

New Skin for an Old Ceremony: The Gay Revolution and the Formation of Israeli Heteroactivism

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Abstract

This article employs heteroactivism as a frame of analysis to examine recent shifts in resistances to gender and sexual equalities in Israel. Using ethnographic, visual, and textual methods, I examine as case studies the oppositions to two academic conferences, *Issues in Therapy with Polyamory* and *Queer Utopias*, that were both held at Bar Ilan University in 2019. The oppositions, which were led by three organisations affiliated with the Religious Zionist public (Leeba; Shovrot Shivion; Boharim Bamishpacha) reveal how Israeli heteroactivist discourses invoke familism, pro-natalism, religious sentiments, Zionist narratives, and collective trauma, in their attempts to recentralise the heteronormative Jewish family. LGBT equality in Israel has been achieved through legislative court-rulings, instead of being legally secured by the parliament, as it was in other countries previously explored by research on heteroactivism. Nevertheless, this article shows, how this quasi-equality, combined with public sentiments of growing acceptance, induced by homonationalist and homonormative trends, sufficed to create a fertile ground for heteroactivist resistances. Through a discussion of the symbolic meaning of Bar Ilan University as an academic institution, affiliated with the Religious Zionist public, this article also illustrates how heteroactivist resistances may be embedded in specific localities and events, and not just on grand national campaigns.

Keywords

Heteroactivism, religious Zionism, homonationalism, Israel, polyamory, queer

Introduction - Queer Utopias in Israel?

For quite a few years Israel had branded itself, internally and externally, as a “the gay heaven of the Middle East” (Gross 2014). As this article is being published, though, the newly founded extreme right government of Benjamin Netanyahu casts doubt over the longevity of this brand, and/or on the continued existence of many forms of sexual freedoms and equalities in Israel. However, when I started working on this article, in 2020, one could easily say that for over thirty years the Israeli society had been undergoing intensive processes of liberalization, individualization and democratization (Fogiel-Bijaoui 2017). As a result of these broader changes, LGBT people in Israel had started to enjoy increased acceptance and growing visibility. They were also granted certain legal, and even more so, legislative equalities (Gross 2014; Hartal 2020; Peleg 2020).

Over the last couple of decades, there has been a significant shift in attitudes towards LGBT people within the Religious Zionist sector. According to Shveidel (2011) throughout the 2000’s, the concept of “religious gays and lesbians” has turned “from an impossible oxymoron into a well-known and well-researched cultural phenomenon” (136). This transformation can be attributed to several factors, including modernisation processes, accessible methods of anonymous and digital communication, academic scholarship, media representations and the activism of three LGBT religious NGOs - *Bat Kol*, *Hod* and *Shaval* (Ibid). Avishai (2020) also notes the significance of this period, particularly the establishment of these three organisations, resulting in the formation of the Proud Orthodox Community as a significant turning point for Orthodox LGBT people in Israel. Before the mid-2000’s, coming out would often implicate a process of disaffiliation with Orthodoxy. After that point, though, religious LGBT people had more possibilities and fewer felt compelled to disengage completely from the orthodox world. Originally LGBT religious organisations had only striven to construct private, social and worship spaces, which were safe for LGBT people within Orthodoxy, but then they moved to demand legitimization and acceptance. The increased tolerance towards LGBT people and homonormative families in the religious Zionist public (and Israeli society) promoted the general sentiment that LGBT equalities have been achieved in the country, thus creating a fertile ground for the rise of heteroactivism in the more conservative parts of the Israeli society.

Browne, Nash, and Gorman-Murray (2018) conceptualised heteroactivism as a framework referring to new forms of resistances to gender and sexual reforms and inclusions that move beyond the vilification and pathologising of past anti-gay activism. Objections are being rephrased in terminologies that frame the heteronormative family as a crucial component of children's well-being, adult happiness, and the foundation of the social order. Heteroactivism tends to emerge in “more inclusive sexual and gender landscapes” (Browne

et al. 2018, 527), in which the battle for gender and sexual equalities seems to have already been won.

Legal equality for LGBT people has not been fully achieved in Israel. Nevertheless, I claim that the social atmosphere of pseudo-equality, induced by legislative court-rulings and the growing prevalence of homonormative identities and homonationalist discourses (Gross 2014), renders heteroactivism a useful prism for analysing recent opposition to gender and sexual reforms in the country. I further argue that heteroactivism in Israel employs familial discourses, religious sentiments, Zionist narratives, and existential fears of religious and national destruction to situate the heteronormative Jewish family as the foundations of Israeli state and society. I am using as case studies the oppositions to two academic conferences: *Issues in Therapy with Polyamory* and *It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times – Queer Utopias in Israel*. As I shall explain, the opposition to these conferences was not only induced by their academic content, but also by their location in Bar Ilan University, which is strongly affiliated with religious Zionism as a historic movement and as a public sector within Israeli society¹. This intersection between content and spatiality makes these conferences relevant and interesting case studies of heteroactivism.

Before delving deeper into heteroactivism, I will briefly outline the structure of this article. First, I introduce the scholarship on heteroactivism and the Israeli context. Then I provide a short overview on the religious Zionist sector, Bar Ilan University, and the relationship between the two. I also introduce the organisations *Leeba*, *Shovrot Shivion* and *Boharim Bamishpacha*. Following that, I describe my methodologies and elaborate on the significance of the conferences to understanding heteroactivism in Israel. Next, I provide an extensive analysis of the resistances surrounding *Issues in Therapy* and *Queer Utopias* showing how Israeli familism, along with nationalist and religious sentiments and anxieties were enlisted to reinforce the centrality of the heteronormative Jewish family and how the location of the conferences in Bar Ilan University situated them at the heart of tensions concerning the role of the University, the religious Zionist sector, and the Israeli society.

