

Gay City NEWS

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Jerusalem Pride Bucks Riots, Hatred

By: DOUG IRELAND



Defying anti-gay rioting, threats of bloodshed, opposition from Israel's prime minister and Jerusalem's mayor, a vote by Israel's parliament, and rabbinical curses, some 2,000 courageous people staged a dignified Gay Pride march in central Jerusalem last Thursday, June 21.

At least 130 anti-gay protesters had been arrested in the week leading up to the Pride demonstration, as homophobic rioting by the ultra-Orthodox engulfed religious neighborhoods of Israel's capital and the nearby ultra-Orthodox suburb of Bnei Brak, according to a police spokesman. The rioters set vehicles and trashcans ablaze, blocked traffic, and threw stones at police, 24 of whom were reported wounded.

Another 19 ultra-Orthodox protesters were arrested at the Pride march last Thursday, including one man who tried to bomb the parade route.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews marched the Sunday before the Gay Pride march in opposition, and continued their anti-gay efforts with rioting and banners targeting the participants in the June 21 event. Jerusalem Gay Pride drew 2,000 marchers despite widespread opposition violence. Dana Olmert, the prime minister's lesbian daughter, was outspoken in her support for the event.

"In his bag, we discovered a homemade explosive device. He admitted he planned on planting it on the

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route of the parade," police spokesman Mickey Rosenfeld said, the news agency Deutsche Presse-Argentur reported.

And 15 more anti-gay protesters were arrested in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearun for throwing stones at police after they had blocked the streets and brought traffic to a standstill.

Others arrested had tried to physically attack the Pride marchers, and one man had attempted to pour oil on the march route along King David Street, presumably to set it alight.

Last year's attempt to hold a Pride march in November had been annulled by police after two weeks of violent anti-gay riots, and instead a Pride rally of 4,000 was confined to a heavily-guarded soccer stadium.

This year's march was significantly smaller than expected; representatives of its principal organizer, the Jerusalem Open House for Peace and Tolerance - the city's LGBT community center - had told police to expect at least 5,000 demonstrators.

"The numerous reports of violent protests by ultra-Orthodox and far-right circles had made people think twice whether they wanted to show up for the event," prominent gay activist and journalist Yoav Sivan told Gay City News in explaining the low turnout, "especially since the violence was well demonstrated. Everybody remembers that two years ago a religious Jewish fanatic stabbed three participants in the Jerusalem Pride parade."

Sivan is a board member of both Jerusalem Open House and of Aguda, Israel's national LGBT association, and helped organize last Thursday's Pride event.

"However," Sivan went on to say, "the gay-bashing and the strong opposition to the parade also made the event into one of the most important protests for human rights in Israel, and it triggered LGBT people and allies to come to Jerusalem from all corners of the country."

The Pride marchers were vastly outnumbered by the 7,000 police guarding the parade route, which was only a third of a mile long, and a fleet of ambulances were positioned nearby in anticipation of possible violence. As the 2,000 Pride marchers slowly walked the short route, passing under arches of balloons in the colors of the gay rainbow flag and past the historic King David Hotel, their mood was sober and subdued.

"I admit I would have liked the march to be of a longer route, but don't read too much into that because here, size doesn't really matter," gay activist Sivan told this reporter. He added, "The street where we marched, King David Street, is known as the cultural mile - although it's not even half a mile - and turned out as a very respectable choice for the parade. It's downtown, central, and when you saw the rainbow flags that the municipality of Jerusalem was forced to hang, waving between the YMCA building and the King David Hotel, two of Jerusalem's landmarks, it was really inspiring."

Sivan said that Palestinian and Arab marchers were scattered throughout the Pride contingent.

"They were part of the crowd, just as they are part of the fabric of the Jerusalem Open House," Sivan told Gay City News.

A group of religious teenage girls blowing whistles, insulting the marchers, and crying, "Disgrace! Disgrace!" at the Pride parade were quickly escorted away by armed police. A protester armed with eggs he intended to hurl at the parade was also removed by police, as was an ultra-Orthodox demonstrator who "disguised" himself by carrying a rainbow flag, according to Israeli radio, and began cursing the marchers.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had declared his opposition to holding a Gay Pride parade in Jerusalem - but his openly lesbian daughter, Dana Olmert, in an interview the day before the Pride event, compared the right to march in the Jerusalem parade to the right to vote.

Speaking of the Pride parade, she said, "The question of 'Why in Jerusalem?' is like asking why we need to give people voting rights. The Gay Pride parade is a political event, an expression of political activism - you don't need to ask permission to do it," the Jerusalem Post quoted her as telling Israeli Army Radio.

Olmert's daughter went on to say, "In every place that there is subjugation, resistance is created. Even if it is embryonic at this stage, it will get bigger, because even in [ultra-Orthodox] haredi society, there are gays and lesbians."

She expressed the hope that "all this ongoing controversy between the gay and lesbian community and the haredim has caused these people to feel that they are not alone, and that they can, in any number of ways, break out of this ghetto of oppression in which they live."

