

This summer I spent eight weeks in Israel in an effort to explore Orthodox LGBT stories and to better understand the LGBT culture in Israel as a whole. While the experiences of those that I interviewed varied greatly, it became clear that their experiences were very different from the more Liberal Jewish LGBT folks I had interviewed in the United States.

The age ranges of the people that I interviewed fell between 27 and 60 and they identified themselves as gay, lesbian, and in one case as a transgender woman. They also identified themselves religiously using different terminology, in some cases “formerly Orthodox” or raised Orthodox, in some cases *dati* or observant, and others eschewed religious labels entirely. It was clear for all of them though that religion had played a significant role in their lives. For many, religion was the reason they had moved to Israel from the United States, had married into heterosexual relationships and had children, had been a part of yeshivas or other Orthodox religious organizations, and why some remained in Jerusalem even as they came out as LGBT, which inevitably changed each of their religious observances.

During my time in Israel I also visited three separate Pride Parades, in Kfar Saba, Tel Aviv, and Haifa. These parades served as a sort of “field” in which to do ethnographic work; the parades exposed local priorities, fears, and power structures in ways that were difficult to gauge in one-on-one interviews. Additionally, attending three allowed me to use a comparative lens and assess the priorities and activism within given communities. For the remainder of this report, I am going to compare the three events and discuss what I think they reveal about the LGBT cultures in various parts of Israel.

Chronologically, I first attended the Kfar Saba Pride Parade. This year was Kfar Saba’s first parade, although not their first LGBT oriented event. The organizations Israel Gay Youth

(IGY) and Aguda were the main organizers for this event, and worked extensively with the police to plan the route, especially as they were required to provide fencing around the parade and change the route so as to circumvent the local Chabad house. I had read all of this before attending, and still was shocked by the size of the event and parade route. The route covered only a block in each direction, and there was no point at which we were closer than 5 meters to people who had not gone through security to enter the event grounds. The parade was entirely on foot, with no floats or other vehicles. However, the overall mood felt celebratory rather than fearful or serious, although the atmosphere was perhaps less “wild” than pride festivities I had been to in the states. There were no (or very few) people in drag, people were generally entirely clothed, and there was chanting more like at what you might hear at a protest march. At one point I witnessed a verbal fight between several of the young adults I was walking near, who were singing Israeli singer Netta’s summer hit “Toy,” and two older adult men. One of the men shouted in Hebrew at the small group to be quiet, and said something along the lines of “this is not Tel Aviv.” The fight didn’t continue, as the younger crowd simply continued to march away, but this served as my first indication that there was an intrinsic comparative judgment, and a value judgement, between smaller parades in Kfar Saba like towns and Tel Aviv.

The next Pride Parade I attended was in Tel Aviv, which is widely known as one of the most fun and wild pride celebrations in the world. Even my American friends were excited to hear about the event. I was lucky to attend Tel Aviv Pride with another Rice Jewish Studies minor and friend, Chloe Wilson. Chloe, several of her friends from the Hebrew University, and I all took a morning bus to Tel Aviv. We came into the very crowded main area and walked along what would become the parade route to the beach. We spent some time swimming, some time at

the nearby market, and then watched as the parade went by. This parade was definitely different, with large floats featuring drag queens and other people clad in rainbow apparel, and sponsored by banking and investment companies, vodka brands, and other corporations rather than IGY or local interests. This difference may come in part not just due to the size, but because the Tel Aviv parade is organized by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, with the express purpose of engaging Israelis and foreign visitors to come visit “Gay Tel Aviv.”

