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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Queer Cats Journal of LGBTQ Studies, 3(1)

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Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/Q531045991

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THE “GAYIFICATION” OF TEL AVIV: Examining Israel’s Pro-Gay Brand

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To someone informed on the modern world’s LGBT hot spots, the mention of Israeli homosexuality would most often connote images of a crowded pride parade or a rainbow themed beach party packed with same-sex couples and carefree attitudes. This picture, whether in a film, on a poster, or in reality, is one of Tel Aviv, the self-proclaimed “Gay Capital of the Middle East.”¹ It is the most popular and well-known image of the Israeli LGBT community.

The history of LGBT rights in Israel predates that of many Western nations, including the United States. Israeli gay rights ensure that all LGBT citizens receive many of the same rights to their heterosexual counterparts, albeit with less publicized shortfalls in terms of health, education and welfare laws. The greatest exception and the most significant encroachment of faith onto the legality of homosexuality is in the lack of legal gay marriage in Israel. Alongside their crafting of legal rights, the Israeli government has invested heavily in the coastal city of Tel Aviv, rebranding it as a globally recognized “gay destination.” This effort resulted in a fiscally beneficial gay tourism industry and a more positive international reputation for Israel. Tel Aviv now attracts LGBT individuals and allies from within Israel and across the globe.

Tel Aviv’s well-known reputation as a pro-gay, modern destination can sometimes distract from inquiries into the status of the LGBT community in the rest of Israel. The city has been referred to in film, print, and by its residents as *HaBuah* (“The Bubble”).² This idea of Tel

Aviv as a “bubble” suggests a distinction between its own identity and that of the rest of Israel. This gap is particularly visible when addressing homosexuality. The LGBT population faces strong opposition in certain Israeli communities outside of Tel Aviv. The tension between homosexuality and portions of the Israeli citizenry represents the ongoing struggle between secular and religious identity in Israel. This identity confusion is particularly evident when comparing tolerance towards the LGBT community in Tel Aviv to that in the capital city of Jerusalem, home to a largely religious population. The status of homosexuality in Jerusalem and in the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) community suggests that Tel Aviv may truly be a “bubble” of homosexual acceptance.

This paper addresses the status of homosexuality in Israel and the question of national identity. It investigates how gay city branding has been used to establish Israel as a more progressive, western nation and Tel Aviv as one of the world’s best gay cities. Further it asks: Is Israel as tolerant of homosexuality as its reputation suggest? How is homosexuality regarded in Israel’s growing ultra-Orthodox community and how does it align with the Israeli pro-gay brand? To what extent is homosexuality a part of Israel’s national identity? These points are central to the longterm survival of LGBT rights in Israel.

HISTORY OF LGBT RIGHTS IN ISRAEL

The growing industry of gay tourism to Israel and transformation of Tel Aviv into a globally recognized LGBT destination relied upon the initial provision of legal rights to Israel’s LGBT citizens. The history of LGBT rights in Israel technically began in 1963 when the Supreme Court ruled that the Buggery Act of 1533,³ a remnant of the British Mandate for Palestine,⁴ should not be used to persecute consenting adults who engage in private same-sex sexual activity. Homosexual sexual activity was officially legalized in 1988 by Israel’s legislative assembly, the Knesset. In 1992 Israel passed legislation that outlawed employment discrimination on the grounds of homosexuality. Often cited as proof of Israel’s commitment to equality is the 1993 decision to allow openly gay men and women to serve in the military. This policy came eighteen years prior to the United States’ repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,”⁵ which served the same purpose.

In 1994 Israel began granting unregistered cohabitation⁶ for homosexual couples, providing them with the same spousal benefits as heterosexual couples in a common-law marriage. Legislation passed in 1999 and 2000 provided insurance benefits and pension rights respectively to same-sex couples. Stepchild adoption was legalized for Israeli same-sex couples in 2005, and in 2008 it was ruled that gay couples could jointly adopt a child that was not biologically related to either of them. A significant moment for gay rights in Israel came in 2006 when the High Court of Justice declared that same-sex marriages performed abroad must be registered in Israel. The ruling however mandated that the marriages be recorded for “the purpose of collecting statistics,”⁷ as opposed to simply for the purpose of equal rights. A major milestone came for the Israeli transgender community in 2013. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) allowed a transgender woman to serve as a female soldier.⁸ This decision reflects the growing support for transgender individuals in liberal Israeli society. Further on June 2, 2015 the Israeli National Labor Court ruled in a case that the Equality of Opportunities in Labour Law, which outlaws discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation also extends to discrimination on the basis of gender identity.⁹ This ruling set an important precedent for the transgender community and rights in the workplace, but there is still much work to be done to establish equal legal protections for transgender people in Israel.

In 2014, following years of individual court cases, the Interior Minister Gidon Sa’ar stated that the Law of Return¹⁰ provides citizenship to same sex couples married abroad, even if one of the married persons is not Jewish.¹¹ These laws protecting the LGBT community have been far better received in Tel Aviv than in Israel’s more conservative areas. Despite being one of the most legally accepting nations of LGBT individuals in the world, there is one area in which Israel falls far behind many western countries: marriage.

Marriage in Israel is controlled by a confessional community system in which marriage, as a religious institution, is under the authority of whichever recognized community a person belongs. For the Jewish majority, this authority is the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. There are other such authorities for various Christian, Muslim and Druze minorities as well. These religious courts are each responsible for regulating marriage and divorce among the Israeli citizens who are categorized as belonging to their religion, whether actively religious or not. As of August 2019

none of the recognized religious courts in Israel perform same-sex marriages. If any of these religious authorities were to change their stance, LGBT citizens belonging to that particular religion could legally marry in Israel without any government intervention or legislation.

