

A Mother of 12 in the Halls of Power

Rivka Ravitz Talks About Meeting the Pope, Bathing Her Kids, and Needing to Eat Apples All Week Long

BY MALKIE SCHULMAN



Accompanying President Rivlin and Prince William on a visit to Jerusalem in 2018

"There was a point in my career where juggling home and work felt too difficult, and I was seriously thinking of leaving my job," shares Rivka Ravitz, former chief of staff for former President of Israel Reuven Rivlin. But at that point, Rivka continues, she realized that the job had become bigger than her. "It was no longer about me and my family. I represented someone more than Mrs. Rivka Ravitz, charedi mom of 12 and wife of the deputy mayor of Beitar, Yitzchak Ravitz. Young charedi women were looking at me. They wanted to see how and if I could handle my family and my high-profile, demanding career. I knew I couldn't let them down. I needed to show them that it was possible to juggle both."

Rivka also recognized that as a charedi woman in the government, she was uniquely poised to help her community. The charedi community had needs, and she was right there in the room, so to speak – in the Knesset – where big decisions were constantly being made. Besides, she explains, "as a charedi mother, I was able to explain our needs the most effectively. For example, when the discussion was about raising the price of fruits and vegetables, I was there to explain what that means to a family of 12. Most of the individuals involved in the discussion were young professionals with not even one child to feed." Although that's not why Rivka was hired, Knesset members got the benefit (as, of course, did she) of the point of view of a charedi mom.

Not a Coffee Maker

Rivka began her career in politics quite unromantically. She was married at age 18½ to a kollel *yungerman*, and she needed a job. So, Rivka went into the "family business." Her father-in-law, Avrohom Ravitz, was then a member of the Knesset for the Charedi Degel HaTorah party, and he hired her to work in his office.

"I was still in seminary in the morning, but in the afternoon, I'd work for my father-in-law," Rivka recalls.

After she left seminary, Rivka became the financial

advisor for the finance committee of the Knesset.

"Financial advisor is an important position in Israel," shares Rivka, "I learned a lot. I had to work with the army budget as well as health and education finances."

In 2000, Rivka was forced out of her father-in-law's office by a new law that stated that first-degree relatives couldn't work together in the same party. She started working for then-MK Ruvi (Reuven) Rivlin of the Likud party, who soon afterwards became Minister of Communications. At age 23, Rivka became the head of his office which, until that time, had never had a charedi staff member – let alone a charedi female staff member running the office, Rivka points out.

After that, from 2003-2006, Rivlin was elected speaker of the Knesset and then was re-elected again in 2009.

"I had lots of campaigns I was running for him," shares Rivka. "In fact, it was Rivlin's idea that Arik Sharon run for prime minister, so I ran that campaign for him as well."

On a sad side note, the Gush Katif tragedy essentially orchestrated by Arik Sharon was where Rivlin and Sharon made their split.

"That's when I clearly saw the truth of the Torah saying, '*Lev mlochim b'yad Hashem*,'" says Rivka. "Sharon had built those settlements and now it was like a *dybbuk* was in him, pushing him to destroy them. Those days were difficult for all of us."

"In those years," continues Rivka, "not only was there no other charedi woman working in politics but there were no women at all." Not because of prejudice, she explains, but just because Knesset hours are not suited for a typical working mom. A normal workday in the Knesset begins at 8 am and finishes at 7 pm. And that doesn't take into account the days when Knesset members and their staff pull overnights because there are major items that need to be voted on.

Perhaps because there were no women working there, and certainly not in senior positions, Rivka recalls in her first few years on the job, whenever older Knesset mem-

bers saw her, they'd ask her to bring them a cup of coffee. "I'd say, 'There's a coffee urn at the end of the hall.' They thought I was the coffee girl. They didn't know I was the advisor of the financial committee." It came to a point, Rivka says, that instead of having to constantly tell them who she was (or who she wasn't) that she just removed the urn from her room. "Ever since then," she adds, with a laugh, "I don't drink coffee anymore, only water."

Older Knesset members' faulty perceptions notwithstanding, at age 28, Rivka found herself chief of staff for the Speaker of the Knesset overseeing a staff of 400.

"My job included overseeing the management of various committees, organizing the budget, running Rivlin's various campaigns which typically included PR work, managing the advertising, strategizing, and working out the budget."

By the time Rivlin was Speaker of the Knesset for the second time, Rivka had just given birth to twins – her 8th and 9th children.

"I got a lot of help and support from my mother, my sisters and especially my husband," maintains Rivka. "Sometimes, I'd come home so discouraged, and my husband would say, 'You can do it, Rivka, go for it. You're smarter than them.' The truth is, Rivka admits, "I always enjoyed my job. I just didn't like the politics part of it that much."

