

My Reform Judaism Journey and Why We Must Vote in the World Zionist Congress Election

I have heard people say that Reform Judaism is not really Judaism. Or that it is “Jew Lite.” I have heard modern Orthodox Jews say to me, “Reform Judaism is better than nothing.” Well, my experience with Reform Judaism is waaaay better than nothing. In fact, if it were not for the Reform movement, I would probably only be Jew-ISH; i.e. Jewish by birth, but with no affiliation to a synagogue or to any Jewish community.

My parents were raised in the conservative, or perhaps even the “conservadox” tradition. Neither of them felt spiritually connected to the style of Judaism in which they were raised. They observed all the traditional holidays with their families, as it felt comfortable and familiar, but when they got married, they did not initially join a synagogue. My parents were turned off by the entirely male congregation chanting only in Hebrew and never in unison. It just didn’t feel right to them. There was no spiritual connection.

When my parents had children in the 1960’s they started to think about how they would raise Jewish children, and they knew that just keeping Jewish holidays wasn’t enough. They were invited by friends to a Friday night service at a Reform synagogue, and immediately fell in love with Reform Judaism. They loved the fact that women and men sat together, and that prayers were chanted in unison in both English and Hebrew, so they could actually understand the service. They especially loved the beautiful, glorious music on Shabbat! Unheard of!

After becoming parents, they joined Temple B’nai Or. We attended the religious school, and my parents became active in the temple. My mother joyfully became a bat mitzvah in 1982 at Temple B’Nai Or, along with many other adult women who had also been excluded from reading from Torah in the past.

I became a bat mitzvah at TBO in 1979. When my sister and I were given the choice by our parents to continue our Jewish education at TBO through to confirmation, we both opted to continue Hebrew School. I was confirmed at age 16, along with many of my friends from the temple.

In 2001 I graduated from medical school and moved to New York City for residency. The same week of my medical school graduation, I met my now husband, Ori, who was born and raised in Israel. Ori moved to the US from Israel in 1995. His family is Sephardic. His parents emigrated to Israel from Yemen in 1948 under “Operation Magic Carpet Ride.” My mother in law wrote a captivating book about their struggle

to practice their beloved Judaism and their 8-year emigration from Yemen to Israel. What joy they felt when they arrived in the promised land!

When Ori moved to the US in 1995 he did not feel a strong pull to join any synagogue or Jewish community. He identified strongly and proudly as Jewish, and Israeli, but like many secular Jews in Israel, belonging to a synagogue was not on his agenda.

Then he met me. When we first started dating we spent many evenings discussing our Jewish backgrounds, and we were quite amazed at how much we really did have in common, despite being raised on different sides of the globe, and in very different cultures.

Ori started coming to services with my family at TBO in 2001 and though the style of the services initially felt foreign to him, he did start to understand and appreciate the beauty of Reform Judaism. We have remained members of our Reform congregation and are proudly raising our son with the same Jewish values.

I had always had a distant love for Israel, but after marrying an Israeli man, Israel became a very important part of my life, as most of my husband's large family lives there. We visit often, and I discovered a new passion for Israel. I began to learn about the differences among the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox groups of Jews both here and in Israel. I was shocked to learn that the Orthodox Jewish men are the only voices in the Knesset, and aim to promote an agenda that excludes Reform Jews. I learned that the Rabbinat (the supreme rabbinic authority for Jews in Israel) does not even recognize us as Jewish! The Rabbinat governs many life events in Israel. For instance:

- In order for any Jewish couple to be recognized as legally married, they must have an orthodox wedding.
- If a Jewish woman in Israel chooses to get divorced, she must, by the laws of the Rabbinat, get her husband's permission, even if he has beaten her, committed adultery, abandoned her, or emotionally abused her. The husband is required by the Rabbinat to physically deliver a religious bill of divorce – a get – to his wife.
- Since the Rabbinat is affiliated only with Orthodoxy, no Reform or Conservative rabbi may legally officiate at a wedding in Israel.
- Same sex marriage is not legal in Israel.
- My very own dear mother-in-law was not allowed by the Orthodox rabbis to be at the gravesite for the burial of her beloved husband.

The good news is that there is a growing Reform Movement in Israel which has been working to establish the rights of all Jewish citizens of Israel to marry in whatever sect of Judaism they choose, and to offer equal rights to both genders for divorce in Israel. The Reform Movement opposes discrimination against women, seeks to protect the rights of those who have chosen to convert to Judaism and to protect the rights of the LGBTQ community in Israel.

In our current world of turmoil, intolerance and exclusion, our voices need to be heard in Israel, so that the Reform movement may thrive both here and in Israel. I strongly support ARZA and the World Zionist Congress. It is imperative that we ensure that the next generation of Jews, both here and in Israel, are afforded the same rights as we are given here in the U.S. The WZC election occurs only every 5 years, and our vote is the only way we can have a voice in how Israel views Jews around the world.

Reform Judaism is, in my opinion, the key to ensuring that the next generations of Jews will keep Judaism alive and well. L'dor v'dor. I urge you to Vote Reform in the World Zionist Congress elections.