

# 'WORLDPRIDE' RISING ISRAEL STRUGGLES WITH THE GAY RIGHTS AGENDA

-by Michael Hines



The 'WorldPride' parade may be off for now, but Israel is still struggling with the gay rights agenda. For more in-depth coverage on this issue, be sure to also read the article 'WorldPride' Rising by *ICEJ News* editor Michael Hines (see below), which is available in the August issue of [The Jerusalem Post Christian Edition](#). This month's issue also has plenty of coverage on the current two-front war in Israel, plus lots more!

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With troubles in Gaza and Katyushas pounding Haifa, the talk in Jerusalem has quickly cooled on what had been the hottest topic this summer – "WorldPride Jerusalem," the controversial, global gay parade scheduled for August 6-12.

Just two weeks away, the parade has suddenly fallen out of public discourse. Facing terror and missile threats from Hamas and Hizb'Allah, both backed by Syria and Iran, the chances are high that the international gay rights rally will be canceled on security grounds for the see increasingly hard to imagine that any but a fra thousands of revelers from abroad will show.

Not that the city would mind. According to evidence presented to the Knesset Interior Committee in early July, 85% of Jerusalem's 700,000 residents are opposed to the gathering – Jew and Arab alike. Even among those defining themselves as secular, 63% indicated they would prefer for it not to take place. When interviewed, many simply felt



the city had enough problems of its own without importing more.

"The most vocal opposition to gay rights is faith-based," says Noa Sattath, chairperson of Open House – the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender community center in the heart of downtown Jerusalem that is hosting the march, plus a multi-faith convocation and a myriad of additional activities during the week-long WorldPride festival.

"By coming here to Jerusalem we're saying that there is an alternative religiosity and spirituality that are not homophobic," Sattath told *The Jerusalem Post*.

Leading the opposition to WorldPride is an ad-hoc coalition of Orthodox Jewish, Christian and Muslim clerics – finding rare common ground in viewing the event as inappropriate for a city of such paramount religious importance. As Israel's Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar wrote to Pope Benedict XVI in an appeal for his help to thwart the parade: "the combination of religious leaders' protests will prevent the evil schemers from... destroying the ways of mankind."

"I'm proud that we, if nothing else, could be a unifying force," Sattath responds jokingly.

Ever since an ultra-Orthodox man took matters into his own hand at last year's local march, breaking through police lines and stabbing three marchers, the clerical rhetoric has cooled.

"We must protest the desecration of the Holy Land," rabbinic court head Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch told *The Jerusalem Post*, when questioned about an anonymous flyer distributed in the city's deeply religious Mea Shearim neighborhood that promised a \$4,500 bounty to any haredi Jew prepared to kill a homosexual in this year's march. "But we must do it nonviolently."

Traditional Muslim and Christian leaders and the ultra-Orthodox Jewish party Shas have been open to the so-called 'Tel Aviv compromise,' saying that they would be satisfied as long as the parade were not held in the Holy City. Other Jewish leaders, backed up by Evangelical and Messianic voices, have insisted they did not want to have the parade anywhere within the State of Israel.

In a joint statement issued at the end of June, Jerusalem's leading Christian Zionist ministries joined the fray. The heads of Bridges for Peace, Christian Friends of Israel and the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem charged the organizers with "deliberately" targeting the city "not because it has any particular significance to the gay and lesbian community, but because of the supreme importance this city holds for those of biblical faith."

It is a criticism borne out by the choice of Jerusalem as the second international WorldPride venue, following the inaugural 2000 event in Rome. Despite the fierce opprobrium of the Vatican – or possibly because of it – over 250,000 revelers came.

At the center of the controversy stands Jerusalem's hapless ultra-Orthodox mayor, Uri Lupolianski, who has tried three times to stop the festival only to run afoul of the Israeli courts, perhaps the most activist liberal judiciary in the Western world. In May this year, the Jerusalem District Court ordered City Hall to pay Open House \$80,000 from the capital's cultural budget to fund the parade and their other 'social and cultural activities' in the city after unsuccessfully trying to challenge the 2006 event.

Knesset members have also weighed in, with religious parties outside Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's cabinet delighting in the opportunity to embarrass rival Shas by submitting a vote of confidence motion on the issue in July, forcing lawmakers from the Sephardi bloc to abstain.

