

141-3

Gays in Jerusalem Parade Their Pride

By JOEL GREENBERG

JERUSALEM, June 7 — Jerusalem has had its share of religious processions, military marches and national parades throughout its nearly 4,000 years of history.

Today it had its first gay pride parade, over loud protests from Orthodox Jewish politicians and some demonstrators, who condemned it as a celebration of sin.

As a scattering of religious hecklers jeered from the sidelines, a crowd that the police estimated at nearly 4,000 marched under rainbow-colored flags and balloons through the city center, pouring into a pedestrian mall that had been shunned by many residents after several suicide bombings in the area.

The usual pall of tension downtown lifted for a while as the carnival-like procession moved up the Ben-Yehuda mall and down King George Street, a main thoroughfare often lined with Israeli flags but today hung with large rainbow banners.

"When the flags went up yesterday I couldn't believe that such a thing could happen in a city that is so polarized and full of hatred," said a marcher, Eitan Buchwall, 31.

With its substantial Orthodox population and deep rifts between religious and secular Jews, and between Jews and Arabs, Jerusalem seemed an unlikely site for a parade celebrating tolerance and diversity.

Similar parades have been held in recent years in predominantly secular Tel Aviv, where gays say they feel more accepted and can visit an assortment of cafes, clubs and bars that cater to them. There are only a handful of such places in Jerusalem, and a local gay community center opened less than four years ago.

Gay organizations are not heard much in Israel's raucous political and social debates, but they have become more vocal in recent years. Their representatives have been invited to Parliament, and more dem-

onstrations supporting gay rights have been held.

In Jerusalem, a bastion of political as well as religious conservatism, the gay population has had limited impact. City officials rejected a request from the organizers to help finance the march, but agreed to put up flags and barriers along the procession route.

The march drew strong protests from Orthodox members of the city council, who called the gathering a provocation. "This is a march of shame," said Eli Simchaioff, a council member and deputy mayor from the strictly Orthodox Shas Party. "These are sick people. Jerusalem is a holy city, and they want to turn it into Rome or Paris."

As loudspeakers blared "Let the Sun Shine In" and "We Shall Overcome" over Zion Square this afternoon, gay men and lesbians converged for the march and an outdoor party at a city park, complete with performers in drag, under a sign saying "Love Without Borders."

Wrapped in a rainbow flag, Eliezer Peles, 21, a gay student who was formerly a strictly Orthodox Jew, said he was elated. "This city has been choking us," he said, "and today we're saying that we are here and we don't have to run and hide."

In recognition of Jerusalem's sanctity to Jews, Christians and Muslims, the march began with a blessing in Hebrew, English and Arabic. A speaker wearing a multicolored skullcap proclaimed the gathering "a sacred moment of brotherhood and peace" and appealed to Orthodox protesters nearby: "We have one Father. Worship God in your way and let us worship in ours."

The protesters would not hear of it. "This is not Sodom!" said a sign held by a group of Orthodox youths, who blew whistles and chanted, "There's no place for homosexuals in the Jewish state."

Shlomo Zaken, 56, a bus driver,

was livid. "You should be ashamed of yourselves!" he shouted at the gay marchers before the police took him away. "Not in the Holy City."

"God is punishing the Jewish people for these people's deeds," he added, asserting that attacks on Israelis were signs of divine wrath.

But other onlookers said they had no problem with the parade.

"People can do what they like," said Ofir Ben-David, 30, as he watched from his souvenir shop. "Live and let live. They're colorful and they're livening up downtown, which was dead."

Gil Naveh, 19, one of the marchers, said their mission was sacred. "We are sanctifying life," he said. "We're telling people that they can live the way they want."

Hagai El-Ad, director of the local gay center and an organizer of the rally, said the aim of the gathering was to make Jerusalem a more open city.

"If men can walk holding hands in downtown Jerusalem, it won't detract from the holiness of the city, but contribute to it," he said. "Every human being was created in God's image."



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Dancing in Independence Park was part of a gay pride celebration in Jerusalem, the first in the city's history.