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Activists demand reinstatement of J'lem councilwoman Azaria

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Yerushalmim faction member was expelled from coalition for petitioning High Court against municipality on gender separation.

More than 2,000 people and dozens of pluralistic and feminist groups signed a petition in support of Jerusalem City Council member Rachel Azaria, [who was fired from the coalition](#) by Mayor Nir Barkat last week.

Two weeks ago, Azaria (Yerushalmim) petitioned to the High Court of Justice opposing gender barriers in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea She'arim during the intermediate days of Succot, accusing the municipality and the police of not doing enough to stop the gender separation.

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The Supreme Court agreed with Azaria that gender separation is illegal, but the municipality claimed that a member of the coalition cannot sue the city and fired her from the coalition. Azaria was also stripped of her early childhood education and community council portfolios.

Petitioners in support of Azaria blasted Barkat for firing her from the coalition and lauded her efforts to halt gender separation in public areas and on sidewalks.

"We will not tolerate an extremist group dictating the way we will live in the capital of Israel," the petition read, which included groups such as Hiddush For Religious Freedom and Equality, the Legal Center for Youth and Adolescents, the Masorti Movement, a branch of the Van Leer Institute, Free Israel and Kolekh Forum for Religious Women, among others.

Deputy Mayor Naomi Tsur, who holds the urban planning and



environmental portfolios, said that the municipality supported Azaria's struggle to end gender separation but not the way she put it into action.

"The public domain is of utmost importance to all of us in municipality," said Tsur. "Everyone agrees – we have wall to wall agreement [on stopping gender barriers] – and what Rachel is demanding is what we all want," she said. "But the core of the matter is that she is a member of the city's directorship and the coalition itself. She is the city, and at that point, she can't sue herself by law," said Tsur.

Tsur said the gender separation in Mea She'arim during Succot was carried out by the Toldot Aharon hassidim, a small sect who do not respect the municipality's demands.

"The situation was much better this year, and police are convinced that if there is no provocation and no interference, they can complete their work next year for no barriers," said Tsur. "Police believe they can do it without the court, because it's actually working."

Jerusalem Police chief Cmdr. Nisso Shaham testified at the hearing two weeks ago that the police have been working diligently and the barriers separating genders were already much less than the previous year.

Azaria agreed to withdraw her petition after reaching an agreement with the police that next year there would be no separation barriers and police would appoint a community liaison to deal with complaints from within the haredim.

Azaria, who filed a similar petition last year over Succot gender barriers, said that some members of the haredi community, especially women, supported her petition. Members of Toldot Aharon have claimed the gender barriers are necessary during Succot, when thousands of "immodestly dressed" tourists pour into the conservative neighborhood to watch the traditional festivities.

Azaria said she did not know if Barkat would reinstate her in the coalition or return her portfolios. The issue is set to be discussed at the monthly city council meeting on Thursday.

"The ball is in his court," she said. "He needs to understand it's a moral issue, not a technical issue."

Azaria vowed to continue petitioning the High Court of Justice if she felt that the gender barriers were not dealt with in a sufficient matter.

"This is very important because extremism is imposing on the mainstream and the petition is really important because it shows that we're not falling asleep on the watch."



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