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**Publication Date**

2007-02-01

*Ani Geh Bisrael: Zionism and the Paradox of Gay Rights*

Democracy and human rights have barely reached most of the Middle East. Many women and minorities lack equality. Not surprisingly, life for gays and lesbians can be difficult. Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities are frequently harassed, persecuted and sometimes even executed. It's a place where many lesbian and gay people live in fear and isolation. But in the middle of all this, you'll find Israel, and open-minded gay-friendly Tel Aviv.

Thus begins the film *Out of the Closet and Into the Streets of Tel-Aviv*, a short DVD proclaiming the cosmopolitanism and modernity of the Israeli state through the state's recognition of its Jewish gay and lesbian citizens. Members of BlueStarPR, a Zionist public relations group, widely disseminated the film during San Francisco Pride 2004. It includes images of young, barely accented Israelis inviting their American gay counterparts to visit Israel during World Pride 2005 in Jerusalem. This film, produced and dispersed in the United States with a specifically gay gentile audience in mind, symbolizes the way in which Zionist projects instrumentalize the discourse of gay rights to portray Israel as the "oasis" of modernity in the Middle East (BlueStarPR 2004). This paper will explore the way gay-rights activism in Israel is mobilized as a barometer of human rights, and specifically how using discourses of modernity and civilization to describe the Israeli gay-rights movement colludes with Israeli nationalism, making the movement complicit with the occupation of Palestine. In other words, in order to access these rights gay and lesbian Jewish Israelis must actively participate in the occupation.

The current progressive state of gay rights in Israel is one of the ways groups such as BlueStarPR argue for Israel as a liberal, civilized, modern nation-state. There are effectively two related narratives composing the history of gay rights in Israel: the history of legal rights and the history of gay and lesbian organizing. Lee Walzer claims Israel as "the first country to get the gay-rights model in reverse" (15). In this gay-rights model,

put forth by John D'Emilio, progress for civic equality comes only after gay people migrate to urban centers and create “an independent community and culture” (15). According to Walzer, many of the far-reaching legal victories for gay civic equality in Israel “came in the absence of a visible lesbian and gay community publicly mobilized to demand its rights” (Walzer 15). In other words, only when the Zionist collective legally allowed for gay and lesbian identities, did independent gay and lesbian communities emerge. This relationship between legal gains and an organized community has led many far-left gay activists to question the acceptance of homosexuality by the state, since the state seemed to do so without an organized protest movement or even an outright request for rights (Kadish 94).

The history of gay legal rights in Israel does seem to model a narrative of progress. A combination of factors during the first few decades of Israel's existence – the religious influence on the legislature, the desire to police the “Jewishness” of the population, and the anxiety over the demographic war with the Arabs – produced numerous laws regulating the sexuality of Israeli citizens, including a sodomy law (Kadish 94).<sup>1</sup> During the 1980s, many secular straight Knesset members began to work to reform the legislature concerning sexuality. The 1980s marked a low point in international opinion about Israel. In 1982, then Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon led the IDF to invade and occupy southern Lebanon (Bennis 64). This war was one of the only in Israel's history that was not supported by the Israeli public, especially after the infamous massacres at the Sabra and Shatila Refugee camps (64). 1987 brought the first collective

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<sup>1</sup> There seems to be a vast amount of confusion as to when the sodomy law was instituted. Several sources cite Ben-Gurion's negotiations with religious rabbis during the formation of the Israeli state, while others claim the sodomy law was left from the mandates of the British Empire. Nonetheless, what constituted a good colonial subject and what constitutes a good Israeli citizen coincide in the regulation of sexual acts.

grassroots Palestinian uprising against Israel, known as the first *Intifada*. Images of young Palestinians, armed only with stones, facing the heavily armed Israeli troops exposed the difference in power between the two sides. This rupture in Israel's self-image as a small nation surrounded by powerful enemies during the 1980s may have forced the state to consciously define itself as more liberal and civilized than its Arab neighbors. Sexuality emerged as a site of this redefinition when the sodomy law was repealed in 1988. Since 1993, gay and lesbian people have gained the right to domestic partnerships, legal adoption, inheritance rights, refugee status, and almost every other civil right bestowed on heterosexual citizens. (MARRIAGE)

Dalit Baum, a longtime Israeli activist against the occupation, understands three different reasons for this apparently progressive acceptance of gay and lesbian people in Israel. First and foremost, gay and lesbian people were never considered an "enemy" of the Israeli state. The Palestinians and "the Arab world" were and are the "real" enemies. Second, Israel has a contested relationship to traditional religion. Orthodox Judaism, in the form of a body of traditional Orthodox rabbis, does have a say on certain kinds of legislation. However, in practice, the religious legislation only affects Orthodox Israeli citizens. Third, secular straight Israelis – the majority of the country – coalesce against the religious right that does exist in the country. Gay and lesbian sexuality acts as a vanguard against religious coercion and regulations: being for gay and lesbian rights is tantamount to being against a religious conservatism that has a blatant, if limited, control over the government (Baum 2005).

It is important to emphasize that rights-based activism is essential to produce what Judith Butler terms a "legible humanity," or, in other words, a livable life (11). Butler

claims that the possibility of personhood is “fundamentally dependent” on social norms (2). These norms provide definitions for who counts as “human,” so if one falls too far outside of those definitions, one cannot be recognized as human (2). The initially discursive distinction between the human and the “less-than” becomes legitimized through the materialization of legal rights, human rights, even though legal rights are necessary for one to be defined as human in the first place. In the case of Israel, those defined as less-than human are Palestinian, and it is against their negated humanity that gay rights can be achieved.

