The Academic's Journey from Israel to India

Interviews and Profiles

Dr. Daniella Saltz

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For Daniella Saltz, law school was always a certainty. “What else would someone who loves words, logic, and humanities do?” she says. However, while in college, the prospect of law school did not appeal to her — it seemed to be a boring means to a certain end, and only three percent of her classmates would have been women. Instead, she decided to study archaeology and languages no one has spoken for thou- sands of years, earning a Ph.D from Harvard University in Near Eastern Archaeology and Languages. She traveled frequently in the Middle East and Mediterranean littoral and excavated in Israel, Cyprus, and Tunisia. Although she enjoyed the adventurous nature of an archaeological career, she was not enamored with the idea of going into academia.

She moved to Israel and became an editor of archaeology books and publications, as well as a translator from Hebrew and French to English. She married and started a family, and after eight years in Israel, she began thinking seriously about law school again. “I realized it was now or never for law school,” she says. Of course, she had several reasons for wanting to become a lawyer. For starters, it was a better financial option. Additionally, Saltz wanted a change from the type of writing and research that exists in a bubble. In the absence of time machines, archaeologists have no way of verifying their conclusions. Even if their ideas are well developed and exhaustively researched, there is no sense of closure or finality. “With law, there’s an ending: the judge decides or the transaction closes,” she says. This was a refreshing change.

With her husband and two young children — ages two and seven — she moved back to her home state of Michigan, where she attended the University of Michigan Law School. She mostly studied on the weekends when her husband brought her daughter and son to her parents. “I couldn’t be part of a study group or do work in the evenings, because that’s when I was mom,” she says. She was also mom at graduation: Her children walked across the stage with her, and she recalls her son also shaking the dean’s hand, gripping it tightly and refusing to let go.

Support from her husband has been a constant feature, and Saltz readily acknowledges that her career would not have been possible without him. Because he is an artist and worked out of his studio in the basement of their home, he had more control over his schedule and was able to handle the children’s sick days and after- school activities. “When you’re an associate, you have zero control over your life,” she says. “He’s been key to all of this.”

Becoming a bankruptcy lawyer

While in law school, Saltz discovered that archaeology actually had a few things in common with bankruptcy, an area that soon became her focus. “They both deal with property in ruins. And you’re always digging and peeling back layers, looking for the answer,” she says. A course in commercial transactions first piqued her interest in bankruptcy law.

In a chapter on preferences, she learned that when a company files bankruptcy, all unsecured transactions that it conducted during the previous 90 days become suspect. The theory is that a company that goes into bankruptcy knows it's coming and starts favoring (preferring) certain creditors over others. The trustee can reclaim the money — even from vendors still owed money by the bankrupt debtor — and redistribute it. Although Saltz thought the theory antiquated and unfair, she wanted to know more. And so her career as a bankruptcy lawyer began.

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Saltz worked for several years at a law firm and eventually made partner. But she found life as a partner was just as unhappy as being an associate. "I discovered that I personally have a need to identify with what I'm doing. You can't identify with a law firm and shouldn't identify with your clients," she says. After leaving the firm, she started working initially part time as a contract lawyer for Ford Motor Company, helping it deal with distressed and bankrupt suppliers. She became a full time employee in November 1997. For many years she was the only in-house bankruptcy lawyer at an auto company. "If anybody had told me that I would end up working for one of the largest corporations in the world, I would have laughed. But I discovered that business is fascinating," she says.

According to Saltz, bankruptcy is a way of being a generalist and a specialist at the same time. Bankruptcy law is the specialty, but one can represent a debtor engaged in any type of business, a secured creditor, or an unsecured creditors' committee, and in this way be a generalist. As a firm lawyer, she mostly represent- ed secured creditors (i.e., banks). That knowledge proved useful in representing Ford as a major customer in supplier bankruptcies. The Bankruptcy Code makes no special provision for customers, even though they are critical to the outcome of a supplier case. Experiencing the other stakeholders' approaches was invaluable. The only way to acquire this knowledge was as a firm lawyer.

When Saltz came to the legal department, the other lawyers on her team had joined Ford directly after law school. Her knowledge and approach was a breath of fresh air. For Saltz, working in-house was an adjustment: no bill- able hours, no Dictaphones. "There was one admin for the whole department. Nobody dictated. We wrote our own letters, sent our own faxes," she says. Only half of her job was understanding the law; the other half was learning the company.

