

WINDY CITY TIMES

**Israel Pride Parade dedicated to transgender rights**  
 by Gretchen Rachel Hammond  
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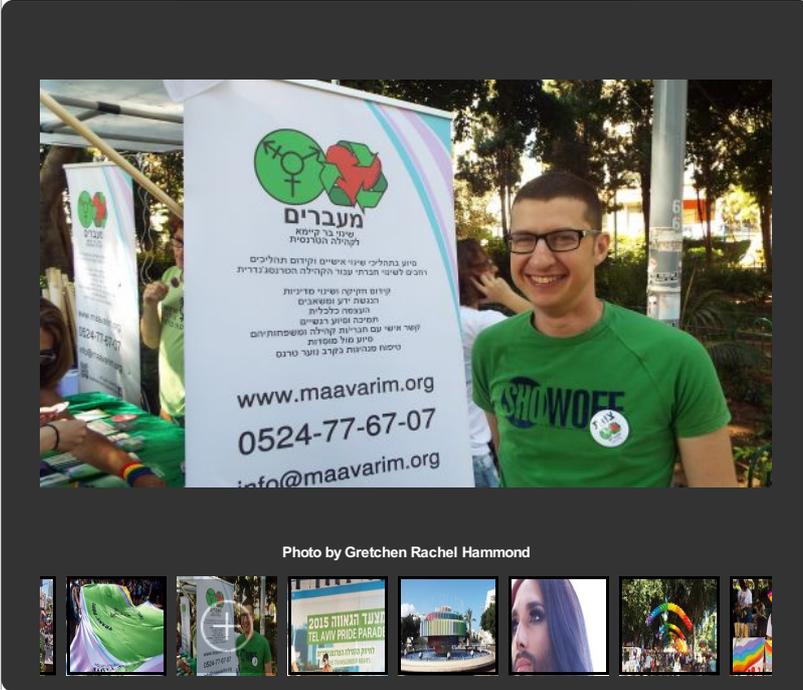


Photo by Gretchen Rachel Hammond



National Gay Media Association

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ISRAEL, June 12, 2015 — The message was written in Hebrew and English in green banners which proclaimed Israel's 17th Annual Pride Parade held in Tel Aviv on June 12. They stretched across both the traditional opening stage in the city's Meir Garden and its much larger brother set up at the ocean front Charles Clore Park at the end of the parade route.

The banners stated "For the Transgender Rights."

Organizers estimated an unprecedented 180,000 people from across Israel ( 17 percent of whom were international tourists ) not only saw the message but were active participants in it. In a marked difference to Chicago's event parade-goers did not simply line the route, they marched alongside, between and behind the nine massive floats which were each towed by semi-trucks. Beginning at 1:00 in the afternoon it took them some four hours to travel the route along Tel Aviv's beach front a little under two miles away from the starting point.

For the Israeli LGBTQ community, the 109 year-old-city founded as a suburb of the ancient port of Jaffa ( Yafo ), Tel Aviv-Yafo is an oasis. Promoted to the world outside of Israel as "the city that never stops" ( an deliberate correlation to New York City ) the LGBTQ community has essentially established a home base in Tel Aviv with a



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throwing nightlife, a homeless shelter for LGBTQ youth, a small, adult transgender housing facility and a Pride Center.

Meanwhile the country around it is still struggling to marry an exponentially growing social acceptance of LGBTQ issues with Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox religious opposition. For Israel's unofficially numbered transgender community this has led to measured advances in comparison to life in the United States such as State-covered transitional health care (albeit mired in bureaucracy which leaves applicants waiting a full calendar year before starting transition) and open service in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), but also the kind of negative issues all too familiar to the transgender community in Israel's most forthright ally the United States.

In January 2014 the English-language Israeli news organization Haaretz reported the attack of a trans woman by 11 IDF soldiers after she left her place of employment in the poor neighborhood of south Tel Aviv. The impoverished area is not one the Israeli government promotes at all outside of the country. Its transgender population includes Israeli trans youth kicked out of their homes by their families as well as refugees fleeing religious persecution in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Since those individuals are not considered citizens under Israeli law, they can claim no government assistance.

Windy City Times was told by trans advocates working in Tel Aviv that many have turned to sex work in order to survive and are thus the targets of both police profiling and harassment along with local violence.

In the weekend following the attack a protest called "Taking Back the Night" drew over 1,000 transgender people and their allies. Ten days prior to this year's parade, the Israeli press reported that the country's National Labor Court had ruled in favor of Marina Meshel—a trans woman fired from her place of employment at the Center for Educational Technology (CET).

The ruling forbid workplace discrimination on the grounds of gender identity. Currently Israel permits an official gender marker to be changed only following Gender Confirmation Surgery (GCS).

Such progress is not fast enough for many members of the Israeli transgender community.

Elisha is a trans man who works for Ma'avarim (passageways)—a trans advocacy group based in Tel Aviv. On June 10 the organization took the transgender fight to members of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament). "We took eight [trans] people who told their story," he said. "The discussion was about transgender education in Israel. It was amazing. Everybody cried. There was one story of a woman who has a 4-year old transgender daughter and there were also transgender youth who told theirs."

After it had been officially opened by Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai the night before, during this year's Pride parade themed "Tel Aviv Loves All Genders", the trans float was at the head of the line. Along its side written in Hebrew, the words "male" and "female" were unchecked. Instead, between them, the word "fabulous" was. A record number of trans community members decked in the vibrant green colors of Israeli trans pride (chosen to promote visibility and presence) walked alongside and behind the float holding a flag so massive it sometimes sagged in need of more people to keep it elevated.

The crowd of cisgender lesbians, gays, bisexuals and straight allies around them were only too keen to help.

In the stadium erected at Charles Clore Park Pride Master of Ceremonies—internationally famed commercial and video performer Uriel Yekutieli introduced over two hours-worth of acts from trans performance artists to dance troupes to an ecstatic crowd who crammed into the park. "This is my first year [as MC] Yekutieli told Windy City Times. "Every year it's someone else. But I've been a participant for, I don't know, the last five years. Statistically this is the biggest parade. In my memory it's the craziest. More people are coming each year and we didn't have a war this summer."

When Yekutieli introduced the show's headliner—2014 Austrian Eurovision Song Contest winner Conchita Wurst the audience became frenzied.

In a brief interview with Windy City Times, Wurst talked about perceptions of the trans community both outside and from within it.

"Many people just get it wrong that a drag queen does not mean being a trans person," she said. "I think it's very important because I cannot imagine how it must be to be in the wrong body. I keep on telling everybody that what we drag queens do is show business and being a trans person is real life. I have so much respect and I think it's so beautiful that we have this huge family of LGBTQ [people]. But trans people are rising and people like Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner are using their opportunities to reach so many people through one microphone and one interview that they raise awareness. I truly believe that respect is linked to knowledge. Many people just don't know about the LGBTQ community, especially its trans people so we have to talk about it. We have to explain it to them. I hope this will change a lot. I definitely believe in it."



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