Heteroactivism and Homonationalism, the Transnational and the National - Theoretical Framework

Heteroactivism seeks to secure the superiority of heteronormativities and specifically that of the heterosexual, monogamous, normatively gendered couple. Heteronormative values are perceived to be under threat from social reforms related to same-sex couples, reproductive rights and sex education, and the growing acceptance of alternative sexualities, childfree life choices, single-parenting, and abortions (Browne et al. 2018; Browne and Nash 2020; Nash and Browne 2020). To deflect accusations of LGBTphobia, heteroactivist

¹ Religious Zionism is used throughout the article to describe a sector in the Israeli public, or to describe the ideological and religious branch of the historic Zionist movement and not to refer to the contemporary party with the same name.

resistances avoid vilifying rhetoric. Instead, they are framed through human rights terminologies, claiming to defend freedom of religion, freedom of speech, parents' rights to raise their children according to their beliefs, and children's rights to be raised in 'normal' families. Heteronormative relationships are not only presented as the best environment for child-rearing, but also as the foundations of civil society. Moreover, heteroactivism often tries to present campaigns and activisms for sexual and gender equalities as the workings of foreign agents, who threaten to contaminate the state and alter its true nature. Heteroactivist resistances are then portrayed as the required countermeasures against these threats (Browne and Nash 2020).

Heteroactivism tends to emerge in response to legal and social reforms related to gender and sexual rights, often fuelled by a sentiment that equality has already been achieved (Browne and Nash 2017). Israel is unique in this regard. Aside from the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the passing of several anti-discrimination laws the Israeli parliament did very little to promote LGBT rights in the country. Instead, LGBT rights in Israel have mostly been secured by legislative court-rulings (Gross 2014). Nevertheless, those legislative court-rulings allowed for increased visibility and acceptance of LGBT people in all public arenas, and fostered an atmosphere of pseudo-equality, in which even leading members of the local LGBT community, like Alon Hadad, the partner of Amir Ohana, then minister of internal security, could declare that "The LGBT struggle in Israel is over" (Yisraeli 2020). I therefore argue that heteroactivism is a relevant frame of analysis for Israel. While formal equality has not been reached, the general sentiment and practical experiences of LGBT people in Israel are relatively similar to those of LGBT people in other countries in which heteroactivism has been studied.

Heteroactivist manifestations are shaped and formed in relation to national and transnational narratives and to local conceptualisations of sexualities, gender, nationalism, religion, and the interconnectedness thereof. Nevertheless, scholarship on heteroactivism has, until now, been mostly limited to Christian, Anglo-European and Canadian contexts (Nash et al. 2019; Nash and Browne 2021). As a country dominated by a Jewish majority, in which state and religion have never been fully separated, Israel is a fascinating case to explore in this context.

From the Closet to the Prime Time - The Ascent of Israeli Homonormativity

Israel is known for its high levels of familism (Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner 2013; Shoham 2014; Fogiel-Bijaoui 2017; Ziv 2021). While the Israeli society has been experiencing an ongoing process of individualisation, manifested in increased tolerance towards alternative familial formations, the normative family still plays in it a pivotal role. Israel has higher rates of marriage and lower rates of divorce than most countries in the OECD (Foigel-Bijoui 2017). Israelis also marry younger than their counterparts and have less out of wedlock births. Moreover, Israel boasts the highest fertility rate in the OECD and the highest use of assisted reproductive technologies in the world (Foigel-Bijoui 2017; Ziv 2021). Yet, over the past thirty years, alternative sexualities and intimacies, including same-sex parenting, single parenting,

late singlehood, second marriages and more recently also polyamory, have been enjoying increased visibility and legitimisation (Fogiel-Bijaoui 2017; Peleg 2020).

The decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1988 opened the gates for public struggles for LGBT rights and equality, which manifested in the foundation of civil society organisations, demonstrations, and parades, grassroots movements and a legislative and litigative struggle for civil rights and legal acknowledgement. The 1990's and early 2000's had seen a succession of court rulings in favour of the Israeli LGBT community, which granted same-sex couples a limited form of common-law marriage. These changes enabled and encouraged the creation of homonormative families and enabled LGBT Israelis to partake in the Israeli familial ethos (Harel 2002; Gross 2014; Ziv 2021).

Significant changes have also transpired in the attitudes of the Israeli military towards LGBT identities. While LGBT people had been drafted to the Israeli army under certain limitations since the early 1980's, starting in 1998 they enjoyed complete equality. Military service in Israel has often functioned as a gateway for minority groups into the heart of the Israeli consensus. The integration of LGBT people and especially of gay men into the Israeli military and militarist culture paved another path of assimilation into the Israeli society and those who served were granted "civic and symbolic capital" (Hartal and Sasson-Levy 2018). Israeli LGBT people have been using their military service, especially in combat units, as the grounds for demanding sexual citizenship and legitimise LGBT lifestyles. Meanwhile, the Israeli army used LGBT integration as a token of liberalism and more specifically for the purpose of pinkwashing its ongoing involvement in war crimes and human rights violation (Gross 2014).

Homonationalism is "a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by the nation state." (Puar 2013, 337). The term is used as a critical analytical framework of liberal LGBT rights discourses, that produce racialised narratives of progress, liberalism, and modernity. Gross (2014, 82) defines homonationalism in the Israeli context, as "a process whereby the homosexual, rather than being viewed as a threat to the state and its security, has been transformed into someone who is perceived as integrated in the state and who distinguishes it from other states through its tolerance towards him". The legal advances which allowed the formation of homonormative identities, alongside transnational shifts in which LGBT rights had become a token of liberalism and democracy (Weber 2016), were translated into a shift towards homonationalism in Israeli politics (Gross 2014; Hartal 2020).