Of course, leaving family was never easy. "I remember when I went to India. This was when Rivlin was president, and we did a lot of traveling. As a rule, we usually were home for Shabbos, but this time, we were away for ten days. I missed my son's birthday party. I remember crying and feeling so miserable."

A Charedi in a Non-Charedi World

When Rivka switched to work for the non-religious Likud party, that's when her situation became more complicated. Although, of course, the non-religious MKs and their staff were familiar with the concept of Shabbos, most of them had no idea that meant that she couldn't answer her phone for 26 hours. Some people got annoyed; some religious people even said it was *pikuach nefesh* and she could answer the phone on Shabbos. Most people, however, were understanding.

The truth is, Rivka says, "Rivlin was nice and understanding about pretty much everything. He was a very pleasant person to work for. You can tell by the fact that he always had a small staff turnover rate in his office. We all enjoyed working for him, so we stayed. We felt like family."

Rivka particularly appreciates Rivlin's consideration for her "special needs" – like taking maternity leave every other year. Not that she ever took the typical maternity leave that moms in other professions take. "Especially if there were primary elections, budget, or other important issues coming up, I needed to come back really fast, like in a matter of weeks," Rivka says.

And yes, sometimes people would make snide comments, like when she'd arrive at the office in maternity clothes, a colleague might tease that she was having so many children in order to get more *Bituach Leumi* (national insurance). "I can't say I always appreciated their jokes," she admits. In general, however, maintains Rivka, she never felt personally attacked because of her

religious beliefs. "I didn't work on Chol hamoed, Purim, Tisha B'Av either, and although I know there were colleagues who weren't thrilled about it, we always maintained a respectful relationship."

As far as hot topics like conversion issues and the army draft, Rivka says, "I tried to steer clear of those conversations. It's one thing as a philosophical debate, that I could handle." But if someone would start to lambast charedim as a group, Rivka would avoid the conversation altogether or if she couldn't avoid it, she might say something like, "What would you say if a German said such a thing about a Jew; would you like to hear that?" That would usually be effective in shutting down negativity.

Interestingly, Rivka says that the animosity you read about in the papers between Knesset members is not always accurate. Aryeh Deri is good friends with Avigdor Lieberman, she says. "I'm friends with Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid and his wife. We go out for coffee every few weeks. It can look really bad on TV, but if you go into the 'miznon Knesset' (Knesset dining room), you see those who were recently virulently attacking each other on the Knesset floor laughing together in the dining room."

Family Considerations

While the Knesset staff were generally respectful of Rivka's time away from work, the same couldn't always be said of Rivka's children's feelings about her time away from home.

"We'd pass by the Knesset or the President's house in the car on the way to a park and one kid would turn to the other and say, 'Uch, don't look, that's where Mommy works.' Also, we'd often find notes around the house before I left for a job-related trip saying, 'Mommy, don't go.' The truth is," shares Rivka, "it was a sacrifice on everybody's part. I missed some important milestones in my children's lives. My mother who was babysitting would call and tell me that my child's first tooth came out or share that my baby took his first steps that day. It was hard not being there then. But as much as my children complained about my absence, if something was in the newspaper about me, they would cut it out and show it to their friends. They were proud of the work I was doing, and they always wanted me to share stories about what happened."

Nevertheless, Rivka makes sure that home time is sacred.

"I will put my phone away when I'm home. I make sure to look into my children's eyes when I speak to them and really listen to them."

Rivka also makes sure that she and her husband have time alone together every week. "Usually, on Friday, my husband and I will go away for a few hours, maybe out to eat or for a walk."

When phone calls do come through when she's at home, Rivka will do her best to either not take the call at all or minimize time spent on the phone. She humorously recalls the time when, in the middle of bathing her children, she received a phone call from then-Prime Minister Arik Sharon. "I'm so sorry," he apologized. "I'll call you back later."

Rivka strongly believes that her work in the Knesset benefited the charedi population. When she worked



Meeting with the Pope

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President Joe Biden bowing for the mother of 12

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with her father-in-law, there were laws the nonreligious parties were trying to pass against the charedi community. "We worked hard to prevent them from drafting yeshiva students into the army, for example." It's a difficult situation, admits Rivka, especially when trying to explain the issue to a nonreligious Israeli mother of a soldier. "Non-religious Israelis have no concept of the holiness of learning Torah, of why we believe that the learning of our boys is as important to the safety of our country as sending their boys to fight. To them, it's 'we endanger our lives and you sit in the beis midrash.' It's almost impossible to expect someone not raised charedi to understand the tremendous value of learning Torah."

The only thing that has been somewhat helpful in bridging the divide is when Rivka tries to get the other side to see that we're operating from a different point of view. If the other side can't understand that from our point of view, Torah learning is vital and that the only reason the world is still existing is because of Torah study, then they can't begin to understand why their son is on the border while my son is safe in his bed, she says. If they can begin to understand the importance to us, then possibly they can begin to understand why we are against drafting yeshiva bochurim into the army.

