RACHEL AZARIA

by SARAH BRONSON

As a child in the 1980s, Rachel Azaria was taught that the Torah is the Tree of Life, and that rabbis, especially the leaders of Israel's rabbinical establishment, epitomize goodness and exercise their authority responsibly and righteously. She still believes most of those things. In a 2006 interview in her Jerusalem office, she says Orthodox Judaism "is how I live my life and how I will raise my children. I totally believe in it."

Yet in her efforts to solve one of Israel's most embarrassing problems, Azaria is engaged in a full-time campaign to remove political power from the very rabbis she once revered. In 2004, Azaria became executive director of Mavoi Satum (Dead End), a nonprofit organization that assists Israeli women whose husbands refuse them a *get*, a Jewish divorce. Known as *mesoravot get* in Hebrew, these women are chained to bad marriages, unable to establish child custody

or child support in Israeli courts, divide their assets, escape their husband's debts, or pursue a relationship with another man.

"Seeing injustice," she says, "drives me crazy." Seeing it within the rabbinical courts inspired Azaria to take the executive director position, despite the fact that at the time she was seeking a part-time job and was considering pursuing a PhD. "How often do you get an opportunity to change the world?" she says. "Anything having to do with injustice gets me going…It can't be that in Israel a woman cannot get a divorce. It cannot be in Israel that a woman must put up with an abusive relationship."

After a year and a half at Mavoi Satum, Azaria has already pushed the movement to eliminate Israel's problem of mesoravot get to new heights, achieving more media publicity and more parliamentary awareness than ever before. As board co-chairman Judith Garson Djemal says, "She has completely turned the organization around. She has put us on the map. She's a huge asset to the campaign. Things will change, and she will be one of the big movers behind it." Thanks to Azaria, she says, Mavoi Satum now has an open door to several members of the Knesset. When the state controller released a critical report about the *bet din* (Jewish Court), Azaria successfully pushed for an inquiry into the matter.

In Israel, all matters relating to marriage and divorce are subject to the regulation of the rabbinate. There is no such thing as a civil marriage or divorce. Therefore, if a husband refuses to make a divorce final, issues such as child custody and division of property are left unresolved, even in the civil courts. And, though the "recalcitrant husband," as such men are known in the world of Jewish law, can go on to have relationships with other women without penalty, a woman who finds a new partner is considered an adulteress.

The problem, Azaria says, is not that the religious court has regulatory power *per se*, but that "they exercise it unevenly, invoking Jewish law when doing so favors the husband but not when it favors the wife and children." She explains that for reasons unclear to her, most members of the Israeli religious courts opt to follow minority

opinions in Jewish law that discourage forcing a husband to give his wife a get.

Of the 9,500 Israeli couples each year seeking divorce, the governmental chief rabbinate claims there are only 180 open cases of mesoravot get. But Azaria points out that the rabbinate's definition of mesoravot get is limited to women who are actively seeking a get and whose husbands refuse to grant one under any circumstances. It does not include situations in which the husband is offering to provide a get in exchange for full child custody or for huge sums of money; nor does it include women who have simply given up on the process and have resigned themselves to living in marital purgatory for the rest of their lives. When one includes such cases, Azaria said, the number of mesoravot get in Israel reaches "the thousands."

In 2006, Mavoi Satum helped twenty-five mesoravot get; this number is up from an average of just ten a year when the organization was first founded in 1995. When Azaria arrived, she says, most women who came for the first time had been without a get for years and were already so exhausted and discouraged that they had little motivation to continue fighting for their rights. As the issue of mesoravot get has garnered increasing publicity, more women are seeking help with their divorces and are approaching Mavoi Satum at earlier stages of the process. Now women come after trying to receive a get for just a few months, realizing that they have recourse other than waiting, often fruitlessly, for a resolution.

