

Canada Israel Experience plans first LGBTQ Birthright trip

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For the first time in Canada Israel Experience's (CIE) history, LGBTQ Jews are being invited to take part in a Birthright Israel trip that caters specifically to their community.

On Feb. 6, LGBTQ Jews between 21 and 26 can register for the free, 10-day trip to Israel that leaves on June 4 – just in time for Tel Aviv's Pride Week.

Dani Fine, CIE vice-president, said this trip will explore all the sites and attractions people have come to expect from a Birthright Israel trip, with the added bonus of experiencing Israel through an LGBTQ lens.

"One of the things I set out to do early on [as CIE vice-president] was to add additional cohorts to Birthright to allow other constituencies and member of our community to experience Israel through a lens that would resonate with them, and with their peer group," Fine said.

"Similarly and simultaneously, we set out to have a couple of what we call niche buses. We recently had a bus for people with cognitive disabilities, single-gender buses for religious girls, so they would be able to have this gift with their own cohorts and peer groups."



The 2016 Tel Aviv Pride Parade FILE PHOTO

Over the past 16 years, CIE has sent more than 32,000 Jews to Israel on Birthright.

Although there have been a number of LGBTQ-themed trips that have left from the United States over the past few years, this will be the first time a group leaves from Canada.

Fine explained that the initiative came from Canadian Birthright alumni who are currently enrolled in CIE's leadership training program.

"As part of our training for our madrichim

– the leaders who supervise and make sure everything runs smoothly – we had people who were very active in the LGBTQ community... who were also interested in perhaps having an LGBTQ bus as well," Fine said.

Jaclyn Finestone, who is in the CIE training program and participated in an LGBTQ Birthright Israel trip from the United States, said a tour that caters to Jewish members of the queer community is important because it is essential they "feel their two

identities do not need to be separate. We can embrace our sexual orientation and gender identity within our Jewish faith."

Gaston Lopez Ficher, who is also training to be a leader, said, "On a trip like this, LGBTQ members would not have to worry about their identity and they would be able to focus on experiencing the trip to its fullest – as themselves."

Fine said part of the itinerary includes celebrating the gay pride parade in Tel Aviv, but the trip "is not intended to just be fun in the sun. It's also intended to get a better sense of present-day Israel, too. To be able to do that with your own peer group is a wonderful opportunity. We're super excited about it. And hopefully this is the first of many such buses in the future."

Fine said based on demand, he expects there will be more trips like this.

"We expect that it's going to be hugely successful. Just from early indicators of the interest and the correspondence we've received so far, it's off the charts. Our expectation is that it will be successful, and if so, and if the community wants it, we'll provide it as often as possible." ■

Visit Israelforfree.com to register or for more information.

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