

From the desk of Rabbi Nancy Wechsler

Suspension of the Kotel Agreement: *They changed their mind?*



I love visiting the Kotel. The holiness of the ancient stones and the mindful placement of my deepest prayers into a tiny crevice are some of the most sacred memories I have. I would wait what seemed like hours in the hot sun for a spot next to the wall in the women's section where girls and women, place a hand on cool stone in prayer and spiritually connect through Jerusalem to G-d and Israel.

After a while I learned to arrive just after dawn to have more time and fewer people to navigate. Images of early mornings at the Kotel; just me, my siddur and open heart continue to nourish me to this day.

It was always louder on the men's side. I was aware that the men's section had Torah services, and Bar Mitzvah celebrations. There was an obvious size differential as the men's side nearly doubles that of the women's side. I had been rebuked by Kotel officers that I must not wear my tallit as a tallit, but only wrapped like a scarf. I prayed with the Women of the Wall on Rosh Chodesh and heard the hisses and curses of ultra-orthodox men on the other side rising like a dark cloud. It was frightening.

I made my peace in those years, but I prayed that one day, there would be an egalitarian section where women and men could pray together and women would be legally permitted to chant from the Torah and wear a tallit proudly.

Over the years, the Reform and Conservative movements, led by the Women of the Wall, have insisted on their place at the Kotel. In the end, they acquiesced to the government-brokered compromise that granted them access to a part of the Wall south of the plaza, while leaving the main area under the authority of the Orthodox rabbinate.

It was a noble compromise but at least the ultra-Orthodox seemed to accept an organized non-Orthodox presence for the sake of Jewish unity. But then this week, the ultra-Orthodox parties revolted and the government withdrew its own compromise.

Now, in the fiftieth year of the liberation of the Wall, the government of Israel has told a majority of Diaspora Jewry that it has no organized place in Israel's most resonant public space.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union of Reform Judaism wrote: "Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to say 'no' to his previous 'yes' is an unconscionable insult to the majority of world Jewry. We are assessing all next steps. The Israeli Supreme Court will rule, but even in waiting for the court we will not be still or silent. The stranglehold that the Chief Rabbinate and the ultra-Orthodox parties have on Israel and the enfranchisement of most of, many of Jews in Israel and the world must – and will – be ended."

Israel needs a third section of the Wall because the purpose of that sacred place is to serve as the homeland of the Jewish people, a place where all Jews can feel authentic at home. We need a third section at the Kotel so that egalitarian committed Jews, religious, traditional and secular alike, can celebrate as they see fit.

Suspending the Kotel agreement is an affront to the dreams and aspirations of Israel. It is an affront to Israel's commitment to being a Jewish democracy. One way that we can support the Jerusalem where all of us can be visible is through supporting the courageous work of the Israel Religious Action Center. www.irac.org.

Yours,

Rabbi Nancy Wechsler