

Reform rabbi reflects on legal battle

First to get state funding after Israeli court case

Frances Kraft
Special to The CJN

When Reform Rabbi Miri Gold was pursuing a lengthy legal battle to receive her salary from the Israeli government – like Orthodox rabbis in Israel – she would “conjure up faces” of North American supporters she had met, as if they were actually in court with her.

Moral support is “of crucial importance,” she told *The CJN* March 19.

“When a small group comes from a congregation in North America to visit, and we see that we’re with like-minded people, it gives us much more strength to keep going. We don’t feel so isolated.”

Israel, in turn provides “nourishment and identity” to Diaspora Jews, she believes.

Rabbi Gold was in Toronto to begin the first leg of a three-city Canadian tour sponsored by ARZA Canada, the Zionist arm of the Reform movement. She was scheduled to speak at four synagogues and to meet with high school students at the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto before heading to Montreal and then Ottawa after Shabbat.

The main reason for her trip here was to speak on behalf of ARZA Canada and raise money for Reform preschools in Israel. As well, she planned to fundraise for a new building for her congregation, Kehilat Birkat Shalom, on Kibbutz Gezer, a 300-member kibbutz between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The congregation is currently housed in a “one-room schoolhouse.” Funding for the new building is well underway, and there is a time-sensitive component because of a government grant being made available by the local regional council, she added. She also expected to talk about her legal battles.

The culmination of her case in May 2012, when Israel’s Supreme Court decided to pay salaries to rabbis of non-Orthodox council and farming communities, was a “historic

precedent” and “a major step forward toward achieving religious pluralism in Israel,” according to Rabbi Gold’s bio.

But it wasn’t until December 2013 that the government transferred \$86,000 to the Reform movement in Israel to pay the salaries of the rabbi and three of her colleagues. The sum represents only a partial retroactive payment, with more to follow this year “if we filled out more forms,” Rabbi Gold said. She is sanguine about the fact that the funding is from Israel’s Culture and Sport Ministry. “Judaism is cultural in many ways,” she noted.

Ironically, when she made aliyah in 1977, the future rabbi thought it would be easier to be Jewish in Israel than her native Detroit. In some ways, that’s been true, she said, but not in others.

For one thing, Rabbi Gold has become a high-profile figure not just for her court case, which she launched in 2005, but also because she was a rarity as the third woman to be ordained by Jerusalem’s Hebrew Union College in 1999.

Prior to the court’s decision, the Reform movement in Israel paid 70 per cent of Rabbi Gold’s salary, and her congregation funded the remainder. “The money coming from the government will certainly ease the burden on everybody.”

Hers was “clearly a test case,” Rabbi Gold said, noting that the legal decision applies only to rabbis who live in a regional council or community with up to 5,000 people. “City rabbis are not yet getting money, but it’s a start.”

She said she doesn’t regret that her case took so long to resolve. “Things have changed, slowly but surely... I think Israel’s more ready for it now.

In recent years, Rabbi Gold explained, the Israeli public has become increasingly sympathetic to the cause, because more Israelis have been exposed to Reform Judaism, either overseas or at life-cycle events in Israel,

which has about 40 Reform congregations. Things were different when she was originally approached by the Israel Religious Action Center, the public and legal advocacy arm of the Reform movement in Israel, to petition the Supreme Court.

Part of the delay in resolving her case was a reluctance on the part of the government to refer to non-Orthodox rabbis as rabbis rather than cultural leaders, she said. “Thankfully IRAC and the Reform movement insisted that they recognize that the money was going to rabbis.”

A longtime kibbutznik with a low-key manner, Rabbi Gold, an alumna of the University of Michigan, entered rabbinical school somewhat late in the game at the encouragement of family and rabbinic friends. She had spent 10 years working in the kibbutz kitchen and a year working with small children. After a stint in Boston, where her husband served as a kibbutz/Reform movement shaliach in the 1980s, she gradually assumed a quasi-rabbinic role on the kibbutz.

At the time of her ordination, one article referred to Rabbi Gold as “Harav Cookie,”

a nod to her love for baking and the giant chocolate chip cookies she used to sell to a Jerusalem ice cream parlour, as well as to the name of the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine (Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook) in the early 20th century. Mostly, though, people call Rabbi Gold by her first name, which is how she prefers it.

The rabbi still bakes for fun and relaxation. Her husband, David Leichman – a Jewish educator – is an accomplished ice cream maker. The couple, now the parents of three grown children, met while they were working in the kitchen of the *garin* (settlement group) that they joined when they made aliyah.

“I really see the Jewish People as a family,” said Rabbi Gold, who cited instances of mutually respectful relationships she has with some members of the Orthodox community.

“Not everyone has the same lifestyle, opinion, or political ideas. Hopefully, in a well-functioning family, people are loyal to one another, and they weather disagreements, and stick together on some level.”

Teen program set for April 6

CJN Staff

Some 500 Toronto-area teens will participate in a day of community service and improvement projects as part of J-Serve, the Global Day of Jewish Youth Service, on April 6.

J-Serve is a worldwide tikkun olam program in which more than 10,000 Jewish teens from across North America, Europe and Israel participate in service projects on the same day in communities around the world.

J-Serve is the Jewish service component of Youth Service America’s annual Global Youth Service Day and coincides with the seventh annual ChangeTheWorld Ontario Youth Volunteer Challenge. The province’s three-week challenge kicks off April 6 in partnership with Volunteer Canada’s National Volunteer Week, Canada’s largest celebration of volunteers, vol-

unteerism and civic participation.

The J-Serve Toronto event, hosted by BBYO in partnership with the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, is one of more than 100 simultaneous international events aimed at encouraging community building and connections across religious and societal lines.

Participants can choose from more than a dozen options.

This year marks the fifth year Jewish youth from the Toronto area will participate, thanks to funding by UJA Federation of Greater Toronto and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation.

Those interested in participating can find additional information on the J-Serve Toronto website, www.jservice.ca, or by contacting J-Serve Toronto co-ordinator Kevin Goodman at kgoodman@jservice.ca or 416-635-2883 extension 4461.



Rabbi Miri Gold

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