

Airline to be sued for asking woman to move seats to accommodate Orthodox male passenger

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An 81 year old holocaust survivor is suing El Al airlines after she was asked to move seats because an ultra-Orthodox male passenger said he would not sit next to a woman.

Renee Rabinowitz was seated in the business-class section of a flight to Tel Aviv when a "man in Hasidic or Haredi garb" arrived and refused to sit next to her because contact with women is forbidden under strict interpretations of Jewish law.

A flight attendant offered Rabinowitz an alternative seat but she said that she was treated by the flight attendant as if she was "stupid" when she was asked to swap. The flight attendant spoke to the passenger who made the complaint in Hebrew, meaning Rabinowitz could not understand what was being said.

When the flight attendant was challenged over whether the moves was simply because the man wanted Rabinowitz to move they said "yes".

When Ms Rabinowitz returned to collect her possessions she challenged the other passenger over why it mattered and he answered "it's in the Torah".

Ms Rabinowitz said "For me this is not personal. It is intellectual, ideological and legal. I think to myself, here I am, an older woman, educated, I've been around the world, and some guy can decide that I shouldn't sit next to him. Why?

"When did modesty become the sum and end all of being a Jewish woman?

"The idea of having a Haredi population is wonderful, as long as they don't tell me what to do," she added. She said that members of her family were Haredi.

Campaigners have long sought a legal case against what they see as a spate of similar incidents. The Israel Religious Action Centre told the *New York Times* that they "needed a case of a flight attendant being actively involved" in moving a passenger and said that the airline had "internalised the commandment, 'I cannot sit next to a woman.'"

The group wrote to the airline stating that Ms Rabinowitz had been pressurised into moving and that asking a passenger to move because of her gender was degrading. They are seeking compensation of around £9000.

The airline said that discrimination against passengers is prohibited.

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