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Pride and prejudice

By Yoav Sivan

After the cease-fire agreement was reached in August, it took only a few days for the Jerusalem Open House to reschedule a gay pride parade in town, after the WorldPride march was put off indefinitely because of the war. It took an even shorter amount of time for the usual opponents of the Israeli lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community to launch their missiles. Indeed, ultra-Orthodox Shas was quick to comment, saying the party regards "with severity those who do not allow the country to recover after the war."

This brought about the usual responses; this time, sharp protests from MKs and activists in Meretz, the gay-friendly party. But these conflicting opinions are old news in Israel. What is new is the common ground shared by the Jerusalem Open House and Shas. Apparently both parties seem to think the war should set aside ongoing issues, including confrontations about gay legitimacy.

Of course, this ad hoc agreement should come as no surprise. War is grave enough an affair to make all other matters redundant. Nevertheless, this is not the first time WorldPride was pushed aside by a large-scale event. During the pullout from Gaza, the Open House chose not to hold WorldPride on its original date while residents were being evacuated from their homes. Now the cannons are silent again: Has the time arrived to embark anew on the gay rights campaign? Or perhaps, as the Shas spokesman implicitly suggested, the fight should only resume when the aftermath of the war comes to an end.

From the very beginning, the Open House faced a tough call. In the last couple of months, police said it would be difficult to secure the parade, due to threats by Jewish extremists. WorldPride even brought about the impossible coalition of Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders through a unified call for intolerance at the supposed abomination of the Holy City. When the war broke out, the police shifted its attention to the North, and it became evident that not only would it be unfeasible for the police to secure the event, but

such a demand would lose the public's support. The goal from the onset was to isolate the conservative anti-gay Jewish Orthodox community and to encourage the general public to side with the LGBT community. The Open House, in the end, compromised on switching to a low-profile protest instead of the march.

Recently, after an appeal to the Supreme Court, the parade was rescheduled to November 10. This event will hardly be the planned flagship march. It aims modestly to entrench the rather new Jerusalem Pride tradition and help ultra-Orthodox Mayor Lupolianski accommodate it. Unlike the parades in Tel Aviv, the parades in Jerusalem are hardly a carnival, but are rather an old-fashioned political demonstration.

But even in its modest form, the planned event - the fifth Pride parade in Jerusalem thus far - has come under growing attack. Interestingly, the opposition has spread from the religious circles to the secular mainstream. Most notably, Vice Premier Shimon Peres signed a petition opposing the parade, proving that being a champion of peace does not necessarily correlate to being an advocate of human rights. Nobel Peace laureate Peres is not alone. National Infrastructures Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer has joined the petition too. Education Minister Professor Yuli Tamir undermined the LGBT claim for legitimacy when she said the parade should not take place in the city center.

This whole affair can shed some light on the current situation and the political goals of the LGBT community in Israel. Ten years ago, gay activists were fighting for recognition among the liberal-secular sectors of society. Now the struggle is focused on our place in the mainstream.

In a demonstration last week, thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews blamed gay people for arousing God's wrath, causing Israel's downfall in the recent war. Gay people have never before been credited with having such an influence. Yet, at the same time, the fact that a religious extremist stabbed three people during the parade in Jerusalem last year did not factor in with the rabbis' sense of public responsibility.

Advocates of gay rights will gradually shift to demanding LGBT's inclusion in the local lexicon of political correctness. This call is addressed at the mainstream politicians, rather than the rabbis: If Mr. Peres is indeed serious about being elected as the next president, he should prove he can lead everyone, including myself. Similarly, it is about time we expect Prime Minister Olmert, whose daughter is openly gay, to also be

publicly supportive of LGBT rights.

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