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The Jerusalem Report®

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the dire situation in Iraq



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COURTESY SETH J. FRANTZMAN

6 After ISIS
The Sinjar area remains key to securing Iraq *by Seth J. Frantzman*



MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

18 The election buzz
Joint List leader Ayman Odeh creates a stir by saying Israeli-Arab parties would consider joining a coalition *by Mark Weiss*

22 Paving her own path
A conversation with Rabbi Dr. Reb Mimi Feigelson, a trailblazer who refuses to let anyone define her *by Noa Amouyal*



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Cover photograph by Seth J. Frantzman of a Kurdish Peshmerga fighter painting over ISIS graffiti in Iraq

MIDDLE EAST

- 12 As it is today: Discovering the Fertile Crescent in Iraq**
by Brian Schrauger
- 16 Saudi Vision 2030 – the British connection**
by Neville Teller

INTELLIGENCE REPORT

- 14 The seven fronts**
by Yossi Melman

ISRAEL

- 20 Small following, big mouth**
by Amotz Asa-El
- 33 Remembering a fallen brother, 50 years on**
by Allan Leibowitz
- 36 An educational oasis**
by Itay Goder
- 42 Escaping reality at The Norman**
by Bradley Levin and Emma McAvoy

PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

- 25 An interview with Gary Spedding**
by Josh Aronson

JEWISH WORLD

- 26 Remembering Holocaust survivors**
by Robert Hersowitz
- 29 When Shoah witnesses are gone...**
by Greer Fay Cashman
- 31 Choose: Food or medical care?**
by Samantha Greenspan

MARKETPLACE

- 38 SOD – Save our diplomacy**
by Shlomo Maital

VIEWPOINT

- 41 The children of Israel**
by Rabbi Neil N. Winkler

BOOKS

- 44 The trials – and tribulations – of Judge Richard Goldstone**
by Neville Teller

46 PEOPLE AND THE BOOK

- From France to home in Israel**
by Dr. Francoise S. Ouzan

DEPARTMENTS

- 2 Letter from the Editor**
- 3 Opening Shot**
- 4 Crossword**
- 5 14 Days**
- 48 On the Front Lines**

Paving her own path



A conversation with Rabbi Dr. Reb Mimi Feigelson, a trailblazer who refuses to let anyone define her

By Noa Amouyal

RABBI DR. Reb Mimi Feigelson is one of the most learned educators – hence all the titles – in the Jewish world today. She knows a lot. What she doesn’t know is how to answer a direct question.

With every question, she pauses, thinks carefully about what she wants to say, and then gives a completely unexpected answer.

But perhaps that’s to be expected of a woman known for saying and doing the unexpected.

She shocked the Jewish world when it was revealed that she was the first woman ordained within Orthodoxy – by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach no less. This was an aspect of her life that she kept a secret for over 10 years in Israel.

She continues to defy expectations today, paving her own path to God. After serving as the *mashgiah ruchanit* (spiritual supervisor) and professor of Talmud and Hasidic thought at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic

Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, Feigelson has come back home to Jerusalem, holding the same positions at the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary – Israel’s only institution awarding Masorti/Conservative ordination – as the resident spiritual adviser guiding each of her students on their own journey with God.

The veteran seminary has ordained 98 rabbis for the Masorti movement since 1988. These talented men and women lead Masorti congregations in Israel and Europe, provide educational leadership in the Israeli school system, advocate for women’s religious rights and social justice, and act as unique role models for contemporary religious observance engaged with all sectors of Israeli society. This fall, SRS will ordain its 100th rabbi.

It is fitting, then, that her charming Jerusalem apartment is strewn with books in every nook and cranny, even as she laments

lightheartedly that she’s still trying to figure out what to do with all the books she’s brought with her from Los Angeles.

Unsurprisingly, she speaks lovingly of the texts that have enriched her life.

“The first text I always share [with my students] is Rav Kook,” she said. “In it, he speaks of a sense of being in exile; one’s identity, one’s essence in exile, and having to answer the question *Ayeka?* (“Where are you?”). There’s only one answer to that question and it’s the one Avraham gave... *Hineini* (“Here I am”). It’s not an easy way to live, but it’s what I demand of myself.”

In that sense, Feigelson sees herself as someone who is on call 24/7. However, she also expects to be able to hear back from God on a regular basis as well. It is this two-way constant conversation with the Almighty that governs her life.

