

From Lesbian Radicalism to Trans-Masculine Innovation: The Queer Place of Jerusalem in Israeli LGBT Geographies (1979-2007)

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Standard narratives of Israeli LGBT history treat Jerusalem as a foil to Tel Aviv. Jerusalem represents religiosity, nationalism and strife whereas Tel Aviv is seen as secular, global and tolerant to divergent sexual and gender expression. Notwithstanding, two influential forces in Israeli LGBT activism had their roots in Jerusalem: The Community of Lesbian Feminists (CLaF) which was active between 1987-2007 and was the longest-lasting statewide lesbian organization that ever existed in the country. The second significant force was the emergence in Jerusalem in the years 2004-2007 of a trans-masculine group, whose performances, posters and camaraderie laid the groundwork to Israeli trans organized advocacy. This article argues that it is not a coincidence that these groupings emerged in Jerusalem. The combination of a heightened political awareness and a pronounced sense of fragility resulted in different LGBT communal configurations than those prevalent in Tel Aviv. This article is based on thirteen interviews with activists and on published and unpublished personal memoirs, flyers and documents.

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Jerusalem occupies an odd place in the symbolic geographies of Israeli LGBT communities. Whereas Tel Aviv is usually viewed as the main site of LGBT social life, organization, and communal self-awareness, Jerusalem is considered its conservative negative (Misgav and Hartal, 2019). As Gilly Hartal formulated it: "Although in other Israeli cities LGBT public visibility is generally tolerated, Jerusalem is noteworthy for its many years of overt antagonism toward LGBT presence in the public space" (Hartal 2016, 1195). Its religiosity, poverty and explosive political disputes seem to function as inhibiting factors to the robust growth of an open and assertive community. It was in the Jerusalem March for Pride and Tolerance in July 2015 that an ultra-Orthodox militant, Yishai Schlissel, murdered 15-year old Shira Banki and stabbed five other people. Schlissel had just finished serving a ten-year sentence for stabbing three people in the Jerusalem March of 2005 and stated a week before the second assault that "it is the obligation of every Jew to keep his soul from punish-

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ment and stop this giant desecration of God's name next Thursday" (Jerusalem Post Aug. 6, 2015). In contrast to the Tel Aviv Municipality, whose financial and logistical support for gay tourism and LGBT social life has increased in leaps and bounds during the past two decades, the Jerusalem municipality refused for many years to support its lone LGBT organization, the Jerusalem Open House (JOH). Only a decision of the Israeli High Court of Justice in 2010 compelled Jerusalem City Hall to allocate funds to the JOH on the same footing as other community centers (Misgav, 2019; Misgav and Hartal, 2019).

Yet, despite its acknowledged conservatism, two influential forces in Israeli LGBT activism had their roots in Jerusalem: the first was the lesbian feminist organization CLaF (Community of Lesbian Feminists) which was founded in 1987 as the brainchild of Jerusalem activist Haya Shalom (Rachamimov, 2015). CLaF has been so far the only statewide lesbian organization and played a central role in articulating lesbian concerns and interests from its creation in 1987 to its demise in 2007 (Shalom, 2005; Rachamimov, 2015). The second significant force was the emergence in Jerusalem in the years 2004-2007 of a trans-masculine group, whose parties, posters and communal activism laid the groundwork to the foundation in 2011 of Project Gila for Transgender Empowerment and subsequently in 2014 to the formation of Ma'avirim (Crossings) – Israel most active transgender organization.

This article argues that it is not a coincidence that these new groupings emerged in Jerusalem. Despite an official Israeli line about a "unified Jerusalem" the city is widely perceived to be divided between "east" and "west", and along religious, ethnic and economic lines. Neighborhoods "belong" to different communities and mundane practices - such as dress, spatial movements or dining choices – are understood to be political to a far greater measure than in Tel Aviv. It would be difficult to think of another city where LGBT issues seem to reverberate so broadly, affecting communal, municipal, national and at times even international politics (El-Ad, 2008). Hagai El-Ad, the Director of the JOH between 2000-2006, argued that every success in communal organization in Jerusalem met with fierce opposition, escalating occasionally into menacing rhetoric and outright violence (El-Ad, 2008). I would like to contend that this heightened political awareness and the pronounced sense of fragility resulted in the emergence in Jerusalem of local configurations which were at times radically different than those prevalent in Tel Aviv and in other places in Israel. However, these same local factors meant that these new configurations found it difficult to flourish within the city and indeed both CLaF and the transgender organizations eventually established themselves in Tel Aviv.

In more theoretical terms I would like to suggest that the framing process of LGBT life in Jerusalem cannot but be different than its counterpart in Tel Aviv despite the mere 60 kilometers that separate the two cities (Ferree and Merrill, 2000; Bentford and Snow, 2000). Local actors address a different set of concerns, deal with different social agendas and cultivate different political and social alliances.

They make use of different social and political frames to enable what they view as meaningful LGBT existence. As Hagai El-Ad described the Jerusalem March for Pride and Tolerance:

We took a global brand - the Pride March - and adapted it locally. We were careful to steer clear of commercializing the event in contrast to marches in other global capitals and in Tel Aviv [...] an event like the march in Jerusalem is a demonstration for human rights and cannot sell out to this or that commercial brand. The marchers in Jerusalem do it for social change and not as devotees of a certain mobile phone or a soft drink. In addition, we refrained from excessive sexuality or nudeness. Not because we agree with the prudery of the public discourse about sexuality (we disagree) or because gays do not have sexuality (we do) but because we are sensitive and pragmatic (El-Ad, 2008, 298).

In framing LGBT advocacy differently than in Tel Aviv, community activists in Jerusalem engage in a creative social process that compliments other urban settings. One might think of Israeli LGBT life as a spatially connected network where "activists are embedded in strong tie relations to allies in their localities. These strong tie relations provide a distinctive set of resources (emotional, material and symbolic) that are essential for successful mobilisations" (Nicholls, 2009, 78-79). Thus, although the "external" structure of political opportunity in Jerusalem seldom allows for dramatic successes, the creative framing process taking place internally contributed and still contributes to the successful social mobilization of the Israeli LGBT community as a whole (Hermann, 1996; Meyer, 2004).