When a woman contacts Mavoi Satum asking for assistance in seeking a divorce, a social worker discusses the details of her situation and then arranges meetings with the particular staff members who may prove helpful: Mavoi Satum includes civil lawyers, lawyers for religious courts, publicity staff, and the social worker. The team works with the woman to formulate a comprehensive support plan, including anything from weekly meetings with the social worker to legal help, from therapy to private detective services to find husbands who have "disappeared."

Mavoi Satum also raises public awareness about the problem. Since Azaria's arrival, the organization has exerted pressure on the

Ministry of Justice and the Knesset to redistribute the authority of the religious courts in overseeing certain aspects of divorce proceedings. Staff members appear on morning talk shows to publicize the issue and arrange for colorful and photo-worthy street displays (such as volunteers representing "the Knesset" and "the rabbinate" playing tug-of-war with a long rope, which has a woman tied up in the middle) that glean media attention. The publicity stunts not only keep the issue at the forefront of politicians' minds, but also inspire many women to call and ask for help.

"The whole system works," Azaria says of Mavoi Satum's approach. "I believe this problem can be solved. Maybe it will take fifteen years. But it will be solved. There is momentum such as we've never had. When we approach politicians now, they know exactly what the problem is and they know that the public is angry about it. If it will be solved, it will be now."

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Azaria's quiet confidence stems in part from her successful efforts lobbying to create an express train service between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. While working toward a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in conflict resolution at the Hebrew University, Azaria worked for Green Course, a student environmental group with a presence on twenty Israeli college campuses. Serving first as lobbying coordinator, and later as chapter director, she coordinated dialogues with Jerusalem's municipal representatives, employees of the Israeli bus company, and members of the parliament.

The campaign for the train was long and complex, involving coordinated and strategic events and efforts to garner public support and convince the correct politicians to create a more expensive, but more environmentally sound, long-term plan for public transportation. A turning point occurred when the Minister of Transportation, trying to put the students off, agreed to support their plan if they amassed ten thousand petition signatures for it, from Jerusalem residents, within two weeks. In response, they recruited college students to stand at shopping centers and on campuses, approaching

strangers to say, "Do you live in Jerusalem? Don't you want a train to get to Tel Aviv in twenty-eight minutes? So sign."

"Two weeks later we had ten thousand, and it worked," Azaria recalls, adding that they made sure to let the press know when they would approach the minister about fulfilling his promise, and that they then did so with television cameras rolling. "It was amazing. We did it. It was the most empowering thing I was ever a part of. Who were we? We were nothing. I was twenty-three, and we were a group of twenty people. I saw how you can change a law. You can campaign and change things. I was definitely empowered."

Her former supervisor, Green Course founder Eran Binyamini, says that many of the skills Azaria uses in her current leadership capacity were already evident back then, and led Green Course to hire her as a full-time fundraiser after her graduation. "She's very good at interpersonal relationships," he says. "And she's a quick learner. We trusted her that she can learn how to do it. Fundraising is different from running campaigns and being a leader who works well on the ground with people. But she did both well."

Azaria's strategies of involving the media and her unflagging efforts to effect change have worked well at Mavoi Satum. With her paid staff of seven and countless volunteers, Azaria organized an awareness rally in February 2006 that drew 1,500 participants. "We're at a peak with the press," Azaria says. "Now, when you talk about divorce, you talk about mesoravot get. It's just obvious." Before the 2006 elections, she reported, three political parties put the issue on their platforms. "That was a dream come true," Azaria says. "Okay, plenty of politicians promise things and don't come through. The fact that they think it's important enough to promise is already one step forward."

Dozens of women have finalized their divorces thanks to Mavoi Satum. In one dramatic case, the son of a religious court judge was refusing to give a get to his wife. He had moved to the United States and remarried. In March 2006, Mavoi Satum organized a demonstration in front of the religious court, setting up a marriage canopy with a happy "couple," and a bound and gagged "ex-wife" watching forlornly from the side. The woman got her get.

"Part of what we were saying is no matter how bad the divorce is, no matter what wrong the wife does, refusing a get is something you just don't do," Azaria says. "Go ahead and fight in the civil courts, but withholding a get is something you just don't do."

