

40 Years And Still Shrugging

Activists in Israel, whether they be for gay rights, peace with Palestinians, or other social justice issues, are a tired lot, tired of the fact that there is too much to be active about.

By David Shneer

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“If I weren’t so busy filming, I think I’d be crying,” said long time Israeli peace activist and filmmaker Paula Kelman, who accompanied me to a sparse commemoration/performance/peace rally on the fortieth anniversary of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the other territories taken in the Six-Day War of 1967. In her parting words to me, “I hope you weren’t bored, but at least your presence increased the numbers.” This poorly-attended event, part of a series of gatherings, concerts, and rallies commemorating the anniversary, took place at Tantur, an ecumenical retreat center on the southern edge of Jerusalem that literally straddles the line between Israel and the occupied territory (or Palestine, as some activists call the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip). I spent most of my time at the festival taking in Tantur’s once-stunning views of the Judean Hills and the city of Bethlehem, vistas that are now scarred by the Israeli security barrier, which nearly surrounds Jerusalem in a solid blanket of concrete.

Anniversaries are often opportunities for reflection, in this case, reflecting on forty years of Israel, once upon a time the darling of the left (hard to remember, isn’t it?), being seen by much of the world as a bully. Opinion on the meaning of the anniversary ranges across the political and ideological spectrum. *The Economist* marked the moment by calling the 1967 war in which Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and Sinai Peninsula, a “wasted victory,” a headline that unleashed a wave of letters annoyed and angry at *the Economist’s* uncharacteristically exasperated tone. At the Tantur peace event, things were of a predictably lefty persuasion — banners trumpeting “enough of occupation,” in the requisite tri-lingua franca of the Israel left (Hebrew, Arabic and English) and tacky t-shirts calling for a “Free Palestine” (or is ‘free’ a verb ... one never knows in leftist activist settings). And in my neighborhood in downtown West Jerusalem, a few

kilometers in distance and light years in world-view away from Tantur, most banners and discussions reflect a Jewish religious right-wing perspective on the fortieth anniversary, which does not commemorate “occupation” but instead celebrates the “reunification” (after roughly 2,000 years) of Jerusalem under Jewish control.

But to be honest, aside from the banners, spicy headlines, and peace concerts, the fortieth anniversary feels like a big, collective sigh. At one end of the country, a city sits at the border with Gaza under perpetual rocket fire, and at the other end, residents contemplate the possibility of giving back the Golan Heights, the land on which some of them have lived for forty years, to Syria. And meanwhile, the Israeli economy booms, as Thomas Friedman reported in a recent *New York Times* piece on Israel’s start up company frenzy. From my vantage point, it seems like a time for the Dickensian cliché — it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. But instead everyone shrugs — more rockets, more secret peace talks, more anniversaries coming and going.

When in Israel, I often seek out activism and political and social confrontation. It’s one of the aspects of Israeli society I find most exciting, such a radical change from American political culture. Shrugging seems to be the state of affairs from activists on all fronts. The day before the Tantur event, I attended the 2007 Gay Pride parade and party in Tel Aviv, whose theme of the year was the startling political statement — Party on the Beach. A measly 15,000 people showed up for what is supposed to be gay Israel’s biggest event of the year, down from what some have estimated as 200,000 in previous years. It seems that activists in Israel, whether they be for gay rights, peace with Palestinians, or other social justice issues, are a tired lot, tired of being activists and tired of the fact that there is too much to be active about.

To be fair, up the road in Jerusalem, gay activists are fighting for the very right to hold a parade, as the authorities are, once again, threatening to cancel or re-route Jerusalem’s annual gay pride gathering, caving under pressure from Orthodox Jews, who dominate Jerusalem’s political landscape (last year, citing security risks, the city canceled the annual parade and instead allowed a very delayed rally in a stadium far from the city center). It seems the same people who celebrate 1967 as a reunification of Jerusalem also aren’t big fans

of showing unity with Israel's queers ... go figure. Many of the Tel Aviv pride marchers had stickers calling for the right to hold a Jerusalem parade and for the right to marriage. But mostly, they wanted to get to the beach, have a beer and dance all afternoon in the steamy Mediterranean sun. When in Rome, right? So I drank, danced, shrugged and caught the bus back up the mountain to Jerusalem, just in time for Shabbat — the Jewish Sabbath. I left the land of thumping music, gyrating scantily clad men and women with beers in hand. In their place, I found families of well-clad observant Jews hurrying home before sunset and the beginning of Shabbat, a time when the city shuts down, and all activists — and nearly all Jewish Israelis — take a collective sigh from the everyday politics of rockets, marches, anniversaries, and shrugs.