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Pride and lots of prejudice

By [Daphna Berman](#)

The commotion over last summer's postponed World Pride parade in Jerusalem is about to revisit the holy city, but Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, American co-chair of the international event and spiritual head of the world's largest gay synagogue, doesn't seem worried.

"I'm used to it," she insisted last month in Jerusalem, where she was on a working holiday, planning the week-long extravaganza scheduled to take place this August. "As soon as we become visible, the religious anti-gay voices emerge. With visibility comes reaction, but I've learned as a Jew that if I determine what I do based on the fact that other people will hate me, then I'll never win."

Today, Kleinbaum, 47, is the leading figure in the gay religious rights movement and she has been named one of the country's top 50 Jewish leaders by both the Forward and the New York Jewish Week. She has been performing same-sex weddings for well over a decade and has been called "the greatest moral terrorist" by rabbis on the religious right. She reckons that she's probably the only high-profile American Jew not to receive mail solicitations from even a single Jewish charity. The Orthodox high school in New Jersey where she graduated in 1977 even took her off their e-mail list after she made headlines for demanding that members of her gay synagogue be allowed to take place in New York's annual Israel Day Parade down Fifth Avenue.

"I had someone tell me that you can't have a synagogue for gays and lesbians because it's as if you're organizing a synagogue for adulterers, thieves and pork eaters," Kleinbaum recalled. "But I don't believe in a religious community where sexual orientation defines who's in and who's out."

Contrary to popular belief, the controversial international gay parade in the capital was not canceled because of the Gaza pullout last August, but rather postponed by a year. Organizers called off the event last summer because it would have strained police resources and been an "inappropriate" time for celebration, given the national trauma of the disengagement. But the event is back on track for this August, and thousands of

gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender individuals are expected to descend on Jerusalem for the festivities.

Last year's public debate was sparked by an evangelical pastor from California who rallied together Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders in Jerusalem to announce - in an unprecedented joint press conference - their categorical objection to such an event. Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar said that such a gathering is "creating a deep and terrible sorrow that is unbearable." Other clerics warned that the event would provoke divine retribution.

"We brought together forces that before treated each other only with contempt," Kleinbaum said of the religious triumvirate. "The radical right uses religion as a weapon and it deeply saddens me when I see religious leaders uniting to condemn a human being."

Already, leading U.S. evangelist Rev. Jerry Falwell became the first of what is expected to be a long line of critics, when he called this summer's event an "in-your-face statement to Christians and Jews." Staging the event in the holy city, said Falwell, "will hurt their cause internationally."

Kleinbaum rejects that claim and says that the gay community has a place in Jerusalem, just as much as any other city. The conference, she says, is "like the Olympics," and every few years, cities can request to be the hosts.

"They tell us to go to Tel Aviv or San Francisco, but the point is that we also belong in Jerusalem. Tolerance is holy and Jerusalem belongs to all of us," she said.

In preparation, the staff of the Jerusalem Open House, a community center for the capital's gay community, has begun coordinating security issues with the Jerusalem police. Yishai Schlisel, who attacked three marchers in the Jerusalem gay pride parade six months ago, was sentenced earlier this month to 12 years in jail for attempted murder, sabotage and injury. But some ultra-Orthodox posters have hailed him a righteous figure and organizers are taking every possible precaution against potential violence.

"I hope religious leaders sends a strong message to their communities and will encourage people to be nonviolent in their expressions of displeasure," she says.

Kleinbaum is the chief rabbi at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST), the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender nondenominational synagogue and community center in Manhattan's West Village. Though questions about her

personal life are mostly off limits, she will say that she lives with her long-time partner and their two children.

A graduate of Barnard College, where she first came out, Kleinbaum was raised in a Conservative home, graduated from an Orthodox high school, has ordination from the Reconstructionist movement and worked with the Reform movement - though CBST is nondenominational. When she graduated from rabbinical school in 1990, she hadn't considered a pulpit position "because it wasn't possible [as an openly gay rabbi] to get a job and I wasn't going to be closeted." It was soon after that she landed the job at CBST, essentially becoming the congregation's first rabbi. Listening for the Oboe, a collection of her Shabbat sermons came out recently and belatedly in celebration of her ten years with the community, though by now, she's marking her fourteenth year.

When Kleinbaum began at CBST during what she describes as the "epicenter" of the AIDS epidemic in New York's gay community, the congregation was comprised mostly of gay men. The congregation lost over 100 members and Kleinbaum was dubbed by one local paper as "the rabbi of death" because of the number of funerals at which she officiated during that time.

The congregation now draws a crowd of 200 people for Shabbat evening services, though high holidays bring several thousand worshipers to a larger rented space. CBST also has an assistant rabbi, Ayelet Cohen, who is straight and a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which does not ordain openly gay rabbis.

"Some people were anxious and not sure that it was okay to have a straight rabbi at CBST," she recalled. "But I stood firm because as leader of the congregation, I felt that it was important that we create a diverse Jewish leadership."

Kleinbaum will be back in Israel this summer, and she insists that she's hardly nervous about the uproar that is expected as the event draws closer. "We are trying to get an international list of Christian, Muslim, Jewish and other clergy members to express their support for World Pride," she said. "There's a lot of work to be done."

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