**Pinkwashing in Seattle**

Last week, JTNews published prominently an official statement from the Jewish Federation’s Community Relations Committee about a pinkwashing event in Seattle. It also published a news article on the same subject. Both were riddled with distortions, errors and false information. The newspaper refused to publish a further news article that would add balance to those pieces. The editor refused even to review or accept an op-ed on the subject. He even refused to publish this paid ad unless I agreed to revisions he demanded (in most circles this is known as censorship). Due to basic editorial unfairness, imbalance and unprofessionalism, I am publishing this as a corrective.

The Israeli government and its NGO supporters like StandWithUs 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 part of a hasbara offensive.  As part of such promotion, Israel sends LGBT delegations to the west to make the case for Israel as a bastion of civil rights compared to the Arab world.

Of course, such an argument neglects several inconvenient facts: that a participant in a Jerusalem Gay Pride parade was stabbed and seriously injured by an ultra-Orthodox Jew several years ago; and that two gay teenagers were murdered at a Tel Aviv community center in a crime that has never been solved, though the police are said to believe that American-Jewish settler and convicted terrorist, Jack Teitel, played an instrumental role in the attack.  The Israeli government's promotion of gay rights in this fashion also ignores the fact that while gays may be celebrated in Tel Aviv, there are entire swaths of Israeli society which vehemently denounce everything that gay rights stand for, including the large Orthodox and settler populations.

The Israeli LGBT delegation that the Seattle LGBT commission planned to host for a reception came to this country under the auspices of A Wider Bridge, a San Francisco gay organization which [closely coordinates its activities promoting Israel](http://www.richardsilverstein.com/tikun_olam/2012/03/24/seattle-rejects-standwithus-pro-israel-pinkwashing-campaign/) with both the local (S.F.) Jewish Community Relations Council and the Israeli government.  Make no mistake, this far-right Israeli government cares *very little* about gays or gay rights.  But it cares a *great deal* about exploiting wedge issues against the Palestinians and Arab world.

Another tour promoter is StandWithUs, a prominent national pro-Israel advocacy group.  It coordinates its hasbara activities very closely with the Netanyahu-Lieberman government, as it did when it spearheaded the anti-BDS lawsuit brought against the Olympia Food Coop, which an Olympia judge recently dismissed.

SWU claims it embraces 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" and call gays “the anti-Christ” in sermons to the faithful.  Rothstein has [spoken with Hagee and to his group](http://www.cufi.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=1521.0), Christians United for Israel, including at a [2007 Connecticut Night to Honor Israel](http://www.cufi.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=1521.0), and the [2008 CUFI Israel Summit](http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/group/AStepUpMinistriesFellowshipChurch/message/11593).  [Jewish Week also reports](http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/breaking_news/jews_and_evangelicals_protest_durban_iii_conference) that Rothstein spoke at a pro-Israel rally in New York in September 2011 which was co-sponsored by a messianic Jewish group. She was joined there by [Robert Stearns](http://jewishisrael.ning.com/profiles/blogs/cufis-robert-stearns-warns-of), a controversial advocate of evangelizing Jews who is also a CUFI regional director. The San Diego’s SWU chapter’s Facebook site [boasts](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.207002389395597.43655.111190252310145&type=3) that it counter-picketed an “anti-Israel” rally in January 2012 together with StandWithUs. SWU’s assistant development director, the person who’s likely soliciting donations from Jewish gays for its pinkwashing work, [once worked for CUFI](http://972mag.com/xmas-weeper-stand-with-us-official-perry-campaigner-former-cufi/31581/). So one has to ask the question: if SWU favors gay rights why does it make common cause with Christians who believe that gays are "of the devil?"

SWU also carefully hid an element of its hasbara campaign regarding its [pinkwashing efforts](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html).  Parallel to the touting of Israel's supposed achievements in the field of gay rights, it [demonizes the Arab and Muslim world](https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/treatmentgay.pdf) for their so-called "primitive" and "backward" attitudes toward homosexuals.  All of this is part of a general religious war that some in the pro-Israel community are fighting.  In truth, every religion and nation is fighting to advance more tolerant attitudes on these matters.   Israel has a ways to go before it can declare itself a gay Eden.  So Arab states do as well.  They may have even farther to go.  But demonizing them for that is part of a propaganda war and doesn’t promote gay rights.

