

### Is that how you got involved with the Israel Religious Action Center?

**Y**es. In 1987 I proposed to IRAC director Rabbi Uri Regev that we open a complaint hotline: “Call Us When You’re Right.” He loved it, and we got started. Soon the complaints came pouring in from all over the country in many languages—Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, Amharic (the Ethiopian language).

Quickly a pattern emerged. Many of the complaints concerned BEZEQ, Israel’s national telephone company. People weren’t getting itemized bills and didn’t know what they were paying for. So we recruited the many callers into the BEZEQ Afflicted Clients Association and started to fight the telephone monopoly. We organized conferences—the ultra-Orthodox, Arabs, rich, poor, everybody aired their grievances. A chair was always set aside for Zvi Amid, BEZEQ’s director general, but he never showed up. Then we published a consumer’s guide on how to defeat the phone company in court and won 43 out of 46 cases. Eventually Zvi Amid resigned, the telephone monopoly was broken up, and for the first time ever, Israelis began to get itemized phone bills.

My high visibility during this period—I was often on TV—and the realization that I could actually achieve social change led me into politics. I ran for the City Council of Jerusalem and held a seat for fourteen years.

### What happened in year fifteen?

**I** decided not to run for re-election. I never forgot an article I’d written ten years earlier demanding the retirement of

**“We track the amount of money allocated to Orthodox institutions and rabbis as compared to non-Orthodox organizations and then use the evidence we find of unjust and unequal government funding to prove discrimination. This becomes the basis for our cases concerning Reform synagogue buildings and recognition of Reform rabbis in Israel.”**

the then councilman Dov Rabinovitch, who had been on the job for twenty years, and calling him an ineffective has-been because he didn’t know when to move on. My article was entitled, “When You’re Furniture and You Don’t Know It.” So I took my own advice, resigned, and looked for another job—fortuitously just as the position of IRAC director opened up.

### You must have been a shoo-in.

**N**ot exactly. The search committee wanted to know if I, a maverick city council member, could work with a steering committee comprised of representatives from six different Jewish organizations—WUPJ, IMPJ, ARZA, ARZENU, URJ, and HUC-JIR. “Yes,” I said, “do you want references?” Someone replied with a laugh, almost a dare, “Bring one from Ehud Olmert.” The mayor and I had an adversarial relationship, and as a councilwoman I had initiated thirty court petitions and four police investigations against him. But I accepted the challenge. Olmert wrote a letter of recommendation and called some members of the search committee on my behalf. Basically he said that he regretted that I was rarely on his side. I got the job on my birthday, April 1, 2002.

### What were IRAC’s priorities then?

**A**dvancing religious pluralism and fighting for social justice and tolerance towards minorities in Israel—including, of course, Reform Jews. Our mission hasn’t changed, but we’ve now broadened our scope, writing new legislation, teaching about social responsibility on the grassroots level, catalyzing 50+ social action programs in congregations of all denominations, and doing *tzedakah* for Israel’s neediest populations.

### How do you aid poor Israelis?

**W**e’ve created a fund called Keren B’Kavod which works with different organizations to supply packages to those who can’t afford food for the holi-

days. Volunteers from Israeli Reform congregations collect food, clothes, and other goods and arrange for their distribution to families in thirty cities and towns throughout the country. Last year we set a new record, collecting seven tons of dry goods.

We donate to anyone in need. This year, in preparation for Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim feast that concludes the month of Ramadan, local Arab youth from Acco and Jewish high-school students from the Leo Baeck Educational Institute in Haifa assembled food packages that we distributed to 350 poor Israeli Muslim families. For Christmas, seventh graders from Congregation Kol HaNeshama in Jerusalem put together packages which we disbursed to more than 300 needy Christian families. We also provide humanitarian aid to hundreds of newly arrived refugees from Darfur.

The beneficiaries of this program are not only the poor people we serve, but also the local shopkeepers. So, for example, to help the besieged residents of S’derot, which is being constantly hit with missiles from Gaza, we buy up everything in the city’s grocery stores. We walk in and say, “We’ll take all the tuna, all the corn, all the diapers, etc. and we’ll pay in cash.” We absorb the thirty percent markup, but since we save twenty percent for transportation because we’re buying locally, it ends up being ten percent above the wholesale price. Still, it’s worth it to support these grocery stores because we enable them to help *their* customers by extending credit, and that’s why they love the Reform Movement. I can’t tell you how many times the local shopkeepers will pull out their record books and say, “You see this? She doesn’t pay because she’s handicapped. This one I carry, he’s my neighbor, I don’t have the heart....”

### How is the program paid for?

**D**onations. Of the one million *shekelim* (\$300,000) it takes to run this project, 30% comes from Reform Israelis and their friends and families, 30% comes from Reform congregations and affiliates in North America, and the balance is raised from foundations. The Union for Reform Judaism provides ongoing support and contributes significant funding through its Reform Move-