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## The gay question and the Jewish question

By Yoav Sivan

The recently published "Forward Fifty" list of the most influential members of the American Jewish community for 2006 should remind us again how pivotal is the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community to the agenda of the Jewish community in America: The word "gay" appears in five different entries, making the acceptance and inclusion of LGBT people the bench mark of advancement and relevance for Jewish institutions. It should also remind us of the distance, in political concepts and not merely in miles, between the Jewish communities of America and Israel.

Last Wednesday provided another example of the widening gap between the world's two biggest Jewish communities, and showed the American Jewish establishment is way ahead of the Jewish State in seriously addressing the status of homosexuals in Jewish life. At the same time as the Conservative Movement's Committee on Law and Standards reached its groundbreaking decision of recognition of same-sex union and on the ordination of openly gay rabbis, the Knesset voted against the registration of same-sex couples who were married abroad.

The Conservative Movement, the second biggest Jewish denomination in America, is not the first to tackle the "gay question," socially and halakhically. The Reform Movement had already humanized the LGBT community: Reform rabbis perform marriages of same-sex couples as a matter of routine. Fifteen Jewish LGBT congregations flourish in North America. Indeed, it is the Jewish religious leadership in America that shows readiness to tackle questions today's world brings about, rather than hide away behind the pretext that morals cannot evolve.

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While the Committee on Law and Standards and the Conservative Movement are engaged in a fierce controversy over the gay question - and controversies are the cornerstone of Jewish thinking - we are not likely to hear Conservative rabbis say "homosexuals are completely evil," as Rabbi

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Ovadia Yosef, former chief rabbi of Israel and spiritual leader of Shas, said. Never mind the explicit call of some Israelis for violence against gays and lesbians.

The appointment of Arnold Eisen, who was strongly associated with the call for halakhic acceptance of LGBT people, as chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the Conservative Movement's flagship educational

institute, proves to the Israeli LGBT community that a Jewish religious establishment can speak in a very different tone from that of the Israeli rabbinic establishment. While the pro-gay opinion was accepted by the Committee on Laws and Standards, so were two opposing opinions; consequently individual synagogues should decide upon their own practice. But clearly we will not hear in America harsh homophobic exclamations (as you do in Israel) in the very heart of the Jewish establishment.

The Orthodox monopoly in Israel competes with itself in raising the bar of ignorance and extremism among religious circles. Homophobic expressions have an influential public dimension, as we have so readily witnessed in the events that preceded the Jerusalem gay pride parade, but hardly any halakhic significance, as they do not reflect any attempt to tackle questions regarding homosexuality within a sincere and thoughtful discourse. Considering homosexuality within a framework of halakhic discussion requires, first and foremost, respect for every human being as a creation in the image of God and recognition of one's identity, needs and distress. Regretfully, when Deputy Prime Minister Eli Yishai (Shas) shares whenever he can his view on LGBT people - "gays and lesbians are sick people" - he actually admits that for him homosexuality is a disease whose treatment should remain within the domain of medical science rather than the domain of halakha.

But the "gay question" is only one example of the distance between the communities on two sides of the ocean. While in Israel's closed society the Jewish religious establishment flourishes due to governmental nourishment, in America the liberal competition of ideas raises difficulties while it introduces vitality into Jewish life, which Israeli Jews can only envy. For Israelis it is so much easier to see America's shortcomings rather than its advantages, so clearly exemplified by Zeev Bielski, chairman of the Jewish Agency, who preferred to look dismissively at U.S. Jews and predict their approaching end, when speaking to a Jerusalem Post reporter at the GA. Indeed, poor connection between Israeli and American Jewish communities is routine. Only a week ago the American Jewish Committee sent an especially grave letter to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, condemning Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar's Conversion Bill, stating "the proposal is an unacceptable attempt to delegitimize the Judaism of the majority of American Jews."

The strong secular tendencies among liberal society in Israel help us forget where the importance of religious pluralism lies. It sometimes seems the campaign for Israel's recognition of non-Orthodox Jewish movements can be summed up in the promotion of alternative bar mizvah ceremonies or egalitarian weddings that might have a stronger appeal to Israeli society at large rather than the Orthodox defaults. The ongoing debate in the Jewish religious establishment in the U.S. regarding the involvement of the LGBT community in Jewish life highlights its importance in integrating Israel in the halakhic revival that is taking place in the new Babylonian Nehardea and Pumpedita overseas.