As a transgender and a queer historian I find it unfortunate that most scholarship on Israeli LGBT issues have tended to replicate the power relations within the LGBT community and within society at large (Kama, 2019). This scholarship dealt mostly with gay men, with legal cases in upper courts, with representation in main media outlets and with the activity of the Tel Aviv based "Aguda – The Association for LGBTQ Equality in Israel". Lesbian, transgender and most conspicuously bisexual issues and identities have not been extensively studied (Frankfort-Nachmias and Shadmi, 2005; Eisner, 2012; Misgav and Johnston 2014; Rachamimov, 2015; Engelstein, 2015; Safran et.al., 2016; Engelstein and Rachamimov, 2019; Kama, 2019). Beside trying to amend a scholarly imbalance this article argues that innovative impulses in Israeli LGBT history have emerged in spaces and among groups viewed by the center as marginal, conservative or peripheral (Hartal 2015; Misgav and Hartal, 2019; Nadan and Tzfati in preparation). The vector of activism and change has been more complex and multi-directional than is usually recognized.

This article is based on thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted with activists in the years 2012-2019. I first encountered the core group of Jerusalem lesbian activists during a meeting in the JOH in 2012 entitled "The Lesbian Herstory of Jerusalem." These Lesbian pioneers protested that Jerusalem LGBT history was being told only from the perspective of gay men, and subsequently four of them

agreed to be interviewed in sessions lasting between one and three hours. Through the method of snowball sampling I was introduced to additional actors who were not in the meeting. As a transgender historian and campaigner I had been already acquainted with most of the members of the trans-masculine group. Ten of the interviews were recorded and transcribed while three were conducted in writing by mail. I also relied extensively on published and unpublished personal memoirs, flyers and documents that activists had kindly shared with me.¹

FEMINIST AND LESBIAN ACTIVISM IN JERUSALEM IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

Feminist activism emerged in Israel in the early 1970s, inspired by second-wave feminists in Europe and North America. In contrast to earlier women's organizations in Israel that worked within the bureaucratic structure of the state or of the General Federation of Labor (Histadrut), the new groups espoused a much more open and confrontational approach, and operated independently of official circles. As Marcia Freedman Israel's first self-acknowledged feminist MK (and in retrospect Israel's first lesbian MK) wrote in her memoirs:

The fear and hostility that feminism aroused in widening circles lasted throughout the seventies and into the eighties fed by an unflagging, negative press. We were described routinely as aggressive, shrill, emotional, unkempt, ugly and of course utterly wrong... we shouted at each other sweated profusely and we never resolved our differences (Freedman, 1990, 50-52).

These diverse feminist groups beginning to take shape in Israel's main urban centers in the early 1970s wanted to debunk "the myth of women equality" in Israeli society by exposing gender discrimination and highlighting the prevalence of violence and harassment. As historian and activist Hannah Safran argued, "so deep was the conviction that women are equal in Israeli society that any attempt to challenge this 'fact' attracted widespread critique and the charge that this [i.e. feminism] was 'foreign import' that had no relevance to Israeli society" (Safran, 2006, 69-70).

Although all Israeli feminist groups shared an anti-establishment consciousness and a decision "not to be nice" they differed in emphasis and in goals: Freedman's group in Haifa emerged first within the recently founded University of Haifa and relied mostly on the energies of recent immigrants from the US. Their main activity in the early 1970s consisted of consciousness raising groups (CR), discussions of feminist literature and critique of Israeli society. In the late 1970s the Haifa group went on to establish the first shelter for battered women in Israel and the first feminist and lesbian bookstore. The Tel Aviv group which was founded in 1972 on the model of Haifa group attracted women who were already active in civil rights issues, though not necessarily feminist ones. The feminist group in Tel Aviv em-

phasized legal reform and was especially active in advocating sweeping changes in Israeli property law, matrimonial law and abortion law which all placed women at a disadvantageous position. The Tel Aviv group was most inclined to work with politicians within the system and on the whole identified as "Zionist" (Freedman 1990).

The Jerusalem feminist group was founded independently of the Haifa and Tel Aviv centers and on a completely different ideological premise. Freedman described the group as anti-Zionist and "in Israeli terms, as well as our own at the time, it was beyond the pale." Dorit Ortal, a Jerusalem lesbian activist recounted:

The Jerusalem branch was formed by women active in left organizations like Shasi [acronym of "Socialist Israeli Left"] which was communist, and Matspen ["compass" in Hebrew], an anti-Zionist, Trotskyite organization. Marxist and socialist theory was very much behind our feminist awareness (Moore, 1995, 62).

Whereas the Haifa and Tel Aviv branches predominantly dealt with women's issues and oppression, the Jerusalem branch protested also the oppression of Palestinians and of Jewish citizens of North African descent. Their emancipation program was much broader in conception and some members advocated a revolutionary change in Israel as part of a new hoped for Socialist Middle East. On May First 1972 the Jerusalem group demonstrated alongside the Israeli Black Panthers, Matspen and other communist organizations "against poverty, discrimination and annexation of the [West Bank] territories...and against the oppression of women in Israel and the world." (Safran, 2006 81-82). The respectable liberal newspaper *Haaretz* called this demonstration the first "feminist demonstration in Israel" while the General Federation of Labor launched a complaint with the Israel Broadcast Authority (which controlled almost all television and radio programming in the country) about the disproportionate coverage of the Jerusalem radical demonstrations which led to "a grotesque and perverted picture about the essence of May First" (Safran *ibid*; *Maariv* May 8, 1972). Marcia Freedman and her colleagues in Haifa and Tel Aviv suspected the Jerusalem group being a front for the extreme left in an attempt to take over the nascent feminist movement: "for many it was an early warning that we needed to keep the politics of the Middle East out of the women's movement. But try as we would, the Arab-Jewish conflict always played a decisive role in the development of Israeli feminism." (Freedman, 1990).

