Beheading of gay Palestinian desecrates sacred city Hebron

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<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-720308>

Deep in the [Judean Mountains](https://www.jpost.com/in-jerusalem/life-in-the-judean-hills-381756) of the southern West Bank lies the ancient Hittite stronghold of [Hebron](https://www.jpost.com/magazine/hebron-the-conflict-in-a-nutshell-490446). The Bible (Genesis 23:1-20) tells of how Abraham purchased the Cave of Doubles from a Hittite named Ephron son of Zohar as a burial place; thither lie the bones of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, topped by a still-extant Herodian-era structure covering a site that bears traces of much greater antiquity.

[King David](https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/article-716517) reigned from Hebron for seven and a half years before transferring his capital to Jerusalem (Samuel 2, 5:5). Interestingly enough, the stories of the love between King David and the son of King Saul, Jonathan, were interpreted as a same-sex relationship by several scholars.

The site is venerated by all three faiths descended from Abraham’s teachings; in particular, Hebron is one of the four holy cities of Judaism, as well as being the fourth holiest city in Islam. How horrific, then, that the storied city was desecrated by an unspeakable act of butchery—the brutal public beheading, filmed live, of a [Palestinian gay man](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-719063), whose only crime was to live and love the way that he saw fit, much like King David.

Who was the Palestinian?

Shed a tear for Ahmed Abu Marhia. Fleeing death threats at home over his sexuality and a family that had shunned him, 25-year-old Abu Marhia was living under asylum in Israel, with plans to eventually resettle in Canada. A friend described him as, “a pleasant and sensitive guy, always appreciative and grateful. He had goals he sought to achieve in life, he found a good job and it seemed like it was all going to work out for him.” Reportedly, “[a]bout 90 [Palestinians who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community](https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-709930) currently live as asylum-seekers in Israel. They suffered discrimination and in extreme cases, violence in their communities before fleeing.”

So what happened to this gentle soul? Much remains unclear. Abu Marhia’s friends say that he was kidnapped and taken to the West Bank against his will, but one member of his family claimed Abu Marhia often visited Hebron. However he got there, his modern life ended in medieval fashion when a murderer cut off his head.

The suspect, currently held by Palestinian Authority police, cruelly recorded his wicked deed and immediately uploaded the grisly video to Palestinian social media. So a promising young life was cut short, and an entire community of LGBTQ+ Palestinians was sent a blood-curdling message: express your sexuality and your life may be forfeit.

Things will only get worse if Hamas and other fundamentalist groups gain more power in Palestinian life. In 2016, when [Hamas commander Mahmoud Ishtiwi](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/world/middleeast/hamas-commander-mahmoud-ishtiwi-killed-palestine.html) was accused of having sex with men, he was “suspended from a ceiling for hours on end, for days in a row... [h]e was whipped and guards blasted loud music into his cell, banishing sleep...” After enduring days of this torture, he was shot to death. If this was the fate of a Hamas commander, imagine the plight of ordinary LGBTQ+ Palestinians living under Hamas control in Gaza.

One report based on interviews with four LGBTQ+ men and one woman from Gaza, found that “[a]t risk of harassment, torture or worse from Hamas or members of their own families, queer Gazans often hide away in fear... passing as straight can be a matter of survival. At the same time, according to a Pew Research Study, 93% of Palestinians in the West Bank do not believe homosexuality should be accepted by society.

LGBTQ+ community living freely in Israel with no fears

Meanwhile, in Israel, LGBTQ+ people are free to be themselves and live full lives under the protection of the law. Indeed, Israel has some work to do to promise full equality like with same-sex marriage, which is recognized only if performed abroad. Yet, with a total size equal to less than 0.03% of the entire Middle East, (as small as New Jersey), Israel is also home to dozens of pride parades, including the most well-known, [Tel Aviv Pride](https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-709083), the largest in the continent of Asia.

In 2019, [Nitzan Horowitz](https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-711867) became the first openly gay leader of a major party, Meretz. In 2021, he was appointed Israel’s health minister and has been transformative in that role, including making it easier for [Israeli women to access abortions](https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/health-minister-nitzan-horowitz-promotes-abortion-reform-687498). Israeli law forbids conversion therapy and allows transgender individuals to change the gender on their ID card cards with or without surgery.

As a queer Israeli Jew whose parents escaped to this country from Iraq and Tunisia, I have rights that are exceptional in the entire Middle East region. In many countries, including my parent’s former homes and theocratic Iran, homosexuality is still sometimes punished by public hangings. What a tragedy that a young person had achieved asylum in my homeland, Israel, to live the life he had always dreamed of, only to have it robbed from him by a soulless thug whose values system corresponds neither to the ethics of the ancient faiths nor the modern world.

The international community must not be silent but it is. Perhaps because he was a member of the LGBTQ+ community because he was a Palestinian or because his murder wasn’t fitting the prevailing narrative of the conflict. I hope that well-meaning folks everywhere will join me in speaking up for Abu Marhia’s memory so it will be a blessing. Hopefully, this can help bring better dawn for LGBTQ+ Palestinians so that they no longer have to endure such repression and can live as they deserve, as free people with dignity.

The writer has been named among the top 50 LGBTQ+ influencers and his award-winning articles have been published in the Los Angeles Times, Newsweek, NBC News, Haaretz, The Forward, Jewish Chronicle, International Business Times and more. He serves as a senior fellow at the Tel Aviv Institute and is the host of the podcast Fresh Look.