Until the late 2000's, the Israeli LGBT community was mostly identified with the political left. Nevertheless, the Israeli political centre, as well as its secular political right have gradually become, more accepting and supportive of LGBT lifestyles, due to the shift in LGBT struggles towards a focus on individual rights, and their adoption of homonationalist discourses. This was manifested in the establishment of LGBT factions in centrist and right-wing parties (Gross 2014; Aharoni and Hasson 2020), and in increased presence of LGBT people, particularly gay men, in the public sphere and in Israeli politics (Gross 2014). Gay men have also been appointed to leading positions in recent government. Amir Ohana from the right-wing Likud

party, for example, had formerly served as the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Internal Security and is currently the Speaker of the Knesset.

The move towards homonationalism encouraged the dissociation of LGBT rights from broader human rights agendas and struggles. It fostered instead a 'new alliance' between representatives of the Israeli LGBT community and the Israeli establishment. This alliance provided the LGBT community with the declarative support of the state, while requiring it to display a normative performance and collaborate with state propaganda meant to portray the country as a liberal democracy and pinkwash its violation of Palestinian human rights. Within the Israeli society, homonationalist discourses, along with the adoption of homonormative lifestyles into the Israeli familial narrative, work together to blur the lingering institutional discrimination of LGBT people (Gross 2014).

Homonormativity, homonationalism and pinkwashing in Israel have been broadly discussed, both from a transnational perspective (e.g., Schulman 2011; Ritchie 2015; Puar 2018; Atshan 2020) and from a local one (e.g., Gross 2014; Hartal 2015; 2020; Preser and Misgav 2015). Anti-gay resistances in Israel have also been discussed, albeit to a limited extent (e.g., Padva 2009; Wagner 2013; Gross 2014; Hartal and Misgav 2021; Livne and Kama 2021). This article foregrounds the links between homonationalism and the emergence of new forms of anti-gay resistances in Israel, a connection that has not yet been considered. Exploring this connection contributes to the discussion of homonormativities and homonationalism in Israel, by focusing on the ensuing consequences of the sense of equality that they had fostered. It contributes also to the discussion of anti-gay resistances in Israel by looking at them through the prism of heteroactivism and relating them to both national and transnational developments. Moreover, the Israeli heteroactivist trends identified in this article have been rapidly expanding since I had written its first draft being promoted not only by an increasing number of organisations, but also by parliament members and parties. Therefore, it is both timely and urgent to begin a discussion of heteroactivism in Israel and the justification regimes that it employs.

Religious Zionism and Bar Ilan University

Israeli society was forged in the shadow of collective trauma - the holocaust trauma for its Jewish citizens, and the Nakba for the Palestinians. Hartal and Misgav (2021, 1472) argue that "both traumas constitute national identities in which catastrophe and trauma play a focal role and in which the national narrative revolves largely around motifs of victimhood and loss." They further argue that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict adds another layer of trauma and national anxieties.

H. Kelman (1999) asserts that due to its traumatic past and precarious present, the Israeli Jewish society suffers from a pervasive sense of vulnerability. The vocation of Israel as a Jewish national homeland, as it is imagined and conceptualised by the Jewish Israeli public, is to serve as a defence mechanism against Jewish, historical, and contemporary, vulnerability (Al-Haj

2002). Real, or perceived threats to the national security, or Jewish identity, of the state are regarded as existential threats, of national and religious annihilation (Kelman 1992; 1999).

Despite a strong collective national identity, the Jewish Israeli public is deeply divided by religious, political, and ethnic cleavages (Blander 2018). The Religious Zionist public, also referred to as *National Religious*, is a significant religious sector in the Jewish Israeli society, representing approximately 10% of the country's population. The term '*religious Zionists*' refers to a heterogeneous group, whose members differ over levels of religiosity, openness to modernity and residential patterns. This heterogeneity allowed the development of different attitudes within the religious Zionist public towards gender and sexual equalities. Politically, though, most religious Zionists are identified with the Israeli political right (Herman et al. 2014).

The religious Zionist society is community oriented. The community, which is habitually structured around the synagogue, runs social and educational institutions, as well as an extensive social support network (Herman et al. 2014). In recent years, the religious Zionist public has enjoyed increasing influence over the Israeli social and political landscape. It moved from the social and political margins to the heart of the Jewish Israeli society and religious Zionists have been occupying prominent positions in all public arenas (Herman et al. 2014; Sheleg 2019).

Bar Ilan University was established in Ramat Gan (a city in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area), in 1955, by leaders of the historical religious Zionist movement². It was founded as an academic institution that was meant to serve the ideologies and cater for the needs of the religious Zionist public (Schwartz 2018). Its commitment to this public and its ideologies manifested, among other things, in a religious dress-code, the inclusion of religious Zionist politicians in the university's leadership, prioritization of religious students, extensive research on the histories and ideologies of religious Zionism, cultural events which are designed for religious Zionists crowds and mandatory participation in Jewish studies for all students (Schwartz 2012). While some of these particularities, like the dress-code, have been revoked over the years, others, like mandatory Jewish studies, remain.

In its early days, Bar Ilan was mostly an educational institution, but since the early 2000's, its focus has shifted from teaching to research. The shift towards academic excellence aimed to gain higher profits, through grants and publication, as is characteristic of global and local academia in the neo-liberal age. In many cases, this shift tends to override ideological considerations, meaning, in Bar Ilan's case its commitment to Religious Zionism. The changes in the university included the establishment of several research institutions and new faculties, including a gender studies program. As part of this change, there was also an increase in the number of secular students and faculty members, as well as a move towards a more voluntary, rather than authoritative, religious characterisation of the university. Despite those changes,

² The move to establish the university was coordinated with Israeli chief Rabbinate.

Bar Ilan University is still held to a certain standard by the religious Zionist public, in regard to its character, its atmosphere, and its academic content.