The absence of gay marriage in Israel is not a direct result of the government's stance on the issue but more of its insistence on keeping the status quo regarding the complicated balance between the state and religion. The Israeli government and judicial bodies have supplemented the lack of legal gay marriage by providing homosexual couples with nearly all the rights of marriage granted to their heterosexual counterparts in the state. The religious, as opposed to governmental, hold on marriage has contributed to the minimal amount of gay marriage advocacy in Israel. This movement does exist but is smaller than many of its European or American counterparts. This is partly due to the knowledge that lobbying a religious authority on behalf of gay marriage is a larger challenge than lobbying a government, and partly due to homosexual Israeli couples already enjoying most of the same rights as heterosexual married couples.

The question of gay marriage was raised by the author in a 2016 personal interview with Ilay,¹² a representative of the Jerusalem Open House for Pride and Tolerance, Jerusalem's leading LGBT organization. His response clarified that, despite legal equality, there are still more pressing issues for the Israeli LGBT community to address before turning to marriage. Ilay brought up the verbal and physical abuse of LGBT Israeli teens as an issue which should be confronted before delving into matters of marriage and religion. He mentioned that the use of gay slurs in schools is pervasive and damaging to vulnerable LGBT teens, saying, "Being called gay is like the most frequent swear word you'll hear in schools. 'Homo' you'll hear it all over, with other offensive, more descriptive swears."¹³ While reiterating that marriage is not the current priority, Ilay brought up the ongoing struggle between secularism and religion in Israel, saying, "It connects with the secular struggle, right now marriages in Israel are done religiously. There is always a rabbi in every wedding and that is the only way it can be done. I know a lot of people don't agree with it. There is a struggle for gay marriage obviously, but I think it's not the main thing that our community is trying to achieve."¹⁴

Still in August 2017 the LGBT Association in Israel brought a petition to the High Court of Justice to recognize same-sex marriages in

Israel. The High Court rejected the petition citing that they could not rule on a matter that fell under the jurisdiction of the rabbinical courts. The Court also passed the buck for any further rulings on this matter to the legislature stating, “On the matter of recognizing marriage that was not conducted in accordance to the religious law—including same-sex marriage—it was ruled [by the court] in the past that it is better that the issue be determined by the legislative branch.”¹⁵ Such a legislative policy is unlikely to be enacted. The government will not push to change the system of marriage for fear of upsetting the balance with the religious community, particularly in light of growing ultra-Orthodox influence in the Knesset.

Despite already established LGBT rights and widespread governmental support for gay tourism religious and conservative factions in the Knesset, particularly the Haredi parties, have blocked a number of legal milestones for the LGBT community. In February 2017 three bills regarding the LGBT community were voted down in the Knesset. The three laws proposed banning gender or sexual orientation-based cat-calls at sporting events, mandating training for educational professionals on matters of gender and sexual preference and banning gender and sexual orientation-based discrimination against students.¹⁶ Sponsor of the second bill MK Michal Rozin blamed the Haredi parties and their influence in the Knesset for the failure of the bills. Rozin, a member of the Caucus for the LGBT Community, stated “The fear of the Haredi parties and narrow coalition considerations leave the members of the [LGBT] community discriminated against in the law books.”¹⁷

Similar complaints about the Haredi parties have been made by other pro-LGBT Knesset members. In June 2017 MK Merav Ben-Ari lamented that, “We have a really big issue with legislation, because you can’t do anything with the ultra-Orthodox in the government . . . In my opinion, the state is supposed to be better for LGBT families.”¹⁸ While the country benefits from its pro-gay brand and tourism to Tel Aviv, growing homophobic factions in the Knesset wage less publicized legal battles against the LGBT community. Ongoing LGBT issues requiring legislative support include surrogacy policy, sperm bank procedure, transgender marriage rights and military forms that require soldiers to name both a mother and a father specifically, among others.¹⁹

In July 2018 the tension between the current right-wing religious government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the LGBT

community and its allies rose to the public sphere when a new surrogacy bill was brought before the Knesset.²⁰ Previously surrogacy in Israel was only legal for married heterosexual couples struggling to conceive, while single and LGBT men and women were only permitted to use surrogates outside of the country. The new bill extended the right to surrogacy to single women but not men, effectively barring gay men from using surrogates. An amendment to include gay men was proposed by MK Amir Ohana of the ruling Likud party, who spoke openly about his own experience as a gay parent prohibited from using a surrogate in Israel. Ohana and his partner's own surrogate gave birth in a foreign country before full term and the couple was unable to be present at the hospital with their newborn twins.²¹ Contracting surrogates outside of the country is not only emotionally taxing but it often costs upwards of \$100,000. Such high costs make parenthood inaccessible to gay couples who do not meet a high bar of personal wealth. Ohana appealed to religious lawmakers to approve the amendment, stating, "I am not inciting against the rabbinate or against the religious—I'm just asking for a little humanity."²²

In response to the public outcry Netanyahu initially endorsed Ohana's amendment and the LGBT community, but he went on to reverse his position and vote against the amendment, which failed, two days later. Netanyahu was criticized for bowing to the ultra-Orthodox contingent of his coalition and betraying his LGBT citizens. Itzik Shmuli, a gay lawmaker in the Zionist Union party, voiced his outrage at the prime minister's actions stating, "Netanyahu has sold the most important thing in our society to an extremist minority in his government for extraneous political interests: the value of equality."²³ The passage of the bill sparked citywide protests in Tel Aviv on July 22nd with 100,000 people marching against the homophobic law.²⁴ Roughly 200 companies granted their employees paid leave to attend the protest in a strong show of commercial support for the LGBT community.²⁵ These events highlight not only the remaining hurdles facing the Israeli LGBT community but also the massive disparity between the progressive, pro-gay Israeli community, particularly in Tel Aviv, and the increasingly right-wing and religious government.

The absence of total legal equality and acceptance for the LGBT community throughout Israel can be credited to the challenge of supporting liberal values in a largely conservative and religious society.

Gay-friendly policies have further secularized Israel, suggesting some government interest in taking the country in a direction that does not align with the vision for Israel held by some religious minorities, such as the ultra-Orthodox community. However, such policies continue to fall short of true equality as religious and right-wing power grows. Still, Israel's LGBT rights remain quite advanced on a global scale and its investment in the LGBT community has benefited not only its gay citizens but the state, both fiscally and in terms of its reputation. These benefits are clearly visible in the city of Tel Aviv.

