

## PERSONALITIES

# The Israeli Experience with Gay Activist and PSU Artist-in-Residence David Ehrlich

By JENNY FURNISS

When Israeli writer and gay activist David Ehrlich arrived in Portland, Powell's Books was one of the first places he visited. As founder and co-owner of T'mol Shilshom, a queer-friendly cafe and bookstore that's one of Jerusalem's literary hubs, he was drawn to Powell's.

"It's the first place I've seen that has even more events than I do," says Ehrlich. Since September, he's been artist-in-residence for the Harold Schnitzer Family Program in Judaic Studies at Portland State University.

As artist-in-residence, he's given staged readings of his short stories and lectures on gay and lesbian life in Israel. On Sunday, November 22 on the PSU campus, he'll lead a discussion and question/answer session after showing *Yossi and Jagger*, a film close to his heart. *Yossi and Jagger* portrays the romance that develops between two male Israeli soldiers. Ehrlich served in the military for three years, as required by Israeli law.

"When I saw this movie, I had the most powerful experience of identifying with those characters. That was the fantasy that I didn't dare have at the time," he says. "The movie gave me a new possible narrative of my own life if I'd had an earlier awakening."

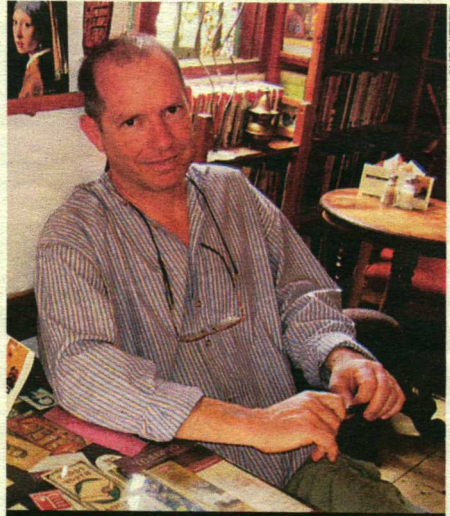
Sharing stories of his life—like his stint in the army and living as one of the first openly gay men in Jerusalem—is not always easy for Ehrlich. He often receives blank stares from Americans as he struggles to convey how religious, ethnic and political tension permeate Jerusalem, the culture and many personal interactions.

"Jerusalem is sitting on a barrel of explosives—on one hand, it's kind of scary, but on the other hand, it's home," he says. In Jerusalem, "You really feel the complexities of the Middle East. It's not the most attractive place for the queer community . . . It's not a place you often see gay couples kiss in the street." In fact, Jerusalem's only gay bar closed down. When it was open, both Palestinians and Jews visited the bar, an usual social milieu. "Being oppressed and having our own issues often makes us more capable of having ties with the other," says Ehrlich.

He first moved to Jerusalem in the early '80s after being discharged from the army. Since then, he helped found the Israeli AIDS Task Force and he's been active in Jerusalem Open House, which builds the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer community, and advocates for social change.

"I feel really proud to be part of the Israeli queer history that I've taken part in," he says.

By chance, Open House provided the



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David Ehrlich in T'mol Shilshom, a queer-friendly cafe and bookstore in Jerusalem he founded and co-owns.


**DAVID EHRLICH** will discuss *Yossi and Jagger* on Sun., Nov. 22, 3 p.m. at the PSU Multicultural Center, 228 Smith Memorial Student Union, 1825 SW Broadway. Admission is free. [www.pdx.edu/judaic](http://www.pdx.edu/judaic).

Tamar, a straight woman who is now his co-parenting partner, through a friend at Open House. They live down the street from each other, and Tamar and the children recently visited Ehrlich in Portland. People often find his parenting arrangement unusual.

"I don't feel different than any other parent," he says, but admits, "I feel extremely lucky. Everything worked out great; there are so many things that could have gone wrong."

Owning T'mol Shilshom—personally choosing the books to stock the shelves and becoming friends with the writers who frequent his bookstore—gives Ehrlich a unique relationship with literature. As a fiction writer and former journalist, Ehrlich uses these and a palette of other life experiences to write his short stories. He's published two collections, *Tuesday and Thursday Mornings* and *18 Blue*, in Hebrew. Syracuse University Press is publishing a compilation of these books in English, and Ehrlich continues to write stories during his stay in Portland.

Since a taste for literature is where the similarities end between Portland and his home in Jerusalem, he's noticed the drastic cultural differences living on an American university campus, and compares them to his own youth, when he joined the army.

"Coming from the outside, coming from a troubled area, I see the advantages of this country," Ehrlich says. "I see young students and envy that period of time when they have so many options." 

Portland freelancer Jenny Furniss can be