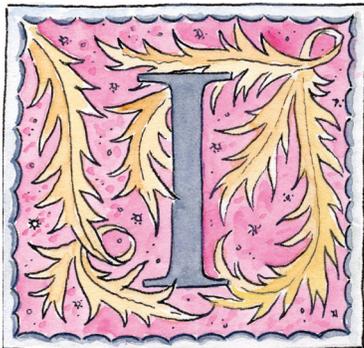


EVE BARLOW

Queers for Zion

The hatred of Israel is a symptom of what plagues LGBTQ politics today



IS IT OKAY to have a crush on a hostage? The day Emily Damari was released from 471 days of Hamas captivity, she came triumphantly bounding out of the crowds of Gaza as though she was a dyke winning an arm-wrestling contest. It couldn't have been more evident that she was a lesbian had she marched out of Khan Yunis waving a three-dollar bill. She raised her injured hand, missing two fingers—they were shot off when she was kidnapped on October 7 from Kibbutz Kfar Aza—and the gesture of strength and Jewish endurance became an instant meme. When I heard Damari speak in Los Angeles 10 months after her liberation, she was magnificent. A whole person. Gay, Israeli, and—above all—free.

“The enemy is watching all the time,” she said. “We cannot give them any satisfaction that they have broken us.” As she retold some of what she had experienced in Gaza, it was her chutzpah that got me most. “Every time they called me a prisoner, I would tell them, ‘No, I’m a hostage.’ Prisoners have three meals a day. Prisoners flush the toilet. Prisoners go outside. Prisoners see the sunlight. Prisoners call their families. I’m not a prisoner.” She refused to accept Hamas’s definition of who and what she was.

She even took the opportunity to check the pulse on homophobia in Gaza, asking the terrorist guard what he would do if he found out his brother was gay. He responded instantaneously: “I would kill him.” “But he’s your best friend, your brother, you love him.” Same automated response, except more resolute. “Kill him.” To further their psychological torture, the hostages were often made to watch Al Jazeera. One day, there was a report about the encampments at Columbia University. Damari saw the Queers for Palestine setting up base. “This was insane to me,” she said, still confused by their commitment to self-destruction. “You guys may be for Palestine. But I can tell you, Palestine is not for you.”

When you tell Western keffiyeh-wearing members of the alphabet tribe (I can say that, I’m a proud L of the LGBTQ) that Damari’s sexuality had to be hidden by the media and the Israeli and UK governments while she was in captivity to protect her from immediate execution, they will give you their stock response. They/them will tell you that it doesn’t matter how hateful Hamas is toward gay people and that in Gaza a gay person would be thrown from the tallest building. “Just because someone would kill me for my lifestyle doesn’t mean I won’t speak out for them against their own oppression.”

Surely it should mean *something* to the LGBTQ community that they’re defending their own would-be murderers; at the very least, they

should know their proper place in Hamas’s worldview. (Hint: no place.) That this means *nothing* to them says a lot. It shows that they fail to acknowledge their real-life place in the world, and that is itself a very dangerous place to be. This is what the LGBTQ community needs to grapple with, and it’s an ambitious task. It needs to develop a greater self-consciousness and self-perception, an accurate and working sense of its place in society—socially, politically, and historically. And once it does, it will see the rest of the world more clearly.



I’d like to propose a path toward that self-discovery, starting with a bit of gay political history. How did this happen? How did the LGBTQ community, after generations of fighting for its own sexual rights, end up, for the most part, in bed with homophobic purveyors of sexual (and many other kinds of) violence?

The answer to this question can be found, fittingly, in the annals of gay politics and feminist theory. In 1988, the trailblazing feminist theorist Donna Haraway gave us the concept of “situated knowledge” to explain the perceptual limits of what any individual person or movement can know. Anything that you or I or the groups we’re members of know we know only subjectively, from the vantage point of where we stand—socially, politically, racially, economically—in the world. And for most of our decades-long fight for equal rights, the situated vantage point of the gay community was on the political margins. The margin, therefore, is what we know. In 1973, a University of Chicago poll showed that 73 percent of Americans believed that consensual same-sex relations between adults was “always wrong,” and another 7 percent said it was “almost always wrong”: cumulatively, 80 percent of the U.S. electorate. A Gallup poll from 1978, the year that gay activist Harvey Milk was murdered,

showed that only 26 percent of Americans would be willing to vote for a gay presidential candidate.

