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LOCAL NEWS | class

Local Jews Clash Over Pride in Israel
Jerusalem march nixed; rally held at stadium instead

By BRENDA GAZZAR
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JERUSALEM — A tame, but festive, Gay Pride rally was held Friday, Nov. 10, without its parade at a university stadium in Jerusalem under tight security. The event followed several days of violent protests and public disturbances by some in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community who did not want a Pride march through the center of Jerusalem.

In New York City, thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews protested the the planned march by rallying Thursday, Nov. 9, at the Israeli Consulate in Manhattan. In response, members of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (CBST), the world's largest LGBT synagogue, held a peaceful demonstration to show support for gay Israelis.

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of CBST was arrested at the Thursday event for creating a public disturbance. "It was bizarre that I was arrested and that we were physically removed from the area when we were acting legally and following police orders," said Kleinbaum. She received a summons to appear in court next month.

"As more ultra-Orthodox arrived, the police tried to make us leave the area and return to the 'gay' area down the street," said Metropolitan Community Church New York's Rev. Pat Bumgardner, who rallied with Rabbis Kleinbaum and Ayelet Cohen. "We explained that it was legal for us to stand where we were, so long as we didn't block the sidewalk or cross into the ultra-Orthodox area. We agreed not to bring our whole group over and to not engage the protesters. The police on duty even called the district attorney's office, who told them that we were correct about our rights."

Rabbi Cohen said that their presence "incensed" the ultra-Orthodox protesters, who "refused to respond to police requests that they stay within their own area and that they not engage us."

Kleinbaum said the ultra-Orthodox protesters should have been arrested for not responding to police requests.

Israeli Pride Rally

The same day in Jerusalem, gay-rights organizers agreed to forego the controversial march after 20 civilians in the Gaza Strip were killed by errant Israeli shelling earlier last week, prompting threats of retaliatory terrorist attacks and raising the level of alert throughout the country.

The rally "was a very strong demonstration for democracy and freedom of speech," said Noa Sattath, executive director of the Jerusalem Open House, the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community center in Jerusalem, which has organized Pride events in Jerusalem for the past five years.

"The past few weeks have been extremely difficult and that we have all felt that, but the fact that we had an event despite the enormous threats was a huge achievement for the entire community."

Organizers were disappointed the march could not be held, they had to make a responsible decision following the tragedy in Gaza and the need for heightened security in the country, Sattath said.

A police spokesperson said that no more than 4,000 people, including media, attended the event throughout the day, but organizers said the total number people well exceeded 6,000.

Originally, more than 10,000 police were expected to be on hand in Jerusalem to secure the planned parade—which had drawn fierce opposition from devout Jews, Muslims and Christians who argued the holy city is an inappropriate venue for such an event—but about 3,000 officers secured the peaceful rally after a compromise was reached. As long as organizers agreed to hold the rally in a contained place and away from public view, religious leaders would call off their plans for massive oppositional protests planned.

Police called the agreement "a good compromise." In the weeks preceding the slated parade, 45 police had been injured, 40 vehicles had been damaged and 180 protesters from religious neighborhoods were arrested for incidents such as throwing bottles, rocks and metal bars at police officers in opposition to the parade. At last year's Gay Pride parade in Jerusalem, a fervently Orthodox Jew stabbed three participants and was sentenced to jail for 12 years.

Michael Weinberger, a 21-year-old American University junior studying at Hebrew University in Jerusalem in Israel, was working at the rally as a volunteer with Jerusalem Open House and said he felt like he had participated in a historic event. Many Israelis have asked why Jerusalem was chosen instead of more a more liberal city like Tel Aviv, but he said, gay people exist throughout Israel, fight wars for their country, are citizens of Jerusalem and pay taxes just like everyone else.

At Friday's event, Israeli Parliament Member Zahava Galon, of the left-wing Meretz party, told participants that she and other activists from her party had arrived to say "we don't give a prize to violence."

Elsewhere in the city, at least 50 people from the gay community with signs congregated at Liberty Bell Park in downtown Jerusalem with plans to start a march but were asked to leave by police, who explained they could not march there because they did not have a permit. About 15 ultra-Orthodox people began to congregate and verbal confrontations ensued between the two groups. Twenty-four people refused to leave, were removed or detained by police, a Jerusalem District Police spokesperson said.

Orthodox activists said they were encouraged that the parade did not go forward again last Friday despite a recent high court ruling in favor of the parade organizers before last week's Gaza incident.

"This is a tremendous victory for the faithful worldwide in the sense that until now, the homosexuals were marching in the center of the city and now they are not, and they are not even marching on the side," said Rabbi Yehuda Levin, an Orthodox activist from New York who is in Israel and has helped spearhead opposition to the parade.

He said a small group of "insecure homosexual leaders" in the community "pushed the envelope too far and awoke the sleeping giant of religious feelings not only in Jerusalem and in all of Israel, but also worldwide."

Trenton Straube contributed local reporting to this story.

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