

Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg dies at 87

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue



(Photo by Steve Petteway / US Supreme Court)

A phrase from the book of Deuteronomy hangs framed on the wall of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's Supreme Court chamber: "Justice, justice you shall pursue."

For Ginsburg, who died at home surrounded by her family on September 18 at the age of 87, the phrase summed up perfectly her calling as jurist and a Jew.

In a 2018 interview with Jane Eisner, then editor of the Jewish daily *Forward*, Ginsburg said that she grew up in the shadow of World War II and the Holocaust and it left a deep and lasting imprint on her.

“She saw being a Jew as having a place in society in which you’re always reminded you are an outsider, even when she, as a Supreme Court justice, was the ultimate insider,” said Eisner. “That memory of it—even if it’s more from the past—informed what she thought society should be doing to protect other minorities.”

Or as Ginsburg said during that interview: “It makes you more empathetic to other people who are not insiders, who are outsiders.”

In 1980, Ginsburg was nominated by President Jimmy Carter to a seat on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, where she served 13 years until she was appointed to the Supreme Court.

Behind the scenes she tried in small ways to make the court more hospitable to Jews. Several Orthodox Jewish lawyers had complained that a certificate issued by the court read “In the Year of Our Lord.” For Jews, explicitly framing the calendar year as Christian was offensive. Ginsburg successfully urged the court to excise it.

In 2018, she received the \$1 million Genesis Prize, awarded annually to a Jewish person for talent and achievement. (She donated the proceeds to various Jewish charities.) In 2019, Philadelphia’s National Museum of American Jewish History mounted a traveling exhibit of her life.

In 2015, Ginsburg was asked by the American Jewish World Service to write an insert to its Passover Haggadah. She agreed and asked Lauren Holtzblatt, rabbi of Adas Israel synagogue in Washington, DC, to help her research some of the sacred texts about women in the Exodus narrative.

True to form, Ginsburg wanted to write about the figures not mentioned in the Haggadah.

“For her that was all the people who were marginalized, like the women,” said Holtzblatt. “She wanted to highlight the roles they played. She wanted to learn more about the daughter of Pharaoh, Moses’ sister Miriam, and the midwives, Shifra and Puah. She and I talked a lot about people who are not given the spotlight when they do miraculous things.” —Religion News Service

