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Twin Points Of Light

Delegation from fledgling gay community center in Jerusalem learns the ropes here with help from Congregation Beth Simchat Torah.

Debra Nussbaum Cohen - Staff Writer

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When the Jerusalem Open House was being developed, Danny Savitch didn't expect it to be very big. Even Savitch, one of its founders, wondered how a gay community center would be accepted in one of the world's most religiously conservative cities.



Seven years later, with as many as 200 people attending support and social groups each week, "we are much more successful than I thought. I didn't know that so many people would use our services," Savitch says.

And with the exception of some vandalism, it has been far more accepted than he had expected.

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While the number of clients is tiny compared to the 6,000 people who visit Manhattan's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community center each week, "We are a small organization in a very young community," says Rina Shapiro, a Siberia-born Jerusalemite who works as programming coordinator there.

JEWISH VACATIONS

FRESH INK FOR TEENS

They were part of a 10-person delegation of staffers and leaders visiting New York and hosted by Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, Manhattan's gay and lesbian synagogue.

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For a closing dinner at the Clinton Hill, Brooklyn brownstone of Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum and her partner, Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, they got together with about half the 45 CBST members who had participated in a parallel trip to Israel in December.

SPECIAL SECTIONS

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Over grilled salmon and fresh strawberries, the Israelis talked about their experiences in New York.

MANHATTAN
BROOKLYN/
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The 10-day visit to New York included services at CBST and other New York congregations, a Yankees game and Broadway show, and meetings at Manhattan's gay community center, where visitors heard about everything from managing volunteers and programming to government relations and

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fund-raising work.

"I have learned many, many things," says Shapiro. "The visit was very important as we think about what we need in Jerusalem."

Most participants are Jewish Israelis from backgrounds ranging from Orthodox to secular. One, however, Haneen Maiki, is a Christian Israeli Arab from the northern Galilee village of Darsheih.

The Jerusalem Open House has groups for a diverse demographic: gay native-born Israeli men and women, Russian speakers, teenagers, those from the fervently Orthodox world, and even Arab men.

Issues are different in Arab culture than they are in Jewish, says Maiki, who directs Palestinian outreach. About 50 men attend Open House events on a regular basis, she says.

"They are coming from a very closed and religious society in which homosexuality is forbidden, but culturally it is very accepted for men to be friends," Maiki says.

The culture also makes room for sex between men, though they don't identify as gay.

"If you're single you're forbidden to be with women," she says, "but if men do it with their friends quietly and privately, it is considered OK."

In general, Israeli culture for gay people is behind that in New York in some ways, and ahead of it in others, says Savitch.

Gays and lesbians have more legal protections in Israel than they do in the U.S., he says, but society there has not evolved as far in terms of attitudes.

Israel has long had laws barring discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, Savitch says, while something similar was adopted in New York State just last year.

And while gay marriage is controversial here, in Israel common-law marriage is legally accepted for both same-gender and straight couples because so many are not permitted to marry in religious ceremonies — the only ones permitted by the government.

So whether it is a gay couple living together or a straight couple in which one partner is not Jewish according to Orthodox religious law, Savitch says both are entitled to receive benefits through their partner's employer, for example. And yet there are fewer places where Israeli gays can feel comfortable socially, and there remains a notion among Israeli psychotherapists that gays can be "cured" and turn heterosexual, he says.

The Jerusalem Open House offers a support group just for therapists who are gay themselves.

The trip to New York was funded by a grant from the Partnership 2000 program of UJA-Federation, as was programming before and during the CBST members' Jerusalem trip in December. The organizations have "twinned" and are hoping to get their \$80,000 grant renewed.

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