



Ruth Calderon brought Israelis to the Talmud, can she bring its wisdom to the Knesset?

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South Africa flag



Ruth Calderon



Reuters

Day after day, Dr. Ruth Calderon goes to her computer, usually in the early morning hours, and posts on her Facebook page passages from the Mishna and her own associations with the ancient compilation of the Jewish oral tradition that forms the core of the Talmud. Sometimes it is to point to a latent tension between the various speakers in the text, sometimes merely to savor a particularly poetic turn of phrase.

Soon her page fills up with dozens of comments. One can almost smell the morning coffee through this shared daily ritual of people who have decided that there is no better way to start the day than with Ruth Calderon's daily Mishna.

On Wednesday morning, the day after she was elected to the Knesset, the chosen passage was from "Pirkei Avot" ("Ethics of the Fathers"). " Rabbi Halafta ben Dosa of Kfar Hananyah says, ten who sit and engage in Torah, the Divine Presence dwells among them ... etc." This time the usual responses were mixed with hundreds of congratulatory messages to Calderon, who is to represent Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party. Who would have believed it!

Calderon, the woman who breathes life into the traditional figures of the Talmud, whose soft speech is suffused with a contagious love of study, will soon be sworn in as a member of the Israeli parliament.

In the late 1980s Calderon founded the Elul beit midrash in Jerusalem. It was the

first institution in Israel in which both observant and nonobservant Jews, men and women, studied religious texts together, and in a spirit of openness and equality. Several years later she brought this spirit to Tel Aviv when she established Alma College. As a practical matter, the idea that the Jewish "bookshelf," which had been the property of Orthodox Jews, could be made available to Jews of all backgrounds was to a great extent Calderon's idea.

Late-night insomniacs can still catch occasional reruns of "Haheder," the Channel 2 program that each week featured Calderon and two guests tackling a Jewish primary-source text.

Going by Calderon's curriculum vitae alone, a skeptic might connect the dots and end up with a picture of a populist or flatterer - a Talmudic scholar who endeavors to make Jewish religious texts accessible to all, a television host who quotes from the user-friendly "Pirkei Avot."

Her association with Lapid, a handsome and slightly obsequious former journalist, does nothing to dispel that impression. But Calderon is different. She does not restrict herself to the exposition of "easy" texts: She recently took on a Talmud tractate that addresses the technical details of the Temple animal sacrifices and the duties of the priests. Not the usual fare of a newly minted politician.

In an interview with me several years ago, for an article on the role of God in the lives of secular children, Calderon explained why she, as what she called a "non-halakhic person," or someone who has not taken on the obligation to observe Jewish religious law, wanted her children to have God. "It's important to me that my children understand the Jewish narrative," she said, adding that it was "also because there must be a place, an empty corner, beyond everything that we understand, and this place is called God."

When asked to elaborate, she said: "It's important for me for there to be a place that we would know that we don't know and don't have control over. My dad was a scientist, and one day when I came home from a scouts activity and told him there was no God, he replied: 'We don't know.' I have an appreciation for a place about which a scientist can also say 'We don't know.' I have an appreciation for a place about which a scientist can say that there is something we don't know - a degree of humility, a degree of wonder about the world."

How will this sense of wonder be translated into a world of the Sisyphean work of a legislator and of parliamentary alliances? It's too soon to tell; we can guess that Calderon will express her unique viewpoint on issues of religion and state, pluralism and education. It is not yet clear, however, whether Israelis, accustomed to sound bites and simplistic arguments, can take on more complex messages. The burden of proof in this case is on everyone.

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