Gay activists from the Palestinian and Jewish communities working with Jewish Voice for Peace [converged on a Seattle LGBT commission meeting](http://mondoweiss.net/2012/03/northwest-pinkwashing-events-cancelled-standwithuss-record-of-queer-exploitation-exposed.html) and testified against the planned reception claiming it would involve "pinkwashing," allowing the Israel to use gay rights as a way of diverting the world's attention from the Occupation.  While this may’ve been a controversial message, a majority of the commissioners agreed that the reception had been too hastily arranged and that further interaction on this subject should be deliberated so all the issues could be placed in proper context.

The Israeli government, SWU and local community leaders have falsely painted the issue of the cancelled reception as one of anti-Israel racism or denial of free speech.  None of the activists protested because they didn't want to hear from Israeli gays.  Rather, they didn't want the Seattle city government to officially honor representatives of the Israeli government (indeed, one member of the delegation is an employee of the Israeli consulate in San Francisco and the government paid for the costs of the tour) as part of a campaign on behalf of a State that has maintained 4-million Palestinians under Occupation for decades.

Their message was, if Israeli gays want to meet with Seattle's gay community, do so without the political backing of the Israeli government and its local advocates.  Don't turn gay rights into a political football, was what organizers said.  Keep the Occupation and Israel's wars against its neighbors separate from gay issues.  By sending a semi-official delegation (the Israeli government paid the delegation’s hotel costs and assigned a full-time minder from the foreign ministry to accompany the tour) as part of a hasbara 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 of Mitzpe Shalem and is a former board director of Ahava, a company whose beauty products are the target of a boycott effort because they are produced in settlements.

The official 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 they use:

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 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,” Carstensen said.

Indeed, the Israeli LGBT tour was a deliberate attempt to advance Israel's *political* interests.  That's why SWU and the JCRC were involved.  Their agenda is not so much to promote gay rights in Israel, as to promote Israel and its policies.  Their fight is against what the Israeli government and its supporters here call a "delegitimization" campaign by Palestinian supporters.  So JVP didn't introduce politics into this incident.  The Israeli government did.

The JTNews issue last week published an [official community position](http://www.jtnews.net/index.php?/viewpoints/item/9095/C29) in the form of a specially-highlighted letter by Zach Carstensen and Ron Leibsohn of the Federation’s Community Relations Committee, along with a [news article](http://www.jtnews.net/index.php?/news/item/9098/C22/).  Both contained errors.  Both refused to interview, acknowledge or fully report the views of local gay peace activists.

In its official community statement, Carstensen and Leibsohn falsely 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 in JTNews also claimed that the City LGBT commission "apologized" for cancelling the reception and admitted it erred.  This is inaccurate.  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 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.

The issue as the gay peace activists saw it was that gay rights were being used to "pinkwash" Israel.  That Israel sought to divert attention from injustices it perpetrated on the Palestinians by trumpeting its supposed 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 is maintained by the Israeli government and *it* casts Israel in a negative light.  As for JVP's actions "resulting in violence against Jewish people here in Seattle," this again is more overstatement taking a page directly from the hasbara handbook. It is shameful to imply that legitimate criticism of Israel might lead to another Naveed Haq-style attack on Jews in Seattle.

The statement closes by claiming the Jewish community wishes to advance the cause of "civil rights everywhere."  This hypocrisy is once again why JVP took this issue on.  Israel is a nation in which civil rights are debased.  The Occupation debases Palestinian civil and national rights.  Civil rights of Israeli Palestinian citizens are also subordinated to those of Israeli Jews.  If the leadership were truly honest it wouldn't obfuscate such serious issues.  It would address them head-on and honestly and would engage the activist community in dialogue.

SWU's Rob Jacobs informed the JTNews in its news article that the Seattle LGBT Commission has been ordered by the City Council to host another reception for an Israeli LGBT contingent in October. So instead of the dialogue the Jewish leadership claims to seek, this will be an outcome forced on the local Jewish and Palestinian LGBT community.

*Richard Silverstein writes* [*Tikun Olam*](http://www.richardsilverstein.com/)*, a blog dedicated to promoting Israeli democracy and civil liberties.*