Speaking with Feigelson requires work, preparation, and the dexterity to always be

Reb Mimi performs the wedding of her student, Yosef Baruch and his wife, Naama

on one's toes. That's because a conversation with her never follows a traditional or linear path – it is filled with anecdotes, revelations, reflections and most importantly, honesty. So while you'll never hear a simple "yes" or "no" coming out of her mouth, you'll come out feeling like you've just been in the ring with one of the best out there.

Below is a peek into that engaging conversation.

As a woman ordained by a renowned Orthodox rabbi and now teaching at a prestigious Conservative school, how would you define yourself?

Any "ism" is not something I'm comfortable with. One of the questions I'll never answer is, "What does Judaism think about...?" Judaism doesn't think, people think. Philosophers think. Ask me questions. Be in dialogue with me. Never make assumptions about what I think or what I'm doing. Let me surprise you. Maybe the answer will be 'yes.' Ask me!

You describe yourself as a mashpiah ruchanit. What do you mean by that, and how does that outlook affect your teachings?

I took on the title when I made my way to the American Jewish University. I was invited to work with rabbinical students. In the ultra-Orthodox Litvish (non-Hasidic) world, there's a person in the *beit midrash* whose function is known as *mashgiach*. There's a lot of judgmental elements in looking at that role. How long is your beard? What does your *davening* (prayer) look like? In the Hasidic world, in Chabad, there's a person whose role was the *mashpiah*. I wanted that. It was a role I took on for myself. I needed to decide on all of my titles. I decided to be Reb Mimi.

As for the *mashpiah ruchanit* term, it is connected to the word *shefa*, or abundance. I'm a water carrier and midwife. Those are both elements that have the word water connected to them. My students are wells, and I want to help them access the wisdom within them, and to help them birth into the world the greatness of who they are. My responsibility is to stand and be present and to promise or commit to that presence as my students are on the journey they are on.

Similar to Miriam who stands and observes what is to be of Moshe once she puts him in the Nile – a teacher is someone who is one step ahead of you on their path. A student observes what walking on a path is, though they need to create their own path.

Where does God fit into your mashpiah ruchanit approach to education?

The *mashpiah ruchanit* is someone who holds God's presence, where God is the core of the journey. She then avails the spectrum of the colors to manifest. I want my students to be in a relationship with God. I want them to be on a journey in that relationship. I don't have a recipe book. I don't have a reading list. The only question I've asked all my students is, "What haven't I asked?" I don't offer answers.

How do you describe your teaching style?

There are different kinds of teachers. One offers a seven-course meal, the other offers a buffet. When you're invited to a seven-course meal, you all arrive at the same time, you're seated at the same time, and you are served the same food at the same pace. There's no responsibility, apart from showing up. But maybe my cooking isn't for you. Maybe what I have to offer isn't healthy for you. Maybe you don't have the patience to sit for a seven-course meal. Whereas in a buffet, you define what you'll eat. The gift of it is that you are the one who is responsible for what you are going to eat. Timing is everything – if you turn up early, not everything is out; if you show up too late, you don't even know everything that was available. You have to assume responsibility as to what you are going to eat. A buffet teacher doesn't make you sit and eat.

I will vacillate between both kinds when I can. With time, you learn what your students like to eat. If I stand and observe what people are "putting on their plate," I know what so-and-so wants, or needs to have.

What made you want to return to Jerusalem and teach at the Schechter Institute?

I never wanted to leave Jerusalem. I was on *shlichut*... Once my doctorate was completed, I knew it was time to make my way home. Schechter was Divine intervention. As I said to the dean, Rabbi Avi Novis-Deutsch, "God chose you. You were the one who said, 'Come home, we'll create a



Rabbi Dr. Reb Mimi Feigelson

position for you.' That said, I ask why is it that God chose me to bring a certain kind of Torah to the Conservative world? Because I raised a generation of Conservative rabbis in America – 16 years. Now I'm learning what is Conservative Judaism in Israel. And for my students, what it means to be an Israeli Conservative rabbi. The worlds are completely different.

I see myself as an artist, who for 16 years painted in oil paints. When you paint with oil there are layers, and there needs to be time between each one. Then I got on a plane and came home – I'm still an artist – but now I paint with watercolors. Now I'm dealing with a different medium. I'm learning. My students and I are in this together.

You were ordained by Rabbi Carlebach, as an Orthodox rabbi, but have spent much of the last 18 years teaching outside of Orthodoxy. Can you explain this phenomenon?

