

# U.S. Gay Rights Activists : Stop Pinkwashing Palestinian Suffering !

jeudi 6 septembre 2012, par [SILVERSTEIN Richard](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 7 juin 2012).

## Sommaire

- [Oren's False Claims](#)
- [A West Coast Pinkwashing Tour](#)
- [Casting Israel as a Gay Eden](#)
- [Gay Rights as a Political](#)
- [What Now ?](#)

Philadelphia hosted its yearly gay rights event, the Equality Forum, in early May. It is part-human rights symposium and part-tourism booster. Each year, it highlights a different country and this year, it was Israel's turn. Organizers invited Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren to address the International Equality Dinner as the keynote speaker. This turned the event into an official political promotion for the State of Israel. In fact, the Israeli Ministries of Tourism and Foreign Affairs were listed as sponsors of the larger event.

A number of local Jewish and non-Jewish gay rights activists who had been invited to participate decided to decline those invitations and make their views known publicly. Among them were Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, a professor of religion at Temple University and Dr. Katherine Franke, a noted Columbia University law professor. They characterize the event as one "that celebrates Israel's good gay-rights record rather than locating it within the larger problems that plague Israel's treatment of the Palestinians." (Click here [\[1\]](#) to read their full statement published recently in *Tikkun*, which criticizes the Shin Bet's recruitment and blackmail of gay Palestinians, growing religious conservatism and harassment of gays in Israel, and ongoing Israeli government policies that violate the human rights of all Palestinians.)

Rabbi Alpert, a member of the Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinic Cabinet, spoke eloquently of her own divided nature when it came to Israel and its "pinkwashing" : the exploitation of Israel's reputation as a champion of gay rights in order to rebut claims that it is a major violator of Palestinian rights. In an interview, Alpert said that what troubled her was that Israel claimed to be a Jewish state and homeland for world Jewry. As such, it speaks in her name and this she could not allow. Gays historically have known dispossession and being stripped of rights as human beings. Therefore, she said, they identify with those, like the Palestinians, who have none. Finally, Alpert believes that Israel cannot be both a Jewish state and a democracy.

Local Philadelphia Israeli queer activist, Uri Horesh, decided to make his voice heard at the Equality Forum gala dinner honoring Israel and Ambassador Oren. With a friend tagging along and acting as videographer, they infiltrated the event ; as Oren got his first round of applause, Horesh stood up and introduced himself (click here to see the video) :

*« My name is Uri Horesh and I'm a queer Israeli. I am appalled that Equality Forum has chosen Israel as its featured nation. Israel only offers equality to a chosen group of Jewish Israelis with no regard to Palestinians, regardless of their sexual orientation. Palestinians, LGBT or otherwise, enjoy*

*no equality in Israel. »*

Almost as soon as he began speaking, Horesh was hustled out of the hall by security guards, though he was not arrested.

### **Oren's False Claims**

Among Oren's major claims are that gay organizations cannot operate freely in Palestinian society and that Israel offers them a special haven to counteract such Arab homophobia. In fact, two Israeli Palestinian gay rights groups, Al Qaws [2] and Aswat [3], exist within Israel. The government has not sheltered them or given them any special status. They simply operate as any other Israeli NGO does. Oren's claim that gay groups do not operate inside Palestine is also false : as an Al Qaws activist recently revealed at a Columbia University conference on pinkwashing, there is a gay meeting place in Ramallah [4].

Oren also claimed that Israel offered asylum to Palestinian gays in danger of persecution or under threat of violence. In fact, *Washington Note* [5] showed that of ten such victims who fled to Israel seeking asylum, none were offered it, although several were granted resettlement in a third country with assistance from the United Nations. A number were actually returned to the very environment that had threatened them. In 2008, Tel Aviv University's Public Interest Law Program published "Nowhere to Run : Palestinian Gay Asylum Seekers in Israel." It noted that while Palestinians face persecution in their own society, Israel prohibits these people from even filling out asylum applications ; Israel cooperates in resettling gay Palestinian refugees to third countries only when intensely pressured by the United Nations or Israeli NGOs. The authors describe one such exceptional case :

*« Officials from an Israeli NGO met with the Interior Minister about C.'s case. After hearing it, the minister promised that the Palestinian's request to remain in Israel while his resettlement application was processed would meet with a favorable response. It never did. »*

*« C. was eventually arrested for overstaying his visa. The detainee's lawyer called the police and warned them that if they deported him he would face "serious danger." The police told C. he would see a judge the next day. Instead, he was deported back to the West Bank, the very place he had fled. By the next day, he was back in Israel. Eventually, he was allowed to remain in Israel and received approval to resettle to a European country where he now lives. »*