While the Haifa and Tel Aviv groups drew on a variety of feminist and liberal models of protest, the Jerusalem group seemed to have been inspired almost exclusively by the "new left" and by radical socialist feminist literature. However, despite its social and political radicalism, the Jerusalem group was unequivocally heterosexual. "It was a *very straight* movement" emphasized Dorit Ortal in an interview she gave in the late 1980s under the pseudonym of Ora Yarden. "A lot of the issues we focused on were about living with men, and how not to give in to them" (Moore, 1995, 63). In a talk in 2012 in the JOH Ortal recounted how the women liberation movement in Jerusalem maintained a firm heterosexual façade into the mid-1980s

and how difficult it was to create a legitimate space for lesbian subjectivity within the group: "not that anyone at the time thought that feminists were anything but lesbians", she remarked wryly, "my family and friends knew I was a lesbian even before I knew, just because I joined the women's lib movement" (Interview Ortal).

Creating a space for lesbians within the Israeli feminist movement required small steps. Lesbian activists had to overcome the fears of their straight colleagues while bridging the profound political differences among the three urban groups. The first attempt to raise lesbian issues came in 1974 in a joint meeting of representatives of the three groups. A motion to create a separate CR group for lesbian women was voted down as too risky for the image of the new movement and as jeopardizing the whole endeavor. However, the breakthrough came in August 1976 at a conference in Kibbutz Gezer devoted to the issue of women sexuality. Ofra, one of the organizers of the conference and at the time deeply-closeted lesbian, came out openly to the other women. 22 years later she recounted the circumstances of her dramatic coming out: "at the beginning of the conference, a woman stood up and announced haughtily: 'I am bisexual and I don't have any problem with men or women, what's the big deal?'...for the first time I presented myself as a lesbian, and attacked the woman's smug indifference and lack of political awareness." Other lesbians who were present at the conference also came out "and the discussion flipped from one about women's sexuality to lesbianism" (Shalom, 2005, 41).

The conference in Gezer was a watershed event not only in that, as Ofra related, "we stopped stuffing ourselves in the closet, and started talking frankly [which] was a great relief," but also in the sense that it led to organized social activities for Israeli lesbian women: "parties, picnics, potluck dinners." The word "lesbian" began to assume also a positive meaning for these women, whereas before the mid-seventies as Marcia Freedman recalled it was used as "the most humiliating and offensive word someone could hurl at a group of women, demonstrating or distributing flyers" (Shalom undated). This new and more assertive consciousness translated into the creation in 1978 of the first lesbian organization, Aleph [acronym in Hebrew of *Irgun Lesbi Feministi* the Lesbian Feminist Organization] (Shalom, 2005, 44). Although Aleph existed only for a year and a half, it was the first Israeli lesbian organization that brought together the three feminist centers. Still, the lack of clear organizational structure coupled with tensions between those who identified as lesbian Zionists and those who identified with the communist left led to the demise of Aleph.

During the next seven years lesbian social and political activity took place primarily within local feminist groups. In Jerusalem a new feminist center—Kol HaIsha [the Voice of Woman]—was opened in 1979 by Nurit D and Terry, who had become an open couple after Nurit left her Kibbutz and husband. "The feminist movement was so glorious, so exciting and fresh and new and creative...I phoned Ofra to tell her I had arrived...and I have come to set up a Women's Center in Jerusalem. She said 'you're crazy'. I asked her to get together all the old feminists to meet with

me, so I could put a proposition to them." (Moore, 1995, 126-7). However, although most members of Kol HaIsha were lesbians, "lesbianism" recounted Nurit, "wasn't a primary issue at that point...for me it always was feminism, rather than lesbianism *per se*. I had my lesbian crowd, my lesbian partner. And at that point that was enough." (Ibid).

Kol HaIsha in Jerusalem offered a bookstore, a lending library, various social and cultural events, CR groups, counseling sessions and a consensual decision-making process. The center, recalled Haya Shalom "quickly became a magnet for lesbians. I took my first steps at the center. Until then, it had never occurred to me to dedicate myself to political activity. Politics did not interest me—I viewed it as corrupt and a place for power struggles. However, the way the center operated, the passions of activity, the dedication of the women, the free expression of feelings and emotions, the language and the new terminology—all jolted my system." (Shalom, undated). Shalom who was active in the Committee for Solidarity with Bir Zeit University in the West Bank and in the other radical left groups, felt it was only in Kol HaIsha she found her true voice and calling. "For three years I was a member of the Kol HaIsha collective, I grew many sides of myself: my personality, professional skills like PR and organizing. I learned how to be a spokesperson—before that I couldn't express myself at all." (Moore, 1995, 312).

However, as Shalom and Ortal pointed out, there were two features of Kol HaIsha that eventually spelled its demise. First, there was a large group of English-speaking members who preferred to use their mother tongue in the center's activities rather than Hebrew. Haya Shalom estimated that "half of the activists were either *olot ha-dashot* [newly-arrived Jewish female immigrants to Israel] or Anglo-Saxon women who came to Israel for a short time. The point was it was very American-oriented. I had to struggle with the language, and the only way I could know stuff was to read and talk in English with my Anglo-Saxon friends mostly Americans. So on one hand I felt, 'this is my place' and on the other hand I felt, 'this is too American for me.'" (Moore, 1995, 312). Dorit Ortal recalled that in terms of ideology and political thinking the "Anglo-Saxons" did not add much to what she knew. After all, she had been active for a decade in unionizing and radical-left causes, especially in solidarity with Palestinians, and had read Marxist and Anarchist literature widely. Yet, in terms of feminist and Lesbian activities she did feel she could learn much from the American example. While visiting the Bay Area in 1980 she came across the "Take Back the Night" marches and decided to organize one in Jerusalem. On March 8, 1981, International Women's Day (not commemorated in Israel at the time in contrast to Mother's Day), "we organized a march with torches and candles in the streets of Jerusalem. People threw stones at us. We had a rally with speeches. It was *very* exciting to be out in the streets confronting society." (Moore, 1995, 70). Still, while being inspired by the "oppositional techniques" of American lesbians, she felt there was something condescending even "colonialist" in their attitude toward

Israeli-born lesbians. This created ongoing tensions within the group (Interview Ortal).