TEL AVIV, THE "GAY CAPITAL OF THE MIDDLE EAST"

Tel Aviv held its first gay pride parade in 1998. In 2019 more than 250,000 people attended the city's nineteenth annual pride with an estimated 25,000–30,000 having come from abroad.²⁶ The 2019 theme was "The Struggle Continues," highlighting the ongoing fight for LGBT equality in Israel. Past themes include "The Community Makes History" (2018), "Bisexuality Visibility" (2017), "Women for a Change" (2016), and "Transgender Visibility" (2015). Gay Pride is one of Tel Aviv's most anticipated annual events. It is estimated that gay tourism is responsible for at minimum one-tenth of Israel's June tourism profits. Branding experts, the Israeli government, and the tourism industry suggest that Tel Aviv's status as a "gay city"²⁷ has led to an increase in non-LGBT tourism as well. This is a result of the tolerant, fun, and modern perception of Tel Aviv that accompanies its gay-friendly international reputation.

Tel Aviv today benefits from the city-wide gay identity established over the last decade. TLVFest, "Tel Aviv's International LGBT Film Festival," began in 2006.²⁸ Since launching in a Tel Aviv record store the self-described "only LGBT film festival in the Middle East,"²⁹ has grown into an internationally ranked LGBT film festival. In 2008 the city cemented their commitment to LGBT Jewish and non-Jewish persons, past, present and future, through the creation of a monument honoring homosexuals persecuted by the Nazis in World War II. The memorial takes the shape of a pink triangle, the symbol gays and lesbians were made to wear in Holocaust concentration camps.³⁰ The monument is located in Tel Aviv's Meir Park alongside the city's Gay Center.³¹ Since the Center's establishment in 2008, the park has been home to LGBT individuals and allies on their way to and from various social gatherings,

counseling meetings, or support groups. Some people simply come to sit and socialize in the building's park-side coffee shop. Tel Aviv's gay identity that is obvious in Meir Park was confirmed on a much larger scale in 2011, when Tel Aviv was voted the world's "Best Gay City" in a global survey conducted by Gaycities.com and American Airlines.³²

Apart from the obvious sense of pride felt by Tel Aviv's LGBT and gay-friendly population, the worldwide perception of Tel Aviv as a gay destination represents a significant victory for the country's image and industry. Dana Bensimon discusses how Israel has benefited from the Tel Aviv gay scene in her thesis "Tel Aviv—A Gay City? *Conceptualizing the phenomenon of gay cities in city branding*."³³ Bensimon includes a quote from Shai Doitsh in which he references the successful "rebranding" of Tel Aviv as a gay city. Doitsh served as the head of tourism for the Aguda, Israel's most prominent LGBT organization, from 2004 to 2012 and is now the Aguda's executive chairman. Explaining the city's transition from a reputation of conflict to one of tolerance, Doitsh states, "Tel Aviv's image was [previously known for] 'bombing,' 'military' and 'people in uniform' . . . When people realize that Tel Aviv is so open-minded, it can't be that scary, and automatically it is becoming free, safe, very tolerant, very open-minded and it brought us a lot of other types of tourists."³⁴ This quote establishes that being perceived as "tolerant" greatly improves both international public opinion of Tel Aviv and the Israeli economy. Central to the establishment of Tel Aviv as "gay capital of the Middle East,"³⁵ or as Israel's Gay Vibe campaign suggests, "of the world," are the concepts of city branding and gay tourism.

CITY BRANDING

The concept of place branding, of which city branding is one type, grew out of the traditional marketing strategy of applying brands to objects. In *Cultures and Globalization: Cities, Cultural Policy and Governance*,³⁶ Helmut K. Anheier expands on this evolution: "Marketing practitioners commonly employed branding as a way to increase the value of their products and it was thought that this technique could also be used to brand places, such as cities, regions and nations."³⁷ Though the recorded history of marketing extends over a century, place branding did not develop as a professional marketing tactic until the 1990s.³⁸ The recent

discovery of this strategy has led to its global popularity, causing cities to compete for various identities within the international tourism realm.

The principal aim of city branding is to establish the city as a popular travel destination and provide a steady, if sometimes niche, stream of tourism. Anheier discusses an alternate purpose: "It has also been used as a tool for regeneration and countering negative images in cities."³⁹ Each of these goals are relevant to Israel's decision to rebrand Tel Aviv, both in the interest of improving Israeli tourism and of replacing the international view of Israel as a nation associated with conflict and tension. In *How to Brand Nations, Cities and Destinations*,⁴⁰ by T. Moilanen and S. Rainisto, the 'X factor' of city branding is discussed. Exploring the process of city branding, they explain that, "A place can be branded when the right tool, the identity, has been chosen[,] which makes it stand out from its competitors."⁴¹ In the case of Israel, the decision to rebrand came prior to the selection of the city's eventual gay identity.

In 2005 the *Jerusalem Daily Forward* printed the article "Israel Aims to Improve Its Public Image."⁴² It discussed the search for a new approach to improving Israel's international reputation. The particular significance of this article was its mention of the Brand Israel Group. This volunteer coalition consisted of seven marketing experts and was headed by Ido Aharoni, a former media and public affairs consultant in the Israeli consulate in New York.⁴³ The article plainly explained the logic behind the creation of the "Brand Israel" campaign, which came at the behest of Israel's Foreign Ministry, Finance Ministry, and the Office of the Prime Minister.⁴⁴ The campaign reacted to in-depth research that claimed non-Israelis struggled to relate to or even understand the people of Israel. Gidon Meir, then deputy director-general for public affairs at the Foreign Ministry, explained the group's intention was to formulate a rebranding effort aimed at the United States and Europe.⁴⁵ The 2005 article only established the government's decision to shift international perception, especially in the West. It did not reveal any specific tactics.

