

## Gay rights - how are we doing?

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YOAV SIVAN , THE JERUSALEM POST

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Speaking at a tourism fair in London last month before the scheduled Jerusalem gay pride march was set to take place, Tourism Minister Isaac Herzog told the British LGBT news Web site Pinknews.co.uk: "Gays and lesbians are welcome in Israel."

Herzog spoke proudly of his support for fair housing laws for the gay community when he was housing minister. These comments were cheered in Britain and scored well for Israeli public relations.

But the tourism minister prides himself on being a champion of gay rights in London only, far from the Israeli media. Back home, the Labor minister did not publicly support the right of assembly for LGBT people. Pinknews reported: "Tourism minister shamed over Jerusalem Gay Pride."

As far as I know, Herzog did not condemn weeks of violent protests against the planned gay pride event here in Israel - though some of that violence was fanned by other government ministers.

This duality exemplifies how Israeli policymakers and spokesmen try to have their cake and eat it, too: enjoying a reputation as liberal advocates of human rights - thus appealing to dominant sentiments in Europe and North America - without actually earning this reputation.

Before events surrounding the Jerusalem pride gathering exposed the depth of homophobia among Israeli lawmakers to the world (Deputy Prime Minister Eli Yishai compared the parade to a terror attack), Israel had been generally perceived abroad as a progressive society in terms of inclusion and acceptance of LGBT people.

FOR THE PAST 10 years the Israeli LGBT community has enjoyed a growing visibility on the street and in the media and won important legal battles in court. Two main factors have contributed to international acclaim of Israel as a gay haven.

First, the striking comparison between Israel and its neighbors leaves no doubt that gays are much better off in Tel Aviv than in any other Middle Eastern city, never mind the rural areas. The arrest of some 50 gays on a boat on the Nile a few years ago, for example, drew the attention of the Western media and led to vocal criticism by US congressmen directed at the Egyptian government.

Even if Arab countries are usually not perceived as champions of human rights, when it comes to gay rights, the situation is particularly grave.

Stories about Palestinians persecuted for their sexual preferences who flee to Tel Aviv have made it to the international media. Regrettably, though, the better situation of Israeli gays does not necessarily reflect the condition of gay Palestinians seeking refuge. Some make their living from prostitution, many encounter difficulties applying for asylum in Israel.

SECONDLY, IN contrast to the US military, soldiers can be openly gay in the IDF; in the army you are not asked, but you're welcome to tell. This makes the IDF a symbol of inclusion of gays, and light years ahead of America.

No wonder then that Eitan Fox and Gal Ochofski's movie *Yossi and Jagger*, a love story between two male combat soldiers which embodies the striking ethos of the Israeli army, has been screened repeatedly by Israeli

advocates on American campuses. This is exactly how Israel wishes to be portrayed in liberal university towns and Jewish communities: a progressive society where even militarism is infused with groundbreaking romance.

The message is simple enough: An Israel that embraces gays, embraces all.

THE COMPARISON between the situation of gays in Israel and in other countries is effective also when approaching the European Left. Europeans - where gay rights are part of the mainstream - are uneasy over reports that Arab countries and Iran oppress gays.

In Spain for example, Prime Minister Jose Zapatero's socialist government has institutionalized same-sex marriage despite the strong Catholic influence in the country.

However, Europe is not the primary target of organizations attempting to improve Israel's image. And anyway, it is hard to believe that pro-Palestinian sentiments can be replaced by true affection for Israel just because of the poor human rights records of our neighbors.

In addition, the violence that preceded the Jerusalem Pride march, forcing it to be held as a rally in a university stadium, threatened to erase any positive impressions people might have regarding Israel's liberalism. The controversy, covered widely by the international media, exposed the fragile situation of the LGBT community once you look beyond Tel Aviv.

When Trade and Labor Minister Eli Yishai told *The New York Times*: "If it was up to me, I would send the gay community, who insisted on celebrating in Jerusalem, to Sodom and Gomorrah," he might have been speaking to his constituency; but he simultaneously sabotaged Israel's interests abroad. With ministers attacking the LGBT community, attempts by Israelis to point to achievements on the gay front can look hypocritical.

I have personally faced the dilemma of how to portray the condition of Israeli gays to leftist politicians abroad. Despite Israel's difficult situation with the European Left my election - an Israeli activist - as LGBT coordinator for the international union of Socialist youth proves how beneficial progressive Israeli politics can be.

Plainly, the fact that I represented an Israeli party did not prevent me from being elected as LGBT coordinator of the Socialist International.

Yet it would be disingenuous to pretend that pro-gay positions of my Meretz Party represents the Israeli mainstream.

When I compare our situation with that of other democracies, I see reason for both pride and concern. Legally, we are in some respects ahead of the US. Yet socially and politically the picture is very mixed, not to say grim, with hatred of gays openly - sometimes violently - expressed in some quarters, including in the Knesset.

This leaves me uneasy and saddened, pondering the long road we still need to traverse.

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