



Life for LGBT people in Israel

Israel is a generally progressive country where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people live freely and openly. LGBT rights have become a celebrated part of liberal Israel, while remaining a source of hostility with the religious communities.

Protection against discrimination

LGBT individuals have received significant anti-discrimination protection over the past two decades. A key exception to this is the right to marry, and associated protections, with such matters continuing to be determined according to traditional religious law. Nonetheless, LGBT couples in Israel have the same pension, inheritance and medical rights as heterosexual couples. This includes equal access to fertility treatment for lesbian women. Since 2005, LGBT people have been able to adopt each other's children and enjoy full rights as parents. In 1992, employment discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation was outlawed. Inclusion of LGBT people in the Israeli military has been formally accepted since 1993. LGBT people now serve openly in the army, navy and air force, with the same rights as those in heterosexual relationships and their partners.

Transphobia and trans rights

Legal recognition of transgender people does exist in Israel and a citizen can access support to transition on government subsidised healthcare. However, it is extremely difficult to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria due to traditionalist views on gender, leaving many to pay out of pocket for hormones and go abroad for

surgery. Recently gender markers were taken off identity cards, a move welcomed by the trans community. In recent years transphobic attacks have been on the increase, even in traditionally 'safe LGBT areas' in Tel Aviv, showing that although certain parts of the gay community may have a home in Israel, gender based oppression is still rife.



Jerusalem Pride memorial, 2015
Credit: Kobi Schutz

Minority experiences of LGBT rights

The majority of discourse around LGBT rights in Israel focuses on the experiences of the Jewish population (and predominantly Ashkenazi Jews within this). There are also the experiences of Palestinians, as well as Ethiopian and Mizrahi Jews, whose experiences are marginalised. Many LGBT Palestinians face double marginalisation due to traditional communities and living under occupation, demonstrated by specifically homophobic incidents involving border police over the last few years. There are support groups who work to improve the lives of LGBT Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories. These communities also work to create links with other Arab LGBT groups in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.

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Religious attitudes

Despite being the most progressive country in the region, life for LGBT people remains difficult in Israel. Homophobic attitudes prevail in some traditional communities of all religions and cultures. While 61% of secular Jews support accepting homosexuality, this falls to 21% among religious Israelis. The religious Orthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem tried to put a stop to the 2005 Pride parade. When Pride went ahead, a religious Orthodox Jewish man stabbed three participants. He was later convicted and given a 12-year prison sentence. The man was released in 2015 and carried out a similar attack on the next Jerusalem Pride parade, resulting in the death of one young person, and the injury of many more.

The established religious authorities in Israel are generally conservative in their attitudes towards LGBT people. However, traditional and progressive Jewish alternatives have proliferated. There are now religious Jewish LGBT groups around Israel, and even LGBT synagogue services in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The leader of one prominent Orthodox Jewish LGBT group is Rabbi Ron Yosef, who came out as gay in 2009.



Jerusalem's Chief Rabbi Aryeh Stern at Pride memorial, 2015
Credit: Kobi Schutz

Same-sex marriage

There is no system of civil marriage in Israel. Marriages can only be performed under the auspices of a small number of recognised religious communities. Israel does, however, recognise those performed in other countries and since 2007 has given full legal recognition to same-sex marriages in this context. LGBT couples may not be able to marry inside Israel, but in 2012 an Israeli family court granted the first same-sex divorce in the country. In 2013, a trans-woman, Chen Arizona, married her husband in a ceremony that was broadcast on national television news.

Social attitudes

Violence against LGBT people is rare in Israel, though still occurs. A central Tel Aviv centre for young LGBT people was targeted in 2009 and two people were shot dead in an apparent hate crime. Although polls suggest a majority of Israelis support same-sex marriage, a recent poll on support for homosexuality found it to lie at 40%, the lowest figure among developed economies. This is however the highest known figure in the Middle East, though polling is complicated in many states in the region.

National political life

The first openly gay member of the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) was a professor of chemistry at Tel Aviv University, Uzi Even, who took his seat in 2002. LGBT citizens of Israel also serve as judges, public officials and represent Israel as diplomats throughout the world with full recognition of their partners and children. One such diplomat, Yossi Avni-Levy, is also a writer and the recipient of the Israeli Prime Minister's Prize for Literature.

Israeli culture

LGBT people are prominent in Israeli culture. Several Israeli films with LGBT themes have been successful in recent years, including *Yossi and Jagger* (2002) and *The Bubble* (2006). Starting with *Florentin* (1997), mainstream Israeli television drama has

included LGBT characters and including an Orthodox Jewish man struggling with his gay identity (*Srugim*) and a co-parenting couple (*Ima v'Abbaz*). In 2009, Israeli television broadcast the award-winning series *Mary Lou*, an LGBT coming of age drama. This was set to the music of Svika Pick, who also wrote the winning song Viva La Diva at the 1998 Eurovision Song Contest, famously sung by Dana International – an Israeli trans-woman. *Dancing with the Stars*, the Israeli version of the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*, featured its first same-sex couple in 2010 when two women – television sports presenter Gili Shem Tov and Dorit Milman – danced the cha-cha on prime time television.



Credit: Jerusalem Open House

LGBT culture in Israel

Large Israeli cities have LGBT facilities, including social clubs and bars. Rather than separate LGBT nightclubs, LGBT nights are frequently held at clubs across Israel. Israel is now a popular tourist destination for LGBT people. Tel Aviv has held an annual Pride parade since 1998, with now attracts over 100,000 participants, coming from all over the world. The city celebrated LGBT life in 2012 by painting a number of its pedestrian crossings in rainbow colours for LGBT pride month. Jerusalem has held its own Pride parade since 2002.

References and Further Reading

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