

## Leading IRAC: A Mission to Advance Human Rights, Freedom of Religion and Equality

In November, ARZA Canada board member August Adelman met with the new Director of the Israel Religious Action Centre (IRAC), Orly Erez-Likhovski, to talk about her work at IRAC and her goals for the organization. Below is an abridged transcript of the interview.

AA: Congratulations on your new role! You were formerly the legal director at IRAC for many years. What's going to change for you between that and what you're doing now?

OEL: Well, I've been doing legal work for IRAC for the past 17 years and now my work is not legal, but rather more [about] seeing the whole picture, dealing with political issues, being in charge of all the staff (around 25 people), doing some fundraising, budgets, so all of the management stuff. I'm very excited to step into this position.

AA: That's so exciting, you get to swap out the legal hat for all your other hats.

OEL: Naturally I'm still very much involved with the legal work, because that's what I've been doing, but it's going to be from a different perspective now.

AA: What are you most excited about?

OEL: I think I'm most excited that the circumstances now in Israel are so unique: we have a change in the political system that we've been longing for, for so many years, and finally we have a government that we can work with. We were used to opposing the government and protesting, and now suddenly we have friends in the government and people really want to promote our values. It's very refreshing and it's something that we have to get used to.

We are used to going to the courts, because the government was always [saying] "we can't do that" and we had no options to pass new laws, because it was so hard to work in the Knesset. And now it's just a completely new reality. It's not that easy, it's a very complicated coalition, so there's a lot of very delicate work that we have to be doing, but it's opened new arenas for us, new methods of work. It's very exciting to have new tools in your toolbox, and that's something I'm really looking forward to.

AA: Wonderful! I know there's a lot of excitement over here too. Thinking about Canada, is there something that you wish that Canadian Reform Jews understood about IRAC and Israel and the Progressive Movement in Israel?

OEL: I would like people to be aware of the issues we're [addressing], and be involved. We have a weekly newsletter, called [the Pluralist](#), that we are sending out in North America and otherwise. I really want more people to be exposed to the stuff that we do. Our social media is something we've been investing in a lot lately, because that's the new thing, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. I wish that more people would be engaged through these different routes with what we've been doing, because the first thing is for people to know, to have the knowledge that these things are happening. Remember that it's really helpful to share the stuff we do or help financially.

Voicing your goals and your opinion in different media outlets, saying that it's important to you and that you care about this or that issue. We've been doing so many issues, that I think touch people both in Israel and abroad, and it is very meaningful to us to hear from people that are saying that this issue means a lot to them, or that really made a difference.

AA: If you were trying to describe IRAC to someone who had never heard of it before, how would you describe it?

OEL: I'd say we are the only Jewish religious organization in Israel that has a mission for advancing human rights in general, and specifically freedom of religion and equality. We are really trying to take the verses of "loving thy neighbour as yourself" and "each man/woman was created in the image of G-d" and put it into action. I think that the most important thing for us is to use Judaism in a way that promotes tolerance and pluralism, and fight against others who use Judaism to incite hostility and hatred. This is the main creed.

This leads us to [addressing] different issues – fighting and protecting different minorities, different groups in Israel that we feel should be protected. I think what is characteristic of IRAC is that we try to map the issues and think of something that has not been dealt with before, and that should be dealt with. An example that comes to mind is our fight against gender segregation in the public sphere and the exclusion of women: something we've been dealing with for over 20 years. We started to deal with the issues of gender segregation on public buses. People did not understand, especially here in Israel, why we were doing this, they would just say "no, there are groups that want segregation, the state should allow them", and "it's their right, multiculturalism" and it took a very long time for people to understand that first, it affects people within this community itself.

Ultra-Orthodox women called us and thanked us for fighting for them, because they were not allowed to do it themselves. You really cannot differentiate, can't have different parts of the country with different laws - we all live together. For the past 5 years everyone understands that this is such a dangerous phenomenon, and I'm really

proud that we were there at the beginning, drawing the red line and saying “this cannot go on”. We feel our role is to draw the red line and say to the government, the authorities, that this shouldn’t be allowed.

The same goes for racism, or the fight to disqualify racist candidates to the Knesset, saying these people should not represent us in parliament. In 30 years no one had managed to disqualify someone for inciting racism, and we have managed to do it with hard work from our staff, because it was very important to us to say this shouldn’t be allowed in the Jewish state. That’s really characteristic of IRAC.

