

northwest

Proud of What?

My journey to Jerusalem World Pride

by Joy Ellison

I've never been to Pride. When summer comes, I always find myself far away from Portland. This year as I booked a flight to spend the summer in Bethlehem, I resigned myself to missing the party again. But then I learned that I would be going to this year's queer hotspot. My first Pride event would be Jerusalem World Pride 2006.

But I'll admit this six-day celebration was a little overwhelming. World Pride included educational tours, a multifaith conference, films, demonstrations and many, many drag shows. It's no downtown dyke march.

And Jerusalem doesn't compare with the Park Blocks. Many organizations have decided to boycott the event in protest of Israel's occupation of Palestine and war with Lebanon. In an article published by *Electronic Intifada*, queer organizer Kate Raphael wrote: "While members of the Lebanese queer group Helem are turning their community center into a shelter for refugees, their counterparts in Jerusalem are preparing for a film festival and beach party. What is the message that this sends to the world about what our community cares about?"

Palestinian lesbian organization Aswat has written movingly asking for a boycott: "Even though the state of Israel holds a tolerant stance towards gays and lesbians, it uses this opportunity to show the world that in Israel a gay man can also be a sol-

dier. However, being a soldier in an occupying oppressive army does not do justice to our quest for peace and tolerance."

World Pride organizers canceled their parade in light of war with Lebanon but carried on with the rest of the celebration. Everyone seems to agree on one thing: Our community knows no borders and includes Israelis, Palestinians and Lebanese. The question is how to honor such diversity that routinely struggles to see eye to eye.

The first World Pride event I attended was a tour of Israeli social change organizations. I had trouble finding the meeting place—not a rainbow flag or a drag queen in sight. I listened to amazing presentations, but the words "gay" and "lesbian" were mentioned only twice, never mind "bi" or "trans." I left feeling confused. Where are the voices of sexual minority organizations? What's their stand in this conflict?

I found myself unable to attend many of the other World Pride events. Though the Israeli films being shown at the festival were subtitled in English, others were subtitled in Hebrew. Which World Pride events could I participate in if I spoke another language, like Arabic?

I was unable to attend many of the late-night parties because I live in Bethlehem. Bethlehem might be only five miles away from Jerusalem, but it's inside the West Bank, and a huge military checkpoint stands

in my way. As an American, I can go through the checkpoint into Jerusalem. Few Palestinians can. But coming back to Bethlehem late at night means I have to wake up the Israeli soldiers to ask them to let me through, which is never easy.

But by the skin of my teeth, I crossed the checkpoint to meet a small, intrepid group of queers for a rally at the Wall. That's the 25-foot-high cement barrier that runs through the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem and by my office. The Israeli government says this Wall is for security, but it runs through Palestinian communities, separating them from each other, rather than Israelis.

I was excited to be demonstrating with fellow queer people. We held signs. We sang. But we had a permit that said no speeches, so the Wall went unexplained to people seeing it for the first time. I'm not sure if they understood how the Wall crushes the Palestinian economy or how homes and olive trees are uprooted to make way for it. We held our demonstration, but I couldn't ignore the fact that this was my first demonstration against the Wall without Israeli soldiers. We could get a permit for our gathering. Palestinians never have that option.

In the end, World Pride left me with more questions than answers. I think that the organizers did their best to create an inclusive event, but the Israeli military occupation of Palestine prevents that. Most Palestinians and many other Arabs just can't get to



Joy Ellison stands at the 25-foot-high cement wall running through the Palestinian city of Abu Dis and throughout the West Bank. The wall was the subject of protest at the 2006 World Pride solidarity rally.

Jerusalem. So the perspective reflected in World Pride was overwhelmingly Israeli. But I was also struck by how similar World Pride's problems are to the problems of Portland events dominated by white people, men or other privileged groups. The question of our community's response to violence and injustice in the Middle East is a valid one, but the question that I will take away from World Pride is simpler: What gives me pride? Am I proud simply because of my gender identity and sexual orientation? Or am I proud because we fight for justice everywhere? 10

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