A second problematic aspect of Kol HaIsha was that it was not lesbian enough for some of its members, despite being staunchly radical in its political and social positions. Although the center's core group of 15 dedicated organizers was predominantly lesbian (only two identified as straight) its activities usually skirted lesbian issues and desires: "we lesbians were providing services to straight women, what about our needs" complained one of them. A more sexually-open alternative emerged in what has been called the Malha Community (located in south-western Jerusalem on the former lands of the Palestinian village of al-Maliha which existed until the summer of 1948). In the late 1970s three lesbian and bisexual working-class women purchased a house together in Malha. One of them—Na'ama Shapira—had a child with a Swiss man who lived in Israel for some time, and the three women decided to build a home together. That home would eventually evolve into an unofficial gay and lesbian social center and for a period of twenty years would host parties and other events. Although the Malha Community was avowedly apolitical it seemed to have created what Hakim Bey termed as a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), a physical space which facilitates non-hegemonic discourses and social interactions (Bey, 1991). As Dorit Ortal recalled, the Malha Community would host parties that involved up to a hundred people, most were gay and lesbian, but about a quarter of the participants were straight. There were also gay Palestinian men at some of the parties, about six-seven at a time. The lesbians were often organized according to butch/femme identities something that Dorit Ortal liked very much but which Kol HaIsha center eschewed at the time (as did many other radical lesbian groups in the US in the 1970s and 1980s). "I met some glorious butch lesbians," she recounted in an interview, "and as a femme I was overjoyed." (interview Ortal). Although the Malha Community adopted an apolitical stance with some of its members preferring not to use the word "lesbian" at all as being too political and controversial, it did reach out to Jerusalem gay and lesbian residents by organizing New Year and Passover dinners, while elaborating and legitimizing alternative forms of familial forms.

The Malha Community attracted some members of Kol HaIsha and there was a continuous trickle from the latter group to the former group. And although Kol HaIsha center became more radical in its political activity in the years 1981-1983 protesting publically and energetically against the Lebanon war of 1982 and against Israeli occupation of the West Bank, there was a rising friction within the collective and a sense of burn-out among those who put in 30-40 weekly hours of unpaid work in addition to their regular jobs. The Israeli lesbians felt that "the American woman conveyed arrogance and were infuriating in giving advice to the locals...[they] were getting support from their families back home and were insensitive to the economic difficulties of the local women, many from working-class and often poor families" (Shalom, 2005, 49). "Sometimes," reported Haya Shalom, "there were even out-

bursts of anger that threatened the very survival of the community." (Ibid). Yet, the feeling among those interviewed for this paper, is that during four very intensive years of existence Kol HaIsha was an incubator for a new lesbian consciousness: it "fertilized the lesbian community, hardened it for social and political struggles that would yet emerge, and sharpened the Israeli-Feminist identity." (Ibid).

This hardened "oppositional consciousness" expressed itself in what would become two of the most sustained feminist and lesbian-feminist frameworks that Israel had ever known: The Women in Black (*Nashim BeShachor*) movement and the Israeli lesbian-feminist organization, CLaF. The Women in Black anti-occupation movement was not an exclusively a lesbian or Jerusalem affair. It swept Israel in the winter of 1987-88 and encompassed women from all walks of life, straight and gay, Jews and non-Jews, Palestinian and Israeli. Yet its epicenter was Jerusalem, Israel's political and religious capital, and its social make-up was estimated by a few participants to be at least thirty percent lesbian, perhaps as high as fifty percent (Safran, 2005). The protest movement began in February 1988, three months after the outbreak of the first Intifada, when a group of women peace activists from Jerusalem started to hold anti-occupation vigils each Friday, dressed in black and holding anti-occupation banners in Hebrew, English and Arabic. The initiative spread to other cities with anti-occupation vigils being held on main squares, in intersections and alongside highways. Women in Black demonstrations took place in full force during the years 1988-1991 and began to dwindle after the Gulf War and the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, ceasing completely with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the end of the first Intifada. It was revived in much reduced numbers with the second Intifada and continues so to this day.

Women in Black was a landmark movement for several reasons. First it was the first peace movement in Israel in which women took center stage. As we have seen women activists played an important role in radical left movements in the early 1970s, and many women joined the Peace Now movement in 1978, demanding peace talks with Israel's neighbors and with Palestinians in the West Bank. However, as Hannah Safran and other historians pointed out, the formal leadership of the Israeli peace movement was exclusively male, and "women found themselves in the lower ranks of campaign organizations—the envelope stuffers and stamp lickens." (Safran, 2005, 194). Furthermore, the leadership of Peace Now consisted of ex-army men officers who legitimized their critique by their experience as fighters. Women officers, for example, were not permitted to sign the famous Officers Letter that launched the movement in 1978 (Safran, 2005, 194). The second important feature of Women in Black was that it did not sugarcoat its campaign in maternalist terminology. Whereas some of the earlier 1980s anti-war movements (such as Mothers/Parents for Peace) justified their anti-war and anti-occupation stance in their social roles as mothers (parents) of soldiers, the Women in Black movement was unapologetic in its defiance of government policy and IDF actions, of men-dominated peace groups and of the culture of machismo which hindered women from expressing dis-

sent in public spaces. Women peace activism in the late 1980s helped to revitalize Jewish and Arab-Israeli feminist groups with many new organizations being created during the period of the first Intifada. By disavowing the implicitly heterosexual and explicitly nationalist maternalist discourse Women in Black created a space for lesbian feminists to articulate opposition to militarism, patriarchy and the privileged position of soldiers (and mothers of soldiers) in Israeli public discourse. It created, explained Su Schachter, "revolutionary excitement which drew us to the peace movement as a way of imagining an Israel with different values...it provide[d] us with an opportunity to speak out on an issue that we believed was crucial for us as lesbians, and to afford us a place to test and mature our skills in dissent." (Schachter, 2005, 177 see also Helman and Rapoport, 1997; Blumen and Halevi, 2009).