Due to this unique position, Bar Ilan has been at the heart of social and religious tensions since its early days, between religious Zionism and the Israeli society on the one hand and within different sectors of the religious Zionist public, on the other. For example, concerns over external regulation of academic content by religious public figures have been expressed by scholars in the university, as early as 1959 (Schwartz 2012). These tensions concerned, inter alia, academic freedom, modesty and adherence to a religious dress code, the growing trend towards sexual segregation among certain sectors of the religious Zionist public and publications on LGBT students. The strong affiliation between Bar Ilan and the religious Zionist public, and internal tensions within religious Zionism over progress and conservatism, were among the main reasons *Issues in Therapy* and *Queer Utopias* had caused such an uproar.

Three Heteroactivist Organisations

Leeba, Shovrot Shivion and Boharim Bamishpacha were among the main leaders of the opposition to *Issues with Therapy* and *Queer Utopias*. Leeba was established in 2013 and is one of the harbingers of heteroactivism in Israel, whereas Shovrot Shivion and Boharim Bamishpacha were only founded in 2018. Leeba and Shovrot Shivion are NGOs, while Boharim Bamishpacha is a subgroup of the umbrella organisation Achva Centre for Jewish Social Policy, which aims to reshape the Israeli public discourse and reinstate 'biblical' (*Torah* based) religious values. All three are strongly affiliated with religious Zionism, either declaratively, as is the case with Leeba and Boharim Bamishpacha, or by the membership and leadership of the organisation as in the case of Shovrot Shivion.

All three organisations work for the reinforcement of 'family values', which they interpret as strengthening and securing the Jewish heteronormative family. They all perceive the heteronormative family to be under attack by foreign agents promoting feminist and liberal ideologies, that threaten to destroy normative gender and familism, but also the existence of Israel as a Jewish state (Boharim Bamishpacha Facebook, N.D.; Leeba N.D.; Shovrot Shivion Facebook, N.D.).

Shovrot Shivion and Boharim Bamishpacha are completely dedicated to heteroactivist ideologies and practices, while Leeba is also involved in other debates and struggles related to state and religion. Some examples of those other struggles include reinforcing the monopoly of Orthodox Judaism on the Weeping Wall and on the *Gior* process (conversion to Judaism) and reinforcing the status of the day of Sabbath as a religious holiday.

Shovrot Shivion are unique, among these three organisations, as they are a women's only organisation. They strongly emphasise women's roles as mothers, essentialist femininity and reinforcement of traditional gender roles. They encapsulate all these agendas under the misleading title of 'familial feminism' (Kelman 2021; Shovrot Shivion, Facebook N.D.).

The Conferences as Case Studies and Methodological Considerations

To show the heteroactivist shift in the resistances to sexual and gender rights and reforms in Israel, I examine as case studies the resistances of Leeba, Shovrot Shivion and Boharim Bamishpacha, to two academic conferences, *Issues in Therapy with Polyamory* and *It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times – Queer Utopias in Israel?* These three organisations were leading the opposition to *Issues in Therapy* and were also involved in the opposition to *Queer Utopias*. Shovrot Shivion played a relatively minor role in the opposition to the latter conference, which was joined by another organisation, Chotam. Like Leeba, Chotam is a religious Zionist organisation dedicated to the conservation and development of the Jewish identity of the Israeli state and society. They use and promote heteroactivist agendas as a way of returning to traditional Jewish family values (Chotam N.D.). Since Chotam had been promoting similar discourses to those of the other organisations around *Queer Utopias* and at that their message was mostly indistinguishable, for the sake of coherency and continuity, I chose to focus only on the three organisations that had initially been involved in protesting *Issues with Therapy*, about whom I had already been gathering ethnographic data.

Issues in Therapy in Polyamory was held on the early evening of February 5th, 2019, at Bar Ilan University. It was organised by the Unit for Continuing Education Program in Sexual Therapy of the Weisfeld School for Social Work in Bar Ilan University and lasted approximately four and a half hours. The conference featured three presentations that explored the intersection of treatment and polyamory. *Queer Utopias* took place in the afternoon and early evening of December 25th, 2019. The event was organised by the Queer/LGBT research community of the Israeli Sociological Association and the Israeli Anthropological Association, and the Gender Studies Program at Bar Ilan University. Each one of the four sessions of the conference included three or four fifteen minutes long papers presenting queer research in the social sciences.

While the two conferences were academically unrelated, there was a distinct continuity in the oppositions they had faced and their location at Bar Ilan University renders them valuable case studies for heteroactivism in Israel. Their occurrence there was made possible by the previously discussed transformation in the university, and its shift from a strictly religious approach to a more research-oriented one. It was also the result of the growing acceptance of LGBT lifestyles in the Israeli society in general and specifically within the religious Zionist public. Even more so, the occurrence of the conferences in Bar Ilan were seen by Leeba, Shovrot Shivion and Boharim Bamishpacha as symbolic moments, in which these social changes were threatening to invade and destroy their academic home turf and their last stronghold in the battle against liberalism and progress. Valentine and colleagues (2010, 926) argue that “[P]articular events – as case studies – potentially represent an effective way of empirically researching the complexity of the ways that intersection of categories, such as sexual orientation and religion and belief are experienced in everyday life.” Events provide a context in which abstract discourses are manifested in social relations that are situated in a specific time and place, temporal transformations become visible, and the consequences of actions become apparent.

The first phase of my work on this article was rooted in critical ethnography (Watson and Till 2009). I started documenting the events and collecting data in January 2019, with the start of the resistances to *Issues in Therapy*, as part of a broader ethnographic project that I am conducting on the Israeli polyamorous and queer community. This phase also included participant observation at both conferences, where I was present as a researcher in *Issues in Therapy*, and as a member of the stirring committee in *Queer Utopias*. In my field notes, I registered protests, media publications, social media debates, petitions in opposition and in support of the conferences and the reaction of Bar Ilan University to the unfolding events. As part of my political and academic position in these events, I felt it was important to make the occurrences accessible to the public and to the polyamorous and queer communities to which I belong, specifically. Therefore, I live-blogged on Facebook from the conferences, taking extensive notes of both content and settings, including protests and disturbances. I continued documenting the events surrounding the conferences until the cease of the turmoil caused by *Queer Utopias* in January 2020.