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Born in 1977, Azaria grew up in the religious town of Bet Gamliel. She is the second of six children, four boys and two girls. She attended religious schools and chose to perform her army service as a tour guide in a special program for religious girls. She married her husband, Elyashiv, in 2001 after a whirlwind romance; their daughter Chava was born in 2003 and baby Rut was born at the start of 2007.

Azaria says her parents, both of whom are educators, instilled a sense of social awareness in their children. Her father is a native Israeli and her mother is an American who grew up Conservative and turned to Orthodoxy after moving to Israel. "My mother made *aliyah* on her own when she was eighteen. There was a sense of responsibility to the nation of Israel, the people of Israel, the land of Israel," Azaria says. "There was something in the way we were brought up – but I'm the most radical in the family." In an interesting twist, one brother has become ultra-Orthodox. Azaria says that she does not discuss her work with him.

To Azaria, the problem of mesoravot get is not only a human rights injustice, but a *chillul Hashem*, a desecration of the very religion she loves wholeheartedly. "Not all the staff members of Mavoi Satum are religious, but there is a lot of religious spirit. People are upset that religion is being abused. It touches people's deepest sense of justice. For some of us who are religious it touches the deepest sense of what religion is all about," she says.

For her, what "religion is all about" is to help the widow and the orphan as the Torah demands; to protect the weakest members of society as well as to observe Shabbat, kashrut and holidays. "I always learned that doing *mitzvot* makes us better people," she says. "Okay, a few rules are a bit complicated, but normally Judaism is supposed to be the highest level of ethics. It can't be that you are supposed to

be good to the widow and the orphan, but to a divorced woman you can do whatever you want. Many women come to us and say, 'I was nervous about approaching the civil courts because who knew what they would do to me, but I felt calm before going to the religious court because my husband was having affairs and was abusive, and I was sure the rabbis – the rabbis! – would care about morals and care about the Jewish people. I didn't think there would be a problem, because it's so obvious we need a get for my husband to leave and let me raise my children in peace.' And then they are shocked at how hard it is.

"Judaism never allowed you to abuse the weak," Azaria continues. "So when did it become true that a man could withhold a get until he gets everything he wants? [The prophet] Jeremiah would certainly have something to say about it if he were living today."

Despite her convictions, her work takes a certain emotional toll, especially as she tries to reconcile her ideals with the realities of today's situation. "Sometimes I can hear her frustrations," Binyamini says, "the dichotomy between her being religious and what she sees, how the religious authorities treat women. It's not easy for her. She [and Elyashiv] are both very into Judaism. They are very connected, traditionally and intellectually. You can criticize the religious authorities but still believe in Judaism and Jewish values. They separate it in their minds. It is not easy for them."

Her disillusionment couldn't be clearer, as she discusses the judges of religious courts. "Suddenly [for me] to go against them," she says, "to see the rabbis for what they really are – all of their beauty and nice clothes and beards disappear, and the rabbis are weak people with power issues…The prophets speak of *mishpat tzedek*, judging justly. It seems to me the [judges] think they do not have to judge justly…the day the bet din takes seriously the huge job on their shoulders, you will see how all of the complaints of religious feminists will disappear, but as long as the bet din does these terrible things [allowing men to extort their wives, forcing women to try to patch up abusive marriages], their power will decrease and go to the civil courts."

Coupled with her sense of responsibility is a tenacity, a focus, that makes it difficult for Azaria to let up. The same forces that make her unable to put a book down until she has finished it, sometimes causing her to miss a night's sleep, also lead her to dwell on a social problem until she has solved it. "In a way she's too responsible," Binyamini observes. During her time at Green Course, "it got to the point that she was worrying all the time that [she was not raising] enough money, and she couldn't sleep…She cares about things deeply. She does not have a poker face. If she cares about something, you can see it. There is something very real in her, very sincere and caring."

