

Synagogue Accused of Firing Pregnant Bride

BY ADAM KLASFELD Sept. 22, 2015 3:45 PM. PT

MANHATTAN (CN) - The oldest Sephardic Jewish congregation in the United States fired its program director for being pregnant at her wedding, the woman says in a lawsuit filed hours before the holiest day on the Hebrew calendar.

On Tuesday at sunset, observant Jews around the world will mark Yom Kippur, also known as the Day of Atonement.

Lawyers for Alana Shultz say that her former employers at Congregation Shearith Israel, a Spanish and Portuguese synagogue founded in 1654, should make amends for falling short of their mission to provide a "welcoming, traditional community."

The congregation "failed miserably in their attempt to merge traditional Judaism with modern civil laws," according a 13-page complaint filed in Manhattan Supreme Court.

Shultz, the congregation's program director for more than a decade, says that she was 19 weeks pregnant when she and her husband married on June 28 of this year.

Two days later, Shultz says that she told her supervisor that she was expecting as she prepared to go on her honeymoon, and the supervisor passed on the news to Rabbi Meir Soloveichik and board member Michael Lustig.

Shultz says that she was in for a rude surprise the day after she returned from her honeymoon.

"Shockingly, rather than demonstrating inclusion and tolerance, [the congregation] callously fired Ms. Shultz for her apparent failure to adhere to their religious morals, at a time when she was at her most vulnerable - six and a half months pregnant, visibly showing and in critical need of medical insurance," the lawsuit says.

The congregation told her that it was "eliminating" Shultz's position and attempted to "silence" her by having her sign a releasing waiving litigation for a "paltry six weeks of pay," the lawsuit says.

Once Shultz retained a lawyer, the congregation tried to "un-fire" her, the lawsuit says.

"Sadly, this attempt to 're-hire' Ms. Shultz was not a decision made after reflection and atonement, but rather was thinly veiled attempt to mitigate [their] exposure for their blatant discriminatory and unlawful conduct," she says.

Shultz said in a statement that she is "beyond saddened" that the congregation "forced me to file this lawsuit, which I hope will help other women avoid what they did to me during what should be a time for celebration and joy."

She is now close to term and out of work, her lawyers say.

The lawsuit alleges three counts of violations of the Family Medical Leave Act and New York City and State human rights law.

She is represented by Douglas Wigdor and Jeanne Christensen of Wigdor LLP.

The congregation did not immediately respond to a request for comment.