Despite having no billable hours, for many years it was practically a 24/7/365 job. "I remember being on vacation in Maine when
a supplier in Canada stopped shipping parts," Saltz says. "I was sitting on the stump of a log, on a hill where I could get a cell phone signal, legal pad on my lap, advising Ford through the crisis." Visteon Corporation was a critical supplier of electrical, climate control, and interior parts to Ford when it filed for Chapter 11 protection. Ford, which was Visteon's largest customer, supported Visteon through the bank- ruptcy, and the company's plan of reorganization was approved in the fall of 2010. "Looking back on the years the auto industry was in distress, I have no idea how I functioned at that level with that intensity for so long. Fortunately, those battle days are gone."

The world, and Ford, is flat

In addition to handling bankruptcy matters, Saltz conducted legal awareness training for production purchasing buyers. She often traveled to Asia on personal vacations and offered to run training sessions in China, Vietnam, Thailand, and India while she was "in the neighborhood." As a result, people in the Asia-Pacific region got to know her and experience firsthand her affinity for the region.

This exposure set the stage for her current role.

Having moved to India in July 2014 to serve as de facto general counsel for Ford India, Saltz is one of only a few Ford lawyers on an inter- national assignment. Ford is a global company with offices and employees all over the world. It has uniform global processes and operates its manufacturing plants similarly in every locale. Many individuals are given assignments overseas to broaden their horizons and develop their leadership skills. But while business is global, law is local, so lawyers typically do not have the same opportunities to work in other countries. “I feel very lucky that I’m doing this,” she says.

Saltz’s responsibilities are much broader than in her previous roles. “In the US, I was a specialist in bankruptcy, commercial transactions, and production purchasing. In India, I have to deal with whatever walks through the door,”she says. She recalls that a month into her new assignment, a major decision was handed down in an area of law that she had previously avoided. So she had to learn about that area — fast — and get involved.

However, working at Ford’s world headquarters in Dearborn, Michigan did give her some unexpected preparation for handling the new challenges she confronts. There, her office shared a wall with the lawyer who handled advertising. The wall was so thin she often heard the woman talking on the phone, explaining to her clients the parameters in which they could operate. Saltz now deals with similar issues in India. “Marketing always wants to push the envelope, but there are things you can and can’t say. What I learned through the wall was very useful,” she says.

Although Saltz has been in India only a little more than a year, she has observed much about Indian culture and takes regular Hindi lessons. She notes how religious life and professional life coexist without conflict in individuals. She has also observed the obsessive attention to hierarchy and titles in India. For instance, she was unable to enter the lawyers’ bathroom in the Delhi High Court with the female lawyers representing Ford, because foreign lawyers and in-house counsel in India cannot be members of the bar and thus do not qualify to use the lawyers’ rest- room. Ford is a fairly flat organization and does not create a plethora of titles and distinctions,
as many companies do in India. However, Saltz tries to respect the levels that are so important to Indians. She is frustrated by the bureaucracy that has built up over time. “It’s like grinding water. There is no purpose or efficiency to it,” she says. She is working on simplifying processes and procedures that are unique to Ford India and conforming them to existing global practices.

For the love of language

When a dealership opens, an executive attends the ceremonial ribbon cutting. Saltz, ever adventurous, has requested dealerships at the more remote locations. She recently helped open a new dealership in Mizoram, which is in the extreme northeast of India, one of seven small states linked to the rest of India by not much more than a road. Mizoram is mountainous and borders Bangladesh and Myanmar. The population is predominantly Mizo (a tribe), overwhelmingly Christian, and the food is mostly boiled. “It was like being in a completely different country,” she says.

In addition to relishing the opportunities to travel around the country and experience the endless variety India offers, she is finding much to explore among her coworkers. “The people I work with are outgoing, friendly, and helpful. They are happy to answer my questions about Indian life, culture, and the many holidays celebrated there. I, in turn, share my traditions. I brought Halloween candy and decorations from the United States and made a Passover treat. I emailed explanations to the entire floor,” she says. She is also fascinated by the ways in which Indians use English, a language they

speak flu- ently. She notes charming phrases like “please do the needful” and useful words like “parawise” for “paragraph by paragraph.” She coaches her team on effective communication in a global setting and on WebEx, reminding them to speak slowly and avoid repetition. Some of this is culturally ingrained — a highway sign reads “Only exit, No entry.” In many ways, Saltz has returned to her roots. After all, a love of languages has been a motivating influence in her career choices.

Getting to Know Dr. Daniella Saltz…

WHAT IS A LAW SCHOOL LESSON THAT YOU STILL USE TODAY?