The development of oppositional lesbian consciousness expressed itself also in the creation of CLaF. Although CLaF knew many ups and downs during two decades of existence and although it became a Tel Aviv- centered organization from 1988 and onward, the impetus for its creation came from Jerusalem radical lesbians. The person most responsible for establishing CLaF was Haya Shalom, who attended the International Lesbian Information Service (ILIS) in Amsterdam in 1986 convinced of the need to create an autonomous and separate platform for Israeli lesbian feminists. She felt that lesbians had a distinctive culture and distinctive interests that could not be fully expressed and promoted in other political and social frameworks. Shalom had also wanted to create an authentic Israeli group that "would draw upon the lesbian experience here and now, and not be rooted in foreign sources - American or other." (Shalom, 2005, 52). Combining forces with lesbian activists from Tel Aviv and Haifa—"who inhabited completely different universes" in the words of Su Schachter— CLaF launched an energetic social program comprising picnics, parties, poetry readings and discussion groups as well as a magazine (*CLaF Hazak* meaning in Hebrew a strong card). In its first year it expressed support for the Palestinian Intifada and underscored "the connection among all forms of oppressions." (Shalom, 2005, 54). However, this was by no means a universally accepted view and the wish to maintain an umbrella lesbian organization meant that Jerusalem radicalism had to co-exist with other forms of lesbian consciousness. As Tel Aviv veteran activist Hana Klein commented in 1988 CLaF could succeed because it created a space both for liberal feminism, "super-feminism" and lesbian women who were not comfortable with any of these labels. Some even wished to strike off the word "feminism" from its name to broaden its appeal; a motion that was never adopted. (Shalom undated, 13)

In the 1980s Jerusalem lesbians could play a role in local and national politics by joining forces with other groups and by supporting various left-wing causes. This was an outcome both of their theoretical view that prioritized common struggles and the small number of self-identified lesbians in Jerusalem. However, they could not hope to maintain a satisfying lesbian social life in Jerusalem and many took the one-hour ride to Tel Aviv to participate in the nascent gay and lesbian scene. As

Amalia Ziv has pointed out, the Israeli lesbian community was not big enough at the time to maintain a deep and significant split "between political (lesbian-feminist) and non-political (nightlife-oriented) lesbians" (Ziv, 2005, 107).

THE EMERGENCE OF A TRANS-MASCULINE COMMUNITY IN JERUSALEM 2004-2007

For many Israelis what took place since the late 1980s is nothing less than a "Gay Revolution" (Harel, 1999). In the span of just one decade, Israeli lesbian and gay activists allied with left-wing parliamentarians and supported by liberal courts, managed to acquire a wide array of legal rights and protections, inconceivable before the 1980s. These included the decriminalization of gay male sex (1988); the prohibition of employment discrimination based on sexual orientation (1991); the recognition of same-sex partners for employment benefits (1994); the granting of state funded fertility treatment to lesbians (and unmarried women) on the same - very generous - basis as married heterosexual women (1997); the abolishment of all restrictions on army service for gay and lesbian soldiers (1998); and the possibility of legal guardianship for a non-biological mother (1999).

The embrace of gay and lesbian rights as an indicator of Israel's western, liberal and democratic credentials has been discussed and debated extensively in recent years by scholars and activists, both in Israel and abroad. Noted critics such as Aeyal Gross and Sarah Schulman argue that the seemingly-public embrace of gay rights in Israel "pinkwash" Israeli brutality toward Palestinians in the West Bank and in fact serve as a "fig leaf" for the Israeli right (Schulman, 2012; Gross, 2015). Lost in this debate is the fact that transgender rights and selfhoods were never embraced by the state of Israel nor were they supported wholeheartedly by the main gay and lesbian organizations: The Aguda added the letter "T" to its subtitle only in 1998 - i.e. 23 years after its establishment - and just recently have included transgender issues in its core purview. CLaF had never welcomed trans people into its midst and its attitude toward female masculinity was lukewarm at best (interviews Ortal and Ziv). Neither of these organizations had ever launched a systemic campaign to change official policy towards gender transition in Israel. Transgender people are still required to undergo a lengthy vetting process by an "expert committee" that de facto holds up or disqualifies the great majority of applications (Sinai, 2013; Engelstein and Rachamimov 2019). Although the Ministry of Health approved a modest reform in 2014, its implementation has been slow and haphazard, and the work of the committee is still cumbersome and inefficient (interview Nina Halevy). As a result, the great majority of transgender people in Israel prefer to bypass the committee and opt for private and expensive surgeries abroad (Sinai, 2013).

This lack of official support meant that trans people had to rely for many decades on their own social, economic and cultural capital (usually quite meager) to obtain

the knowledge, medical technology and paperwork necessary for transition. Trans selfhoods emerged from below and from the margins of the LGBT community, often against the wishes of gay and lesbian organizers. As Gil Engelstein has shown, the first visible LGBT grouping in Israeli history was composed of poor adolescent trans girls, who worked the Tel Aviv cruising areas – the beachfront and HaYarkon street – in the mid-1960s and banded noisily and conspicuously together (Engelstein 2015, 2016; Engelstein and Rachamimov, 2019). This group drew inspiration from the Parisian cabaret *Le Carrousel* and their transgender star Coccinelle, who had visited Israel in 1964 and 1965 and were covered extensively by the press. In fact, Coccinelle became so popular in Israel that her name became the standard – and extremely derogatory – term in Hebrew for transgender women (as well as an all-purpose slur hurled at men not perceived as macho enough). It is still widely used to describe trans women alongside the more neutral term “transgender”.