We, or more accurately those who came out before us, spent the next several decades fighting and resisting from the margins. The queers collect causes as if they're going extinct. Posters, plants, pets, you name it, LGBTQ people will adopt it. We seem never to have met a marginal movement we're not ready to jump into bed with. And that is not a coincidence. In the LGBTQ world, protests are the gateway to hook-ups. Romance blossoms from the inherent compulsion to fight for recognition of our love. Our placement on the margins for so long generated its own kind of sexualized energy, a romance of resistance, you might say. And while on the margins, we met a whole slew of other marginal political camps, none were as conversant in the language of resistance, or *muqāwama*, as they say in Arabic, as Free Palestine. By the time of LGBTQ's final offensive in the early 2000s — our battle of the bulge, as it were — the second intifada was in full swing. That was when the colors of Palestine started to become fully interspersed with the rainbow. Since then, the two have been as inseparable on the streets of New York, London, and Paris as they are mutually exclusive in Gaza City and Ramallah. At every march in every Western town square, Ls, Gs, Bs, Ts, and Qs bow at the altar of P.

That the LGBTQ community seems on the cusp of acquiring a new letter that has nothing to do with gender or sexuality is itself a curious absurdity that has little to do with the content of the P cause and far more to do with its placement on the margins of American politics, where we all met. Having come into its own on the sociopolitical margins, the LGBTQ community still sees that place as its home. This situated political “knowledge” has now become irreconcilable with a happy political fact: While the LGBTQ community stays on the margins, its cause now sits firmly

at the political center. As of 2019, Gallup notes that 74 percent of Americans are willing to vote for a gay presidential candidate, an exact flip of the percentage from four decades ago. And yet the LGBTQ community has never been able to shed marginalization as a fundamental feature of its political identity. Suffering from a case of arrested political development, it is perennially drawn toward other movements that will reaffirm that identity. How else can the community hold onto its psychological political home on the edge after it has already launched itself into the center? It insists on its continued marginalization by allying with other marginal movements, regardless of that movement's actual values: homophobia, misogyny, and so on. The blue-haired watermelons will say that their alignment with Hamas's "freedom fighters" is a matter of moral political conscience. It is in fact a matter of subconscious political pathology. The supposed alliance of values is actually a display of psychological and emotional stuntedness. Similar to a rageful extended adolescent who can't get out of his parents' house, it is a community-wide failure to launch.

The shift in the language of gay politics, from "gay and lesbian," denoting a basic sexual preference, to "queer," denoting strangeness, illustrates the community's subconscious preference for the marginal and non-mainstream. To quote the queer theorist David Halperin, "Queer theory proper is often abstracted from the quotidian realities of lesbian and gay male life." This is how queers find themselves marching with those who would destroy the West and the very ideals that made their sexual liberation possible—marching on the same streets where they gained their freedom, no less. (And it is why, if you must know, the first woman I fell in love with idolized terrorist collaborator Frantz Fanon as though he were Atticus Finch.)

Couple all of this with the "postcolonial" framework that has taken root in university humanities departments, where many budding gays

end up after leaving home, and you can easily see how today's queers were psychologically and intellectually primed for Palestine.



So here is my provocatively and somewhat ironically phrased proposal: We in the LGBTQ community need to be less progressive and more regressive.

What do I mean by that? We need to regress to our original cause: the global expansion of gay rights. But this time, we need to fight from our well-earned place in the political center. Our psychological fixation on the political margins has become detrimental to our cause because it has resulted in our allyship with movements that don't share it.

In 2021, President Biden issued a presidential memorandum directing departments and agencies to take action "to advance the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons around the world." Particular focus was devoted to five pillars:

- 1) Combat Criminalization of LGBTQI+ Status or Conduct Abroad
- 2) Protect Vulnerable LGBTQI+ Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- 3) Foreign Assistance to Protect Human Rights and Advance Non-Discrimination
- 4) Swift and Meaningful Responses to Human Rights Abuses of LGBTQI+ Persons Abroad
- 5) Build Coalitions of Like-Minded Nations and Engage International Organizations in the Fight Against LGBTQI+ Discrimination

The fifth and final pillar is a good reflection of the state of global gay affairs. After a half century of painstaking activism inside Western democracies, the gay community has made itself a foreign policy

priority of those very democracies. The nations of the West today judge one another and others on the basis of how well they treat their LGBTQ citizens. This is a monumental political achievement and one we should recognize with pride. (Recent actions by the Trump administration have shaken this accomplishment; we will see how they play out.)

If I may be so bold, we, members of the global LGBTQ community, should judge and accept allies on the basis of these exact same pillars. If a national political movement wants our help, our bodies on the street, they need to demonstrate their own nation's commitment to these principles. Our political constituency is the same as it's always been: the global gay family. You want us to walk for Palestine? Show us what Palestine is doing for our brothers and sisters on its own streets. Our political allyship isn't free. It requires a commitment to the safety of those whom we have always represented: the frightened, the imprisoned, the closeted whose love remains illegal all over the world. Asserting this is an act of political self-respect and responsibility to our cause. It's a demonstration of a social movement that has reached political maturity. The Free Palestine movement needs the gay movement more than we need them. They should know that, and so should we.