Denominations are likened to dysfunctional families across the board. Being mature in one's religious life is to be able to understand the compartmentalization of how we live. We can create harmony within that compartmentalization. I haven't walked outside of Orthodox adherence to *halacha*. That being said, God isn't Orthodox or Conservative or Reform. And God isn't renewal or humanistic.

I have a wardrobe. For my soul, it's a Jewish wardrobe. This time around, in this incarnation, I came into the world a Jewish woman. If I wasn't Jewish I'd be a *frum*/Orthodox whatever... Amish, Sikh, Protestant... In this lifetime I'm an Orthodox woman. I believe I have a soul that lives a

life of service. And this is the garment that my soul was given.

Does your insistence not to be put in a box confuse people?

Everyone feels uncomfortable with me, because I don't fit into any one definition of what it means to be a woman serving God. My students accept me on an individual level – and it has nothing to do with what our shared or different observances look like.

I also will have the blessing of being buried in Israel. Even when I die, I won't be put in a box!

How do you describe your success as a female Orthodox rabbi?

In the Orthodox world, there wasn't a possibility of women rabbis. We have a tradition of how words are written and how words are read. Subconsciously we were taught not to ask how that could be. If the Torah is divine, given from God, we were never taught to ask how this distinction could exist.

Thirty years ago, it was clear to me that I was going to be a history professor. Thirty years ago I had the perception that academia is gender neutral. As we now know, academia is not gender neutral, and Orthodox women can be rabbis! That was a lie and this is true. Women could be rabbis when the right rabbi came along, when the right time came.

Initially, I was fearful for over 10 years that people would discover that I was ordained. I worried about how the community would embrace my existence. There was a fear of being excommunicated or rejected from within my birth denomination. It was a great relief to be "out."

What made you decide to finally go public?

Too many of my students from the States walked in Jerusalem's streets, who knew all about me and that "Reb Mimi" was a reality. My students brought Reb Mimi home – that was one of the gifts that they gave me. In the same way that children turn their parents into parents. Too many people were telling my story in inaccurate ways. The merger of both of those was the moment that I said to myself I need to sit and write.

What advice would you give aspiring women rabbis today?

I don't think the rabbinate is a gender question. I don't think all men should be



Rabbi Mimi Feigelson with one of her students at the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem

rabbis, neither should all women be rabbis. There are men rabbis who shouldn't be rabbis. There are women who should be rabbis and there are women rabbis who shouldn't be rabbis. It's a question of what is your service, what is your calling? What were you sent into the world to do, and how did God ask you to manifest as a servant? That for me is the primary question. The rest are technicalities.

What a blessing that women can even study in rabbinical school. There are choices now of where to study, what that study will take on, how that studying will prepare you. How do you envision your rabbinate? How do you want to serve as a *rav*? There are options today. These are the questions they need to ask themselves.

There are dozens of *midrashot* today that didn't exist when I left high school. Today you have families growing up with mothers sitting and learning Torah in ways that didn't exist years ago. There were always women who studied, but now there's infrastructure and institutions for it. It's hard to imagine how much effort women had to put in to find a learning environment.

Do you credit yourself for being part of this progress as an example?

Women do come up to me and say they were inspired by my existence or by the Torah that I've shared or the path that I walk.

It makes me feel grateful to hear that – filled with purpose on my journey. It makes it seem less lonely. I am happy for them that their lives are easier.

In God's world, I held a space for reality to manifest. As long as I can ask God "Ayeka?" then God has to respond. The blessing was that when I went to Reb Shlomo and asked for his ordination, his response was, "But you already have it."

"I know I do, but I want to study for it differently" was my immediate response to him. On the spot he dictated a whole syllabus. It wasn't a denominational or political question; I was his *talmidah* (disciple) – I traveled with him, I studied with him. It was the most traditional ordination, as a disciple of Reb Shlomo and the Hasidic masters. In the moment, there was not one ounce of functionalism, normative analytical thinking of the significance of the ordination. It was simple. I had been studying with him for 20 years. I had students – both men and women. I was walking in the world already as a *mashpiah ruchanit* (spiritual family) and *rav* (rabbi) without the title. The title was a technicality. In God's world I planted a seed. In the world as we know it, or define it in the 21st century, I wasn't in dialogue with that world at that moment. I was only answering, "Ayeka?" (The first question God asks in the Torah – where are you?) ■