Not to write in mystery style, where you ask a question, then build up an argument to reach a conclusion. Instead, you have to give away the ending by answering the question up front, then discussing how you got there (which the reader can skip if not interested).

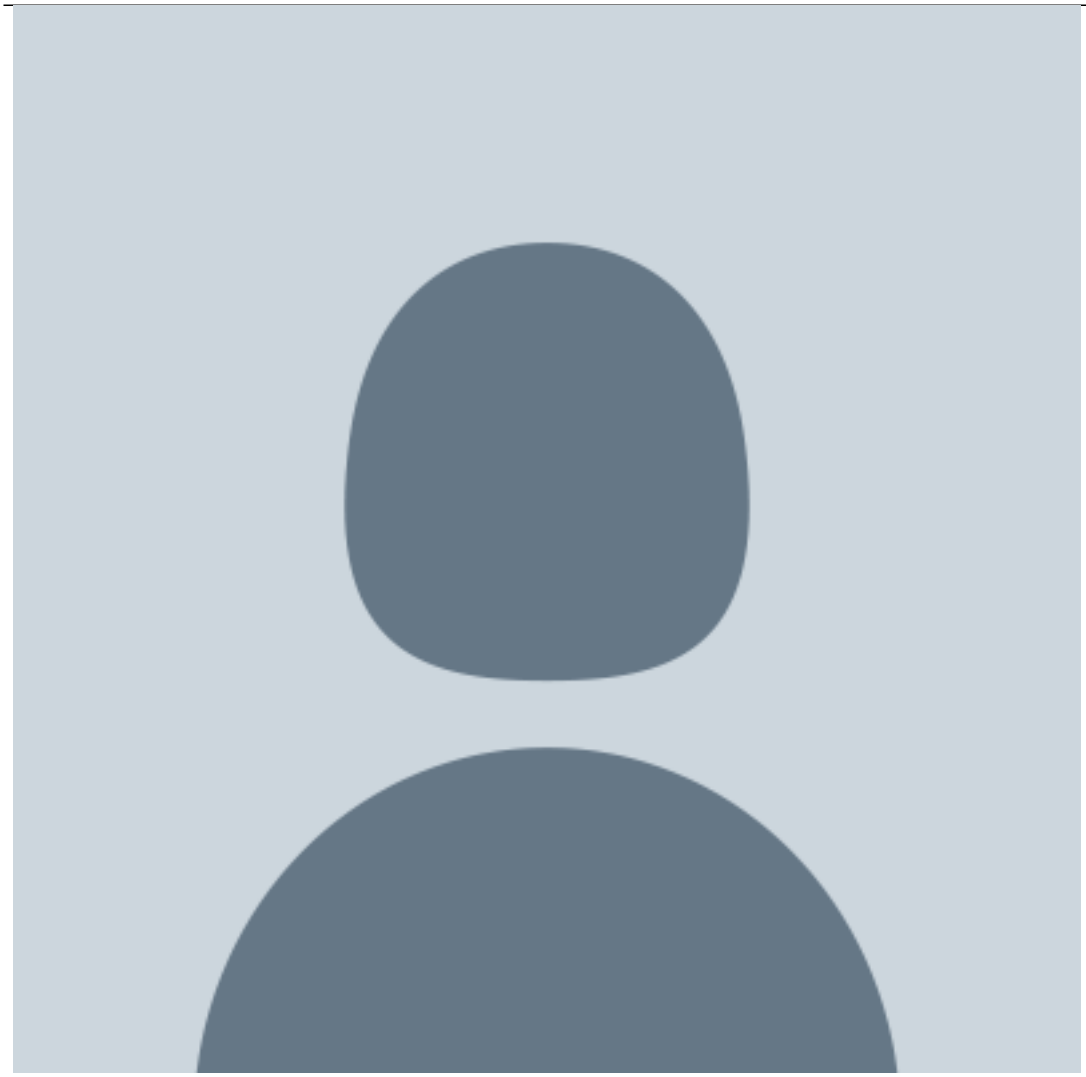
WHAT ARE YOUR RETIREMENT PLANS?

Sleep. Travel. There is so much in the world to see. Be in Michigan in the summer. There’s nothing like a Michigan summer. Spend time in California, where my grandchildren live. Maybe some freelance editing.

WHAT ARE YOUR PROUDEST PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS?

My proudest personal achievement is my kids. Professionally, guiding Ford through the Visteon bankruptcy was a highlight. Also, tackling the challenges of this assignment in India.

Laurie Adamson



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