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If Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat follows through on his threat to fire City Councillor Rachel Azaria from the coalition and take away her important portfolios of early childhood education and community councils, he will be declaring war on Zionist Jerusalem – the core constituents who elected him. Fortunately, the news reports treating the firing as a done deal were premature. This Thursday's City Council meeting must ratify the decision. Everyone who cares about quality of life in a free, pluralistic, prospering Jerusalem should sign [the petition](#) [2] demanding Rachel Azaria's full reinstatement. If this grassroots initiative succeeds, not only will we be saving Jerusalem, we will be rescuing Nir Barkat from his self-imposed imprisonment to anti-Zionist, ultra-orthodox political bullies.

The same redemptive spirit that elected Barkat in November 2008 propelled Rachel Azaria, a grassroots activist, to the City Council from the *Yerushalmim Lo Mevtarim*, "Jerusalemites Don't Give Up" movement. Azaria, 33, now the mother of three young daughters, has dedicated herself to improving Jerusalem's quality of life, focusing particularly on young Jerusalemites. She is a religious Zionist whose movement unites religious and secular, old and young, Sabras and immigrants, committed to reviving Jerusalem. She has performed her City Council duties magnificently, boosting the budgets for community councils, helping to open dozens of kindergartens, revitalizing neighborhood schools, and putting the issue of young families on the city's agenda. "Before," she explains, "everyone talked about keeping students. Now people in the municipality understand that young families are the key to our future too." Full disclosure – I met Azaria during her campaign in 2007 and have supported her enthusiastically since.

Connected to her quality of life push, this religious woman has also navigated the complicated dynamics between ultra-orthodox haredim and their fellow Jerusalemites. She has fought to ensure that the Western Wall does not become a haredi synagogue but remains a unifying Jewish and Zionist space. She has combated haredi attempts to inflict gender segregation in public spaces, including her latest fight against gender segregation on Meah Shearim's streets during Sukkot, a shocking imposition of fanatic, idiosyncratic, undemocratic, restrictions on public thoroughfares.

"I am not anti-haredi," Azaria insists, visibly uncomfortable with the characterization itself. "I yearn for the way Israel was in the 1950s, when religious and non-religious Jews lived together in the same apartment

building. We were all returning together, in the spirit of the prayer ‘*Vahavieynu Leshalom Mearbah Kanfot Haaretz*,’ G-d will bring us in peace from the four corners of the earth. But I object to all kinds of segregation – residential and gender. I want to affirm to the haredim that they are a part of us. They are 20 percent of Jerusalem and are here to stay. We have to change the discourse that this is ‘our’ neighborhood or ‘theirs.’ Meah Shearim can’t be beyond the law.” This segregation, she notes, harms haredim too. She has fought equally hard to ensure that buses serve all of haredi Jerusalem, on this principle of equality.

Mainstream, “hegemonic,” Ashkenazi rabbinic and political authorities find this religious woman fighting from within tradition even more threatening than secular Meretz types. But, she notes, “I am the address for many disenfranchised haredim. They come to me begging for help, because I am willing to get my hands dirty.”

Rachel Azaria embodies the open, constructive, pro-Jewish, pro-Zionist, pro-Israel, pro-Jerusalem spirit Nir Barkat himself embodies. She and her party represent the majority Jerusalem sensibility needed to make the city thrive. She is a poster child for all the aspirations of Zionist Jerusalem that Barkat stirred and promised to serve. He was absolutely right when he tried promoting her to deputy mayor last spring. And he was absolutely wrong when he succumbed to haredi pressure then. Even worse, he is now threatening to fire her on a technicality, based on the city’s marginal role in the lawsuit Azaria and others initiated opposing the gender segregation in Meah Shearim’s streets – which, she notes, many haredi women encouraged.

As a student of executive power, frustrated that Israel’s current Prime Minister lacks the spine to fire coalition members, no matter how incompetent or defiant, I understand Mayor Barkat’s discomfort with Azaria, his coalition partner, launching a lawsuit implicating the city, although Barkat also opposes the gender segregation. But, in a democracy, activists need to use a range of tactics. This move against Azaria seems too technical, too political, too opportunistic. The haredi press’s delight indicates that this palace coup has been long in the making.

The haredim are well-organized, appear unified, and control between 8 and 11 votes at different times in the 31-person City Council. Azaria’s –and Barkat’s – core constituents are more diffuse and more distracted, living their lives and making the city work rather than playing politics. If Barkat, however, figures he can continue disappointing Zionist Jerusalem, because no one else from that camp will run against him, he risks alienating so many we will simply stay home on Election Day. A surge of voters elected Barkat last time; elections can be lost by abstentions too. Barkat needs Zionist Jerusalem to rise up and free him, demanding Azaria’s reinstatement and promotion to deputy mayor. He should remember not just the 17,000 who elected Azaria but the tens of thousands who placed such hopes in him when he promised to bring this ancient city into the twenty-first century.

Rachel Azaria is Nir Barkat’s natural ally in this all-important mission. We, citizens of Jerusalem, and lovers of Jerusalem, must reunite them, not just by signing [the petition](#) ^[2], but by demonstrating that while we may not be well-organized or very loud, we care deeply about this special city, which remains the Jewish people’s capital, precious to many of us, religious and secular alike.

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