

TRAVEL OBSERVATION AND SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Freedom under Threat

Israel between lived diversity, security reality and the struggle for its right to exist

Personal essay based on a delegation trip to Jerusalem, Be'er Sheva and Tel Aviv, 9-14 June 2026

This English version is a faithful adaptation of the German essay. It preserves the argument, personal perspective, sources and central observations, while adjusting phrasing for English-language readability.

Summary

This essay connects observations from a six-day LGBTQ+ delegation trip with a broader reflection on Israeli society and antisemitism in Germany. At its center stands an apparent contradiction: in Israel, joy, openness and visible diversity are particularly present in a society that also lives with permanent security concerns and the memory of violence.

The journey to Jerusalem, Be'er Sheva and Tel Aviv showed a country that cannot be understood only through military maps, casualty figures or diplomatic statements. Israel appeared as a concrete society: a place of cafés, education, humor, argument, mourning, professional community work and future plans. A positive view of Israel is credible only if it does not deny the suffering of Palestinian civilians or the legitimacy of criticism of concrete political decisions. At the same time, it must clearly affirm Israel's right to exist and the real threats faced by its population.

1. Israel beyond the Headlines

The delegation began in Jerusalem and continued via Be'er Sheva to Tel Aviv. Its purpose was not tourism in the usual sense, but encounter: with activists, journalists, community organizations, medical institutions and people whose biographies connect several cultural, religious and social identities.

The composition of the delegation itself contributed to this diversity of perspectives. It brought together higher education, queer civil society, city partnership work, counseling and psychotherapy, foundation work and journalism. This created conversations not only between Germany and Israel, but also between different professional and biographical experiences within the delegation itself.

In Jerusalem, religious history and modern civil society were close to one another. Jerusalem Open House showed how a protected space can combine counseling, culture, education and everyday encounter. The Old City and Yad Vashem reminded us that Jewish presence cannot be understood without the long history of persecution, expulsion and annihilation. This history does not explain every decision of Israeli politics, but it helps explain why state sovereignty and the ability to defend oneself are not abstract concepts for many Israelis.

The Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem also stood out in the city's urban space, even though it was not part of the official program and I did not visit it from the inside. Its visible presence and its stated mission nevertheless fit a central question of the journey: how can tolerance, human dignity and dialogue be imagined in a city where history, religion, memory and contemporary politics are so densely intertwined?

Be'er Sheva widened the perspective beyond the best-known metropolitan centers. The local LGBTQ+ center and the community history tour showed that social change does not take place only in Tel Aviv. Counseling for young people and families, educational programs and accessible meeting places create participation in a regional city as well. The city also mattered to the German delegation because Be'er Sheva is Munich's partner city.



Jerusalem in the evening of 9 June 2026: historic urban space, everyday life and visible color. Photo: private.



Encounter and shared dinner with members of Jerusalem Open House on 9 June 2026. Photo: private.



The delegation during the pub-crawl tour in Jerusalem on 9 June 2026: informal exchange as part of the encounter-focused trip. Photo: private.



Hall of Names at Yad Vashem: photographs and testimonies restore individual identities to those who were murdered. Visit on 10 June 2026. Photo: private.



Sculpture for the unknown Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem: remembrance also of those who helped the persecuted and whose names remain unknown. Photo: private.



The Aedicule over the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Visit to the Old City on 10 June 2026. Photo: private.



The Western Wall in Jerusalem: religious site, historical testimony and part of contemporary urban life. Photo: private.

2. Medical Participation: LGBTQ+ Medicine at Ichilov Hospital

One of the most remarkable visits was to LGBTQ+ medicine at Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, usually known as Ichilov Hospital. The importance of this offer is not that LGBTQ+ people need fundamentally different medicine. Rather, it is about ensuring medical quality where experiences of discrimination, lack of specialist knowledge or unsuitable standard assumptions make access to care more difficult.

Dr. Roy Zucker, who leads LGBTQ+ medicine at Ichilov Hospital, explained to the delegation how this approach is implemented in practice. The clinic combines accessible counseling and prevention with interdisciplinary care. This includes HPV counseling, tests for sexually transmitted infections and targeted referral to different specialties, from dermatology and urology to proctological care. Patients therefore do not have to navigate an opaque system alone or explain themselves again at every new point of contact.

