

## Words Dotan Brom

Frederick Douglass, once a slave and later one of the most influential leaders of the abolitionist movement, famously said that "if there is no struggle, there is no progress." He was right, of course. Us queers know it best. What is queer history if not the story of progress propelled by struggle? But the taking up of a political cause seldom happens in a vacuum. For people to push back against an oppressive reality, there must be a community. And with a community, this story begins.

When I arrived in Haifa and looked for ways to get myself involved with local activism, it was a time of ebb in the LGBTQ activity in town. Undoubtedly, the city had some impressive queer action in its past – after all, it was the birthplace of Israel's lesbian-feminist movement – but for several years before I moved there, things went somewhat dormant. The primary activity was the annual production of the Pride parade, which marched yearly from 2007. In its nascent years, it was led by the Haifa Pride Forum, an activist group that was formed in 1999 and operated a community centre. After its funding from a Reform Judaism congregation was cut in 2012, the centre was closed down, the Forum dismantled, and with it, the activity withered.

Clichés are sometimes poorly stylised truths: once hitting rock bottom, the community could only move up. By the time I settled in my new apartment in Hadar – the city's degraded historical centre and a magnet for students, artists, activists, and hipsters – a new queer organisation was already forming. Its name was Yotzrimot, a hermaphroditic play on the male and female forms for the word "creators". This group identified what the Jewish lesbian feminist-socialist activist, Rose Schneiderman, put so beautifully already in 1911: "The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too." A community cannot solely fight, and the struggle alone is not our *raison d'être* as queers. Queer folks need art, music, and dance, too. And so we started organising cultural events. A queer party, an open stage evening, events for holidays, a queer history project. The hunger for such activities was immense if judging by their surprising popularity. Through attending them, one could feel that there is a queer public in Haifa. One could socialise. A community was slowly built.

Since the termination of the Pride Forum community centre in 2012, Haifa's Pride parades, organised by the ad-hoc Pride Coalition, marched under the banner of "a community without a home". In the summer of 2014, after an energetic parade that ended in front of the city hall's entrance, we started to work politically towards gaining municipal support for such a home. It was not going to be an easy task. At the time, two cities in Israel had LGBTQ community centres. The Open House in Jerusalem was an independent community-run institute, whose budget is mostly not supported by the city. Tel Aviv's Pride House was our only precedent. Moreover, the political atmosphere was also not on our side. Although Haifa is relatively pluralist, the mayor, Yona Yahav, was known to be reluctant to support sexual and gender minorities. Perhaps it was a private inclination,

or possibly due to his coalition with orthodox parties. No matter the challenges, we were determined to succeed. We formed a team who contacted the municipality. The answer we got was that our community is too scattered and has no official representatives. In response, we formed an official body to represent Haifa's queers: The Haifa Rainbow Association.

Summer 2015. It was a hot Friday in June, as usual, but something was different. Instead of the expected hardcore cadre of a thousand marchers from various political and social groups and parties, some 5,000 sweaty men and women, shouting activists and flamboyant drag queens, showed up for the Pride parade and demanded their rights. It was ended in an assembly next to the sea. Tall palm trees stood as the backdrop of a large stage. One after another, different local members of the community, from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, spoke, shouted, or performed. It was clear: we had a voice.

Mondays are hard. Mondays after a Pride parade are harder. But this time, instead of the ennui of returning to routine, we were thrilled. We were convinced that with this amount of citizens in our backs the municipality must take us seriously. We could not know, of course, that this summer will end with a tragedy. At the very end of July, an ultra-orthodox man stabbed to death 16-year-old Shira Banki and injured six more in the Jerusalem Pride. This was only six years after a massacre in a Tel Aviv LGBTQ youth centre and ten years after the same man himself, Yishay Schlissel, attempted stabbing in the Pride parade in the holiest city for Jews. The community in Haifa, as in other places, was in shock. A spontaneous gathering was organised. Some lighted candles and others cried. A lot of us demonstrated in demand for justice, protection and support for our community. When the mayor came to visit us, we immediately started shouting with anger: "Budgets for the community! A home for the community!" Someone told me to hand the mayor the megaphone. Others were clever enough to record as his voice was carried over the shouts. There he was – promising to give us what we wanted.

In February this year, we celebrated the first anniversary of the inauguration of our community centre – the Communities' House. It's not big, but it's filled with love and activities. Many groups meet there regularly, including youth, trans, Arab, and 35+ men and women groups. There is a psycho-social clinic and weekly HIV and STD checks. There are poetry reading nights, board game evenings, concerts, lectures, exhibitions, and activists' meetings... and it is entirely funded by the city.

It's not all rosy. There are prices to our new relationship with the municipality. There is always the danger of becoming less radical, of being co-opted. There is also still much to do. But this is a good reminder that when people come together and collaborate, they can make a change. To paraphrase Douglass: Where there's struggle, there's progress.