Individuals whom we might understand today as trans men lived mostly private lives in Israel until the 1990s. Apart from the well-known story of Karl M. Baer who had undergone gender transition in Berlin in 1906 and died anonymously in Bat-Yam in 1956 (Simon, 2005; Savran and Rachamimov, 2015), very few examples have been unearthed and studied by historians. Trans masculine persons tended to lead stealth lives or were subsumed under the “butch” category (Rachamimov 2015 and interview with Ziv). The rising influence of queer theory and queer politics at the beginning of the millennium opened the door for a more expansive and playful articulation of gender among lesbians. The anti-occupation group, “Black Laundry”, relied on linguistic reappropriation and on queer performative transgression to critique both Israel’s actions in the Second Intifada and gender binary (Ziv, 2010). For example, during the 2002 Tel Aviv Pride March they handed out flyers proclaiming: “We are ugly, sexually frustrated, hairy, mannish, fat lesbians; bitter humorless feminists in need of a good fuck, whores of Arafat, bleeding heart Israel-hating traitors; effeminate cock-sucking sissy pussy-boys taking it up the ass.” (Ibid, 540). As Ziv noted, their reliance on performance “supplied many occasions for doing male drag — whether impersonating Israeli soldiers, Palestinian youths, or politicians — and for some group members this provided an opportunity for experimenting with cross-gender identification that in some cases led to embracing a partial transgendered identity” (Ibid 548). Many members adopted cross-gendered nicknames and found ways to subvert the gendered grammar of the Hebrew language. Although Black Laundry fizzled out at the end of 2003 – their political message largely ignored by the straight and the gay mainstream – they managed to make room for gender fluidity and queer consciousness among lesbian groups.

This new way of doing gender came to prominence in the Jerusalem drag scene in the years 2004–2007. Elisha Alexander, who would go on to found *Ma’avarim* in 2014, arrived at trans-masculine activism through drag performance and through queer consciousness:

“I came out when I was thirty. I completed my degree in Computer Sci-

ence in Jerusalem and started to work at Check Point [a high-tech company]. I was really depressed and I tried to understand why [...] I suspected that I was LGBT, maybe lesbian or bisexual, and slowly realized that there was something there [...] In the Jerusalem Pride of 2004 I saw a drag king. Ha! What was this drag king?! And I met the person who embodied this drag king and I was not sure if it's a boy or a girl. I found it strange and fascinating. It was Avivit Katzil [1975-2019] who organized women's parties in Jerusalem and just pestered everyone to do drag. So I performed as Slim Shuki [Shuki HaRazeh] a name given by my friends but I can't recall now why. It was really nice, and slowly Shuki's clothes replaced my previous clothes [interview with Elisha Alexander].

Tamir Lederberg took a more circuitous route to a queer and trans selfhood. After finishing his army service in 2001 he became involved in the lesbian group of the JOH and in the gay and lesbian union at the Hebrew University. Apart from Katzil (who went by the drag name of Sharshabil Forte (Figure 1) Lederberg also met Inbal van Creveld ("Asi mon Cheri") both laying the claim to be "the first Israeli drag king". Like Alexander, Lederberg chose to try drag in 2004 and adopted the name of Semi Sababa - a moniker that conjures a street-wise operator (see Figure 2). He saw Semi Sababa as means to experience a range of local masculine types while evaluating their effects on himself and on his audience - a dress rehearsal of sorts. Participating in an academic roundtable in 2007 - while still using the feminine form to refer to himself - Lederberg explained the internal and external effects of doing drag: "when I wear men's clothing (and I pass as a very masculine man, sexy and attractive) there is no question about what gender I embody, in contrast to my daily life where I move between and betwixt and feel comfortable in not being at one end of the scale." (Lederberg, 2007, 1).

The Jerusalem drag scene had emerged in the early 1990s but never became as prominent as the Tel Aviv scene. Tel Aviv boasted both Dana International, who went from drag novice to transgender superstar by winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 1998, and *Bnot Pessia* (Pessia's Daughters) who rose to national fame in the years 1995-2001. The 1990s are often seen as the first golden age of Israeli drag, bursting from the gay margins into mainstream venues. However, until the appearance of van Creveld and Katzil in the late 1990s it was inhabited solely by drag queens, who employed usually an acerbic and misogynistic style. Drag queens did not view kings as fully-fledged artists and did not think they deserved equal performance time or pay. Gil Naveh who began his apprenticeship as an aspiring drag queen at age of fifteen in 1998 and performed for the first time on stage in 2001 under the name of Gallina Port de Bras, used in the first few years the customary sexist style:

What happened in Jerusalem was that we were a small tightly-knit group, a real family - us against the world [...] Rina Shapira the administrator of JOH took me aside and said 'I really enjoy your shows but you must stop with the jokes about women's genitalia' [...] she sat me down for a very long

talk which was a turning point for me. I became much more involved with feminism, with lesbian-feminism and with anarcho-queer – what we called ‘lesbo-chaotic’ – feminism. I took this talk very much to heart and said ‘okay, I can be better than this’” (interview Naveh).

Figure 1: Sharshabil Forte (center) flanked by Udi Hamudi and Lee. (Courtesy of Mayan Amiezer (Udi Hamudi)).



Figure 2: Semi Sababa in one of his many aliases – a young ultra-orthodox gay man. (Courtesy of Tamir Lederberg and Ophir Figenboim).



In 2003 Jerusalem's only gay and lesbian bar, *Shushan*, opened its doors (Figures 3 and 4). The owner, Sa'ar Nethaniel, remarked when it closed four years later that "it was the only place in Israel where a Haredi [ultra-orthodox Jew], an Arab, a kippah-wearer and a straight man can hang out and have fun together. They would then return to their own ghettos." (*Haaretz* Nov. 10, 2007). *Shushan* prided itself on facilitating connections despite threats and recurrent homophobic violence (it was torched in 2005 and needed at times police protection in the face of overt hostility). In 2004 Naveh asked Nethaniel whether he could organize a weekly drag night on the weakest night of the week – Monday.