This model is especially important for people who avoid medical services out of fear of rejection, stigma or involuntary outing. It can also affect people from religious or conservative families who cannot consult their family doctor without concern. Confidential and queer-sensitive access lowers social barriers and concretely improves the chances of timely prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

The Ogen Center for the Health and Wellbeing of the LGBTQ Community is particularly illustrative. It is a cooperation between the hospital and the city of Tel Aviv-Jaffa and combines specialist medical care, social work, rights counseling and health education in a community-based setting. Its services include dermatology and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, urology and sexual medicine, breast medicine, proctology, gender-affirming treatment and psychosocial support.

This breadth is socially significant. Queer health is not reduced to HIV, sexuality or transition, but considered across the entire lifespan: from youth and family formation to aging, loneliness, care and multiple health conditions. Medical recognition becomes concrete in confidential communication, appropriate prevention, competent anamnesis and the knowledge that people do not have to hide their identity in the treatment room.



The delegation after the visit to LGBTQ+ medicine at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv on 11 June 2026. Photo: private.

3. Civil Society as Infrastructure of Freedom

The program made clear that social openness does not arise from liberal attitudes alone. It needs durable institutions. At the Tel Aviv LGBTQ+ Center, municipal infrastructure, personal activism and national advocacy came together. The center is not only an event venue, but a visible home for the

community. The Aguda combines political advocacy with concrete assistance such as counseling, psychosocial support, legal help, reporting of anti-LGBTQ+ violence and support for local communities.

These structures also prevent an overly smooth success story. The organizations themselves report continuing discrimination, anti-queer violence and gaps in security and equality. Precisely here the democratic quality of their work becomes visible: problems can be named, documented and publicly represented before politics and administration. A positive image of Israel does not require claiming that equality is complete. It lies in observing that an effective civil society fights for it.

The tour of Tel Aviv's LGBTQ+ history on the day after Pride added a historical perspective. Today's visibility did not emerge by itself. It rests on decades of self-organization, counseling, cultural work, legal disputes and the courage of earlier activists. Pride thus becomes understandable as the visible peak of a much broader social infrastructure.



The delegation during a visit to the modern Tel Aviv LGBTQ+ Center on 11 June 2026. Photo: private.

4. Lived Freedom in a Contradictory Society

The journey made a sense of freedom tangible that cannot be reduced to nightlife or Pride symbols. Freedom appeared in the openness of conversations, in professional community work and in the fact that people can live several identities at the same time. Religion, origin, citizenship, queer visibility, military service, activism and media work repeatedly touched one another in individual biographies.

A first important conversation concerned the relationship between religion and queer identity. Jonathan, a co-chair of the religious LGBTQ+ organization Havruta, described its task in two directions: it wants to create a place where religious people can be queer, and a place where queer people can be religious. Identity is not presented as a choice between faith and sexual orientation, but as the right to connect both.

A further evening brought the delegation together with Julien Bahloul. As a journalist, former military spokesperson and LGBTQ+ activist, he linked personal experience with political interpretation and showed how closely security reality, queer visibility and public communication can be connected in Israel.



Julien Bahloul, on the left, in conversation with members of the delegation during dinner in Tel Aviv on 11 June 2026. Photo: private.

During the conversation, the internationally circulated 2012 photograph of two uniformed Israeli soldiers walking hand in hand also came up. Julien Bahloul told us that he himself was one of the two men shown in the photograph. This gave a widely known symbol of queer visibility a personal dimension for the delegation. The image was intended to communicate the openness of the Israeli armed forces toward gay soldiers.



Two Israeli soldiers walking hand in hand. In personal conversation, Julien Bahloul identified himself as one of the men shown. Photo: Israel Defense Forces, 2012; provided image file.

The origin and publication of the photograph had already been discussed critically in 2012. The Guardian reported, referring to coverage at the time, that the two men were not a couple, that only one of them was gay and that both worked in the army spokesperson's office. These details do not contradict Bahloul's statement that he was one of the men in the image. Rather, they show that the identity of the person depicted, the relationship between the two men and the communicative staging of the image must be distinguished. Real visibility of queer soldiers and the use of such an image for state communication can both be true.

