



Members of the OGAE Israel Eurovision fan club in Lisbon last year

Photo courtesy of Itzik Fishely

ROLLING OUT THE RED CARPET

The Israeli chapter of the largest Eurovision fan club wants this year's competition in Tel Aviv to be the most impressive ever – and it's making sure the contest's devotees will have an unforgettable experience

Liza Rosenberg

Itzik Fishely is taking ten days off work for the 2019 Eurovision song contest and he booked his short-term holiday apartment in Tel Aviv long ago. “What can I do? I have to host,” he quips. Fishely, who lives in Haifa and works for an accounting firm, is the current president of OGAE Israel, which is the Israeli chapter of Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision, the largest network of Eurovision fan clubs. He and other members of OGAE Israel are pulling out all the stops to ensure that this year's Eurovision will be a celebration that fans won't soon forget.

During Eurovision week, the host country's local OGAE fan club traditionally sponsors EuroCafe – a venue for all local and visiting OGAE fan club members. Events include daytime activities such as “meet-and-greets” and parties in the evenings. Not surprisingly, Fishely is clearly excited about what his club has in store. “We have our own activities, our own plans for the contest and for the visitors coming from Europe and from around the world. We want to make a very big impression on everyone, so we're really thinking out of the box, thinking about things that were never done during Eurovision week, ever,”

emphasizes Fishely.

To that end, from May 12th through May 18th OGAE Israel is taking over HaOman 17, one of the biggest, hottest clubs in Tel Aviv, where they will be throwing massive parties every night. Big-name artists from all over Europe are being flown in for each party alongside appearances by Israeli stars. “We do everything big here in Israel,” says Fishely, with a twinkle in his eye.

Events all year long

OGAE Israel was founded in 1986 to serve as a home for all Eurovision fans in Israel and to share information with clubs from different countries. It has a diverse membership of approximately 240 members. Annual dues are used to cover events throughout the year, including karaoke evenings, public screenings of old Eurovision contests, joint activities with other OGAE fan clubs in Europe and more. Club members were even invited to the home of Sweden's ambassador to Israel to watch the final round of the Melody Festival, Sweden's popular televised Eurovision selection competition.

The Israeli club also has an annual tradition of throwing a big party

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before the Israeli contestants travel to the host city for the contest. The contestants are invited and say a few words, and perhaps sing the song they'll be singing in the competition. “Netta (Barzilai) came last year. This year we'll have it with Kobi, of course, and it will be easier to arrange because he's not traveling,” explains Fishely. “Our fan club is very active. We like to keep busy,” he adds with a grin.

“Netta was something special”

The first Eurovision Song Contest was held in 1956 in Lugano, Switzerland, and Israel made its first Eurovision appearance in 1973, when the competition took place in Luxembourg. Israel has since participated 41 times. In 1980, Israel became the only country in Eurovision history not to defend its title from the previous year – not only did it decline to host the contest for financial reasons after winning for the second year in a row, it also withdrew from the 1980 contest because the date conflicted with Israel's Memorial Day. Israel has won the competition four

times – in 1978 (“A-Ba-Ni-Bi” by Izhar Cohen & the Alphabeta), 1979 (“Hallelujah” by Gali Atari & Milk and Honey), 1998 (“Diva” by Dana International) and 2018, when Netta Barzilai stole the show with “Toy.”

“Netta was something special,” says Fishely. “We knew from day one of ‘Hakochav Ha'ba’ (“The Next Star,” an interactive singing competition reality TV show that selects Israel's Eurovision contestant),” he added. Netta's odds of winning the Eurovision were high even before she had a song, and when “Toy” came out, the odds put her in first place. “That was my fourth time attending Eurovision, and there was never such a big fuss around the Israeli singer as there was with Netta,” notes Fishely.

“Kobi (Marimi) wasn't actually my favorite during ‘Hakochav Ha'ba’ this year, but I'm not disappointed by the song. It's very beautiful, and it's really his type of music. I think that in the contest, he's going to do an even better job than he did with the studio version,” confides Fishely, adding, “You know that he's going to touch people's hearts in his own special way, and it's going to be amazing.” Fishely doesn't know if Marimi will make it to one of the highest spots, but believes that he can reach the top ten.

Fishely has heard criticism of Marimi, but points out that the selection process on ‘Hakochav Ha'ba’ has proven itself. “Since we started using this show to choose our Eurovision contestant—starting with Nadav Guedj in 2015—Israel has qualified for the finals every time.

Fishely watched his first Eurovision in 1983 with his family when he was six years old. “Eurovision was a big deal back then. We only had one television channel in Israel and everyone used to make a big fuss over it,” he recalls. “The reason I love the contest so much is because of the music. I love music, and it's always been a part of my life. I used to DJ, and still do it now at Eurovision parties in Israel as well as when I go to Europe for the contests.” Fishely and his family continued the tradition of watching the contest together until he started attending the contests in person five years ago.

Welcoming and open-minded

Initially, four cities were in the running to host this year's Eurovision: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa and Eilat. Fishely believes that Tel Aviv was the right choice. “Don't get me wrong – I love Jerusalem. It's a beautiful city with a tremendous amount to offer. However, hosting Eurovision 20 years ago was very different from what it is today; everything was on a much smaller scale. Now, you're talking about thousands of people coming here, and they are going to want to party and have fun. Tel Aviv is going to show everyone how incredible, welcoming and open-minded it is,” exclaims Fishely. “Visitors who come here will see the very best of what the city has to offer.”

In addition to OGAE Israel's EuroCafe, the Tel Aviv municipality has designated beachfront Charles Clore Park as the site of this year's Eurovision Village (the official fan zone), with live performances, big screens showing the contest and more. EuroClub is the official party venue for accredited contest delegates, press and fans. Thanks to Kilim Electronics Company, the Israeli agents for the German company responsible for the contest's microphones and amplification systems, a café will be set up backstage at Expo Tel Aviv, with all proceeds going to Ruth Rappaport Children's Hospital, part of the Haifa-based Rambam Health Care Campus.

OGAE Israel wants to make things as easy as possible for visitors coming from abroad for Eurovision. They plan to make instructional videos showing people how to use public transportation and taxis, and might try to cooperate with one of the local phone apps for taxis to ensure that people don't get cheated. Fishely is optimistic. “When you look at the big picture, you have to make everything count. We want to create an overall good experience for the people coming here, and this is what drives us. We know that when people leave Israel, they will say it was the best Eurovision experience they've had in a very long time.”



Netti Milrad

Netta Barzilai celebrating in Tel Aviv last year, after winning the Eurovision