The new drag line – *Gewald* [from "oy gewalt!" in Yiddish] – attracted at first a medley of about ten performers mostly drag queens. However, it quickly became the most important stage for drag kings in Israel with about 30 kings taking the stage in the years 2004-2007, about half of whom performed on a regular basis. It was a different kind of drag than the drag performed by the queens, touching regularly on political subjects significant in Jerusalem politics: religious-secular tensions, the separation wall newly constructed in the midst of the Jerusalem urban area and domestic violence (Rozin, 2014). Even the Yiddish name reverberated the linguistic heterogeneity of the city and the prominence of the ultra-orthodox community. Jerusalem drag was never devoted to direct political action to the extent Black Laundry had been, but it allowed more space for examination of gender boundaries and transition. "I came out as 'trans' during a performance," recounted Alexander, "that's how drag kings do it [...] I am viewed often as a 'trans man' but that's not how I view myself. I don't define myself as a 'man' just 'trans'" (interview Alexander). Tamir Lederberg felt a sense of elation being on stage: "I remember the first time I used a binder – I did it with Shuki. We felt exhilarated. As Semi I could be a lot of things that I didn't dare to be in my daily self. I felt admired, loved and accepted. I had a lot of fun packing, standing on the stage and scratching my balls" (interview Lederberg). He began using the first-person masculine in daily life, but reverted to first-person feminine when he encountered misogyny in the LGBT community. For him it was a question of politics and solidarity not just personal preference (Lederberg, 2007). For a few years after that Lederberg adopted a fluid persona in which he would be regularly read as a man by other people, yet self-referred in the feminine. Leaving Israel and taking testosterone convinced him to align external appearance and self-reference, and he began talking in the first person masculine – "eventually binary won" he concluded (interview Lederberg).

All those interviewed for this article emphasized the sense of groupness forged in these years. Elisha Alexander began adding people to an internet list – Trans IL – in order to exchange information among group members and to obtain support. However, it dawned on him that this was also a way to attract new trans-identified people – "the basic idea was to collect enough emails until we reached a critical mass. I offered drag classes for those who wanted" (interview Alexander). When

CLaF sank into debt in the years 2005-6 the drag kings of Jerusalem volunteered to help. They produced a calendar for the Jewish year of 5767 (2006-2007) with all proceedings going to CLaF - a gesture which turned out a bit futile as CLaF folded later on that year (Figure 5). The calendar featured mainstays of the Jerusalem drag scene in various provocative or mundane situations such as Gurnisht Nice-Ass and Udi Hamudi using the urinals in Independence Park in Jerusalem – the main gay cruising area (Figure 6); Semi Sababa and Slim Shuki grilling in Sucker Park [i.e. Sacher Park – the biggest public park in Jerusalem] (Figure 7) or Ido Tigmor and Gurnisht writing slogans on the Separation Wall (Figure 8).

Figure 3: Shushan Bar Exterior (Courtesy of Gil Naveh).



The 2006-7 Drag Kings Calendar is remembered by participants as the most important communal activity. Yet, the same year marked the beginning of the end of the Jerusalem drag king scene. The public threats, the violence and the chicaneries of the ultra-Orthodox Mayor Uri Lupolianski took their toll on participants. The incessant fighting between drag queens and kings over meagre earnings and performance space fractured the sense of camaraderie that had existed during the exciting first year. Gil Naveh who had gone to New York in 2005 to study dance was shocked by the animosity he found upon his return a year later. When *Shushan* shut its doors in November 2007 many of its members felt already spent. Some left abroad – to Germany, Australia and the United States – while most others moved to Tel Aviv to the more hospitable soil of Israel's LGBT metropolis. The owner of *Shushan* bitterly commented that “with all due respects to ideology, ideology does not pay my city taxes nor does it cover my rent” (*Haaretz* Nov. 10, 2007).

Figure 4: Master Bate and Gurnisht Nice-Ass performing at Shushan Bar (Courtesy of Yoan Gonen - Master Bate).



Figures 5-8: The Jerusalem Drag Kings – Calendar for 2006-2007. (Courtesy of Ophir Figenboim).