Yoav Sivan is LGBT coordinator of Young Meretz and of the International Union of Socialist Youth. His Web site is [www.yoavsivan.org](http://www.yoavsivan.org)

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05:49 Israel's Christian population numbers 148,000 as of Christmas Eve

12:50 One of Israelis rescued in Chile: Our food was running out

12:54 Singer James Brown, the 'Godfather of Soul,' dies at 73

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- |   |                            |          |
|---|----------------------------|----------|
| 1. Only God Knows...  | 10:21   Aaron              | 10/12/06 |
| 2. # 2 Aaron:Speaks only the truth...                               | 10:52   Zuriel             | 10/12/06 |
| 3. gay avec   | 11:02   nate               | 10/12/06 |
| 4. ...and knows best  | 11:35   shai               | 10/12/06 |
| 5. shai #4  | 12:36   Jake               | 10/12/06 |
| 6. Millions of Jews make choices every day.                         | 13:35   Moshe              | 10/12/06 |
| 7. As an Orthodox man with homosexual tendencies, I want to say.... | 14:13   Change is possible | 10/12/06 |
| 8. When does an abomination become "normal" and acceptable?         | 14:28   Itzik              | 10/12/06 |
| 9. As The World Edges Closer to WW3.....                            | 14:58   The End Is Nigh    | 10/12/06 |
| 10. Not such a gay day  | 15:13   Moshico            | 10/12/06 |
| 11. MORE IMPORTANT IS TO STUDY WHAT MAKES ADEVIANT ??               | 15:22   paul harris        | 10/12/06 |
| 12. Use of language to deceive                                      | 16:31   B                  | 10/12/06 |
| 13. Orthodox illiteracy   | 16:38   Dani Reiss         | 10/12/06 |
| 14. Author is wrong   | 16:41   Geneh              | 10/12/06 |
| 15. Judaism versus Liberalism                                       | 17:07   Joe                | 10/12/06 |
| 16. rejecting gay actions, not people                               | 17:17   joy robbins        | 10/12/06 |
| 17. lgbt youth suicide  | 18:03   jess               | 10/12/06 |
| 18. Torah always up to interpretation                               | 18:42   Rabbi Bentley      | 10/12/06 |
| 19. Is Zionism right?   | 18:45   Assaf              | 10/12/06 |
| 20. To Jess   | 18:53   Aaron Levitt       | 10/12/06 |
| 21. Should we kill children?  | 19:48   Boris              | 10/12/06 |
| 22. Yoav Sivan totally misses the point                             | 19:54   rz                 | 10/12/06 |
| 23. How to wipe off zionism of the map (humoristic)                 | 23:02   Yankelowitz        | 10/12/06 |
| 24. To Boris  | 23:57   Gene               | 10/12/06 |
| 25. Israel more liberal than Portugal or Greece                     | 00:04   Paul Henzen        | 11/12/06 |
| 26. "relegious"   | 01:37   rafiq              | 11/12/06 |
| 27. Yoav so negative...   | 01:57   yaakov             | 11/12/06 |
| 28. Aaron and Boris   | 01:59   Rafram             | 11/12/06 |
| 29. "The Land Will Vomit You Out"                                   | 04:26   Leviticus/VAYikra  | 11/12/06 |
| 30. Destructive delusion: "Make it up as you go along Judaism"      | 07:16   Sim                | 11/12/06 |
| 31. gay vs the abnormality of the Haredi community                  | 07:22   iris               | 11/12/06 |
| 32. To Gene   | 07:43   Michael            | 11/12/06 |
| 33. I would just like to know...                                    | 08:53   Lindsey            | 11/12/06 |
| 34. Lindsey, No one wants to harm you!                              | 09:36   Ben Azai           | 11/12/06 |
| 35. King David  | 11:25   Bret               | 11/12/06 |
| 36. To # 29 Leviticus/VAYikra : Holy Land ? Let's see... Huummm     | 11:31   Yankelowitz        | 11/12/06 |
| 37. to continue...  | 11:36   Lindsey            | 11/12/06 |
| 38. to # 33 Lindsey : Will you do it with stones ? Interesting...   | 11:39   Yankelowitz        | 11/12/06 |
| 39. To#34 Ben Azai : forget the book and live in the 21st century   | 11:47   Yankelowitz        | 11/12/06 |
| 40. law and order lovers  | 14:23   christoph          | 11/12/06 |
| 41. Support for #1, #27, #34  | 15:59   B                  | 11/12/06 |

<b>42. gay question</b>	16:59   Derek	11/12/06
<b>43. #33 Lindsey</b>	17:08   Derek	11/12/06
<b>44. Homosexuality is a fact of life, requires normal halakhic debate</b>	17:19   AV	11/12/06
<b>45. God vs Rabbis - Talmud already debated this over a millennium ago</b>	17:33   AV	11/12/06
<b>46. If you feel being gay is a CHOICE, then you are bisexual</b>	17:42   AV	11/12/06
<b>47. for the record</b>	20:37   Lindsey	11/12/06
<b>48. Halacha</b>	23:42   Aaron	11/12/06
<b>49. Gay Jewish Pride</b>	23:57   Gill	11/12/06
<b>50. Conservative Movt is truer to halakha than Haredim!</b>	01:29   AV	12/12/06
<b>51. Typical nonsense from AV</b>	03:15   B	12/12/06
<b>52. No. 21 Boris</b>	08:09   Aviva	12/12/06
<b>53. The gay question and the jewish question</b>	20:13   Joe Nigrin	12/12/06
<b>54. to #46 AV</b>	02:33   rz	13/12/06
<b>55. gay question and jewish question</b>	12:58   saad	25/12/06

  
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