

The case of the confiscated mezuzah

Ruth Eglash, THE JERUSALEM POST

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For new immigrant Debra Gassman the transition into Israeli society has been difficult - but for reasons other than one might expect.

Since making aliya last December, the thirty-something Chicago native has had to return to the US several times to give depositions and assist lawyers in a discrimination case she brought against the board members of the apartment building where she used to live.

"My life is up in the air and I cannot commit to anything here because I keep having to return there," said Gassman, a student at Ulpan Etzion in Jerusalem, in an interview with *The Jerusalem Post* on Thursday.

A lawyer by profession, Gassman recalled how her life was turned upside down one fateful summer evening two years ago when she returned home to her Chicago condominium to find her mezuzah missing from the doorpost.

"My first thought was to call the police to report a hate crime," said Gassman. "My instinct, however, told me to contact the building management first. When I got in touch with the property manager at Wolin and Levin at Shoreline Towers Condominium Association, I couldn't believe what I was told. Apparently, the condo board had instructed building staff that no type of decoration would be allowed in the hallways and on the doors, including mezuzot."

Gassman, together with another resident, Lynne Bloch - whose mezuzah was removed from her door as she sat shiva for her husband - immediately challenged the policy, explaining that a mezuzah was not a decoration but a requirement under Jewish law.

"We presented them with letters from Chicago's Rabbinical Council verifying the religious significance of posting a mezuzah, and a letter from the Decalogue Society of Lawyers, Chicago's Jewish Bar Association, advising that prohibiting the display of religiously ordained mezuzot was discriminatory," explained Gassman, noting that 15-20 percent of the residents in the 328-unit building are Jewish.

The board, however, refused to make an exception, so Gassman and Bloch filed complaints of religious discrimination with the City of Chicago Commission on Human Relations, the Illinois Department of Human Rights and the Illinois attorney-general.

"As a public defender for eight-and-a-half years, it is in my heart and my character to defend the rights of others," said Gassman. "Not being allowed to put up my mezuzah made me feel violated. There was really no justification for it."

Gassman said that for more than a year she would hang up her mezuzah only to return home and find it had been removed. Finally, after daily battles with the building staff and threats by the condominium association's board president, Gassman decided it was time to leave.

"I had always dreamed of making aliya," said Gassman, who came to Israel with the help of Nefesh B'Nefesh. "And when all this was going on, I decided that now was the appropriate time."

As Gassman prepared to make drastic changes on a personal level, the case against the condominium association began to garner attention from the media and lawmakers in the Chicago area, triggering changes to city and state laws.

Articles written in the city's *Jewish Star* newspaper spurred legislators to draft a new law guaranteeing condo owners the right to freely observe religious doctrines in the home, including the display of objects on one's front door.

In April the bill - sponsored by two Chicago Democrats, Rep. Sara Feigenholtz and Sen. Ira Silverstein - unanimously passed both chambers of the Illinois General Assembly and will go into effect on January 1, 2007.

The case, which is scheduled to go to trial in Chicago's Northern District Federal Court on August 28, has even been moved onto the books of prestigious law firm Much Shelist Freed Denenberg Ament & Rubenstein, who will represent Gassman in court.

The Shoreline Towers Condominium Association and its legal representation were not reached for comment by press time.

"This is a very important battle that affects Jews around the world," said Gassman. "People do not realize the importance of a mezuzah until it is no longer there. I am not an Orthodox Jew, but as a public defender who spent every day in jails interviewing clients, kissing my mezuzah every morning gave me an extra sense of security and helped me make it through the day."