Meeting the Rich and Powerful

In 2014, when Rivlin became President of Israel, he offered Rivka her position of choice in his office. For the next seven years, she was his chief of staff, planning, arranging and traveling everywhere with him.

"I was 37 when I became the president's chief of staff. The political advisor under me was a 60-year-old ambassador and my attaché was also a 60-year-old male who was head of the famed Special Tactics Rescue Unit 669, the Israel Defense Forces helicopter Combat Search and Rescue extraction unit. In the beginning, it was awkward," admits Rivka.

The job of the Israeli presidency is largely a ceremonial role which includes meeting world leaders and dignitaries, to keep relations with Israel and the rest of the world on good terms. Part of a president's job also includes visiting wounded soldiers and terror victims and attending (*lo aleynu*) funerals of soldiers and victims of terror. Although it was easier than the daily pressure of being on the Knesset floor, working for the president included a lot of PR work both in Israel and around the world. This meant lots of traveling.

"I traveled with President Rivlin everywhere," shares Rivka, "which means I had the opportunity and sometimes, the honor to meet many world leaders." The list includes (but is not limited to) four U.S. presidents – Clinton, Obama, Trump and Biden – Russian Prime Minister Putin, Former Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, President of France Emmanuel Macron, and Pope Francis. Rivka admits to being impressed by Obama, especially his speaking skills.

"I was arranging Shimon Peres' funeral and having a difficult time getting all the state leaders to attend in a day and a half," shares Rivka. "President Obama was not planning on attending. At the last minute, however, he changed his mind. So, his speech was impromptu. This is not typical. Every president/state leader has a speechwriter, and if something goes wrong, they get all

nervous and the speech suffers. Obama came straight from the airport after a long flight, and he spoke well without even notes or prompts." He was also courteous to Rivka and her staff, which impressed her.

Rivka met President Trump when he came to Jerusalem to open the U.S. Embassy. "I remember wondering if maybe he was Jewish, he was so friendly to us and so pro-Israel. I also appreciated how Trump included everyone in the conversation, instead of just speaking to the other president."

Working on the inside and meeting some of the most powerful political figures of our time, I wonder what Rivka can tell me about some of these individuals.

"Over the years, I've met kings, queens, political and religious leaders, and I've learned that, at the end of the day, they're regular people," maintains Rivka. "They have egos, they have tempers, and they sometimes talk badly about others. It's not always so impressive to see them up close – they may act nicely on TV, but it's not necessarily a pleasant experience with them privately. They may be brilliant but if they don't have *yirat Shomayim* (fear of Heaven) or good *middot* (character traits), then there's nothing special about them."

Character traits notwithstanding, world leaders do have more power than your average Joe, many holding the fate of millions of people in their hands. Perhaps because of this, Rivka realizes the importance of making a kiddush Hashem with everyone she meets.

In her travels, Rivka contends, kashrut is usually not a problem.

"I bring tuna and crackers wherever I go, and there's always a Chabad house somewhere," she says. One time, however, she left for a trip to Russia right after Sukkos and didn't have a chance to go shopping. "Unfortunately, we didn't get to the Chabad house until Shabbos. All I ate for the week were the apples and bananas I got from the hotel. I was starving by the time Shabbos came around!"

"When I started meeting world leaders," continues Rivka, "my husband asked Rav Chaim Kanievsky, zt"l, regarding my requirement to recite the blessing upon meeting a king. In all instances that we asked him, we were told that I should recite the blessing without G-d's name except for when we asked about Putin. Since Putin has the power to put people to death, Rabbi Kanievsky said that in front of him, I should recite the full blessing using G-d's name."

Mentioning Putin, Rivka is reminded of a story he shared with her when they met.

"He invited a small group of us for dinner, and apparently, he'd heard a member of our group was Orthodox because everything was kosher. At one point during the meal, he turned to us and said, 'I want to tell you a childhood story.' He revealed that as a young boy, he'd often come home after school to an empty house because his parents worked all day. He'd spend his afternoons with the friendly neighbors down the hall, a family of four children (a rarity in Russia). Interestingly, the mother would light candles every Friday evening and the family would then sit down to a festive meal. As an adult, Putin realized they were a Jewish family. Because of their kindness to him, Putin, as political leader, behaved kindlier to Jews.

Rivka thought the fact that Putin chose to relate this

story to her was fascinating but wondered if it was even true because she wasn't under the impression that he was particularly kind to Jews. Subsequently, however, she asked Rabbi Berel Lazar, the chief rabbi of Russia, about it, and he said he believes Putin is supportive of the Jewish community and yes, probably because of this childhood experience.

Then, of course, there's the famous story of Rivka's meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden.