Contrary to Ambassador Oren's claim, the study's authors write that "the plight of gay men should have little direct relevance on any of the contentious issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Oren further claimed that "Israel was fighting for gay rights before the 1967 war. Even when terrorists were blowing up our buses and cafes, there was equality for gays." In fact, sodomy and homosexuality were illegal in Israel until 1988. Tel Aviv law professor Aeyal Gross [6] explained in *Haaretz* [7] :

*« Israel did not fight for the rights of gays, not in the sixties nor in the seventies. Only at the end of the eighties and in the nineties, in the wake of vigorous activism on the part of members of the LGBT community and a small number of politicians who supported them, did any progress take place. This included the cancellation of the criminality of homosexual intercourse and the creation of a law and a ruling that would prevent discrimination. Now, said progress...is being appropriated for Israeli hasbara. »*

It was only thanks to long-time human rights activist, MK Shulamit Aloni, who proposed the bill, that it was signed into law. In the current right-wing political environment, such a law would never be proposed or passed.

While the U.S. president and vice-president have publicly endorsed gay marriage, *Haaretz* quotes Israel's finance minister, Yuval Steinitz, saying a few weeks ago, the time isn't yet right for legalizing gay marriage in Israel [8]. When asked by members of a Likud LGBT caucus whether he would become the first Likud minister to attend Israel's annual gay pride parade, he appeared embarrassed, noted the date, but refused to make any commitment.

When asked by *Haaretz*, most Israeli government ministers refuse to offer their position on gay marriage. The reason this is an especially fraught issue in Israel is that there is no civil marriage. The rabbinate controls all issues surrounding matrimony and divorce, and no Israeli rabbi would marry a gay couple (though the Interior Ministry will recognize some gay marriages performed outside Israel). Not only is there no gay marriage in Israel, there are no gay rabbis ordained in Israel, and gays do not have their own synagogues as they do in the U.S.

I'm also troubled by the fact that Michael Oren would keynote a major gay rights dinner while at the same time fraternizing with Christian fundamentalist homophobe, John Hagee. Among other things, Hagee has called homosexuals "the anti-Christ." The Israeli ambassador has spoken at Hagee's Christians United for Israel (CUFI) [9] events four times since he became ambassador in 2009. He will speak once again to CUFI's Night for Israel event this coming July.

Oren pointed to the transgender Israeli Eurovision prize-winner, Dana International, as a further example of the triumph of gay rights in Israel. But he forgets that the performer was asked after her victory how she could reconcile her representation of a Jewish state in the contest, when so many of her fellow (Orthodox) Israeli Jews rejected her and what she stood for. Her response was that she represented the State of Israel, not a Jewish state. In other words, Dana International's conception of Israel as a secular state is at loggerheads with Oren's and his government's.

The first year Israel held a gay pride parade in Jerusalem, the ultra-Orthodox strenuously objected and lobbied for outlawing it. At the parade, a religious fanatic stabbed and seriously wounded a participant. While there are indeed festive gay pride rallies in Tel Aviv and other places, there is a deep strain of disquiet within Israel against the parades and gays in general. While it is generally true that Israeli gays find acceptance in more culturally-liberal areas like Tel Aviv, there are entire swaths of Orthodox Israel in which gays remain unwelcome.

## **A West Coast Pinkwashing Tour**

A few months ago, the San Francisco pro-Israel gay group, A Wider Bridge [10], teamed with the advocacy group, StandWithUs, to bring an Israeli LGBT delegation for a west coast tour. The gay delegation sponsor is known to closely coordinate its activities promoting Israel [11] with both the local (S.F.) Jewish Community Relations Council and the Israeli government.

StandWithUs, the other partner, is a prominent national Israel advocacy group. NW director Rob Jacobs booked and accompanied the group on its NW appearances. SWU often coordinates its activities here in the U.S. with Israeli foreign ministry representatives, as it did when it spearheaded the anti-BDS lawsuit brought against the Olympia Food Coop [12], which an Olympia judge recently dismissed.

The Israeli government's consulate in San Francisco contributed to the delegation's hotel lodging

expenses. An LGBT staff member from Israel's NW Consulate accompanied the delegation and appeared on a panel with it [13] as if he were a member. All of this turned the trip into a promotion of Israel and its human rights record.

In Seattle, the city's LGBT Commission agreed to host a reception for the delegation. Jewish and Palestinian human rights activists organized to protest the tour and specifically the Seattle meeting. At a Commission hearing before the event, activists urged Commission members to cancel it since it would allow the Israeli government to promote its human rights record and ignore the oppression of Palestinians, both gay and non-gay. The protest persuaded the Commissioners that they were not ready to organize a truly diverse event that would incorporate all the voices that should be represented. They canceled the reception.