AA: As someone who has been involved in the legal stuff for so long, is there a particular legal challenge, either finished or in progress, that is the one that is close to your heart, that’s your baby, in terms of legal challenges.

OEL: There are so many! I think that nowadays one of the hot topics is the issue of the Kotel, of the Western Wall. It’s in the news, and this is something that I’ve been dealing with for many years now, both from the legal front and also joining Women of the Wall and the Reform movement for different events.

I think it’s frustrating because we reached such an amazing agreement/compromise, which should have been implemented, and wasn’t. It felt like we were there after so many years, and then we were thrown back -- this is something that happens quite a lot. We sometimes have victories, but it’s like one step forward and two steps backwards. But I think really you have to look at the long run, the years ahead, and even if you have some setbacks, eventually you do make a difference.

I think that you see this even when we talk about the attitude of different municipalities to Reform congregations around the country. We had to educate the authorities, that they have to treat us equally and, over time, the message does penetrate. It takes time, but now people understand (some more, some less) after three or four congregations, that you have to treat the Reform movement equally. It’s a freedom of religion issue: we need to treat the streams equally. We’ve made a lot of progress, but there’s still a lot of work ahead!

AA: Thinking of the Reform Progressive Jewish movements in Israel, is there something, a kind of message, that you wish that Reform folks in Canada knew about the Reform/Progressive movement in Israel?

OEL: The Reform movement is going through an amazing process where many more Israelis are taking part in life-cycle events in the movement, especially marriage ceremonies and Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. That is something that has been growing tremendously over the last decade or so. According to surveys, we have

hundreds of thousands of Israelis who identify as Reform and would go to a Reform synagogue for holidays or for life cycle events. This is very different from what it used to be, when I was growing up. Now it's a major factor in Israel. It's what makes the ultra-Orthodox feel so threatened, because they understand there is a real alternative.

For many years it was hard because we had one stream that was heavily funded by the state, and we were always discriminated against. You have to level the playing field to really allow a true competition, and I think that in recent years many more Israelis know there is an alternative, whether it's the Kotel or getting married, or you want to go to a school with a pluralistic program.

This is a truly amazing process, and I'm really happy that my kids are growing in a different reality than I grew in. I think this is the case in many places in Israel, we have new congregations and we see that people want to experience their Judaism in a different way, they want to go to a place where they feel at home. I think many secular Israelis are at first very alienated by Judaism because they think of the Orthodox option alone and I think when they're presented with other options, they truly understand that now that there's a wonderful thing they can experience. Hopefully that will continue.

AA: There is a real demand for it.

OEL: Definitely. Part of it is that people are so sick of the current system, even within Orthodoxy you see many more people go and marry outside the Chief Rabbinate, and wanting Kashrut outside the Rabbinate, because it has become so radical. It does not even appeal to people who define themselves as Orthodox.

So I think the fact that we have so many options is blessed, and the interesting thing is that in a way, the Reform movement paved the way for other initiatives within Orthodoxy outside the Chief Rabbinate. So we had our conversion cases, and victories, and then the Orthodox basically set up a conversion system outside the Chief Rabbinate for marriages and for Kashrut. So really, we're sort of pioneers in this sense, to have pluralism, to have different options. It's really something we should be grateful for.

AA: Where do you see the Israeli Reform/Progressive movement in 10/20/50 years in the future?

OEL: I hope we are really going to have even more and more Israelis attending our institutions, our ceremonies, and I think appealing to youth and young adults is really important. We have a youth movement, we have a pre-military program which I think is tremendously important, to build the next generation of Reform leaders. Hopefully it's something that is going to expand. So I really hope that we'll have more people joining us, and also on the political and legal side we are going to have more achievements

and more funding, that would really allow us to develop more, and even to go into areas where we haven't explored before.

AA: If you could give any message to Reform Jews in Canada, what would you tell them?

OEL: The connection to Israel and the Reform movement in Israel is tremendously important. The support of ARZA Canada is allowing us to do what we are doing. I wish we can continue to do the work which is important for us, the religious work, the legal work, the political work, because there's still a lot of work ahead.

AA: Thank you so much!

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