In 2010 the subject was revisited at the tenth annual Herziliya Conference⁴⁶ aimed at confronting the continuing issue of Israel's negative image. The conference brought together a variety of marketing and branding experts to debate the best approach for Israel. Brand Israel Group leader Aharoni gave a speech in which he summarized Israel's perception problem: "Universally, Israel's DNA is about the conflict and the context within which Israel is being perceived is all about bad news.

Whether you agree with Israeli policies or not it's irrelevant. Even our biggest supporters are unable to relate to us."⁴⁷ His research revealed that Israelis saw themselves as "modern, creative, friendly." Intent on communicating this identity to the global screen, Aharoni presented his rebranding approach. Aharoni lectured, "You have to restore—and I use the word restore rather than create—restore Israel's relevance in the world, by communicating Israel's success, by identifying Israel's relative advantages. And then begin a long-term strategic celebration of those relative advantages."⁴⁸ Aharoni offered his expertise on city branding, explaining that there are, in his opinion, two words that matter: "personality and attraction."⁴⁹

The Herzliya Conference produced a working paper titled "Winning the Battle of the Narrative."⁵⁰ It summarized the branding debate and conclusions for future strategies. The Israeli government's official branding effort, Creative Energy, sought to project a brand that communicated characteristics like, "building the future, vibrant diversity and entrepreneurial zeal."⁵¹ It was also widely agreed that all future branding efforts must engage those belonging to the Western European and American elite. The report offers the expert's reasoning, "To create and mobilize support, one must point to convergent morals and similar values. In that sense, messages should be coupled with examples of similar compatible values of Israel with the West. Gaining the trust of members of Western elites and thus strengthening their association with Israel can influence Israel's image very favourably."⁵² This same strategy of engaging liberal elites was encouraged in the Tel Aviv-based Reut Institute's⁵³ 2010 study, "The Assault on Israel's Legitimacy."⁵⁴ The conclusion being that in 2010 Israel was committed to recasting its international identity in a manner that steered away from conflict, highlighted modernity, diversity, and future, and especially appealed to Western liberal elites who could impact public opinion and create stronger ties between Israel, America and Europe. The first signs of gay branding in Tel Aviv came that same year.

Bensimon's interviews with representatives of the Israeli government, tourism industry, and LGBT community explore the decision to rebrand using a gay identity, its impact on the Israeli LGBT population, and its effect on international perception. In keeping with the goal of appealing to Western values and modernity, branding efforts were directed at establishing a pro-gay identity in the city of Tel Aviv.

Bensimon analyzes this choice, theorizing that, “Gays are likely to be a preferred minority, considerably wealthy and found to attract other desired segments helping the city to keep up with its competition.”⁵⁵ This strategy is effective but attention should be drawn to the fact that it relies upon a portrayal of homosexuality that aligns with the Western perception alone. In *Pink Tourism*⁵⁶ Howard L. Hughes provides a common image of this archetype: “the gay consumer, at least in the USA, has been that of male, white, professional, affluent, good-looking and youthful, trend-setting and well-educated.”⁵⁷ This ‘consumer’ is pervasive throughout American LGBT imagery, despite the fact that the majority of LGBT people in the United States are not in fact well-educated male professionals.⁵⁸ In Israeli gay branding the tourism strategy stays true to this image. This is partially due to the gay male industry being more accessible than the lesbian demographic. It is also an appeal to the European and American pro-gay communities, who share this depiction of the respectable, carefree, employed consumer. This particular version of gay identity is not targeted at the international LGBT community, rather it is targeted at the Western world, their values and their opinions.

The effectiveness of this choice, pursuing a gay brand, is confirmed by Doitsh. Casually recounting the decision, he shares, “In the beginning when people asked us: ‘Why did you choose the gay segment?’ our council member who is in charge of the tourism for the city said: ‘First the gays will come, and then the rest.’ And it showed it was a success because actually now we have a lot of segments coming to Tel Aviv.”⁵⁹ Doitsh simultaneously argues that the Israeli gay community benefits from this brand, the suggestion is that the gay community’s contribution to the economy enhances their place in society and the state’s appreciation of their demographic.

The senior deputy director general at the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, Pini Shani, claims the gay branding of Tel Aviv also changed the identity of the city from a “religious destination to an ethnic destination.”⁶⁰ This established Tel Aviv as a place geared towards secular modernity over religious history—a popular brand in Israel. The inherent suggestion of this branding is that infusing the gay identity into Tel Aviv’s international brand caused a further separation between Tel Aviv and the rest of Israel, namely, other urban tourist destinations, such as Jerusalem. Eytan Schwartz, chief executive officer of the Municipality-owned branding initiative Tel Aviv Global, gives his take on the individuality

of the Tel Aviv brand: “The dissociation of Tel Aviv from its country in the branding could be explained by the fear of resistance, but it mainly aims at improving the image and touristic situation of Israel abroad via Tel Aviv.”⁶¹ Schwartz touches on a central point in this statement. In order to establish itself as pro-gay, progressive and modern Tel Aviv must separate itself from the rest of Israel and yet all of Israel benefits from the increase in tourism and Israel’s shifting global reputation. Consistent gay tourism to Tel Aviv permits Israel to maintain this liberal, modern, tolerant identity.

GAY TOURISM

In 2010 Israel launched the “Tel Aviv Gay Vibe” campaign in Western Europe. A Wider Bridge, a pro-Israel organization based in San Francisco and pivotal to the branding campaign, describes Tel Aviv Gay Vibe as “a collaboration between Israel’s Ministry of Tourism, the Tel Aviv Tourism Board and Israel’s preeminent LGBT institution, the Aguda, to fulfill the city’s promise as the world’s newest gay capital.”⁶² An expert on gay tourism, Hughes explores patterns of the gay tourist demographic and how to market cities towards the LGBT segment in *Pink Tourism*.⁶³ Similar to Ido Aharoni, Hughes preaches the need to *attract*.

