

## Democracy, Tolerance and the 'Gay Pride' Event

By Shlomo Fischer

A generation ago, a New York writer once remarked that, for her, Israel is an ongoing World War II movie. I do not know if that is still the case, but Israel certainly provides battlefields. In June, following the capture of Gilead Shalit, the IDF conducted a campaign in Gaza. After that came the Lebanese war. The latest battlefield, though of a different sort, is the International Gay Pride Parade due to take place in Jerusalem on Friday November 10.

Orthodox Jewish groups who make up a large portion of Jerusalem's and the Islamic Movement have promised violent demonstrations against it. They have learned to employ the language of rights in making their argument – stating that while the gay groups have argued that they have the right to freely assemble and publicly celebrate their identity, a gay pride parade in fact infringes upon Jewish Orthodox and Muslim rights. Such groups find such a display so offensive that it involves actual damage to individuals and communities. Do they have a point?

In order to resolve this, we have to go back to the very roots of the modern concept of tolerance. The term tolerance goes back to the latin root *tolerer*, to bear or to suffer. To tolerate means to bear and suffer something that otherwise I would find offensive and painful. In modern secular societies, most people don't tolerate others who differ in religion, most people are simply indifferent. For many liberal, secular people religion simply is not important or credible enough for one to be intolerant towards it. This was not always the case. In the early modern world actual tolerance towards religious minorities was needed – Catholics were considered Papist idolaters who worshipped their images and the saints and Jews were considered deicides. Majority Protestant or Christian groups were called upon to bear and suffer these others whose very existence they found offensive.

In Jerusalem there is very little indifference both in religion and towards sexual orientation. But we can call upon ourselves and others to be to be *tolerant*: to suffer and bear others whom we find offensive in the name of a higher good. I am an Orthodox Jew and I am offended by the public flaunting of a homosexual identity.

Nevertheless I believe that the Gay Pride parade should be allowed to take place and its participants should be protected from violence. The public sphere in Jerusalem and other places in Israel has to be kept open. I am sure that I proclaim values – religious and political, that others find offensive. If I want to insure my right to do so, I must insure that right to others no matter how much they offend me.

But I reiterate, I am not indifferent and I am not a relativist. I firmly believe that the good life involves heterosexual family structures. I will therefore demonstrate, peacefully and in accordance with police instructions against the homosexual lifestyle. It is not only my religious duty, but my civic duty as well. A commitment towards rights and towards keeping the public sphere open does not imply an atomistic or indifferent society. In a healthy society citizens must engage and debate about how life ought to be lived and such a society - without infringing upon the rights of individuals – should make commitments (via taxation and education) towards encouraging certain lifestyles and not others. Only then will its members develop a sense of commitment and loyalty towards it. While some members of our community fear this coming Friday, I in fact am looking forward to a frank debate with my fellow citizens from the Gay community.

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