

By Rachel Epstein

I want to speak to you today, as a Jew, about the dangers of censoring the words “Israeli Apartheid” from Toronto Pride celebrations. This decision runs counter to principles of free speech and the democratic spirit upon which Pride has been built. Pride is an event that is historically all about speaking out in a political way.

I cannot tell you how frustrated I get when Israel becomes synonymous with all Jews and it is assumed that we all unquestioningly support the policies and actions of the Israeli government. This assumption ignores the many races, geographies, experiences and political viewpoints that exist amongst Jews.

The state of Israel does not speak for me as a Jew. I come from a long lineage of Jews who are committed to fighting for social justice. I grew up in a Jewish home where at our seders we talked about racism, about homophobia, about Canada’s treatment of aboriginal people, and about the rights of Palestinians. We hoped for a next year in a *shared* Jerusalem, a Jerusalem that has a place for both Jews and Arabs.

And it terrifies me when I witness how accusations of anti-semitism are being used in this country and in this city to silence criticism of Israel. Using the term “anti-semitism” in this way is a misuse of the term and is a painful disrespecting of Jewish history, of the Holocaust, and of the ways that Jews have suffered throughout history. If the definition of anti-semitism is allowed to become distorted in this way, who will recognize it and stand up for us when we encounter the real thing?

I have been an activist for 35 years, including being a founding member of the Jewish Women’s Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Although I am not a member of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid, I marched with them last year. The QAIA contingent was completely peaceful. I did not observe one act of aggression or anything resembling violence from anyone in that contingent. What I did notice and what frightened me was the

garbage people threw at us as we marched, and the bottle that was thrown into the contingent by an angry person on the sidelines. It is those who oppose the views of QAIA who intransigently refuse to hear views that disagree with their own, who use distorted accusations of anti-semitism in manipulative and dangerous ways, and who are willing to resort to violence towards those that disagree with them. Why is it then that the group to whom violence is being directed is the group being banned? Civil and human rights movements have historically been unpopular amongst those who are resistant to change and who support the status quo. If you are aiming to reduce the threat of violence aren't you targeting the wrong people and the wrong groups? Is the city going to bow to the lobby groups of the powerful in suppressing a movement that is fighting for basic civil and human rights?

I 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.

Rachel Epstein  
June 14, 2010