This, in turn, raised a ruckus in the pro-Israel Jewish community. Seattle's Jewish community newspaper published an official statement from the Jewish Federation's Community Relations Committee decrying the cancellation [14]. It also published a news article on the same subject [15]. Both contained errors, which I'll outline. While the news story quoted freely from SWU leaders and community leaders favoring the delegation, those who opposed the appearance were not interviewed and barely mentioned.

When I suggested either an updated news story to correct this imbalance or an op-ed, the editor refused. He even refused to publish a paid ad unless I agreed to two separate sets of "factual" revisions he demanded (aka censorship). For this reason, I'm grateful that Tikkun has offered a venue for airing these important issues.

In an op-ed in the *Seattle Times*, SWU director Rob Jacobs attacked those who protested the reception for the Israeli delegation saying they violated the basic tenets of free speech [16]. The problem with his view is that he views "free speech" as speech supporting his views. But true free speech allows the airing of a diverse range of views. In that sense, there was to be no free speech at the event. The Israeli government had supported the west coast tour to promote its gay rights brand— not speech exploring Israel's overall record on human rights, an overarching principle that includes, but is not restricted to gay rights. Had a truly open discussion or debate been scheduled for this reception, I would have supported it 100 percent.

The Seattle LGBT Commission has been directed to host a new Israeli delegation in either November or December. I wrote an op-ed in the *Seattle Times* in which I outlined my own vision for this meeting [17] : sending independent (i.e., non-governmental) delegations ; a focus on religious and ethnic diversity within the delegations (especially including Palestinian perspectives) ; and framing the event as an examination of the broader human rights environment in Israel, the Palestinian territories, and the Middle East.

## **Casting Israel as a Gay Eden**

The Israeli government discovered some years ago the resonance of gay rights as a cudgel in its fight against the Palestinians. Because Islam and Arabs in general presumably oppress homosexuals and Israel offers them full rights, the issue has been taken up as a way to cast Israel in a favorable light in comparison with its Arab enemies. As part of such political advocacy, Israel sends LGBT delegations to the West to make this case.

Casting Israel as a gay Eden neglects some uncomfortable facts. Among them : American-Israeli settler, Jack Teitel confessed to police that he shot and killed two people in 2009 at a gay youth center in Tel Aviv (according to *Haaretz*) and posted flyers publicly praising the murders, but police

have not charged him [18] [19]. He faces trial in numerous other terror attacks that wounded and killed Jews, Palestinians, and a Christian. Though Israel's far-right government invests considerably in promoting Israel as a paradise for gays, it cares more about exploiting wedge issues against the Palestinians and the Arab world than it does about actually improving the status of gays in Israel.

SWU too claims to embrace the cause of Israeli gay rights. But facts tell a different story : SWU's founder, Roz Rothstein, has embraced Christian Zionist fundamentalists like John Hagee who fulminate against "Babylon" and "Sodom and Gomorrah" in fiery sermons to the faithful. Rothstein has spoken with Hagee and to his group [20], Christians United for Israel (CUFI), including at a 2007 Connecticut Night to Honor Israel [21], and the 2008 CUFI Israel Summit [22]. *Jewish Week* also reports that Rothstein [23] spoke at a pro-Israel rally in New York in September 2011 that was co-sponsored by a messianic "Jewish" group. She was joined there by Robert Stearns, a controversial advocate of evangelizing Jews who is also a CUFI regional director. The San Diego's SWU chapter's Facebook site boasts that it counter-picketed an "anti-Israel" rally in January 2012 together with CUFI. SWU's assistant development director, the person who's likely soliciting donations from Jewish gays for its pinkwashing work, once worked for CUFI [24]. So one has to ask : if SWU favors gay rights, why does it make common cause with Christians who believe that gays are "the Anti-Christ ?"

SWU also carefully hid an element of its campaign regarding its pinkwashing efforts [25]. Parallel to the touting of Israel's achievements in the field of gay rights, the group demonizes the Arab and Muslim world in a manner that fuels Islamophobia, sharpens East-West divides, and undermines the efforts of liberal Muslims to promote tolerance and acceptance of LGBTs. One SWU ad features a noose [26] and, under the heading "Know the Facts," details the abuse of Palestinian gays in their society. The group's website also features "testimony" from Israeli gays affirming falsely that Israel regularly offers asylum to such Palestinians afraid for their lives.