Rivka relates that she was excited about the upcoming meeting with the president. This was the fourth American president she'd be meeting, and this time it was to take place in the Oval Office with Rivlin in what was usually a private *tete-a-tete* meeting between two world leaders.

"It was the beginning of Biden's presidency term, and I'd been warned that Biden was anti-Israel. But it wasn't true," relates Rivka. "He and Rivlin hugged warmly, and he spoke very well of Israel." Then Rivlin introduced Rivka as his chief of Staff, adding, "And you won't believe how many children she has! 12!"

Biden was astounded. "I come from a Christian family, he said. 'My mother would've loved to meet you.' Then in an unanticipated and unprecedented gesture, he kneeled before her and said, 'I have to go down on my knee to honor you for having 12 children.'"

"It was a good thing there was a photographer in the room," says Rivka with a laugh. "Otherwise, I don't think anybody would've believed me."

Rivka observes the Jewish law of *negiah* forbidding physical contact with males outside her immediate family circle. This has sometimes presented a challenge when meeting with secular or non-Jewish male leaders. To this end, Rivka always tries to plan in advance.

"If I know I will be meeting with a leader, I send a message to the staff to alert the leader of my halachic restrictions so that when we meet, there is no embarrassing moment. This works well most times. We will nod our heads politely instead of the customary shaking hands." If she doesn't know enough in advance to alert anybody, Rivka says she will try to have a book or a computer to hold with both hands or she will put her hands behind her back. It will always be accompanied by an explanation that as a charedi Jewish woman, she doesn't shake men's hands. "Most people are fine with it, although Israelis will sometimes be cynical and make some kind of joke. I find the non-Jews very respectful," says Rivka. For example, when President Biden attempted to shake Rivka's hands, Rivlin was in the room and quickly explained the prohibition. The president was totally respectful of it, she says.

Another well-publicized experience involves Rivka's meeting with the Pope. This was a very important meeting, shares Rivka.

"The Vatican had strong influential connections with the Palestinians. Our government attached tremendous importance to our meeting with the Pope. We had dozens of meetings rehearsing with us exactly how to behave. In Israel, we met with various government ministers, including the Prime Minister, and in Rome, we had a special meeting with the Israeli ambassador to the Vatican who explained the protocol," she recalls.

When Rivka heard that part of the protocol involved shaking the Pope's hand, she immediately explained

why she couldn't. No problem, she was told, a message will be sent beforehand, and you can simply bow your head to him. When Rivka explained she couldn't do that either because of the cross the Pope wore, once again, the ambassador said, "Don't worry, I'll let the Pope know in advance."

Unfortunately, however, Rivka discovered on the way to the Vatican that the ambassador had indeed forgotten to notify the Pope. As a result, for the entire car ride and subsequent long walk down the halls of the Vatican accompanied by a sea of cardinals, Rivka was a nervous wreck. Her colleagues at her side kept reassuring her that her rabbi would allow her to shake his hand in this case since it was so important to be in the Pope's good graces. But, as she said, "In all my life, I had never shaken hands of another man other than my husband. It wasn't something I was prepared to do." All she could do at that point was pray. Nevertheless, she says, "I was sure I was going to ruin everything, and my colleagues would be so angry at me."

Despite all the pressure, Rivka held fast to her principles. As the Pope extended his hand, Rivka began to explain her position, President Rivlin picking up her thread and continuing for her. In the end, it turns out the Pope was so impressed that she stood up for her values that *he* bowed to *her*.

Besides the handshaking incident, Rivka had to prepare in other ways for her Vatican trip. She knew she would be entering the buildings of the Vatican where there were crosses all around. Before the trip, she asked a rav and was told it was OK to walk through rooms hung with crosses as long as they were not rooms used for prayer.

Rivka has even met famous Hollywood actors, not that she watches movies and has any idea who these people are. But she shares a funny story that happened when she was in Los Angeles for a conference with President Rivlin.

"When I arrived in L.A. for the conference," Rivka shares, "I got an email from someone named Gal Gadot inviting me to the premier of her movie called *Justice League*. I asked my colleagues who she was. My friends were so excited for me and told me to make sure to take a selfie with her. The funny thing is that when I went backstage to meet her, she said to me, 'You're the real wonder woman!'"

Life Post-Politics

President Rivlin retired in 2021, at which point Rivka also left the government.

"Incoming President Herzog asked me to join his office as Advisor for the Diaspora, but after over 24 years in politics, I needed a break," shares Rivka.

Today, Rivka works in bilateral relations for a cybersecurity company and is a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI) involved in a research study on charedi women in the workplace.

Does Rivka feel like she's finished with politics? Not quite. Currently, charedi parties don't recognize women as potential MK candidates. However, Rivka believes this will change, and when it does, she knows that with her 25 years of experience, she will be a pretty qualified candidate. ▲



Surveying Israel's northern border in a helicopter with President Rivlin

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