

Religious 'rebel' finds path to pluralism

No longer Orthodox, Israeli educator shares her journey of faith

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NJIN Staff Writer

Next year, when Nathalie Lastreger receives her ordination as a Masorti (or Conservative) rabbi from the Schechter Rabbinical School in Israel, she expects her parents to attend the ceremony, but probably not her siblings.

Lastreger, 47, was married to an Orthodox rabbi. They were together for seven years and had three children — now all grown — before she made the decision that her evolving religious sensibility was incompatible with her role as a *haredi* rebbitzin.

Lastreger studied for two years at the Tehuda program for pluralistic Jewish leadership and was a leader with the Rabbis for Human Rights Beit Midrash at The Hebrew University.



Divorced and remarried, she now lectures and leads pre-army year programs throughout Israel, dealing, she said, with an age group at a crucial point in their moral development.

"The more religious I became, the more I became a rebel inside," she told *NJ Jewish News* in a phone interview. "It took time, but I began to

Nathalie Lastreger, a guest educator at Congregation Agudath Israel this summer, has made a transition from *haredi* rebbitzin to champion of religious pluralism in Israel.

realize I am not Orthodox, and I cannot let this community define what is acceptable for me in my religion."

Lastreger, in the United States for a six-week stay this summer, has been sharing her experiences, and leading services and discussions as a guest at Congregation Agudath Israel in Caldwell (see box).

CAI educational director Susan Werk said the congregation is finding their French-Israeli guest fascinating and inspiring.

Lastreger said that for her, one of the most important events is the screening on Wednesday, July 23, of *Purity*. The documentary about the *mikva*, or ritual bath, in some ways embodies her own combination of tradition and freedom. The video, made 11 years ago, features Lastreger herself and several other Israeli women, some of whom regard the monthly immersion in the *mikva* as archaic and demeaning and others who regard the practice as a beloved, uplifting affirmation.

Lastreger herself treasures the practice and would like to see its popularity growing among less observant Jews. She rejects the notion that it is about women's impurity. "This is about the power of rebirth. It is a magnificent thing," she said.

Lastreger was born in Paris, and attended an Orthodox Jewish day

school there. Her family made aliya when she was 10, and — faced with a choice between Israel's secular schools and a religious track much stricter than the one in France — she chose the latter. That path, Lastreger explained, led them all to become much more observant.

But she was always "a troublemaker," she recalled. "I was always asking so many questions. I wanted to understand." Eventually, she stopped asking questions of her rabbi because they led nowhere, but she didn't know where else to turn. "I knew nothing about Conservative or Reform Judaism. There was such demonization of non-Orthodox. We were told they were doing such huge damage to the Jewish people."

When she left her husband, her twin son and daughter were six, and her younger son was three. "Divorce is difficult anyway," she said. "Today it's easier, but then to be a single woman in an Orthodox environment was unusual, and with kids..."

Every Friday, she took the children to her parents in Haifa, so they could hear her father recite the Kiddush. "Till today, for the High Holy Days, my kids still go to them in Haifa," she said.

She started her academic studies, graduating cum laude in political science from The Hebrew University.

She is a member of Rabbis for Human Rights, and regularly joins the services of the Women at the Wall, with whom she served for a couple of

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If you go

NATHALIE LASTREGER will offer a series of events on Women's Rights in Judaism at Congregation Agudath Israel:

Wednesday, July 23, 7 p.m. (minyan at 7:30, film at 8) — *Purity*, a documentary examining the tradition of *mikva*.

Tuesday, July 29, 7:45 p.m. — Israeli film night

Wednesday, July 30, 7 p.m. (minyan at 7:30, film at 8) — *Mekudeshet*, a documentary exposing the process of divorce for women in Israel.

Wednesday, Aug. 13, 7:45 p.m. — "Let's Talk About Love," a discussion celebrating Tu B'Av, Judaism's "Day of Love."

Lastreger will also lead a Lunch and Learn series (participants should bring a dairy lunch) on Tuesdays, July 8, 22, and 29, at 11:45 a.m., and will take part in the congregation's Women's Rosh Hodesh Group on Monday, July 28, at 8 p.m.

For more information, contact Susan Werk at swerk@agudath.org.

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