

By Elle Flanders

I speak before you today as a member of the Toronto lesbian and gay community; as the former executive director of the Inside Out lesbian and gay film festival; a former board member of Pride Toronto; as well as a member of the Jewish community. I am also a member of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid. I have spent the last 20 years serving these various communities in different capacities. I have fought for a good part of my life to obtain equal rights—those that allow me to speak before you as an equal citizen today.

It saddens me that some of those very same councillors who have helped us to win those rights, have forgotten the history and the tenants on which they were founded. As a Jewish woman, I am all too aware of how fragile one's equality is—and hence I do not only fight for my own rights but the rights of others as well. As a lesbian, I did not fight for my equal rights to deny those same rights to others either. Our struggle stemmed from the very basic understanding that all our struggles are connected, be we women, be we gay, be we minorities; we understood that there was no point in fighting for one's rights while denying others theirs—this is simply hypocrisy. This is what we mean when we say Human Rights are Queer Rights, a campaign that I helped to launch at Toronto Pride in 2008. We indeed marched as queers against Apartheid in 1986, and as members of diverse communities, we have stakes in many parts of the world. Many QuAIA members are Jewish with roots or implications in what takes place in Israel and Palestine. Other members

are longtime human rights and social justice activists. On these bases—Pride has always been political and it is not for any one of you, not even councilor Rae, to decide which politics can or cannot be at Pride.

Toronto councilors, with this motion and with the unacceptable pressure city staff and certain councilors exhorted on Pride Toronto, you have not upheld your end of this simple covenant. In your attempts to accommodate certain interests, you have in turn denied others. And you also know that withdrawing funding based on the participation of QuAIA, contravenes the charter of rights and freedoms, guaranteeing political speech and assembly. I believe you are fully aware that criticism of Israel state policy is NOT in any way hate-speech, nor does it violate your anti-discrimination policy. You know that QuAIA has not more created an atmosphere of hate at Pride other than in the hearts of those who oppose ANY form of criticism of the state of Israel. When we criticized the Jamaican government's institutionalized homophobia, were we racist or just simply admonishing a gov't for their hateful policies?

The words Israeli Apartheid are nothing more than a descriptor of insidious systemic racist policies that allow for one ethnic group to oppress another in the same land. I grew up in Israel, I think I have the authority and knowledge to tell you a little bit about what is happening there. It saddens me and in fact breaks my heart. This was my grandparent's dream, a land they help to build, and my parent's after them. It was a promise, but in that promise, others were dispossessed. And in that dispossession, much injustice has occurred. I am not afraid

to say that, I am not afraid to admit when I and/or my people have erred. And Israel has erred mightily. I have also just returned from living in the West Bank for a year, yes, a nice Jewish lesbian living in Ramallah. So I can tell you of the reason why the words Israeli Apartheid are apt: There is a pass system in place, where Palestinians must produce an identity card that is either blue, yellow, or green, defining where they are from, whether they are Muslim or Christian, and hence where they are allowed to travel to—both within their supposed own territory or into Israel. To get to and from work, they do this every day and wait, and wait and wait—you have most likely all heard of the hundreds of checkpoints. Palestinians, gay and straight, live enclosed behind walls that are three times the height of the Berlin wall, the only exit for the lucky few is with your identity card, your fate in the hands of an eighteen year old soldier. Can you imagine a wall of this size enclosing all the residents of Thornhill and only some individuals would be able to leave to get to their jobs in downtown Toronto? No, I suppose you cannot. But this is the reality of “the only democracy in the Middle East.” There are roads, which I drove on each and every day, known as the apartheid roads because they are segregated by your ethnic identity. Roads for Jews, roads for Palestinians. I am telling you these things to demonstrate that Israel is indeed an apartheid state and it is up to Israel and those who defend it, to dismantle these systems. Jimmy Carter wrote a book called Palestine, Peace not Apartheid; Desmond Tutu described the system as that of apartheid, as did Nelson Mandela. The Israel Supreme Court heard a case this past summer arguing that the road systems constituted a state of apartheid—The term is used in

countless Israeli newspapers and by many Israeli politicians. Are they too creating “atmospheres of hate”? It is not up to Toronto city councilors to decide that they know more about the conflict than all these esteemed members of the political elite, in Israel and internationally, in order to appease a few voices in the Toronto community who oppose the politics. While those voices are from individuals in the Toronto Jewish community, I too am the Toronto Jewish community, and if you are truly and justly listening to a community, then you know that there are many voices and opinions in a community.

Anti-Semitism is a potent and poisonous phenomenon, but calling every critic of Israel, Jewish or not—an anti-Semite—not only undermines the real incidences of Antisemitism but further delegitimizes those who claim to ‘stand by Israel.’

We urge the City to pressure Pride Toronto to rescind its ban of the phrase "Israeli Apartheid" and to officially confirm the accepted participation of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid.