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## No pride in Israel's government

By Yoav Sivan

To the question "do you believe homosexuality is a choice," with which U.S. President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry were confronted in the 2004 presidential debate, Deputy Prime Minister and Shas Chairman Eli Yishai has just offered an affirmative answer: "A minority with a normative defect" is how he referred to gays and lesbians when the news broke that the state had partly sponsored a campaign aimed at gay clientele.

Admittedly, it was no surprise that a photo of two men kissing with the Old City of Jerusalem in the background would provoke the usual homophobic exclamations from Yishai. After all, he and his colleagues in Shas share their views on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community whenever they possibly can. Yishai's rich repertoire includes statements such as "gays and lesbians are sick people" and a comparison between the Jerusalem pride parade and a terror attack.

Although homophobia is only one sort of the xenophobia that is so abundant here, the official gay-bashing has become such a standard part of Israel's political scene that it does not even embarrass us anymore. The seasonal gay-bashing, peaking with the Jerusalem pride parade tomorrow, proves again that Israel is more tolerant of homophobia by its top-ranking officials than of other forms of hatred and incitement.

When former chief rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu linked the Holocaust to the emergence of the Reform Movement in Germany, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was quick to issue a letter explaining that Nazi Germany was responsible for the Holocaust, in which Jews were murdered merely because they were Jewish.

An interview in which Strategic Threats Minister Avigdor Lieberman called for separation between Israeli Arabs and Jews prompted the premier to say the minister did not represent the government. Then defense minister Amir Peretz and other ministers from Labor immediately demanded that the

government condemn the minister.

But when it comes to incitement against the LGBT community, the prime minister and the supposedly liberal ministers keep silent, at best. Even the newly elected president, Shimon Peres, chose to voice his opposition to the pride parade at the house of Shas's spiritual leader, former chief rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who regularly calls us "evil and abominable." Haaretz reported a proposed deal under which Peres would work against the pride parade in exchange for ultra-Orthodox support for his presidential bid.

Two weeks ago, the Knesset passed two bills aimed at banning the Jerusalem pride parade. The main bill was a proposed amendment to the Basic Law on Jerusalem, which would condition the right of assembly in the capital upon the Jerusalem municipality's approval. That would effectively prevent future parades from taking place there. The other proposed banning gay parades throughout the country.

Scandalous as these bills may be, they passed their preliminary reading with a handsome majority, with many Knesset members from Kadima and Labor either actively supportive or absent from the voting. Forty years after the so-called reunification of Jerusalem, the minister for Jerusalem affairs, Jacob Edery (Kadima), supported, both on the floor and in the Ministerial Committee on Legislation, a bill that would diminish the capital's status from that of a political hub to that of a provincial town where no one may speak against the mayor's will. Labor, as a member of the coalition, could have exercised its veto right when the bills were debated beforehand in the Ministerial Committee on Legislation, thereby preventing yet another embarrassing moment in Israeli parliamentary history. But Welfare Minister Isaac Herzog, the party's representative on the committee, conveniently chose not to show up for the discussions.

Perhaps it would be too much to ask that Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shimon Peres follow the lead of the (straight) Finnish president, Tarja Halonen, who chaired the main organization for LGBT rights in Finland in the 1980s, a time when gay rights were hardly the mainstream even in the progressive Nordic countries. But even President Bush - not exactly the hero of the gay rights movement - could teach our leaders a lesson. Bush began his answer to the aforementioned question in the widely watched debate by apologetically stating: "I do know that we have a choice to make in America and that is to treat people with tolerance and respect and dignity. It's important that we do that." Only then did he move on to outline his support for the

marriage amendment.

While the pulsa denura (an ancient, supposedly deadly kabbalistic curse) set on me as a board member of the Jerusalem Open House does not contribute to my feelings of acceptance in Israeli society, my political demands are aimed at Kadima and Labor rather than extremist rabbis. It is not enough that Olmert is personally gay-friendly, it is high time for him to come out as publicly gay-friendly as well. Homophobic politicians should crawl back into the homophobes' closet and understand that while they are holding high-ranking posts, they must choose their words carefully. Bush continued his answer: "And I also know in a free society, people, consenting adults, can live the way they want to live. And that's to be honored."

He is right. Does our next president believe that, too?

The author is the LGBT coordinator of the International Union of Socialist Youth and Young Meretz

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