In a short interview during the trip, Bahloul formulated his position more carefully than the polarized debate around 'Queers for Palestine' often suggests. He explicitly emphasized that queer people can support a Palestinian state and Palestinian freedom. His criticism was directed at ignoring the responsibility of Hamas and other armed, anti-liberal actors, while also failing to address the difficult situation of queer people in Palestinian territories and Arab societies. For the German debate, this does not mean a ban on solidarity, but a demand for credibility: human rights should not be selective.

His personal wish at the end of the conversation was also notable. First and foremost, he wished for an end to the war. He also hoped that more queer people from Europe would travel to Israel again, seek encounters and form their own impressions. At the same time, he wished for more international attention and concrete support for LGBTQ+ people in Arab countries, not only when their situation is used as an argument in debates about Israel.

The final day brought the group to Jonathan Khoury, a Lebanese-born Christian content creator and LGBTQ+ activist who chose to live in Israel. His biography formed a fitting conclusion to the encounters. Origin, religion, citizenship and queer identity do not have to be closed categories. People with multiple affiliations challenge the idea of two completely separate and internally uniform camps.

The walk through Old Jaffa added a quieter, but important dimension. In narrow alleys, small shops and artists' studios, diversity appeared as something that does not need to be loud in order to remain in memory: old sandstone walls, stairs, sea views, plants, cards, illustrations and handmade ideas. The artists' scene in Jaffa showed that culture does not arise only in major institutions, but also where people shape their city, preserve memories and bring beauty into everyday life.

5. Tel Aviv Pride: Visibility as Self-Assertion

A highlight of the journey was Tel Aviv Pride on 12 June 2026. For me it was the first Pride in Israel. After the quiet and emotionally heavy impressions of Yad Vashem and the Nova Festival memorial site, another equally real Israel became visible: open, colorful, life-affirming and full of energy.



The delegation at Tel Aviv Pride on 12 June 2026, together with Bavarian support and flags from Keshet Germany. Photo: private.

Pride was far more than a parade. It stood for visibility, respect and the right to live different ways of life in public. After a war-related pause, this return to public space had particular significance. At the same time, the security effort made the basic tension of the journey almost physically tangible: freedom and threat were present at the same place.

Helmut Metzner, managing director of the Federal Magnus Hirschfeld Foundation and a member of our delegation, later spoke in a Pink Channel interview from the beach in Tel Aviv. He described public visibility as an important signal of the city and also emphasized that the queer community does not necessarily share every political decision of the Israeli government. This connection matters: criticism of one's own government and solidarity with the State of Israel are not mutually exclusive.

The comparison with many neighboring and regional states makes this visibility particularly striking. International legal overviews show that consensual same-sex relations remain criminalized or practically endangered in several countries of the region through unclear legal situations, policing practices or social sanctions. This is not a simple story of superiority and does not erase contradictions within Israel. But it shows that public Pride, municipal LGBTQ+ centers, specialized healthcare and queer self-organization in the Middle East cannot be taken for granted.



Tel Aviv Pride 2026 on the beach promenade: public visibility, joy and a large number of participants despite the tense security situation.

Photo: private.

6. Freedom under Permanent Security Pressure

The visit to the Nova Festival site was the emotional counterpoint to the joy of Pride. The conversation with Amit Ganish, a survivor of 7 October 2023, turned news images into a personal experience of loss

and trauma. She described how she and a friend hid for nine hours while people were murdered and abducted nearby. Today she deliberately returns to the site to guide visitors and give a voice to friends who were killed.

The Nova memorial has come to stand, for many, as a symbol of 7 October. Yet it must not narrow the view. The festival was only one of many targets. Hamas and other armed groups simultaneously attacked places along the border with Gaza: military bases, towns, smaller communities and especially several kibbutzim. Names such as Nir Oz, Be'eri, Kfar Aza and Nahal Oz stand for communities in which families, children and elderly people were surprised in homes, safe rooms, gardens or on everyday paths. The deeper shock of 7 October lies precisely in this: it was not only an attack on a festival, but an attack on everyday life itself.

The security situation was also present in unspectacular moments: checks, references to shelters, conversations about military service and a constant awareness of possible danger. What may appear extraordinary in Germany is understood by many Israelis as precaution in everyday life. The statement that Israel has to fight for its right to exist is therefore not a mere political formula. The state was founded as a shelter for Jewish self-determination and has repeatedly faced wars, terrorist attacks and threats of annihilation.



