

WORLD

Israeli gays out of closet, on screen

By Andrew Meisels
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JERUSALEM — Israel's first gay film festival will be held this week despite the strident objections of the Jewish state's religious community.

The hall where the festival's 29 films will be shown is in the Valley of Hinnom, condemned by biblical prophets as a place where vile and wicked rites were practiced.

The location apparently made such a strong impression on the Israelites that the Hebrew word for hell, "ghennom," literally means "the Valley of Hinnom."

That point is not lost on Yitzhak Levi, a member of parliament from the National Religious Party.

"This abomination will be a continuation of the valley's cult," he said, urging that the festival be banned. "I don't want Jerusalem to go the way of San Francisco, to become a center of homosexual and lesbian culture, a culture of perverts."

Festival organizer Enulla Shamir obviously does not agree. She noted that the 29 films come from seven countries and address such subjects as homosexuality among Jews and how the Holocaust affected homosexuals.

its an honor for Jerusalem to be hosting this festival," Miss Shamir said, calling it "a celebration of the rights of the individual."

No one knows how many homosexuals are in Israel. In what is largely a traditional, family-oriented culture, most gay men and lesbians prefer to stay in the closet.

But increasing numbers of Israeli homosexuals are demanding equal rights. The furor over the festival is only the latest in a string of controversies involving homosexuality — a subject that was hardly mentioned in Israel a few years ago.

Then came last year's Supreme Court ruling that a homosexual steward for El Al, the national airline, was entitled to a free ticket for his live-in companion. Spouses traditionally are entitled to free tickets.

That precedent-setting ruling set off homosexuals' demands for other rights. A Tel Aviv University professor won a free membership to the school's swimming pool for his male lover.

In another case, the longtime male companion of an army colonel who died demanded a widow's death benefit. That army is considering that claim.

Parliament's Labor Committee is seeking to put together legislation on homosexual rights in the workplace and invited an expert on traditional Jewish law, Nahum Rackover, to testify:

"Sexual relations between members of the same sex are defined by the Bible as an abomination," he told the committee. "For generations, such relations were considered a perversion. Only recently have they become an 'orientation.'"

Rabbi Moshe Feldman of the United Torah Judaism Party laments the trend of more open homosexuality.

"We must do everything we can," he said, "to keep Israel from becoming Sodom and Gomorrah."