Applying this principle to Israel and the global Jewish community is also a source of pride. It's no coincidence that the boldest, foremost voices in combating antisemitism and anti-Zionism in the past decade have been Jewish gay and lesbian men and women. Many years before October 7, the visible voices for Jews and for Zionism included myself, Ben M. Freeman, Bari Weiss, Hen Mazzig, Shai DeLuca, Blake Flayton, and Matthew Nouriel, to name a few. We knew before many others what was coming on the Left because we had experienced the hostility and the expulsion from our microcosms first: The LGBTQ family discarded us in favor of those who would

imprison them. For the same reason that we built our gay communities, we built a space for Zionists in order to survive and thrive. We carved out that new space from the ground up. We channeled our pain into reconstruction.

Slowly but surely others joined us, including LGBTQ men and women who are not Jewish but were cast out of their puritanical circles. They include Yemeni Muslim advocate Luai Ahmed, and black American media personality Xaviaer DuRousseau. Were the LGBTQ community to take its political responsibility to these people seriously, they would see the Israel that we see: a flawed but durable liberal democracy on whose streets our gay kin fought and won the same way we did. They would see that even Israel's Orthodox have made space for us, as Orit Avishai chronicles with admirable nuance in her book *Queer Judaism: LGBT Activism and the Remaking of Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel*. They would see Israel as a locus of LGBTQ triumph, where the hard work of queer liberation has been done and continues to be done, a feather in the global LGBTQ cap. And perhaps they'd exhibit the same political clarity and situated knowledge as transgender model Madeleine Matar recently did on a podcast. "I am Palestinian as well as Israeli," she said. "The reality is that I have an Israeli passport. I live in the State of Israel. I have Israeli rights. The state gives me my rights as a female. Arab countries do not give you these rights." The time is long overdue for the LGBTQ community to remember that Matar is one of them, not despite her views on Israel, but in alignment with them. People ask me how we can make Zionism compatible with LGBTQs. What? It already is!

LGBTQ Jews are already at the forefront of Israel. The irony of global LGBTQ anti-Zionism is that they should be taking their cue from the LGBTQ community's success in Israel, a profoundly religious and traditional society that has learned to protect and value its queer community. This is the country that gave us Dana International (the stage

name of singer Sharon Cohen), the first-ever transgender Eurovision contestant and champion. Viva la Diva! We have every qualification to be the LGBTQ leaders of the free world. Let's remind them who they are by being louder, prouder, and so fabulous it would be politically ridiculous to exclude us. Let's be so successful at it that the LGBTQs will be begging for a float at the Israel Day parade.

This is not to say there isn't more work to be done within. The time is also long overdue for the State of Israel and Jews in the Diaspora to recognize the LGBTQ leaders who have guided the rest of our community through these dark years. Without such basic recognition, we are denied the authoritative stature that our loudest trolling enemies have when they accuse living and breathing LGBTQ citizens around the world of "pinkwashing" the nation we love and that loves us. They should be made to feel embarrassed by the factual incongruity of their verbal assaults, and the organizations that regularly platform and promote these enemies should hold them to account, including the trolls who claim credibility on account of being Jewish (looking at you, Matt Bernstein—the makeup artist and anti-Israel influencer). If we have any chance in hell of reversing the damage done to the LGBTQ world, the Jewish community must first and foremost make aspirational rock stars of its own LGBTQ leaders before proceeding to tell our stories. They should be investing in Israeli gay talent. There's no reason why Israel can't pioneer the future of the LGBTQ media landscape, lead the fight against discrimination, campaign for gay rights across the world, and produce trendsetting pop culture.

And the stories we tell must be full ones, for we are not just Jews. We are not just Zionists. If Israel is the haven for LGBTQ in the Middle East, and Tel Aviv is one of the best gay metropolises on the planet, with the biggest Pride festival in the Middle East and continental Asia, we must invest in our own lifeblood. Forget teaching the legendary accomplishments of Zionism to our LGBTQ family.

They're not ready for that success story. Change the focus from how to undo the harm caused by the Free Palestine movement to fighting for our endangered LGBTQ brethren throughout the world, including Palestine. We need to renew our focus on the rainbow.

The lesson of our movement rings true: The cure to hate-fueled political shame is everlasting political pride. *

EVE BARLOW is the owner of the Substack *Blacklisted*. Formerly a music and film journalist, she is a leading pro-Israel voice in today's media landscape.