All of this is part of a general Judeo-Islamic religious war that some in the pro-Israel community are fighting. In truth, almost every world religion and nation is fighting to advance more tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality. Israel has a ways to go before it can declare itself a gay paradise. Arab states have even farther to go. But demonizing them for that is part of a propaganda war and doesn't promote gay rights.

## **Gay Rights as a Political Football**

The Israeli government, SWU, and Seattle Jewish leaders have falsely painted the issue of the cancelled reception as one of anti-Israel racism. None of the activists protested because they didn't want to hear from Israelis. Rather, they didn't want the Seattle city government to officially honor a delegation that was in large part doing the bidding of the Israeli government. The protesters' message was : if Israeli gays want to meet with Seattle's gay community, do so without the financial and political backing of the Israeli government and its local advocates. Further, they said : don't turn gay rights into a political football. By sending an official delegation as part of a political advocacy mission, Israel was doing just the opposite. The government added another element of political advocacy by choosing Iris Sass-Kochavi as a tour participant. She lives in a West Bank settlement, Mitzpe Shalem, and is a former board director of Ahava, a company whose beauty products are the target of the Stolen Beauty national boycott effort, because they are produced in settlements [27].

The official Seattle Jewish community response confirmed that pro-Israel politics played a role in all of this. Here the community leadership explains that it hosted a meeting of interested parties at the federation office. Note the politicized language : "We welcomed the chance to host a meeting of

LGBT, Jewish, and pro-Israel leaders at our offices.” The issue of gay rights shouldn’t be pro-Israel or anti-Israel. When it becomes one or the other, it becomes debased as a human rights concern.

Note the irony of this statement by Zach Carstensen, the director of the Jewish Community Relations Council : “The unfortunate thing is that there are groups on all sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict who want to fight that war right here in Seattle, Washington.” Indeed, the Israeli LGBT tour was a deliberate attempt to advance Israel’s political interests. That’s why SWU and the federation’s pro-Israel lobbying group, the Community Relations Committee, were involved. Their agenda is not so much to promote gay rights in Israel, as to promote Israel, defend its policies, and attack its “enemies.” Their fight is against what the Israeli government and its supporters here call “delegitimization,” a perceived campaign to destroy Israel. If anyone introduced politics into this incident, it was the Jewish federation and the Israeli government.

In its official community statement published in the Seattle Jewish newspaper (jtnews.net), Carstensen and Ron Leibsohn, chairman of the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, claimed the issue had been advanced by “a small group of vocal anti-Israel activists.” In fact, Jewish Voice for Peace is a national organization with chapters in several NW cities including Seattle and Olympia. It has 100,000 members and supporters. JVP, despite attempts by those on the political right to label it “anti-Israel,” is not. In fact, it supports an equitable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It supports the BDS movement, but does not reject Israel. It only rejects the Occupation and the injustices that accompany it.

The JCRC statement also claimed that the City LGBT commission “apologized” for canceling the reception and admitted it erred. Actually, the Commission apologized to both sides for the controversy and pain it caused, and went on to say that at the time of the decision, the only way to fairly respond to the pain on both sides seemed to be to cancel the reception. The statement reads :

*« The Seattle LGBT Commission sincerely apologizes for the pain, offense and embarrassment that we caused by canceling our scheduled event with leaders from Israel’s LGBTQ community...We apologize both to those leaders who were invited as our guests and to the many members of the Israeli, Palestinian, and LGBTQ communities in Seattle and worldwide who were affected by our decision. »*

Returning to the Jewish community’s official statement, here it again misrepresents the position of JVP and its supporters in this debate :

*« We also must use this moment to help a crucial and important ally understand how language, which misrepresents Israelis and casts them in a negative light, can result in violence, anger, and hate against Jewish people here in Seattle. »*

Again, the issue as the gay peace activists saw it was that gay rights were being used to “pinkwash” Israel—Israel sought to divert attention from injustices it perpetrated on the Palestinians by trumpeting its achievements in the field of gay rights. None of this “misrepresents Israelis.” If it casts them in a “negative light” it is only because the Occupation, maintained by the Israeli government, casts Israel in a negative light.

As for JVP’s actions leading to “violence against Jewish people here in Seattle,” this overstatement takes a page directly from the hasbara handbook. In light of the recent history of violence against the Seattle Jewish community, in which a mentally ill Pakistani-American shot and killed a Jewish federation employee in 2006, it is shameful to imply that legitimate criticism of Israel might lead to a similar violence against Jews in Seattle.