Upon looking at the ethnographic data, I identified new themes, relating to family values, normalcy, the safety of children and the threat to the foundations of the Israeli society, arising in the resistances to the conferences. These themes were best understood as a form of heteroactivism and thus, I reapproached the field from that perspective. As an activist and participant in the conferences, I noticed the limitations of the data I was exposed to as they focused on direct protest against the conferences. Consequently, my second phase of data collection, starting from August 2019, entailed textual analysis (Baxter 2020) and visual analysis of publications on the websites, Facebook pages and YouTube channels of Leeba, Shovrot Shivion and Boharim Bamishpacha. I read through the Facebook pages of all three organisations for posts published between 2018 and 2020 to contextualise the objections to the conference in their broader discourses and gathered all the publications around *Issues in Therapy*. I also collected the publications from these virtual domains on *Queer Utopias* as the event was unfolding and after the conference, ran targeted searches using keywords like 'polyamory', 'queer', and 'Bar Ilan', to ensure that no relevant data was overlooked. I examined together both the ethnographic and the textual and visual data that included my own fieldnotes, media publications, op-eds, video clips, photos, petitions, and texts published on the organisations' websites and social media. Finally, I searched for recurring themes concerning resistances to gender and sexual equalities and analysed them through the prism of heteroactivism.

The data I gathered was published on the Facebook pages and websites of the researched organizations. wherein all posts and publications are intended to reach an audience as broad as possible, and to be shared and redistributed. Quotes from specific individuals were only taken from news articles, blogs, and public statements made on the organisational pages and websites. No information was taken from any private profiles.

A (Heteroactivist) Tale of Two Conferences

In their opposition to *Issues in Therapy* and *Queer Utopias* Leeba, Shovrot Shivion and Boharim Bamishpacha employed different tactics of resistance, including petitions, protests, social media activity, blogs, editorials, and interviews in the media, as well as blackmail and harassments of the university's rector and board members (Pincu 2018; Hareli 2019; Vertzlavsky 2019). Protests were held by the campus gates while the conferences were taking place in heavily secured lecturing halls, and several attempts were made by the protestors to break in and disrupt the events. In what follows, I examine the recurring themes in the oppositions to the two conferences respectively and demonstrate how they integrate into a heteroactivist frame of analysis, in which heteronormativity, Judaism and nationalism are deeply intertwined. I also address the reactions of Bar Ilan University to each of the events and its consequences.

Issues with 'Issues in Therapy'

Leeba, Shovrot Shivion and Boharim Bamishpacha looked with dread at *Issues in Therapy*. The academic conference for treatment professionals was viewed as an event that bestowed polyamory with academic and psychological legitimacy. Oren Hanig from Leeba said that "Until now, polyamory was far from the public consciousness. In recent months, though, it was included in news items and then we see this conference — that tries to normalise cheating and adultery and provide it with academic authority" (Hareli 2019). Meir Seidler (2019) from Boharim Bamishpacha described the conference as "a surrender to the spirit of our time that in the name of enlightenment, had forsaken all sexual restraint." He also forewarned that the following move would be "the promotion of the polyamorous family" (*Ibid*) and referred to *Issues in Therapy* as "part of the expanding LGBT assault" (*Ibid*). Shovrot Shivion (N.D.) declared that polyamory was "a slippery slope leading to moral and ideological bankruptcy," into which Israeli society was being driven by LGBT organisations and their leaders, who were attempting to replace and destroy the heteronormative family.

The condonement of *Issues in Therapy* brought together (Jewish) religious and heteroactivist rhetoric. The publications against the conference referred to it as "*Kenes Haniuʿ*" ("The Adultery Conference"). In Judaism, adultery is a gendered offense that can only be committed by a married woman. The man who partakes in an adulterous act is merely violating the husband's property (Triger 2014). The term 'adultery' with its religious and gendered connotations, implies that the conference is threatening not only the heteronormative couple, but also traditional gender roles.

At the same time, heteroactivist oppositions tried to establish *Issues in Therapy* as a threat to the centrality of the heteronormative family and as a result, to the Israeli society. The 'about' section of the Facebook page "Stopping the Adultery Conference", which was created ad-hoc by Leeba in protest of *Issues in Therapy* serves as a good example. It states that "the polyamory conference in Bar Ilan corrupts the foundations of our existence, the couple's trust, morality, and the family unit..." This description highlights the functionality of the heteronormative family and coupledom as the grounds for civil society (Browne et al. 2018).

The intersection of religious and secular terminologies was also apparent in protest signs, as can be seen in figure 1. One sign reads “Thou shalt not commit adultery!!!”, while the other says “Mummy, don't cheat! I want to know who my dad is!” One portrays the conference as a violation of the religious order, the other as a threat to the heteronormative family and the well-being of children. Their presence side by side also implies on the Jewishness of this desired normative family.



Figure 1. A picture of the protest against the conference.

Source: Kipa News 16.01.2019.

In addition to an emphasis on the family's function as the building-blocks of the Israeli nation and society, Shovrot Shivion paid special attention to the role of women as its keepers:

We women, who dedicate every day and every night to constructing steadfast homes, are worried by the moral deterioration of the Israeli society. Every block in the building, a small familial unit, plays its part in constructing a society and a nation, which is a building, a skyscraper. Without stable foundations, there will be no less than destruction. (Shovrot Shivion, Facebook, 31.01.2019)

The gendered conceptualisation of women as the reproducers of the collective in nation-building narratives is not unique to Israel (Yuval-Davis et al. 1989; Ziv 2021). Shovrot Shivion is alluding to the local Zionist ethos, in which women are conceived as the 'bearers of the nation' (Kadish 2005) and motherhood is constructed as women's most significant contribution to the national effort, as is the military service for men (Ziv 2021). Due to individualisation processes, the perception of childbearing as national duty was somewhat replaced by a perception of childbearing as an act of self-fulfilment. Yet, Israel has remained a very pronatalist society and the Zionist ethos of motherhood still holds (Donath 2011; Ziv 2021). By enlisting this gendered Zionist ethos to the opposition to *Issues in Therapy*, it was implicated that polyamory and the event that sanctions it could destabilise the gendered, Zionist social order.