An example of this negation of Palestinian humanity emerged during Israel’s first Gay Pride in 1998. The *Agudah* (The Organization for Gay Men, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transgender in Israel) handed out bumper stickers with the statement “Ani G’eh Bisrael,” which translates into either, “I am gay in Israel” or, “I am proud of Israel.” The Hebrew word “g’eh” means both “gay” and “proud.” There is no way of determining the definitive meaning of the statement from the structure or spelling. Thus, according to this speech act, there is no way to be gay in Israel without always already being proud of Israel. For Jewish gay and lesbian Israelis, this play on the word “g’eh” is a safe signifier of sexual transgression, because the statement could then always be an affirmation of national pride. For gay and lesbian Palestinians and Jewish Israelis who resist the occupation, this sentiment completely negates any resistance to Israeli state practices. Palestinians are excluded as subjects of this speech act; they are marked as the unspoken object. This is not to say that all gay and lesbian Israelis would agree with the bumper sticker. However, it is important to note what the sticker makes impossible: a gay identity in Israel that does not comply with the occupation.

To complicate matters further, when Zionist gay activists attempt to include gay Palestinians in a national narrative of sexual identity, the “voice” of this identity is silenced even as it speaks. In the fall of 2004, the Zionist Organization of America sponsored a touring speaker who was only known by the name of “Ali,” at over twenty college campuses in the United States, usually through Jewish organizations. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, the event was entitled “Ali’s Story” purported to be an exposé of gay life in the Middle East. After showing the film *Out of The Closets and Into The Streets of Tel Aviv*, Ali, a gay Christian Palestinian man who currently resides in Israel, told a moving personal narrative about the violence inflicted upon gay and lesbian Palestinians by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The extreme sexual violence was described in graphic detail, peppered with iterations of Ali’s respect for Israel as a nation. His narrative included the story of a close Muslim friend, Adam, whose persecution by the PNA forced him to migrate illegally to Israel. The *Agudah* successfully lobbied the Knesset to allow Adam refugee status, a legal definition exclusively reserved for Jews. Upon hearing of his migration Adam’s family held a funeral for him, excluding him from the family permanently. Adam’s story within Ali’s narrative ended with Adam’s conversion from Islam to Judaism. Ali’s presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period, mediated by Dror Elnor, an Israeli Jewish representative of the Zionist Organization of America. During the question and answer period, Islam was portrayed as a traditional, barbaric religion, a religion fundamentally opposed to modernity. Oppression of “women and gay people” was perceived as an inherent and essential part of Muslim practice. At one point, Elnor solicited the audience to remember the Palestinian Authority’s treatment of gays and lesbians the next time

someone “defends” Palestine. He also asked the listeners to imagine Palestine without the occupation, suggesting that life would be much worse for gay Palestinians without the influence of the Israeli State (Ali’s Story 2004). Critique of the blatant Zionist ideology was made all the more difficult because of the use of experience and personal narrative, which seemed to lend authority to Elnor’s remarks. Listeners could not ethically deny the violence inflicted upon gay Palestinian bodies, and this violence was held as proof of the barbarism of Palestine.

Elnor’s depiction of life under occupation aligns self-identifying gay and lesbian Palestinians with Israel, identified as a liberal, inclusive, westernized nation. The PNA’s policing of sexual behavior establishes Palestine as barbaric, traditional, and regressive, especially through the supposed opposition to “inalienable rights.” According to this rhetoric, the oppression experienced by gay and lesbian Palestinians at the hands of the PNA validates the inevitability of occupying Palestine. Elnor’s support of the occupation places gay Israelis in the position of saving gay Palestinians from Palestinian culture itself, as well as suggesting that gay Palestinians who oppose the occupation play into their own oppression.

The physical and epistemic violence experienced by gay and lesbian Palestinians at the hands of the PNA defines homosexual Palestinians through a rhetoric of impossibility within both Palestinian and Israeli political discourse. This rhetoric of impossibility defines a homosexual Palestinian life as beyond imagination, a life whose very existence is systematically defined by state-sanctioned violence. In other words, it is impossible to exist as a Palestinian and as gay or lesbian. Most information regarding self-identified gay Palestinians is mediated through Israeli gay organizations such as the

*Agudah*, which estimates that between 350 and 450 gay-identified Palestinians illegally migrate to Israel per year (Crouse 25). This lack of documentation in and of itself (*changing in the last few years, Aswat*) helps constitute the rhetoric of impossibility that defines the representation of Palestinian gay life. However, the PNA has no contradicting narrative for the lives of gay Palestinians. In fact, it seems as if, officially at least, the PNA is unable even to admit to the existence of same-sex desire within the borders of the Palestinian nation (QX Magazine 2003).

The positions of both Zionist gay and lesbian activists and Palestinian nationalists work together to fashion this impossible subject position. For Elnor, Adam needs to be saved, and this salvation comes in the form of both Israeli occupation and conversion to Judaism. For Palestinian nationalists and Adam's family, Adam's migration is a statement of support for Israeli state practices; Adam's sexuality places him outside Palestinian national identity. Outside of the graphic descriptions of violence, Adam's actual lived experience is erased from the discourse of either nation. Rather, his body is narrated through acts of violence and exclusion. He has access to the category of the "human," to a legible humanity with a speaking voice, only as a Jew who supports the Israeli state, never as a Palestinian against the occupation. In many ways, however, Adam is the exception: Israel currently refuses to accept any more requests from gay Palestinians seeking asylum because of "security risks" (Crouse 26). Nonetheless, these border crossings are still used to support Israel's self-image as the "oasis" of modernity in the Middle East.