

The Fire of Torah

Rabbi Kalman Topp



Flaring tensions have engulfed the sacred Kotel in Jerusalem.

A battle over control of our holiest site has been raging in recent months. A group of women known as Women of

the Wall (WoW), and their supporters, have demanded that they be granted the right to publicly read from the Torah and pray freely at the Kotel with tallit and tefillin, if they wish. The Chareidi Orthodox have responded strongly against these deviations from traditional Orthodox custom. Women attempting to don the tallit at their monthly Rosh Chodesh services have even been arrested for disturbing the peace.

The escalating situation led PM Netanyahu to appoint Natan Sharansky, Chairman of the Jewish Agency, (and Beth Jacob Scholar in Residence on June 1) to negotiate a solution to the crisis. In mid-April, after much deliberation, Sharansky proposed a compromise which would permit egalitarian prayer in an expanded renovated plaza adjoining Robinson's Arch off the southwestern portion of the Kotel. While Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovich, the Western Wall Rabbi, and leaders of the WoW initially agreed to the compromise, some leaders and Rabbis are calling (at the time of this writing) for the rejection of any compromise on the matter. The sanctity of the Kotel, some are saying, is non-negotiable. The full rights of every Jew to pray as they please, the others are saying, should not be hampered. It is my strong belief, however, that considering the current realities, we ought to embrace this compromise. Here is my reason why:

God speaks to Moshe at the burning bush and to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, from "within a fire." (Shmot 3:2 and Shmot 19:18) Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik^{z"l}, explained that fire usually has three

characteristics: It provides warmth, it gives off light and it consumes that which is in its path. At the burning bush and Har Sinai, however, only two characteristics were present: warmth and light. The fire did not consume the bush or the grassy Sinai mountaintop.

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This unique fire teaches us that the word of God we follow should never be like a fire which consumes. The fire of Torah, the gift for which we celebrate on Shavuot, should never be one that negates. Those



who observe Judaism should never be snared in the trap of smug self righteousness which leads to a disregard for the dignity of fellow human beings. Rather, the fire of Torah should be one of warmth, light, love and concern for others. To be sure, Jewish law, or Halacha, is a system of rules that are non-negotiable. But the driving force of Halacha, and one non-negotiable rule is "v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho"—to love your neighbor as yourself. *Kol Yisrael*

areivim zeh lazeh—we are all guarantors for one another, is the foundational principle that animates our Beth Jacob community. Personal religious observance has to always be understood in the context of others, in the context of Am Yisrael.

We all have strong feelings about the Kotel and our relationship with it. But the Divine fire that did not consume reminds us that negating the feelings of a significant number of Jews is not an option. This goes both ways. The WoW and their supporters need to recognize the strong desire of many other (mostly Orthodox) Jews to preserve the traditional customs at the Kotel. Chareidi leaders, for their part, need to recognize the strong desire of many other (mostly non-Orthodox) Jews to feel included in Am Yisrael by having a share of the Western Wall. The compromise proposed by Mr. Sharansky insures that no Jew is negated, by taking into account considerations of both parties.

This crisis must be solved. American Jewish support for Israel is eroding further because of a perception that there is a lack of equality in Israel. Fundamentally speaking, we need a solution because ultimately the greatest sanctity derives from unity. The other Temple walls were destroyed, the Sages tell us, because of *sinat chinam* and a lack of unity. The compromise on the table appears to strike the best balance between preserving the traditional norm and accommodating the interests of all those in Am Yisrael. We

need to support the compromise to remove the untenable division from the Kotel and for the sake of *achdut* (unity). After all, the driving fiery force of Torah is not intended to divide but rather has as its goal to warmly bring people closer together in a spirit of a shared vision. May Hashem answer all of our prayers for a more united and stronger future. **BJ**

With blessings for a joyous Chag Shavuot,
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