Many of the heteroactivist themes surrounding *Issues in Therapy* came together in a video clip that was published on *Stopping the Adultery Conference* YouTube channel, on the 30th of January 2019, several days before *Issues in Therapy* was to be held. The video begins with a shot of a young girl, standing next to her smiling parents, openly discussing their other partners. Suddenly, the girl's quiet voice is replaced with heavy war-drums and battle cries. The camera zooms in on her face before moving to close-ups of other children's faces. Words form on the centre of the screen, cutting through their faces in bold and sharp letters "Look into this girl's eyes. Now look your children in the eyes" they say. The next caption, spread on a bright red background asks, "Do you want your children to grow up in a world in which mummy and daddy are consensually cheating?" The use of war drums, bold and sharp letters, and bright red colour in the video is designed to incite a sense of fear and urgency in the Israeli mind that is practiced in states of national emergency. The innocent faces of children are meant to generate feelings of empathy and protectiveness, all the while posing polyamory as a looming threat to their safety and well-being.

The drumming and battle cries continue throughout the video. The next shot closes in on Miriam Faust, the university's rector stating, "In her eyes, it is not so horrible?" It is followed by several shots of Bar Ilan University, announcing its intention to host a conference on polyamory "which is the academic term for 'consensual cheating'." In the next sequence, David Banay, a psychologist and one of the speakers in *Issues in Therapy*, is shown in a recorded lecture saying: "Polyamory for me is a fantasy, a paradise, an abundance of love...". Banay continues to praise the blessings of polyamory for a while, though an adamant listener would notice that his sentences were edited together from different segments of his presentation. His presentation in *Issues in Therapy* reflected a very unfavourable position towards polyamory (Banay 2019).

In the final shots Ely Merzbach, an emeritus professor at Bar Ilan University, declares that the conference must be cancelled, stating that "this conference does not seem to be academic at all and it deals with matters contradicting the Jewish bible and the family structure." Banay's manipulated statements are meant to portray the conference as an ideological event aimed at promoting polyamorous lifestyles and the destruction of heteronormative coupledness, and Merzbach's quote spells out what was previously implied.

The video, along with many of the acts of protest, strongly emphasize the fact that the conference was being hosted by Bar Ilan university and personally targeted its rector and board members. Religious Zionist groups saw the decision to host the conference as a betrayal of the university's values. In an interview to Ha-makom on *Issues in Therapy*, Naama Zarbiv, chairperson of Shovrot Shivion explicitly stated: "If it was not a religious university, we would not have said anything" (Pincu 2018). Bar Ilan, as a university founded by and for the religious Zionist public, was held to a different standard than other academic institutions.

Geographic and cultural distinctions can be used to assert "moral distinctiveness" and form national and religious sexual borders (Nash and Browne 2019). In the opposition to *Issues in Therapy*, Bar Ilan University was depicted as the last stronghold of religious Zionism in its

battle against foreign agendas of gender equality and sexual freedom that infiltrated and contaminated Israeli academia.

Bar Ilan tried to quell the protest by making changes, in form and content, to the conference agenda. The number of participants was reduced, and registration was limited to treatment professionals. Figure 2 compares the original and revised invitation to the conference (in Hebrew). As can be seen, a presentation by Rivka Tuval Mashiach was added. Tuval Mashiach was the chairperson of the Gender Studies program, a practicing psychologist, and a religious woman. Additionally, the titles of some presentations were altered to convey a more conservative tone. In Roy Samana's presentation, for example, originally titled "With Doors Widely Open: On Polyamory, Open Relationships and Judgment in the Therapeutic Space", the prefix was omitted. Another example provides the recreational part of the event, which was renamed "Monologue" instead of "Sex Project".



Figure 2. The original (on the right) and the revised (on the left) invitations to *Issues in Therapy with Polyamory*. Source: Galit 2019.

Due to the resistances, the conference drew greater public and academic attention than it would have received otherwise, and the heavily guarded lecturing hall was fully packed. Nevertheless, despite its portrayal by heteroactivists as a site of academic radicalism, *Issues in Therapy with Polyamory* was, in fact, quite conservative in its content. Most speakers had limited knowledge or understanding of polyamory, working with polyamorous clients and polyamorous scholarship. Their discussion of polyamory was contaminated with stereotypes,

including statements on its hazardous nature to children and hypersexualisation of people in polyamorous relationships (Banay 2019). Despite the fact that some leading members of the Israeli polyamorous community work in the treatment professions, none of them were included in the list of speakers, a fact that induced heavy criticism against the conference from within the polyamorous community. However, the public discussion was not concerned with the actual content of the conference, and, in the liberal public memory, the conference registered as a victorious moment for academic liberalism. For Israeli heteroactivists, it registered as a manifestation of their worst fears.

Queer Utopias?

Protest against *Queer Utopias* had started almost as soon as the conference was announced and Leeba was clearly leading the charge, while Boharim Bamishpacha and Shovrot Shivion were echoing their messages. Here too, as the following examples will show, the protest portrayed the conference as a non-academic event promoting gender ideology, which is shaking the foundations of the Jewish heteronormative family and Israeli society. Moreover, it explicitly tried to portray the conference as the work of traitors and foreign agents, striving for the destruction of the Jewish state.