Azaria admits to being a somewhat obsessive worrier, but says her concerns are justified. Israeli religious leaders, she believes, are violating the biblical commandment of, "Do not stand by your friend's blood," usually interpreted as prohibiting negligent behavior that may cause harm to others. "Last week a woman in Meah Shearim committed suicide after the rabbis told her to go home and make peace with her husband," Azaria says. "The rabbis do not realize they are dealing with people's lives."

She does not characterize herself as pessimistic, only fearful that her efforts will not bear fruit. She said that her work for mesoravot get has made her more nervous and overworked, less able to discuss mesoravot get calmly, and "more upset with the rabbinical authorities. I've seen things I never thought I'd see. I hear things I never thought I'd hear," she says. But Azaria also believes people can make a difference. She has seen it happen. "If you push the right buttons, you've done so much. With mesoravot get you can help so many women with one change of legislation."

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Postscript (Spring 2008): Azaria's career recently and unexpectedly underwent a significant change. She left Mavoi Satum in spring 2007 after a disagreement with the board. She received several job offers but decided to take time to weigh her options, to determine what she was passionate about and where her efforts would be most needed. She ultimately decided to work

toward a stronger Jerusalem, to address what she sees as the many challenges that detract from the experience of life in the city, a city she loves and says is deteriorating. "It is hard to see a city you love change so rapidly. If we don't fight now, it will be too late," she says.

Azaria was born in Jerusalem, lived there until the age of six, and always knew she wanted to settle there. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem is the only place she applied for college, and she and her husband live in the city.

"Jerusalem once was a very strong, pluralistic city, very cultural, very historic. Over the past ten years the city has changed dramatically. It is getting weaker and weaker," she explains. She attributes the problem to the influx of ultra-Orthodox: although the ultra-Orthodox are "very nice people," as a group she believes they are wreaking political havoc on the city. "There are many more ultra-Orthodox; the city is much poorer, less pluralistic, and although only twenty percent of the population is ultra-Orthodox, the mayor [Uri Lupolianski] is ultra-Orthodox and he basically takes care of his crowd," she says. She contends that a disproportionate amount of funding is going to ultra-Orthodox causes, that more people can't pay taxes, and that there is substantially reduced support of education and culture. Public transportation is inadequate, and traffic problems plague the city. High housing costs are driving many of the middle class out of the city, and the drain of people is weakening the city.

Azaria went to work for an organization created by the municipality to address culture, but quickly found that the organization had no true power, and she left that job after four months. After more soul searching, she decided to run for city council in November 2008. She created a political party, Hitorerut Yerushalmim (Wake up Jerusalemites), which attracted more than one hundred volunteers before she even announced it, as well as others who want to run for city council on the same platform. "We are saying that we care about the citizens of Jerusalem," she says. The central issue, as she sees it, is, "How do we turn [Jerusalem] into a pluralistic city where people enjoy their differences, instead of a place where people are fighting for their piece."

The decision to start her own party, to run for city council, is not one she made lightly. She is more comfortable behind the scenes, and she understands that politics can be ugly and take a toll on one's personal and family life. But the idea, once hatched, would not go away. "At first I kind of

whispered it to myself," she says. She thought about creating an organization to address these issues. But ultimately, she has come to believe that the way to effect change is from the inside. Her experiences at Mavoi Satum helped shape that belief. "At Mavoi Satum we really managed to change the way people in Israeli society saw the problem and the way people talked about the issue in the media, in the government, on the street. But when it came down to decision-making in the government, the decisions were always pro the ultra-Orthodox," she recalls.

In the end, she followed her heart, going with this idea that she calls "a little crazy," and "far-fetched," but that every day is gaining momentum, becoming more tangible.

"This is what the city needs and I am going to do it," she says.

Postscript (Autumn 2008): In the municipal elections for Jerusalem held in November, Azaria's party, Hitorerut Yerushalmim, captured two seats on the thirty-one-seat Jerusalem Municipal Council.