Also last Wednesday, Israel's High Court of Justice - the country's supreme court - rejected three petitions to block the Pride parade from taking place. One of the petitions was filed by Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox Mayor Uri Lupoliansky, and another by Israel's minister for Trade, Eli Yishai of the ultraconservative religious Shas Party, which is a member of Prime Minister Olmert's ruling coalition.

Minister Yishai argued in his brief that the Pride parade was a "vulgar event that offends and violates the sanctity of Jerusalem."

A third petition was filed by Orthodox activists who said the Pride parade "would lead to public disturbances and riots on an unprecedented scale."

Led by its president, Dorit Beinisch, the High Court of Justice wrote, in rejecting the three anti-gay petitions, "Authorizing the Gay Pride parade allows for the realization of the right to expression and demonstration... It allows the marchers to voice their message by virtue of their right to equality and social recognition. Additionally, the permit affords deserving priority to the principle of the rule of law, and to the perception that violence is not to be rewarded nor succumbed to."

The Sunday before the Pride march, ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews held an anti-gay protest rally that drew 10,000 - far fewer than the 100,000 its organizers had predicted. Haaretz, the most respected Israeli daily newspaper, headlined its article on this rally: "ULTRA-ORTHODOX PROTESTS AGAINST GAY PARADE FALL FLAT."

Seven police were injured by the anti-gay protesters at the rally.

Also in the week before the Gay Pride march took place, the Orthodox Righteous Court of Law (Badatz) placed a curse on the parade's organizers and participants, and on police officers assigned to protect the march.

Prominent Orthodox rabbis published a declaration which read: "To all those involved, sinners in spirit, and whoever helps and protects them, may they feel a curse on their souls, may it plague them and may evil pursue them; they will not be acquitted of their transgressions from heavenly judgment."

On the day of the Jerusalem Pride march, Shas Party MP Nissim Ze'ev proposed the establishment of "rehabilitation centers" to suppress the sexual tendencies of gay people.

"The government should initiate this; these people are dangerous and we must keep an eye on them," Ze'ev said, adding that gay people must be made aware of "how their lifestyle is destroying our existence."

Ze'ev, who said he would submit a bill that would ban gay sexual relations if he thought the Knesset, Israel's parliament, would approve it, added that those who broke such a law would, under his proposal, be assigned to a two-year "rehabilitation period."

"We must set up special teams of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers who will help them return to a normal life, just like in a drug rehabilitation center," the MP said.

On June 6, a Shas party bill to ban any Gay Pride march anywhere in Israel passed the Knesset on its first reading by the overwhelming margin of 41-21 (see this reporter's June 14 -20 article, "[Israel's Sharp Right Turn on Gays](#),").

As the Pride marchers walked down King David Street, an anti-gay rally across town organized by ultra-Orthodox Jews drew 4,000 people. Israeli public television Channel One broadcast the Pride event and the anti-gay rally simultaneously on a split screen.

A Pride rally at the end of the march was to have been addressed by the pro-gay Meretz Party's chairman Yossi Belin, who had been a cabinet minister in the previous governments of Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak - but the rally was canceled because a firefighters strike led police to conclude security could not be assured.

Following the Pride march, gay activist Sivan told Gay City News, "What you cannot really understand afterwards is why such a peaceful political demonstration has drawn so much fire and opposition. What's really mind-boggling for me is that Jews constantly use anti-Semitic lingo against LGBT people without even realizing it. It seems almost like the best route for us to walk in Jerusalem would be the Via Dolorosa, and indeed many of the city's population would have loved to see us crucified at the end."

Sivan added, "You don't really get used to hatred. There were some incidents when a few young girls - Orthodox Jews - started calling swearwords at the crowd. And you see the hatred in the eyes of a young girl and see how different people in the parade react differently. One man even told her, 'I love you, despite your despising me.'"

Nonetheless, Sivan told this reporter, "The march provided a triumphant feeling, a shared feeling of a united community and it empowered us to continue our fight for gay rights throughout the year. In November we had a rally, a couple of days ago we had the march. Next year we'll have a rally and a march!"

Doug Ireland can be reached through his blog, *DIRELAND*, at <http://direland.typepad.com/direland/> . Ireland's June 14-20 reporting, "[Israel's Sharp Right Turn on Gays](#)," can be found at http://gaycitynews.com/site/index.cfm?newsid=18474246&BRD=2729&PAG=461&dept_id=568864&rft=8 .

A promotional banner for Orbitz. On the left, two women are smiling. The text reads "LESBIAN-FRIENDLY GETAWAYS" in large, bold, blue and orange letters. To the right of the text is a small icon of an airplane and a house. Further right is the Orbitz logo "ORBITZ AND GO!" in white on a blue background. Below the logo, it says "Travel your way!" and "Book Now" with a button icon. At the bottom right, the website "orbitz.com/gaytravel" is listed.

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