In an interview to channel 7, Oren Henig, the chairperson of Leeba, explained that:

There is an attempt to change the definition of a family among Israeli Jews. The term 'family' has become passe. The name of the conference "*Queer Utopias in Israel*" is telling. It is about the radical notion that there is no such thing as a man, or a woman and every person must be free to follow their heart's desire." (Cohen 2019)

In its opposition to *Queer Utopia* Leeba had once again utilised the heteroactivist approach of depicting the conference as an event that threatens family values and innate gender. At the same time, it attempted to delineate the conference as a non-academic event and cast doubt on the academic credentials of Bar Ilan University. A couple of videos published on a YouTube channel with the indicative name '*Auni'Bar Ilan Zo lo Be'emet Academia*' (Bar Ilan University is not really an academy), portrayed the conference as an act of adulation and pinkwashing, in which the university surrenders to liberal agendas promoted by foreign agents.

The first video, titled *Retzach Rabin VeAuniversitat Bar Ilan: Hasipor Haamiti* (The Murder of Yitzhak Rabin and Bar Ilan Universtiy: The True Story) published on December 16th, 2019, shows a mock meeting of Aria Saban, Bar Ilan's president, Miriam Faust, the rector, and a young and fashionable spokesperson, in which they strategize how to overcome the lingering shadow of the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin (*Auni'Bar Ilan Zo lo Be'emet Academia*, 2019a). The murder of Rabin by Yigal Amir, a Bar Ilan student, on the 4th of November 1995, left a lingering stain on the university's image in the Israeli public and has been the source of ongoing tensions between the religious Zionist society and the secular

Israeli sector. It was also one of the causes for the academic shift that the university has undergone (Schwartz 2012).

In the video, the actor playing Saban mockingly presents the efforts that the university has made over the years to wash away this stain, by opening various research centres, and laments that it was to no avail. The young spokesperson then comes up with the idea of holding an LGBT conference in the university, saying that it would be “a blast!” “Listen,” he says, excitedly “It’s brilliant, it’s the consensus, imagine a conference called *Queer Utopias* in Israel...” He states that the media would love it and the Ultra-Orthodox would fear to act against it. This section works well to show how LGBT rights are perceived by heteroactivists to be at the heart of the Israeli consensus, to the extent that it could be argued that they are used for internal pinkwashing. *Queer Utopias* is presented as an act of flattery meant to appease the liberal hegemony.

The second video *Auniversitat Bar Ilan Vehkeren Hachadash Lelsrael* (Bar Ilan University and the New Israeli Fund) was published on December 22nd, 2019, two days before *Queer Utopias* (Auni’Bar Ilan Zo lo Be’emet Academia, 2019b). Its opening shot declares “The Institute for Gender Studies is proud to present”. The text appears in the middle. Bar Ilan University's logo is located to its right, while the left side of the screen is taken by a drawing of a distinctly non-binary person, with a moustache, red lipstick, nail-polish, one big-rounded earring, and a matching set of a pearl necklace and a bracelet (see figure 3). This image was featured in the original invitation to *Queer Utopias* but was removed due to the protests, as shall be further discussed later. The screen in this shot and throughout the entire video, is coloured the same shade of bright pink, as the invitation.



Figure 3. The original invitation to *Queer Utopias* on bulletin board by a synagogue in Giv'at Shmuel. Source: Arutz 7 2019.

The following shot features a picture of Daphna Izraeli, with a caption, 'The Gender Studies Program'. The speaker declares that Izraeli, the founder of the Gender Studies Program in Bar Ilan, "was also coincidentally vice-president of the New Israeli Fund." The NIF is an American non-profit organisation that provides financial support to hundreds of Israeli human rights organisations promoting ethnic, religious, sexual and gender freedoms and equalities. In recent years, the NIF has been the target of incitement campaigns by the Israeli right, in which its members and the organisations enjoying its support have been depicted as traitors to the nation and the state (e.g., Bein-Lubuvitch 2018).

"Have you been wondering, who is speaking in this conference?" the video asks, and the blurred names of some of the speakers appear on the back of the screen, in the order of their appearance in the program. Each speaker is then affiliated with a civil society organisation, whose name and logo briefly appear on screen and are rapidly covered with the words, "Funded by", in bright red letters and the logo of the NIF. The clip asks again: "Have you thought that there was no diversity?" and immediately answers: "Of course there is! Dr. Adi Moreno and Leehee Rothschild. They are not related to the NIF. They are only activists in the BDS." The Palestinian BDS movement calls for the enactment of boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel, to force it into compliance with international law and respect Palestinian human rights (Giora 2010). Association with pro-Palestinian human rights organisations and participation in Palestinian struggles for human rights are constructed in Israel as an act of treason against the Jewish state and society (Chaitin et al. 2021). In this video, the threat is not implied. Instead, there is an explicit act of naming and shaming, an attempt to frame *Queer Utopias* as an anti-Zionist event that threatens not only to the social order, but also to the existence of the state. The video concludes with the statement "Sycophants, we're fed up with you!" Again, the university is criticised for its endeavour to be conceived as more liberal and for revocation of its commitment to the religious Zionist project (Auni'Bar Ilan Zo *lo Be'emet Academia*, 2019b).

As seen in these videos, resistance to *Queer Utopias* also focused on Bar Ilan University. In an interview with Channel 7, Oren Hanig from Leeba declared: "This is a matter of Bar Ilan University and what it would like to represent... Religious Zionism must say that this shall not happen on our turf, and this is not a part of our world" (Cohen 2019). Here too, there was an assumption that Bar Ilan University must be committed to the religious Zionist public and, as a result to family values. This time, however, the university was no longer painted as the last stronghold in the battle, but as a fallen stronghold that must be deserted. As figure 4 shows, protests and petitions explicitly called for a boycott of the university and for people to stop studying at Bar Ilan.

In an article published on Kippa, Leeba was quoted:

We have no intention of cancelling the conference, on the contrary, it is good that Bar Ilan is coming out of the closet and exposing its true face to the student public, its tight relations with the NIF organisations and its agenda as an organisation working for the destruction of the family. (Kippa News 2019).