In Hughes’ model, tourist attractions form the nucleus of the gay tourism system. Hughes explains the nucleus process as, “Nucleus becomes a tourist attraction or destination by the influence of markers such as guidebooks, films, books, television programmes and recommendations, and also promotional material generating images of the nucleus . . . If they relate positively to motivations, these images may generate tourist flow. Tourist places are thus marked or coded as such and the choice of places to visit is influenced by ‘place-myth’—the creation of image.”⁶⁴ This process is exemplified in the Gay Vibe campaign, which uses social media, foreign magazines, mobile phone applications, and international LGBT events to promote Tel Aviv as a tourist attraction, or nucleus, for gay tourists.⁶⁵ Gay Vibe provides tourists with a comprehensive online guide to gay Tel Aviv, consisting of detailed maps and weekly events and promotions. These physical advertisements and materials encourage a connection between the gay tourist and the city of Tel Aviv. The success of this process creates a cycle in which tourists come to Israel *because* of its tolerant, pro-gay ‘image.’

Doitsh describes Gay Vibe's image of the city: "The campaign sells Tel Aviv as a free, fun, and fabulous city. 'A metropolis along the beach, a free and safe place in which you can enjoy yourself.'"⁶⁶ Director of marketing for Tel Aviv Gay Vibe (2009 - 2012) and prominent gay-rights advocate/lesbian party promoter Anat Nir offers insight into the success of their branding campaign. Reacting to the 2011 "Best Gay City" award, Nir exclaimed, "[Y]ears of hard work, international travels and promotion [,] we finally did it. Tel Aviv is on the map. This news has got into every major communications channel here and we are very proud. Of course this means that this year is going to be full of LGBT incoming tourism which is our aim. Small city huge impact."⁶⁷

Israel has consistently invested in gay tourism since 2011 and the city and its reputation continue to thrive. However, Israel's own LGBT community is not as thrilled as the government and tourism industry. In 2016 the Israeli Ministry of Tourism announced a plan to invest 11 million Shekels to promote gay tourism to Israel overseas. This plan quickly came under fire by Israel's own LGBT community because the government had only allocated 1.5 million Shekels in funding to actual Israeli LGBT groups for the year.⁶⁸ The Aguda released the following statement condemning the government and the disparity in funding:

"Gay tourism is nice and the income it generates to the state is blessed. It's just that the LGBT citizens of Israel, who live all over Israel, all year long, not just on Tel Aviv Gay Pride Weekend, there is no physical security, no employment, no equal rights and the budgets for education, information and services to the community are pathetic and insulting. As we have said again and again at the Knesset on LGBT Rights Day, the huge investment in publicity abroad is absurd while the LGBT advocacy inside Israel gets zero funding and the State of Israel does nothing against the raging LGBT-phobia that claimed the life of Shira Banli Z"l⁶⁹ only last summer."⁷⁰

In response to the criticism the government agreed to invest 10 million Shekels annually for two years in the LGBT community.⁷¹ This controversy is representative of a perception that Israel's investment in its pro-gay brand is of a greater priority to the government than the ongoing well-being of its own LGBT community. The Labor Party's LGBT Caucus similarly noted in an official statement that six separate bills proposed to benefit the LGBT community were rejected just a month prior to this investment plan.⁷² The caucus echoed the Aguda's sentiments criticizing the government for prioritizing gay tourism over

the issues facing its LGBT citizens, including violence in schools and discrimination against LGBT individuals.

A 2018 report by the Nir Katz center for LGBT Violence reported a 26% increase in discrimination complaints by LGBTQ Israelis in the previous year, 17% of these complaints were of violent incidents and a majority came from transgender and gender queer individuals.⁷³ In response to the report Aguda chair Chen Arieli reflected on the societal discrimination facing LGBT Israelis,

“[M]any of the reports are just the tip of the iceberg, because behind them hide more cases that are not reported at all—be it from fear, shame or loss of trust in law enforcement . . . the unbearable ease with which LGBTphobia is translated into threats and violence, along with concrete discrimination, which requires all legal authorities to mobilize and fight with all their might. LGBTphobia is growing on a fertile ground of serious statements made by public figures, rabbis and MKs—and there’s no one to condemn or censure their words.”⁷⁴

Arieli’s statement highlights the need for government, law enforcement and religious authorities to protect the LGBT community and confront areas in which homophobia has been normalized in Israel. However he states that some members of these bodies are not succeeding in this effort and are even helping foster homophobic environments. Such actions are a direct contradiction of Israel’s pro-gay identity and external brand and most importantly a serious harm to the LGBT community. Discrimination and societal homophobia are especially relevant to LGBT Israelis living outside of the liberal center of Tel Aviv.

TEL AVIV THE BUBBLE? HOMOSEXUALITY OUTSIDE OF TEL AVIV

It is important to understand the distinctions between Tel Aviv and the rest of Israel when discussing Israeli homosexuality. The tendency in the Israeli government, pro-Israel organizations, and the international media to focus solely on Tel Aviv when discussing the subject of homosexuality and liberal values often distracts from the status of these subjects throughout the remainder of the country. As the purpose of this paper is to investigate Israeli homosexuality and city branding it will not delve into the widely different and challenging circumstances facing LGBT Palestinians. Instead it looks to explore the disparity of experience within Israel’s own LGBT community outside of Tel Aviv through the lens of Jerusalem and the ultra-Orthodox community. A central issue in this

analysis, highlighted in the replacement of a religious brand in Tel Aviv, is secular versus religious identity.