Shas in turn has tried to turn the spotlight back on Lupolianski, who is unwilling (and unable) to cough up more city cash to pay the inevitable court fines and has simply retreated to a policy of non-cooperation with Open House.

All eyes, consequently, are on Israeli national police chief Moshe Karadi – formerly Jerusalem's top cop and now the only man with the legal authority to authorize or stop the march. His decision was expected close to press time.

WHATEVER HAPPENS in August, few appreciate that WorldPride is actually a sideshow – a catalyst at best to draw attention to the real battle brewing in the corridors of power as a tolerant, pluralistic democracy grapples with its fundamental identity as a Jewish state. It is a clash where traditional Jerusalem meets Tel Aviv hedonism.

*The Christian Edition* has learned that on the back of the WorldPride festival this August, new Israeli Education Minister Yuli Tamir has decided to kick-start a long-shelved curriculum project to promote homosexuality as a viable, 'normal' alternative lifestyle in all Israeli state schools from first grade onwards. Meanwhile, the tourism ministry is working on plans to promote Tel Aviv as the 'gay capital of the world.'



"It is the first time in education history that the government is doing something on homosexuality as part of a formal school program," Ariel Deri, spokesman for Shas cabinet minister Meshulam Nahari, told *The Christian Edition*. Furthermore, the move flagrantly breaches the so-called 'status quo' agreement on socio-religious affairs that holds together the uncomfortable governing coalition between Olmert's Kadima party, Tamir's left-of-center Labor and the ultra-religious Shas.

The curriculum, Deri adds, "now says that the teacher has to teach that homosexuality is fine and normal," while pupils as young as 7 must be taught to "understand it, to be open to it and to receive the change as a normal thing."

It is unclear exactly what "change" Deri is referring to, but one veteran conservative activist in Jerusalem familiar with the details of the proposed curriculum put it more bluntly. "School children would be told not only to embrace the lifestyle as an acceptable alternative, but would be openly encouraged to experiment with their sexuality both ways before deciding whether they're straight or gay."

It would be hard to believe were it not part of a worldwide phenomenon mirrored in the unashamed WorldPride emphasis on adolescent teens.

'The Youth Are Here', the parade's international teen gathering at the Israeli Knesset on August 7, is geared towards - in the organizer's own words - "all boys and girls, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, friends, and unsure buddies; age 15 to 25" (emphasis added).

"After this day no one will be able to ignore us," declares the Open House 'teen team' who are organizing the day-long event and "the biggest Israeli Teen Party ever" in Jerusalem the same night. "They will understand us... and they will know that we are cool, successful, smart, beautiful and fascinating."

It's an objective shared it seems by Israel's \$3 billion-a-year tourist industry, which in November 2005 began mooting plans to transform the bustling, hip metropolis of Tel Aviv into "the gay capital of the world." Admitting that the gay consumer would travel just about anywhere for a good party, a senior Israel Hotel Association official told the Hebrew daily *Yediot Ahronot* that,

"Tel Aviv and gay people are a perfect fit."

It was a dramatic departure from Tourism Minister Isaac Herzog's more familiar talk of picturesque Galilee hilltops and the "land where Jesus walked," in a *CNN Business Traveler* special this June.

"The gay community has amazing consumer power, and Tel Aviv has a lot to offer to this community," explained IHA Director Eli Ziv. "We have the beach, sun, culture and nightclubs. To our knowledge, gays are capable of hopping on a plane and traveling to the other side of the world just to participate in parties and events that are related to the gay community."

In line with the tourism ministry's 2006 summer advertising blitz in Europe that pitches Israel as a 'sexy' travel destination for the young, Ministry Director-General Eli Cohen has committed all the necessary financial assistance, Ziv claimed, to enable him to achieve "an airlift of gays" from Europe in time for Jerusalem's August parade.

As trouble escalates on Israel's borders and the future of WorldPride Jerusalem 2006 hangs in the balance, battle lines are being drawn over a very different set of boundaries. It is a clash that cuts to the heart of how this liberal democracy will also honor its Jewish past.

Parade or no parade this summer - the real fight has only just begun.