Figure 4. A picture from a protest against *Queer Utopias*. All signs declare in Hebrew "Stop studying in Bar Ilan University – A University of the New Israeli Fund".

Source: Arutz 7 2020.

Initially Bar Ilan University had attempted to pacify the protest, as it did with *Issues in therapy*. The steering committee was required to make several, mostly aesthetic modifications to the invitation, which were meant to make it more acceptable to the heteronormative eye, including the omission of the word "polyamory" and the image of a queer person that decorated the poster. However, these changes failed to subdue the opposition. Instead, as shown in figure 3, the unmodified invitation to the conference was hung in protest, on bulletin boards next to several synagogues in Giv'at Shmuel (Arutz 7 2019), a city near the university that has a strong presence of religious Zionists (Herman et al. 2014).

The synagogue plays a focal part in the religious Zionist community building. It is the basic structure, both in its physical sense and in its social function around which the community is constructed (Herman et al. 2014). The invitations to the conference hung by the synagogues informed many people about it, who would have otherwise been oblivious to its existence. This act also positioned the conference as an event whose spatiality extended beyond the academic space, an event that threatens religious gender and sexual normalcy. In the overtly gendered space of the synagogue, the queer, non-binary imagery of a moustached person, wearing nail polish, lipstick and jewellery that decorated the original invitation stood starkly. Its inclusion, despite its omission from the formal invitation, was intended to visualise the threat.

After this incident, the university made no further attempts to appease the protestors and took all the necessary security precautions to guarantee the safety of the participants and

the conference's peaceful occurrence. In a letter to its academic and administrative staff, Arie Zaban, the president, Miriam Faust, the rector, and Zohar Yinon, the chairperson of the university stated:

Leeba Centre is making strong efforts to foster a hostile discourse in the media, which is likely to expand as the conference draws near. This is not the first time they have done that, and we are familiar with their patterns. But we have no intention of succumbing to this bullying, which is aimed at cancelling an academic conference that aspires to share research on the field. It is known that the main goal of academia is to research and question all fields of knowledge (WDG Editorial Staff, 2019).

When heteroactivist organisations forced Bar Ilan to choose between its sectorial and academic identifications, it chose to side with academic freedom and commitment to research.

We Are Here, We Are Queer, and We Want Exactly What They Fear - Conclusion

Recent years have seen a change in the resistances to gender and sexual equalities in Israel. As the Israeli public has grown more tolerant towards LGBT people and other alternative sexualities, right wing religious Zionist organisations have adopted heteroactivist discourses and practices and redefined their oppositions, claiming to be working in defence of the state, social order, and the well-being of the children.

This article demonstrates the workings of heteroactivism within a Jewish and Israeli context. While Israeli heteroactivism manifests similar discourses and resistance tactics to Anglo-European resistances to gender and sexual reforms, it makes a specific use of the Zionist integration between religion and nationalism. The rhetoric of fear of foreign agents contaminating the state, which is typical of heteroactivist discourses is used in Israel to frame these discourses and practices as preventive actions, undertaken against the threat of national and religious destruction.

Israeli heteroactivism is unique in its development within a setting in which state and Orthodox Judaism have not been fully separated and therefore certain aspects of institutional discrimination against LGBT identities linger in the legal system. Exploring heteroactivism in Israel shows how heteroactivism is not dependent on legal changes, but on a sense of achieved equality that may be induced by the change of social atmospheres, narratives, and discourses. The Israeli case opens the door for further exploration of heteroactivism in situations of quasi-equality and partial or incomplete processes of legal recognition that still have a significant effect on social sentiments and atmospheres. It also shows how heteroactivist discourses are transformed to fit Jewish rhetoric and ideologies, and thus carries the potential for comparative research on the manifestation of heteroactivism under different religiosities.

This paper also shows how heteroactivist struggles can be focused not just on broad national campaigns, like the struggle against abortions in Ireland or same sex-marriage in Australia, but can be embedded in a specific location with its symbolic meanings. Moreover,

it shows how events with little to no importance in terms of impact and public visibility, like academic conferences addressing a small, targeted audience of scholars and researchers, may turn into heteroactivist battlegrounds due to their connection to these symbolic locations. Further reflections may consider how the symbolism of specific localities may be used to invoke moral panic and justify the promotion and implementation of heteroactivist discourses and practices. It may also consider how social, cultural, and even more so educational institutions, especially those identified with conservative publics, may become targets for demands to surrender to heteroactivist ideologies, under the guise of common values and sectorial belongings.

There is much to be explored in relation to Israeli heteroactivism that could not be addressed in this article. The growing prevalence of heteroactivist rhetoric in Israeli politics and parliament is one such subject that requires further investigation. While the organisations that have been discussed here are considered marginal and extreme, not only in Israeli society, but also in the religious Zionist public, they have acquired political presence and power in recent years. Specifically, the campaigns and membership of the Religious Zionist party in recent elections require broad consideration in this context.

The newly founded government in Israel, which is led by extreme right and religious agents, exposes the precarity of LGBT equalities that rely on homonationalist and neo-liberal acceptance of LGBT subjects, which are mostly backed by court-rulings that could be easily revoked. Even today, the situation in Israel is very different from the image that heteroactivists are trying to depict. Despite the progress that has been made, LGBT and polyamorous people are not enjoying full sexual citizenship. Israel still has many miles to go before it achieves complete gender equality, and Israeli children are still not being raised in a world in which gender, intimacy, and family are fluid and vague concepts. Nevertheless, the Queer Utopias that we, as a steering committee, had envisioned upon planning the conference of are not far off from heteroactivist predictions. The queer project, in theory, and in practice, has been striving to deconstruct gender, sexuality, the family, and the romantic couple, as the building blocks of relationships and identities and replace them with more fluid alternatives. This vision of sexual, relational, and gender fluidity is even more important in light of these political changes, and it should not be denied, disavowed, or diminished in any way, in face of rising heteroactivism.

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