The branding decision to encourage a separation between religion and homosexuality in Tel Aviv suggests that the two cannot coexist. While this is technically incorrect, recent polling indicates that in Israel the link between religion and homophobia remains present. Additionally, while the branding efforts improved gay tourism to Tel Aviv and assuredly benefited the international perception of tolerance in Israel, homophobia is far more widespread than Israel's new reputation suggests. A 2013 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center asked, "Should Society Accept Homosexuality?" 47% percent of Israeli responses said "No," while only 40% said "Yes."⁷⁵ These statistics were particularly alarming since they came two years after Tel Aviv was voted the "Best of Gay Cities" worldwide. Also in 2013, the Israeli Democracy Index conducted a study in which they asked Israelis "It would bother me to have as neighbors. . . ." The answer "A homosexual couple" was chosen 46.2% (Arab sample),⁷⁶ 68.4% (Jewish Haredi sample), 48.4% (Jewish National Religious/Haredi-leumi sample), 37.5% (Jewish Traditional religious sample), 28.2% (Jewish Traditional non-religious sample), and 17.6% (Jewish Secular sample).⁷⁷

HOMOSEXUALITY IN JERUSALEM

Only an hour away, the Jerusalem brand varies significantly from that of Tel Aviv. Considered a holy city by Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, the country's capital is home to a large religious population. It is also home to an LGBT community. This community is proud and strong but often faces challenges. The Jerusalem Open House for Pride and Tolerance⁷⁸ provides a safe and supportive base for the Jerusalem LGBT community. The city is home to one gay bar and, like all Israelis, the residents are privy to extensive LGBT rights. The challenge in Jerusalem is the presence of homophobia in the city, especially in regards to the ultra-Orthodox community, and the suggestion that, in Jerusalem, homosexuality should remain a bit more covert. Tom Canning, a spokesman for Jerusalem Open House, explains, "There's a general sentiment, very mainstream in Israeli society, that the LGBT community in Jerusalem should keep their head down, shouldn't be visible and that the pride march is seen as a provocation against religious people."⁷⁹

Jerusalem Open House staff member, Ilay, expressed that visibility is a prominent issue facing Jerusalem's LGBT community. Ilay advocates for Jerusalem being seen and known for all of its communities, not only its more religious residents. Speaking about the LGBT community in Jerusalem, Ilay said,

There is a strong [LGBT] community here. And I feel that we are not seen publicly. When people think about Jerusalem, they wouldn't think about us. They would think about an Orthodox city, about a very religious city. I think Jerusalem has a lot of differences in the communities inside of it. And most of these differences don't show up and there are a lot of struggles within it. Even just, people that want children to be a little more secular or maybe more secular friendly.⁸⁰

The matter of secularization is, in fact, especially contentious in Jerusalem as a result of the city's more conservative Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities. Despite Ilay's hopes that Jerusalem's LGBT community gain visibility for its personal pride and identity, it has historically received attention as a result of its relations with the city's more homophobic residents or, worse, instances of violence and homophobia. The most visible and terrible manifestations of homophobia in Jerusalem have twice occurred during the city's annual pride parade.

Jerusalem Pride has had a troubled history. Though the first Tel Aviv Pride Parade took place in 1997 and draws an annual crowd of over 250,000, Jerusalem's own Pride began in 2002 and, at most, attracts a tenth of the marchers. Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox community protests this parade each year. These protests have taken the form of throwing eggs at marchers, putting up posters denouncing the parade, and referring to homosexuals as "subhuman."⁸¹ In 2006, Israeli Knesset member Bezalel Smotrich of the Jewish Home Party helped organize an anti-gay parade, referred to as the "Beast Parade," in Jerusalem in response to the city's Pride Parade.⁸² Smotrich, still at present a Knesset lawmaker, made comments in 2015 in which he referred to the annual Pride Parade as an "abomination."⁸³ These actions offer a window into the homophobic beliefs that are held by a variety of Knesset members, especially within the more conservative parties. In 2007 and 2008, the Israeli Knesset approved legislation to ban gay pride parades from taking place in Jerusalem. Though these laws were never passed, they represent some of the national and government sentiment regarding homosexuality's place in their capital.

The Jerusalem pride parade remains a source of contention in Israel today. Despite heavy security between 10,000 and 15,000 marchers attended the 2019 Jerusalem pride.⁸⁴ All participants were searched and tagged and the event was heavily barricaded by security and police. Twenty-two people were arrested at the march, one of whom was carrying a knife.⁸⁵ Jerusalem chief rabbi Aryeh Stern condemns all violence but opposes the march, stating in 2017, “The essence of this parade is contradicting the trend of Jerusalem as a holy city, and that is the city we want.”⁸⁶ To have the capital’s chief rabbi plainly suggest that a pride parade is a hindrance to the city’s desired religious identity contradicts with Israel’s pro-gay identity. In 2019 Stern reiterated his stance asking the Mayor to ban all pride flags at the Jerusalem march, complaining that “they make the city ugly.”⁸⁷

Jerusalem Pride was home to two eerily identical hate crimes in the years 2005 and 2015. In 2005, a Haredi Jewish man, Yishai Schlissel, stabbed three individuals marching in the parade. In regard to his crimes, Schlissel stated, “I came to murder in the name of God. Such abomination cannot exist in Israel.”⁸⁸ Schlissel was sentenced to 12 years in prison. He was released three weeks before Jerusalem’s 2015 Pride parade to which he returned and stabbed six more participants, one of whom died from her wounds.⁸⁹ Following this second senseless act of violence, Israeli media criticized the police for failing to enact measures to keep the recently released Schlissel away from the event.⁹⁰ Though this level of violence is exceptional, analysis of the ultra-Orthodox community does reveal widespread homophobic sentiment.

HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE ULTRA- ORTHODOX (HAREDI) COMMUNITY

The Haredi, or “ultra-Orthodox,” Jewish community in Israel makes up 12% of the nation’s overall population.⁹¹ The conservative, religious demographic grew to over one million Israelis in 2017.⁹² In a 2013 report, the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics lists the factors that distinguish the Haredim⁹³ from the rest of the Jewish population. Their description is included, *ver batum*, below.⁹⁴

- Internally diverse religious (“ultra-orthodox”) subculture, resisting modern culture and western lifestyles, guided by authoritative [r]abbis

- Live in self-segregated geographic communities
- Separate, distinctive educational institutions
- Early arranged marriages, high fertility norms
- Economic[s] based on private welfare institutions, universal state benefits, and female employment
- Distinct political parties protect way of life through political bargaining

The ultra-Orthodox community's high-birth rate has drawn significant attention in regard to the future breakdown of Israel's population. The average birth rate for Haredi women in 2017 was 6.9 children, as opposed to the 2.4 children in the non-Haredi Jewish population.⁹⁵ The Israeli Democracy Institute predicts that the Haredi community will equal 16% of the population by 2030 and will make up one third of Israel's population and 40% of its Jewish population by 2065.⁹⁶ The projected increase in size of this community suggests a likely growth in influence as well. In light of this probability, the ultra-Orthodox community's negative attitude towards homosexuality grows more significant to Israel's national identity and pro-gay brand and to the longterm survival of LGBT rights.