Amit speaks at the Nova memorial site in front of panels that give faces and life stories back to those who were murdered. 10 June 2026. Photo: private.

7. Antisemitism in Germany

The journey thus led back to a German question. Antisemitism in Germany is neither exclusively historical nor limited to one political camp. It appears in far-right, Islamist, conspiratorial and sometimes left-wing forms, and also in forms that present themselves as pure criticism of Israel. The 2024 annual report by the Federal Association RIAS documented 8,627 antisemitic incidents, almost 77 percent more than in 2023.

The decisive point is not only the statistical scale, but the question of whether Jews in Germany can live visibly and freely. If a Star of David, a kippah, Hebrew language or visits to Jewish institutions are hidden out of fear of hostility, this is no longer only a question of feeling safe. Civil freedom is then practically restricted. Antisemitism therefore affects not only individual victims, but the democratic claim that religious and cultural identity can be lived publicly and naturally.

It is particularly alarming when conflicts in the Middle East are transferred onto Jews in Germany. People are held responsible for the actions of a foreign state, Israeli or Jewish institutions require police protection, and Jewish symbols are concealed out of fear. This turns a foreign policy debate into a direct restriction of civil freedom in Germany.

8. Criticism, Delegitimization and the Duty to Differentiate

A democratic debate must allow criticism of Israel. Government decisions, settlement policy, military operations, the protection of civilians and perspectives for political compromise may and must be examined. Criticism does not become antisemitic because it is sharp. It becomes antisemitic when it holds Jews collectively responsible, uses antisemitic images, judges Israel by standards applied to no other state, or fundamentally denies the Jewish state's right to exist.

This distinction has become more difficult and more necessary since 7 October. One-sidedness can arise in both directions: whoever denies Palestinian suffering loses moral credibility; whoever relativizes terror against Israelis or glorifies it as inevitable resistance does the same. The sentence heard during the encounters, that human suffering has no nationality, is therefore not an evasive formula. It is the basis for perceiving victims without blurring perpetrators and responsibility.

9. A Positive Image without Illusion

The positive image that remains from this journey is not the image of a problem-free country. It is the image of a society that creates spaces of freedom despite mourning, internal conflicts and external

dangers. People organize counseling, healthcare, culture and political visibility. They argue about religion and secularism, security and peace, identity and belonging.

For me as an employee of Albstadt-Sigmaringen University, the journey also produced important impulses for academic work. Internationalization is not only an exchange of knowledge, but also an exchange of perspectives, experiences and vulnerabilities. A university is not only a place of professional qualification. It can also be a space where democratic conversation, empathy and tolerance of ambiguity are practiced.

The lessons learned are not simple answers, but points of orientation. Freedom is not self-evident; it needs institutions, civil society and personal responsibility. Humanity is also a decision that must be made every day, against dehumanization, hatred and the temptation to hold whole populations responsible for the acts of terrorists. Diversity needs concrete spaces: community centers, medical services, counseling, education and places of encounter. Personal conversations change perspectives because they make people visible where headlines often show only lines of conflict.

Conclusion

The most important insight of the journey is this: closeness does not create simple answers, but it creates better questions. Israel can neither be idealized nor reduced to war. A just assessment must see the freedom and diversity of its society, the trauma of 7 October, the historical meaning of Jewish self-determination and responsibility toward Palestinian life at the same time.

This also includes not suppressing one's own shock. Compassion, grief and disbelief are not weaknesses, but expressions of humanity. At the same time, no one has to remain trapped in a permanent stream of cruel images. The human brain is not made to absorb suffering without pause; conscious breaks are not a form of looking away, but can be a condition for remaining capable of judgment and action. It is equally important to distinguish between terrorists and entire populations. If this boundary is abandoned, the logic of polarization wins.

A positive image of Israel is convincing precisely when it does not beautify reality. It shows a democratic, diverse and life-affirming state whose right to exist should be self-evident and whose concrete policies remain open to criticism. For Germany, this creates a double task: to fight antisemitism in its own society and to preserve, in the debate about Israel, the differentiation without which neither historical responsibility nor present humanity is possible.



The delegation during the guided tour of Tel Aviv's LGBTQ+ history and community on 13 June 2026. Photo: private.

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