Figure 5



Figure 6

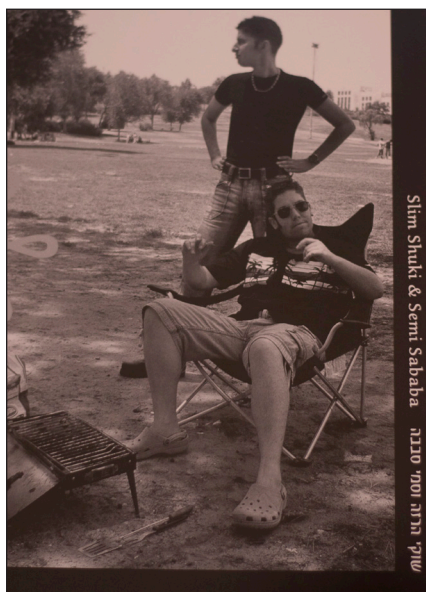


Figure 7

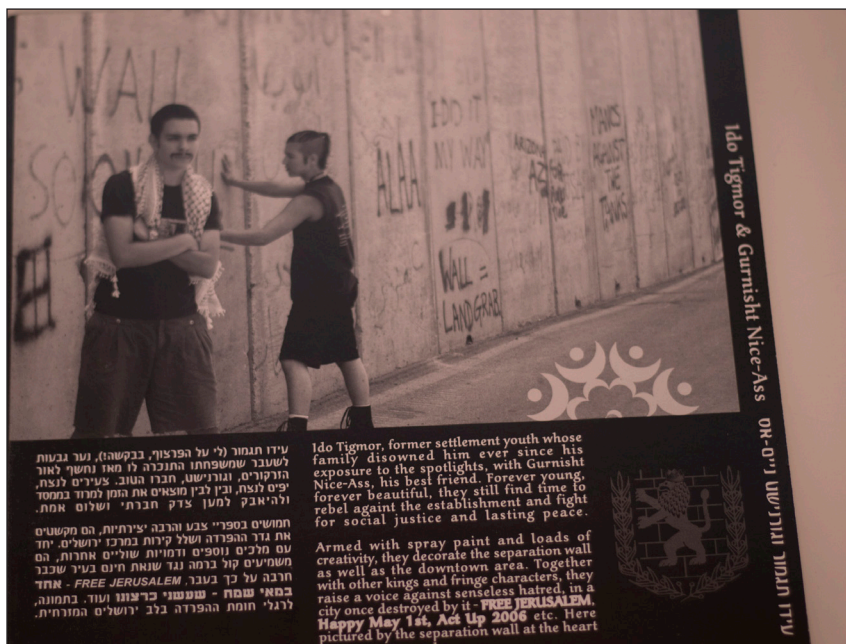


Figure 8

Nevertheless, the bonds and sense of purpose proved longer lasting. After moving to Tel Aviv some members of the group joined transwomen activists such as Lilach Ben David and Nina Halevy to lay the foundation for trans-specific organizations that are separate from the Aguda. Elisha Alexander, Ido Katri (Ido Tigmor) and Ophir Figenboim – the producer of the drag king calendar – were among the founders in 2011 of Project Gila for Transgender Empowerment (<https://awiderbridge.org/gila-project/>). Project Gila – named in honor of Israeli transgender pioneer Gila Goldstein (1947-2017) – is dedicated to providing legal assistance to transgender individuals, campaigning on behalf of transgender women involved in sex work and providing advice in dealing with bureaucratic hurdles. In 2014 Elisha Alexander left Project Gila and established with veteran gay organizer, Avi Soffer, a separate organization, Ma'avarim. Since its founding, Ma'avarim has grown into the biggest and most visible framework for transgender advocacy. It regularly conducts lobbying efforts in the Knesset and in the Israeli public health system, and provides voice training courses, scholarships for transgender students and employability skills for trans people (<https://www.maavarim.org/english-home>). It has been quite successful in raising funds from businesses such as Microsoft, Adallom or advocacy groups such LGBTech. It is one of constituent organization house in the Tel Aviv LGBTQ Center. Alexander was responsible for the groundbreaking framework “Trans at the Center” which provided a space for public discussion of a wide range of issues relevant to trans community (Misgav 2015). Both organizations have been effective in mobilizing public support against police and border police harassment of transgender women and against the bullying of transgender youth in schools.

THE QUEER ROLE OF JERUSALEM IN ISRAELI LGBT HISTORY

Standard narratives of Israeli LGBT history treat Jerusalem as a foil to Tel Aviv. Jerusalem represents illiberalism and strife in contrast to the ostensible pervasive acceptance of gender and sexual expression in Tel Aviv. Jerusalem is “backward” and “eastern” – either Arab Middle Eastern or Haredi Eastern European – compared to Tel Aviv’s professed “progressive” and “western” credentials. Jerusalem is “national” and “holy” while Tel Aviv is “global” and “profane” (Alfasi and Fenster, 2005). The inaccuracy of these dichotomies is highlighted by the fact that Tel Aviv has also seen its fair share of LGBT bashing and violence: in 2009 an assailant opened fire on an LGBT youth group in Tel Aviv killing two and wounding fourteen people – a crime that has not been solved yet by Israeli Police. Physical and verbal attacks on “coccinelles” are still pervasive in Tel Aviv especially against sex workers. In 2014 ten soldiers serving in the Israel Border Police and one border policeman attacked a transgender woman with electro shockers, pepper spray and batons. They were wearing masks in order not to be identified and the press reported that there was a

tradition among border policemen to hunt “coccinelles” and beat them to a pulp (ACRI Report, 2014).

Misgav and Hartal recently compared the queer urban movements in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in order to understand the significance of each locality in the political choices of its LGBT communities (Misgav and Hartal, 2019). Their study focused on the two community centers - the Tel Aviv LGBTQ Center and the Jerusalem Open House - and concluded that both practice “a mix of radical and liberal activism.” In both centers there were radical strands seeking to link LGBT activism with other left-wing social political struggles. However, these radical initiatives were eventually toned-down by the desire to retain internal unity. The sense of fragility which exists in Jerusalem accentuates the desire to retain the JOH as a place of shelter for all LGBT people, regardless of politics, ethnicity and religion.

As this article attempted to show, radical politics and transgressive practices flashed brightly in Jerusalem decades before the establishment of the JOH in 1997. The politicization of everyday life, the sense that everything is serious and the compactness of its queer community meant that a few dozen committed actors could steer big chunks of the Israeli LGBT community to new waters. Jerusalem radical lesbians of the 1970s and 1980s were pivotal in launching the Women in Black movement and in creating CLaF as a mainstay of Israeli Lesbian life for two decades. CLaF counterbalanced the Aguda which was perceived by lesbians as representing the interests of middle-class gay men, and it offered a space to discuss lesbian sexuality and feminist politics. The Jerusalem drag scene – which operated outside the JOH and thus away from its mollifying tendencies – was a primary location for the creation of Israeli transgender activism. Most of the core group would eventually identify on trans*¹ spectrum and at least five – Elisha Alexander, Ido Katri, Ophir Figenboim, Amit Geffner and Yuval Topper- Erez – would become major organizers or public figures. They helped in opening the door for trans-masculine selfhoods and building an effective organizational structure for the whole transgender community. Transgender lives in Israel would be very different without these efforts.

NOTE

1. "Trans*" is a term that refers to different identities under the gender identity umbrella (some beginning with the word "trans" and some do not). The asterisk signifies variety, open-endedness and future possibilities.

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