

The Future of Israel

I have a new hero. And I'm not the only one. Her name is Ruth Calderon and she is the most talked about new "MK" (Member of Knesset) in recent memory. In fact, I can't remember ever a time when the election of a person to Israeli government caused such interest and excitement.

It's not merely because Dr. Calderon is *not* a politician. The Israeli-born daughter of Bulgarian (Sephardic) and German (Ashkenazic) Holocaust survivors, she comes to leadership from a non-conventional path. Well into her life as the wife of a *shaliach* ("ambassador" representing the Jewish Agency for Israel in our own community of MetroWest), Ruth became enchanted with Torah and text-study and pursued a career as an academic. She received her Ph.D. in Talmud from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, then subsequently founded *Alma* and *Elul*, institutions both egalitarian and secular devoted to, among other things, the study of sacred texts.

But having an academic in Israeli government circles is nothing new. Israel's leaders have always been studied in scholarship. What sets her apart is that she is not merely versed in our literature, she employs it every chance she can. Much like Ben-Gurion's constant referencing of the Bible, Ruth Calderon teaches Talmud as a living document in a socio-political context from which modern Israel can grow. In her inaugural speech to the Knesset, she said, "The Torah is not the possession of this or that denomination—it's the gift that was given to all of us... I aspire to bring about a situation where Torah study will be the heritage of all Jews." Of course you might well expect that I, as a rabbi, would celebrate such a statement. But, in her own words, she's not religious. On the contrary, she's a self-proclaimed *secularist*. And that excites me. Because Israel doesn't need Israelis to be religious; Israel needs Israelis to embrace themselves as Jews.

What we are witnessing may very well be a ground-shift of Israel's political landscape. Dr. Calderon is part of an emerging cadre of Israelis who are exasperated with the paucity of vision, courage, and devotion to the "spirit" of our Jewish heritage—as opposed to its "letter"—that characterizes the country's recent governments. A member of the most surprising winner of Israel's February parliamentary elections, the *Yesh Atid* ("There is a Future") party captured 19 seats, making it the second-largest political party in the Knesset. (Not bad for a party that didn't exist a year ago.) Ruth was ranked number 18 within the party's hierarchy; she never imagined she would actually end up a MK. But here she is. And people are paying attention. As the second century sage Shimon bar Yochai taught, Torah can be a powerful weapon in the right hands. Dr. Calderon appears to many to be deftly ambidextrous.

Yet what I find most compelling about Ruth Calderon is her authenticity. She carries no pretenses. In fact, when I went to hear her speak the other night in New York City, I was taken with how starstruck she is at her own celebrity. She doesn't get why so many people want to be her "friend" on Facebook. She's genuinely surprised when she

becomes the topic of radio and television "conversation". It is clear to anyone who meets her that Ruth is simply an Israeli who loves her country, its people, and its heritage, and like so many other Israelis, she wants Israel to be the "ideal" of which its Zionist creators had dreamed.

Ruth Calderon and *Yesh Atid* give me hope for Israel. Her voice, deeply rooted in a reverence for sacred texts, is fresh and uninhibited. She speaks her mind regardless of who is listening. She is not afraid to offend. (She refers to the *Kotel*—the Western Wall—as "occupied territory".) And while the political extremes of Israeli politics might not always agree with her—she has been sarcastically derided as "Rabbi" Calderon by the ultra-Orthodox for daring to teach Talmud to men, while equally dismaying her liberal allies for her unwillingness to protest alongside "Women of the Wall" because she feels she cannot, as a lawmaker, break the law—it is clear she has gotten their attention if not earned their respect. All you need do is go to YouTube, type in her name, and then watch her speech to the Knesset where she turned a political venue into a *beit midrash* (house of study). A woman. Teaching Talmud. To a room filled with more than a handful of ultra-Orthodox Jews. They listened. And by the end, several vocally called out *Yashar Koyach*. The highest praise one gets from a serious Jew. Watch the video. You too will be smitten with her.

Ruth Calderon may very well be the future of Israel. And, if it be so, she will take along the Torah on her historic journey. The same Torah that God gave to "all" Jews. For such is her message. Torah—and the land where it was born—belong to each and every one of us. And should she be successful in realizing this vision, and I pray that she will, then the State of Israel and Jews the world over will have every reason to reclaim the *Tikvah*, the Hope that is at the core of Israel's soul.