 by a group of gay Israelis. It opened its doors two years later and has been a beacon for gay equality, and a safe haven for gay Israelis, Jewish and Palestinian alike, ever since. As such, it provides a beacon of hope in a war-torn region — an object lesson, perhaps, on ways in which the two peoples can find common ground.

Members of CBST had visited Jerusalem in December 2003. "It was like walking into the original CBST 25 years ago when people were just discovering us," said Lisa Kartzman, the synagogue's president. "There was that type of fervent need to have this. They were warm, they were welcoming, they were just so overjoyed to have us there."

Daphna Stroumsa, the mission's co-chair, headed the group that recently visited New York. As the only gay community center in the entire region (aside from a less active one in Tel Aviv), it has been impossible to find any comparable institution.

All of Israel's Arab neighbors are intensely homophobic. Saudi Arabia still has the death penalty on the books for "offenders" who



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practice their sexuality, and Egypt has been embroiled in a sweep of gay men that has been condemned by international rights organizations.

Despite the power of Orthodox Jewish factions, in recent years Israel has taken a liberal stance toward gay rights. The nation was one of the first to integrate out-gay soldiers into its military.

Israel has out-gay members of its parliament, the Knesset. Most recently, it has made strides toward gay adoption and even gay marriage.

Beacon in the Middle East

The exchange program to New York was sponsored by the Partnership 2000 project of the Jewish Agency For Israel. The trips were meant to bring hope and a sense of fraternity to the beleaguered gay community in the Middle East.

"It's overwhelming to see what can be done, and it's so inspiring," Stroumsa said. "It's opened our minds to think in other directions, wider possibilities."

While she sees much room for growth, Stroumsa feels that Open House is already having an effect beyond the gay people who come in and out of their doors or call a help line. She has seen a positive effect on the general atmosphere in Jerusalem, a city divided by religion, nationality and between secular and observant Jews.

One of the proudest accomplishments of Jerusalem's gay community is the region's first gay pride celebration. And now, in an acknowledgement by the wider world of the region's importance in the struggle for gay right, Jerusalem will host World Pride 2005, the largest gay-themed event in the history of the Middle East.

The event drew approximately 400,000 people in 2000 when it was held another ancient and holy city, Rome. The event was the largest gay event ever held in the Eternal City.



Haneen Maikay is a Palestinian who does outreach work with her compatriots at Jerusalem's gay center.

"Pride is much less a celebration and it's more like a holy day to me," Stroumsa said. To her, gay pride is not about a weekend of circuit parties. It's about the liberation of herself and people like her from the bonds of a conservative culture and repressive governments.

As an Orthodox Jew, Nethanel Lipshitz, who was also on the trip, had to struggle with his tradition and his sexuality. "To be both Orthodox and gay, you want to do something that is forbidden, and almost every Orthodox person deals with it in a different way," Lipshitz said. His choice was to continue to live an Orthodox life but to exclude the Jewish teaching that sex between men is forbidden. With its myriad of laws, Lipshitz downplays "disobeying" that one (one, it should be added, openly questioned by Orthodox theologians).

While the atmosphere in Jerusalem continues to be dominated by socially conservative Jews, Lipshitz said Open House rarely receives any open hostility. The building, like all buildings in Jerusalem, has a "stress button" to be pressed when the immediate assistance of the police is needed. The stress button in Open House has never been pressed.

The only violence against Open House Lipshitz knows of was the burning of a rainbow flag and the

theft of the building's rainbow-color mezuzah every few months.

He added that anti-gay violence is uncommon because it's hard to differentiate between the gay people and straight people on the streets.

"Either the gay people dress exactly like the straight people, or the straight people dress exactly like the gay people," he joked. "Tight shirts are common with everyone."

Lipshitz added that, until several years ago, there was some homophobic abuse from the police in Independence Park, the city's main gay cruising area. When two 16-year-old boys were arrested for kissing in the park, Open House organized a kissing march in front of the police department, involving 300 same-sex couples. Lipshitz said no cases of overt homophobic attacks from the police have been reported since the protest.

Gay Palestinians face death

If the situation for gay people in Israel is at times hostile, it can be downright deadly for those living in the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza, where the punishment for homosexual acts is death.

That has prompted Open House to work with the Israeli government to get visas for gay Palestinians.

Haneen Maikey is a Palestinian living in Israel who has been with Open House since graduating from Hebrew University's Paul Baerwald School of Social Work in 2000. She acts as the Open House Palestinian outreach coordinator and made the trip to New York.

For her role with the group, she runs into a very different obstacle when trying to reach out to Palestinians in Israel.

"Palestinian society has to deal with such issues, this seems not that important," she said, pointing to the ongoing conflict with Israel and the desperate living conditions of most Palestinians.

Through her outreach, about five Palestinian-Israelis are contacting Open House every week. The number of those actually entering the doors of Open House is going down, apparently the result of the wall Israel is erecting between the city's Israeli and Palestinian sectors.

The center's hotline keeps communication lines open for Palestinians looking for help, Maikey added.

For each of the Open House members on the trip, their stay in New York brought a deeper understanding to the multifarious aspects of gay life in a Western metropolis.

Stroumsa, a 24 year-old fourth-year medical student at Hadassah Medical School of the Hebrew University, focused on how gay health issues are addressed in New York City.

She visited the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center on 18th Street. The visit left her lamenting Jerusalem's lack of a comparable gay health clinic. "We should be aiming for better treatment for people," she said.

Lipshitz focused on learning about gay organizations such as the primarily gay synagogue and the state lobbying organization, the Empire State Pride Agenda, as well as taking in museums and art



the gay Middle Easterners were panelists at the Center on 13th Street as part of their stay in New York.

galleries. Maikey said the trip deepened her understanding of minority organizations.

Kartzman said a contingent from CBST will be traveling to Jerusalem in 2005 to help Open House — and the city — celebrate World Pride.

“It touches you as a gay Jew,” she said. “Every Jew should be doing something to help Israel. Our roots are there.”

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