The statement closes by claiming that the Jewish community wishes to advance the cause of “civil rights everywhere.” In truth, Israel is a nation in which civil rights are threatened. The Occupation debases Palestinian civil and national rights. Civil rights of Israeli Palestinian citizens are also subordinated to those of Israeli Jews. If Seattle’s pro-Israel leaders were truly honest, they wouldn’t obfuscate such serious issues. They would address them head-on and honestly and would engage the activist community in debate.

## What Now ?

As I wrote above, I challenge the Jewish community to organize another event with an Israeli LGBT delegation that presents both sides of this issue. It could be a civil debate between Israelis presenting a position supporting Israel and those who believe Israel should not exploit the issue of gay rights in order to promote Israel’s image.

And let’s be transparent about everything that’s involved in the coming tour : Tell the public who’s paying for it and who’s sponsoring it. Offer full biographies of participants and any political affiliations they may have. Also, let those who criticize the tour reveal their biographies and sponsors so the world can judge them and the issues fairly.

**Richard Silverstein**, June 7, 2012

---

## **P.-S.**

\* <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/u-s-gay-rights-activists-stop-pinkwashing-palestinian-suffering>

\* Richard Silverstein writes the Tikun Olam blog ([www.richardsilverstein.com](http://www.richardsilverstein.com)) about Mideast conflict and Israeli human rights and democracy.

---

## **Notes**

[1] See on ESSF (article 26257), [Boycotting Equality Forum’s Israeli Sponsorship](#).

[2] <http://www.alqaws.org/q/>

[3] <http://www.aswatgroup.org/>

[4] <http://electronicintifada.net/content/israels-pinkwashing-exposed-dishonest-new-york-debates/11142>

[5] [http://www.thewashingtonnote.com/archives/2011/06/israels\\_treatme/](http://www.thewashingtonnote.com/archives/2011/06/israels_treatme/)

[6] <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/michael-oren-pinkwashes-the-truth-about-israel-and-gay-palestinians-1.429248>

[7] <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/michael-oren-pinkwashes-the-truth-about-israel-and-gay-palestinians-1.429248>

- [8] <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/obama-gay-marriage-remarks-spark-debate-among-israeli-mks-ministers-1.429577>
- [9] <http://mondoweiss.net/2012/05/after-lgbt-forum-next-stop-for-ambassador-oren-is-john-hagee-conference.html>
- [10] <http://awiderbridge.org/>
- [11] [http://www.richardsilverstein.com/tikun\\_olam/2012/03/24/seattle-rejects-standwithus-pro-israel-pinkwashing-campaign/](http://www.richardsilverstein.com/tikun_olam/2012/03/24/seattle-rejects-standwithus-pro-israel-pinkwashing-campaign/)
- [12] <http://mondoweiss.net/2012/02/whos-who-behind-the-olympia-food-co-op-lawsuit-2.html>
- [13] see photo : [http://www.jtnews.net/images/uploads/20120330lgbt\\_israelis.jpg](http://www.jtnews.net/images/uploads/20120330lgbt_israelis.jpg)
- [14] <http://www.jtnews.net/index.php?/viewpoints/item/9095/C29>
- [15] <http://www.jtnews.net/index.php?/news/item/9098>
- [16] [http://seattletimes.com/html/opinion/2017901163\\_guest04jacobs.html](http://seattletimes.com/html/opinion/2017901163_guest04jacobs.html)
- [17] [http://seattletimes.com/html/opinion/2018060946\\_guest25silverstein.html](http://seattletimes.com/html/opinion/2018060946_guest25silverstein.html)
- [18] <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/1.1287936>
- [19] <http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/docs/shotef11109.pdf>
- [20] [http://www.cufi.org/site/MessageViewer?em\\_id=1521.0](http://www.cufi.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=1521.0)
- [21] [http://www.cufi.org/site/MessageViewer?em\\_id=1521.0](http://www.cufi.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=1521.0)
- [22] [http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/breaking\\_news/jews\\_and\\_evangelicals\\_protest\\_durban\\_ii\\_conference](http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/breaking_news/jews_and_evangelicals_protest_durban_ii_conference)
- [23] <http://jewishisrael.ning.com/profiles/blogs/cufis-robert-stearns-warns-of>
- [24] <http://972mag.com/xmas-weeper-stand-with-us-official-perry-campaigner-former-cufi/31581/>
- [25] [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html?_r=1)
- [26] [http://www.richardsilverstein.com/tikun\\_olam/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/swu-treatmentgay-image.png](http://www.richardsilverstein.com/tikun_olam/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/swu-treatmentgay-image.png)
- [27] <http://www.codepinkalert.org/section.php?id=415>