

Israel's Bear community - Corona style

Ami Pomerantz

Gay bears are a sub-culture within the LGBT+ community. The bears are gay men who do not comply to the western beauty-model for men of a fit, slim and hairless body. This bear sub-culture emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to the oppression they suffered by the rest of the male gay community. The bears preach for a different, more applicable, male body, which is big, stocky and hairy. The bears admire body and facial hair, fat bodies, laid-back attitudes, easygoing sexual conduct and "manly" attire such as jeans, plaid and leather.

Since the 1970s the bears had formed local bear communities throughout northern America and later all through Europe. Today bear communities exist in every western country as well as in some Muslim countries and some Asian countries. Although bear communities comprise mainly of fat men, other body types are welcome to these communities (i.e. slim hairy men) as well as bear-chasers: fit, smooth men who are sexually and romantically attracted to fat men.

The bear gospel arrived at Israel by the late 1990s and a local bear community has been formed within a decade – first solely online and gradually evolving to physical meetings. Contemporary Israeli bear community is still mainly active online, on several Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram groups – even though routine bear gatherings do exist. These online groups are the main arena for discussions of the oppression of fat gay men and debates regarding the bear identity. The groups are also the main platform for initiation of fat-pride activism both within and out of the LGBT+ community.

Corona virus, and the quarantine imposed due to the pandemic, had stripped Israeli bears from their physical bear gatherings and from one-on-one meetings, moving all social encounters to virtual spheres. As a result, those fat men were forced back to gay dating-apps in order to conduct pandemic-appropriate sexual encounters. Additionally, dating-app use had increased due to the free time made available to many, as a result of job-loss. Gay dating-apps are one of the most prominent sites of oppression towards fat gay men, as well as other gay male minorities such as racial minorities (men of Asian or African origin etc.) or gender minorities (transgender men, a-binary people etc.). This unique situation was quickly manifested onto online bear groups.

Many members of the local bear community asserted on Israel's online bear groups oppressive comments they received from gay men on the apps. Such slurs, commonly heard on regular times, had dramatically increased on the Corona era. The loneliness and sadness many bears experienced due to the quarantine (as many others have), only intensified the impact of such negative encounters. As a result, the online bear groups have become an important platform for emotional-support and well-being for many members of the community. Corona era had led to the centrality of support and empowerment discourse in those groups. It had also encouraged several community members to initiate new quarantine-compliant bear spaces.

One of the most popular new, Corona induced, bear spaces is the daily Bear Zoom-meeting. Zoom is a videotelephony and online chat service used for teleconferencing. The need for quarantine had made this online service immensely popular in Israel as well as worldwide. One of the bears has announced the formation of a daily bear Zoom-meeting and encouraged all community members to participate in those meetings via a link he published on all Israeli online bear platforms. Very soon the Bear Zoom-meeting became a reoccurring daily virtual gathering, attracting tens of community members. Over 100 bear community members had participated in one or more of these meetings with a daily average of roughly 25 gay men.

These meetings included discussions on various matters, social game playing and sometimes even sexier games, such as “truth or dare”. The meetings allowed the bears to have solid social connections in a time of solitude and a platform to discuss their hardships and joys. They also allowed to get to know other community members and form new friendships and even relationships. The special characteristic of these online meeting enabled the participation of Israeli bears who currently live abroad as well as Israel residing community members – helping to strengthen their bond to the Israeli community.

Bear Zoom-meetings keep happening almost daily even after the quarantine had been removed. That is even though some of the physical bear gatherings had been restored since. It is safe to say that the Corona pandemic had not been only a burden on Israel’s bear community – but also an opportunity.