The ultra-Orthodox community strictly follows *Halacha*, Jewish religious law. *Halacha* alone dictates the ultra-Orthodox conversation on homosexuality, and according to *Halacha* it is forbidden. The Torah condemns same sex sexual acts between males in Leviticus 18:22, which reads, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination," and again in Leviticus 20:13, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." Though the Torah does not explicitly forbid same sex sexual acts between females, those too are considered against *Halacha*.

Historically, and still throughout many Israeli ultra-Orthodox communities, homosexual desires are completely ignored and repressed. Until recently, the existence of homosexuality was not acknowledged by the ultra-Orthodox. This ignorance was aided by the fact that *hara* (gossip) is not allowed in the ultra-Orthodox faith nor is *chilul Hashem* ("desecrating God's name").⁹⁷ Between those two rules alone, homosexual acts, when they do occur are not spoken about to anyone. The ultra-Orthodox rarely talk to their children about sex of any kind, thus creating a sexually uninformed environment in which even physical

activity between a husband and wife can be challenging. It is common in these communities for LGBT people to marry and have children regardless of their undisclosed identity. Among those ultra-Orthodox who do acknowledge such feelings, many rabbis would still advocate that the afflicted ignore their urges, marry, and reproduce.

In 2004 Rabbi Chaim Rapoport was widely considered the most progressive authority on ultra-Orthodox homosexuality. His 2004 book *Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox View* was the first book written on the subject by a respected member of the Orthodox community. Though he received widespread criticism for daring to write on the subject, the book was praised as brave and forward thinking by many of the more progressive thinking ultra-Orthodox. Rabbi Rapoport's "progressive" stance remained in line with religious law. He agrees that homosexuality goes against *Halacha*. At no point in the book does he explain how a same-sex couple could live according to *Halacha*. What made his book so groundbreaking was simply the fact that he acknowledged the struggle with homosexuality as real.

Until recently, the most "progressive" approaches to homosexuality in the ultra-Orthodox community were corrective therapy and abstinence. In Israel today "corrective" or "conversion" therapy, in which a person receives psychological treatment aimed at reversing their homosexual urges and teaching them to "become" straight, remains an all too real option. In 2016 the Knesset rejected a bill proposing that the use of conversion therapy on a minor be counted as a criminal offense.⁹⁸ In 2014 the largest Jewish conversion therapy operation JONAH was ordered to close in the United States by a New Jersey court. Following this case JONAH moved its headquarters to Israel and began operating under the name People Can Change.⁹⁹ Additionally the ultra-Orthodox organization Atzat Nefresh was founded in 2001 to address inappropriate sexual urges and behavior in the community, including homosexuality, pornography, sexual abuse, prostitution and masturbation. Atzat Nefresh, which translates to "Psychological Advice" offers conversion therapy intended to "reverse inclinations" in Orthodox individuals struggling with homosexual feelings.¹⁰⁰ Despite its presence in Israel conversion therapy still remains a somewhat progressive approach to homosexuality for many ultra-Orthodox. Common beliefs among the Israeli ultra-Orthodox community are either that homosexuality does not exist or, if

it does, homosexuals should ignore their feelings and marry members of the opposite sex.

In recent years a conversation has begun in the Modern Orthodox community and a few alternate approaches to the “homosexuality issue” have revealed themselves. Most notably, the formation of Yachad, a “liberal” Modern Orthodox congregation based in Tel Aviv, which is the first and only Orthodox congregation to allow openly gay members.¹⁰¹ The extent of that “openness” remains in question, especially in terms of *Halacha’s* stance on homosexuality. Even this most progressive community cannot condone acting against the law, but it has been suggested that a policy remnant of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” may have begun to form. In other words, since *Halacha* only forbids penetrative intercourse between two men, the congregation may choose to believe that its homosexual members abstain from such “illegal” acts while maintaining an otherwise intimate relationship. Budding tolerance for LGBT people in the Orthodox community has primarily taken place in more progressive Modern Orthodox congregations as opposed to the ultra-Orthodox.

The rise of homosexual acceptance worldwide, and certainly Israel’s pro-gay policies, has allowed some slight progress to take place within the ultra-Orthodox community. Following the 2015 stabbing attack at Jerusalem Pride, a group of individuals from the ultra-Orthodox community came to Jerusalem Open House and began a dialogue with a group of LGBT people and allies.¹⁰² This unprecedented occurrence represented for many of the participants, on both sides, the first real inter-community interaction. This conversation included a comment by a Haredi man regarding the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem distinction. The man, whose identity was not disclosed for his own protection, bluntly stated, “We’re very homophobic. The Haredi public community fears homosexuals and all those related concepts . . . As long as it’s in Tel Aviv that’s one thing, but when they come to Jerusalem it’s terrible.”¹⁰³