While the Kfar Saba parade had documented issues working with the police and fears about pushback from the local community, it was not until Tel Aviv that I saw any protestors. While at or around the Pride event I saw two different groups of protestors, one in the event grounds and one outside. The protestors outside were a Christian religious group, something I was fairly accustomed to coming from the United States, and specifically very close to the home of the Westboro Baptist Church. They held signs which quoted Levitical prohibitions against same-sex sexual activity and others simply calling the reader to “repentance” from their homosexuality. However, inside the event grounds there was also a group of LGBT protestors who were not protesting against homosexuality, but against the parade itself and Israeli “pink-washing.” Pink-washing is the term used to denote the Israeli government’s involvement in the promotion of their LGBT friendliness and culture with the purpose of covering up or “washing” their reputation of abuse and persecution of Palestinians. I think that both of these forms of protest were in response to the size and the popularity of the event, whereas Kfar Saba was so small and new that it did not attract the same sort of negative attention.

Finally, the last Pride event I attended was in Haifa. I was meeting an interviewee in his home in Haifa and chose to meet the weekend of Pride so that I could also see what that culture

was like. I arrived in Haifa on Thursday, a day before the parade event, and was able to attend a pre-Pride event that night. It was located on a street which is particularly well known locally for having gay-friendly bars and shops, constituting the city's small "gayborhood." The gathering was incredibly small, much smaller than the turn out for Kfar Saba, and consisted mainly of performances from local drag queens as well as parties in some of the nearby gay bars.

The next morning I arrived early to the festival grounds, and there were tents set up for around 25 local and Israel-wide organizations. These consisted of IGY and other similar services, a local Reform synagogue whose members were giving out havdalah spices and inviting people to services, and a local LGBT historical society among others. More so than either of the other Pride events there was a clear local community presence and participation in this event. It was clear that there was an active community of LGBT people in Haifa, whose interests covered political, social, and historical issues.

From a U.S. context, one organization that I found the most surprising at the Haifa Pride was an HIV focused organization. A man approached me while I was near this booth and started to explain to me that they were focused on HIV prevention, education, and treatment. He asked me if I had been tested for HIV and other STDs recently and if I wanted to be tested on the spot. The surprise came when I asked him how much it would cost and he, equally as confused and surprised as myself, told me that of course it was free. Although I was not surprised that HIV was a priority in the Israeli LGBT community, I was surprised that getting tested was free, something that can be quite expensive in the U.S. without insurance. I was also surprised that people were openly getting tested while at a parade, when HIV and AIDS has such an association with shame and fear in the U.S.

The Haifa parade itself was very much a mix of Tel Aviv and Kfar Saba. There were a few floats boarded by drag queens and others, but the majority of people were marching rather than watching. I did not see any signs of protest near the parade, except for a few marchers carrying anti-circumcision signs which seemed both surprising and unrelated to the parade itself. Corporate and government sponsorship in Haifa was much less prevalent than in Tel Aviv, but not entirely lacking.

Much of what I learned and experienced this summer can unfortunately not fit into a short fellowship report. However, I am using much of the data I gathered and many of the questions I began to confront this summer to inform my thesis work. I think that while these Pride events were not the main focus of my research that they did give an insight into the culture of LGBT life in Israel, and particularly what is important to various communities. The comparison I have offered here illuminates that although Israel is much smaller than the United States or other countries, the priorities and struggles of the LGBT community within this small geographic region are diverse. Just as we could never lump together the experiences of LGBT people in the rural midwest with those living in San Francisco, it's equally important to understand that Israeli gay culture is also not a monolith.



"Don't Give Up!" Me, at Kfar Saba Pride holding a sign



"Pinkwash Parade," Anti-Pinkwashing Protestors at Tel Aviv Pride



"Homosexual is Sin" Christian protestors outside Tel Aviv Pride



"Rice JWST Pride" Myself and Chloe Wilson at Tel Aviv Pride



"Make Kitsch Not War" Detail from Pride Float in Haifa



"Pre-Parade Drag" Myself and an unidentified drag queen at a pre-Pride event in Haifa





“Wait, it’s free?” Free HIV and STI testing station at Haifa Pride



“Keshet is the Only Word I Know in Hebrew” Me, posing in front of a parade float in Haifa



“Let’s Wrestle” Me with Rabbi Steven Greenberg, author of *Wrestling with God and Men*