*The Jerusalem gay pride parade, which takes place every year with support from the New Israel Fund, is fundamentally a protest event. Today, we will march under the banner of freedom—in the most basic sense of the word. We will march demanding that the Israeli government allows all its citizens, especially our hostages, to live a life of freedom, security, and equality.*

*“The Jerusalem pride parade is fundamentally different from most pride parades,” explains Nili Mederer, executive director of Jerusalem Open House. “In terms of its underlying legal basis, the Jerusalem pride parade is not a cultural event. It is a protest event.”*

**Nili Mederer, executive director of Jerusalem Open House: the Jerusalem pride parade must go ahead this year too.**

*Right now, we do not have the privilege to relinquish the very basic demand for equality, justice, and security—and above all, for freedom. For me, the Jerusalem pride parade symbolizes the fact that the LGBTQI+ community is part and parcel of the complex fabric of Israeli society.*

We met with Nili Mederer, executive director of the Jerusalem Open House for Pride and Tolerance, and chatted to her about the decision to hold this year’s pride parade during such a sensitive time, and about the importance of the Jerusalem Open House.

**This current period is a difficult, sad, and challenging time for all of us. How will this be reflected in this year’s Jerusalem pride parade?**

After October 7, Open House went into emergency mode. All our work plans were changed so that we could direct attention and resources to meet the immediate needs of our community members. Consequently, we also re-examined whether or not to go ahead with the parade. As a result of a deep and broad community process, we came to realize that this is not a parade for joy or celebrations. We have members of the community who lost friends and family, whose relatives were murdered or taken hostage, who have returned home after lengthy and difficult military reserve duties, we have friends from the Palestinian LGBTQI+ community…

We also came to understand that we could not hold the parade without the cooperation of the hostage families. Voices from the community were very clear that this is not the time to celebrate as a community.

The Jerusalem pride parade is fundamentally a protest event, and this year we will march under the banner of freedom. Freedom in its most basic sense in terms of the hostages, as well as the freedom to be ourselves, to live in equality and security in our city and in our country. *Born to be Free* is a call to the government to allow all its citizens to live a life of freedom, security, and equality.

It is important to understand that the Jerusalem pride parade is fundamentally different from most other pride parades. In terms of its underlying legal basis, the Jerusalem pride parade is not a cultural event. It is a protest event. That is how it is defined by the Israel Police. Unlike most pride parades in Israel, the Jerusalem pride parade is not organized by the municipality’s cultural department, but by Open House. This discrepancy is felt at every stage of the Jerusalem pride parade, from the police requirements to the broad support from the city, whether that be budgetary support or support in principle.

In most Israeli cities, gay pride parades are relatively consensual events. In Jerusalem, however, the parade is a protest march that goes ahead despite significant objections.

**This year, like every year, there has been talk that here, the LGBTQI+ community is already part of the mainstream, there are community members in key political and civil roles, people have rights. If this the case, then why march?**

A few months ago, a Rabbi from a congregation in Jerusalem visited Open House. When he arrived, he expressed his personal difficulties with what he referred to as “a place a lust such as this.”

We had to get some air and take a deep breath, because it was clear to us that since he was coming here and facing his discomfort, he must have a good reason. The rabbi had come to ask advice about two students in his small yeshiva, whom he felt had the “wrong tendencies.”

Even if this sounds awful at first, here at Open House, we were moved. In the first place, the rabbi came here. That meant he understood that conversion therapy was out of the question. It meant that he saw Open House as a safe and secure space, in spite of all the complexities involved. But most of all, it meant that that we had managed to save at least two young men. Even though they didn’t know it. Simply by giving their rabbi a space to express himself freely, and to receive help and advice.

A few weeks later, a young man from a small yeshiva in Jerusalem attended one of the religious groups at Open House. Maybe that had nothing to do with the rabbi. But the important thing is that Open House is a space for all communities in Jerusalem.

Open House cooperates with a variety of organizations within the city’s religious, traditional, Palestinian, and secular societies. We work sensitively and sometimes very quietly, but we still manage to provide answers despite all the complexities involved. My optimism stems from the grassroots, from the communities, from the young people who feel like they have a home.

In terms of civil equality—same-sex couples still cannot register as married in Israel. Or both register as parents at the time of birth. Rights that seem basic to the straight population have yet to materialize for the gay community. The State of Israel still does not consider us as having equal rights. We have seen this in the cuts that the Ministry for Social Equality has made, and in the frightening statements given by government ministers and members of Knesset. I long for the day when we can close Open House because it is no longer needed. But that day has yet to come.

**We have all read about and seen the list of priorities in the last budget. How does this affect Open House and the LGBTQI+ community? How does it affect you personally?**

Relatively speaking, in terms of the bottom line, Open House has managed to avoid significant damage. And here, the professional staff at the Ministry of Social Equality deserve a positive mention.

I am more concerned about the impact these priorities are going to have on the future legitimization of the community. Government decisions have ripple effects. For example, when the Bennett-Lapid government came to power, we saw significant changes that were nothing to do with any particular budget. The mere willingness and desire of the government to hear and listen to voices from the community, and to legitimize its challenges, requests, and demands, transformed the level of trust that members of the community had in government institutions.

Suddenly, we saw how men and women were feeling comfortable contacting municipal authorities with their requests and needs. How inquiries were being made on issues such as couples counselling, safe spaces, mental health support, and so on. How LGBTQI+ groups were sprouting up one after the other, and how there were more and more community safe spaces, more room for questions, reflection, and appeals.

Most likely, we will be able to cope with the net financial aspect of the budget cuts. We will cut back on certain activities, although we will try to keep our emergency response going. But we are going to have a hard time coping with the crisis of confidence.

**How do you plan to deal with these challenges?**

Together, we are strong.

Low estimates put the LGBTQI+ community at about 10 percent of the overall population. Also, we’ve got our families and social circles. We are not alone—and this is the most significant source of our strength.

As an umbrella organization, Open House mainly focuses on creating an infrastructure on which our community members can build, and from which significant grassroots work can grow. In addition, we also have partners like the New Israel Fund, which has supported and continues to support a variety of programs, both in terms of resources and organizational infrastructure—something that is extremely important to organizations like ours.

More than this, though, is the knowledge that there is someone who will lend a hand when times get tough. This empowers organizations like ours to undertake meaningful and effective work. It enables us to direct maximum resources toward meeting the needs of the community, without having to hang on to them for when things get worse.

**Right now, when we are seeing that even the families of the hostages are being turned into political tools, how are you preparing for this year’s pride parade? In Jerusalem, it has always been highly charged—will it be even more charged this year?**

The parade must go ahead, because right now, we do not have the privilege to relinquish the very basic demand for equality, justice, security—and above all for freedom. For me, the Jerusalem pride parade symbolizes the fact that the LGBTQI+ community is part and parcel of the fabric of Israeli society, in all its complexities. The struggles of the LGBTQI+ community, which sometimes appear to be very specific, are deeply connected to the struggles of Israeli society.

All of us, Jewish and Palestinian, straight or LGBTQI+, each and every single one of us is deserving of real and complete freedom.