In September 2017 the resignation of ultra-Orthodox Shas party MK Yigal Guetta drew further attention to the status of homosexuality in the ultra-Orthodox community. Guetta was forced to resign after news broke that he and his family attended his nephew’s same-sex wedding ceremony. Speaking on his decision to attend Guetta said, “Beforehand, I told my kids: ‘We’re going to make him happy because he’s my sister’s son and I want him to be happy, but I want you to know that according to the Torah this [wedding] is forbidden and an abomination. I have

no leeway on this.”¹⁰⁴ Though Guetta never swayed from his beliefs his attendance alone sparked widespread outrage in the community. Five prominent ultra-Orthodox rabbis penned a letter condemning Guetta and calling for him to be fired for having “publicly desecrated God’s will.”¹⁰⁵ When reporting this story the leading Israeli news source *Haaretz* argued that the story was a sign of progress in the ultra-Orthodox community. The article, “Whisper It, but Israel’s ultra-Orthodox Community Is Starting to Talk About Homosexuality,¹⁰⁶” claimed that the bigger story was the fact that an ultra-Orthodox MK attended a gay wedding at all. The same article noted that the ultra-Orthodox MK Eliezer Moses had recently publicly acknowledged that one of his 10 children is lesbian and that he respects her and remains only concerned for her welfare. These and other exceptional instances in which homosexuality has been acknowledged, if not accepted, by public ultra-Orthodox figures are promising. Perhaps the community is moving from a system in which homosexuality is not recognized into one where it is at times acknowledged and even passively or secretly tolerated. Unfortunately, the overwhelming approach to homosexuality in the ultra-Orthodox Israeli community is still primarily judgment, condemnation, expulsion and even hate.

Ultra-Orthodox attitudes on homosexuality are relevant to Israel’s claims regarding its stance as a gay-friendly nation, especially as ultra-Orthodox influence in the government expands. Thus far the impact of religious rejection of homosexuality in Israel has manifested not only in the lack of gay marriage and the blocking of legislation but in the form of discrimination and violence. The passing down of homophobic hate to another generation is also particularly concerning. There are about 300,000 students, 18% of the Israeli student population, in ultra-Orthodox schools in Israel.¹⁰⁷ This matter gained public attention following the 2015 Jerusalem Pride stabbing, when an ultra-Orthodox school canceled their meeting with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. They informed the president that he was not welcome after hearing of the public support he offered to the LGBT community following the attack in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁸ The presence and encouragement of homophobia in ultra-Orthodox schools, despite the national policy of equality, has incited some government condemnation in the LGBT community.

Regarding the persistence of homophobia and the attack in Jerusalem, JOH spokesman Tom Canning shared his frustration in a *Jerusalem Post*

article: “[Canning] and others in the gay community . . . viewed the attack as symptomatic of the government turning a blind eye toward extremist religious rhetoric. [Canning said,] ‘LGBT people in Israel are regularly victims of discrimination . . . It can be violence, it can be rejection of services, it can be slurs on the street.’”¹⁰⁹ Though Tel Aviv is thriving and a necessary conversation on homosexuality has arisen in the most progressive circles of the ultra-Orthodox community, LGBT residents of Jerusalem and other, more homophobic, communities continue to struggle in Israel.

CONCLUSION

The actions analyzed in this paper, the provision of LGBT rights, the concentrated public-private effort to rebrand Tel Aviv, and the growth of the gay tourism industry, prove that homosexuality has been accepted, to an extent, into Israel’s national identity. The progressive rights afforded LGBT Israelis represent a liberal victory in a country that is largely defined by religion and geographic location in a region with little to no state-recognized LGBT tolerance. The advancement of gay rights in Israel allows countless individuals to live freely and proudly, particularly in the tolerant city of Tel Aviv, while simultaneously contributing to a shift in Israel’s international reputation from one of conflict and extremism to one of acceptance and modernity. In Tel Aviv, Israel has created a fiscally beneficial safe haven for Israeli and visiting LGBT people. Israel has also seen a substantial change in their international brand, now being widely perceived in the West as a “fun” and “liberal” destination.

However, the existence of religious and societal homophobia, sometimes seen through violent attacks, as well as the lack of gay marriage and blocking of pro-LGBT laws, including the recent surrogacy law, suggest that homosexuality is far from fully accepted into Israel’s identity. Though slow progress is being made in some progressive circles of the ultra-Orthodox community, it is not enough. Tolerance is still the exception in this community and discrimination and homophobia persist. Laws designed to further protect the LGBT community are failing in the Knesset, all while Israel benefits from its pro-gay external brand. Meanwhile the Haredi community is growing in numbers and political capital. If Israel is to promote itself as a tolerant gay destination the government must continue to institute legal and equal protections for its citizens and condemn the encouragement of hate against LGBT people.

This paper juxtaposed the rebranding of Tel Aviv as a gay city with the status of homosexuality in Jerusalem and the ultra-Orthodox community in order to investigate the pervasiveness of Israel's pro-gay brand. However, there are many other segments of the Israeli population significant to this discussion not addressed in this brief analysis. The legal rights granted to LGBT people in Israel have certainly impacted the lives of LGBT Israelis in areas apart from the aforementioned major cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Further the ultra-Orthodox community is not the only community, religious or otherwise, in Israel preaching homophobic beliefs. It was selected for this particular analysis on account of its size and growing influence in the Israeli political system. Also relevant to Israel's gay brand and not discussed in this paper is Israel's relationship with LGBT Palestinians. Israel's refusal to grant asylum to LGBT Palestinians both violates the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol¹¹⁰ and challenges its claim to be a "gay haven"¹¹¹ in the Middle East. Interested parties can also read into the disparity in LGBT resources for Arab-Israeli schools and the experience of LGBT Arab-Israelis in the Tel Aviv gay scene.

In conclusion, Israel has made a consistent effort to provide rights to LGBT Israelis since long before establishing Tel Aviv as a gay capital. The government has also frequently publically condemned violence against the LGBT community and encouraged tolerance throughout Israel. However, while investing in this tolerant pro-gay identity, it has also supported Israel's religious national identity allowing marriage to remain in the hands of the rabbinical courts and proponents of religious law to gain increasing political influence. This precarious balance between secular and religious identity impacts all levels of Israeli society and politics and is contributing to the current failure to institute more extensive legal rights for its LGBT citizens. Ultimately, if Israel is to continue promoting its pro-gay external brand then its government must invest equally in protecting and supporting its own LGBT community.

NOTES

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