

# A conversation with Prof. Karen Avraham: Dean of Tel Aviv U's medical faculty

By **Linda Chase**  
Editor

Professor Karen Avraham was recently appointed Dean of the Sackler Faculty of Medicine at Tel Aviv University (TAU) and is recognized as one of Israel's top scientists for her research that centers on disease genomics with an emphasis on hearing disorders.

Professor Avraham shared details of her role as dean.

"I oversee day to day running of the faculty. That includes: 5 schools (School of Medicine, School of Public Health, School of Health Professions, 6 year program of the School of Medicine and School of Dental Medicine), 1,400 faculty members, 5,000 students and multiple training and research programs. As the dean I'm setting the vision for the future: Where is medicine going, How will we change the curriculum to make sure that we (TAU) are implementing the latest techniques and How to stay on top of the game".

Professor Avraham explained some of the research her team is undertaking.

"I have been studying the genetics of deafness for many years. My team and I have discovered a number of genes that lead to hearing loss. One of our goals is to discover genes that are involved in deafness and diseases that affect children. In this study we focused on genetic deafness caused by a mutation in the gene SYNE4. It is a rare deafness discovered by our lab several years ago in two Israeli families. Since then we identified it in Turkey and the UK as well. Children inheriting the defective gene from both parents are born with normal hearing, but gradually lose their hearing during child-



Professor Karen Avraham is the dean of the Sackler Faculty of Medicine at Tel Aviv University (TAU). **COURTESY OF TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY**

hood. This happens because the mutation causes mislocalization of cell nuclei in the hair cells inside the cochlea of the inner ear which serve as sound wave receptors and are thus essential for hearing. This defect leads to the degeneration and eventual death of hair cells. My team has also been studying a rare developmental disorder in children that lead to developmental delay and epilepsy."

Professor Avraham expressed how her upbringing inspired a career in scientific research.

"I was born in Canada and moved to the U.S. at a young age. My parents were Israeli and we moved to Israel for a year and a half when I was 7. We then moved back to the U.S.

My father was an engineer and my mother, a very career driven business woman. Both parents inspired me to be a professional. I wanted to be an artist. As I started learning science, I became enamored with the subject and decided that I wanted to be a medical illustrator. When I was an undergrad at Washington University in St. Louis, I had a job washing glassware in a lab. Each semester I washed less glassware and increased my research. Eventually science captured me and I fully transitioned to science."

Professor Avraham shared details of her post-doctoral training at the United States' National Cancer Institute in Maryland.

"I spent 5 years there, it was remarkable.

*"There were no genes known for deafness, which gave me an opportunity to enter a brand new field. Within a year we identified one of the first genes in deafness and in 1998 we published a science paper."*

— Prof. Karen Avraham

That work helped define the direction of my future as a scientist. There were no genes known for deafness, which gave me an opportunity to enter a brand new field. Within a year we identified one of the first genes in deafness and in 1998 we published a science paper. When I came to Israel and started my own lab at TAU, it was the perfect transition to work in human genetics."

Professor Avraham has won numerous awards, including: the Sir Bernard Katz Prize from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Germany, the Michael Bruno Memorial Prize from the Rothschild Foundation (Yad Hanadiv), the TEVA Prize for Groundbreaking Research in the Field of Rare Diseases and the Teva Founders Prize on Breakthroughs.

Professor Avraham shared her thoughts on being recognized for her work.

"I'm incredibly proud of my achievements. What stands behind the prizes is an outstanding team of grad students and post doctorates who are driven and passionate to do the research."

## Delray's Rabbi Saunders meets President Biden at Toys for Tots event

On December 12, Rabbi Zevi Saunders from the Delray Orthodox Synagogue was invited to attend the annual U.S. Marine Corps' Toys for Tots event with First Lady Jill Biden in attendance. However, it was the 75th anniversary, so President Joe Biden decided to attend as well.

Rabbi Saunders said, "I recited the blessing over the President who gave his hand and bowed his head and thanked me".

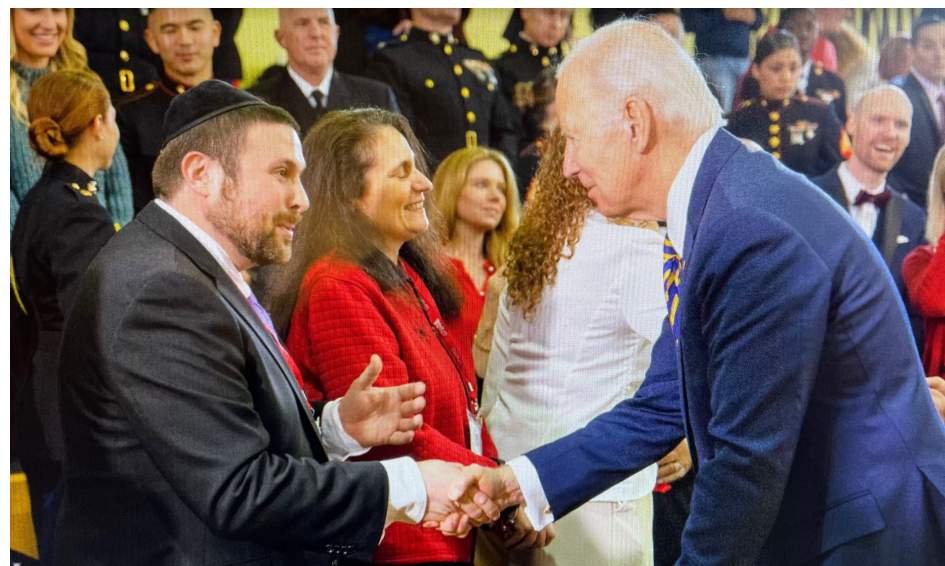
The president went on to say, "During the civil rights movement I attended Mass in the morning and Synagogue in the afternoon".

Rabbi Saunders said it was a great honor

and a privilege to meet the president.

"Judaism teaches we must have great respect for the leaders of the countries that we reside in regardless of whether we agree with their policies or not. It would have been nicer to go to the White House for a Chanukah party but I will take what I can get," Rabbi Saunders added.

Rabbi Saunders has had the privilege of meeting the late Queen of England and now the President of the United States. He hopes to meet the new king of England in the near future.



Rabbi Zevi Saunders from the Delray Orthodox Synagogue had the opportunity to meet President Joe Biden during the U.S. Marine Corps' Toys for Tots event. **COURTESY OF RABBI ZEVI SAUNDERS**