

Women of the Wall – Reflecting on 30 Years
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March 8, 2019

A memory stands out in my mind from five years ago. I assume everyone knows what this is? It is a Torah mantle, the protective and decorative covering for our sacred Torah scroll. But just holding it like this, it looks like something is missing. It feels empty. Can you imagine how you would feel if we opened the ark and took out only the Torah mantle? Can you imagine a service with just a Torah mantle and no Torah? Can you imagine me not being able to chant from the Torah? Can you imagine a girl, like Ellie, not allowed to be called to the Torah tomorrow as a *bat mitzvah*?

Five years ago, on Rosh Chodesh, the new month of Kislev, a sea of women and girls held up empty Torah mantles like this high in the air at the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem. They were demonstrating that women, like men, should be permitted to read from the Torah on the women's side of the wall. Nearly one thousand people gathered there to celebrate the 25 year struggle of the group, Women of the Wall. Hundreds of women filled the women's section and men lined up in the plaza area behind them in support.

This weekend marks the 30th anniversary Women of the Wall, in Hebrew, *Neshot HaKotel*, and their struggles to advocate for religious pluralism and freedom at the Kotel, the only remaining supporting wall of the ancient Temple, and considered one of the holiest sites of our people. This anniversary coincides with Rosh Chodesh Adar, and with International Women's Day.

Thousands of women and male supporters gathered this morning at the Kotel to pray and welcome in the new Hebrew month. Since Israel is seven hours ahead, I woke up this morning to disheartening reports about large protests from ultra-Orthodox Jews at the wall, and reports of members of women of the wall being pushed, scratched, spit on, yelled at, and threatened. The group moved to the new egalitarian section adjacent to the Kotel for the reading of Torah.

Just a few weeks ago, eighty members of our temple met with Anat Hoffman, the Executive Director of the Israel Religious Action Center and the Chairwoman of Women of the Wall, at our hotel in Jerusalem. She was a whirlwind of passion and fury, imploring us to support the cause and encouraging us to add our voices from America to the struggle for Jewish religious freedom in Israel. For me, this story and struggle is palpable and personal.

If you are newer to this story, and perhaps surprised to hear that women and men do not have the same rights at the Western Wall, I understand. I, too, was shocked, the first time I decided to pray with Women of the Wall back in 1994. I had grown up with a more idyllic image of this holy site and the holy land. I had no idea that the men's side of the *mechitza* (divider) is double the size of the women's. I did not know that this group existed or that they had been bringing cases to the Supreme Court for years. The

experience praying with these women was so life changing, that I decided to join the group whenever I could in Israel.

Women of Wall began on an early morning in 1988, when a group of women gathered at the historic Kotel to pray aloud together, an act prohibited by the religious authority of the Orthodox rabbinate. Over the years, the women's prayer group has met monthly to celebrate Rosh Chodesh, the first day of the Hebrew month. At this holy place, women from all Jewish denominations have been met with insults, curses, stones and chairs thrown at them, tear gas, and personal injury. Women have been arrested, detained and interrogated by police, for wearing a *tallit*, a prayer shawl, for bringing a Torah to the women's side of the *mechitza*, and for praying out loud.

This all goes back to how religion was defined at the founding of the State of Israel back in 1948. And how the political parties form a coalition in the government, which is relevant to the upcoming elections. Our group of recent travellers to Israel learned how the development of religious life in Israel is still very much a work in progress. Education is taking place about how there is more than one way to be Jewish. And in this way, Reform and Conservative Jews abroad have a lot to add to the conversation.

During the time I have joined Women of the Wall in prayer at the Kotel, I have felt the power of my voice, and the strength and solidarity of this extremely dedicated, diverse group of women. If you look closely, you can spot me in the documentary movie that was made about Women of the Wall, called "Praying in Her Voice." The experience of being part of this historic group is deeply engraved in my memory. The group meets in the very early hours of the morning. We made our way to the Kotel, going through security. As protestors would shout and yell at us, we would move closer together into a tight circle, protecting each other and blending our voices into one. I have always been moved by the group's perseverance and kindness toward one another.

Over the years, this international group of women has grown and made strides to gain legal rights to pray out loud as a group, to wear ritual garb such as *tallit* and *tefillin*, and to read from the Torah scroll at the Western Wall.

Anat Hoffman has said, "Our souls yearn to pray, in peace, in the sacred place, to read from our holy Torah, together with other Jewish women... Simply put, our goal is to obtain the freedom to pray on the women's side of the *mechitza* (divider). At a minimum, we want to be allowed to pray at the Wall for one hour each month, free of injury and fear. This should not be a provocative request. That some are provoked does not make us provocative. We have been waking up early to pray every Rosh Chodesh, once a month – this is no fad, no political act. It is done for the sake of prayer... We are pushing the envelope. History is made of moments like this."

Each month history continues to be made. More supporters are joining. Our Temple Beth David group enjoyed a beautiful moment at the new egalitarian section when we wrapped our recent and upcoming B'nai Mitzvah students in a tallit and blessed

them. It is a good compromise introduced by Natan Sharansky, Chairperson of the Jewish Agency, and supported by Women of the Wall and the Israel Religious Action Center. You can go to womenofthewall.org to learn more and become a supporter. You can also write to New England's Consul General of Israel to make your voice heard.

This matters because the Kotel belongs to the entire Jewish people, not just a select group. For many Jews, it is a symbol of the Jewish people. And the Jewish people are diverse, reflecting multiple voices and means of expression. In the words of Union for Reform Judaism President Rabbi Rick Jacobs today, "We pray for the healing of all those who were injured today and pray that the stain of this hate filled day will speedily and soon be replaced with the loving embrace of our Jewish diversity."

May this prayer come to be. This Shabbat we will complete the second book of the Torah, the book of Exodus. The Israelites finish the building of the *mishkan*, the portable tabernacle in the wilderness, and God's Presence fills the holy space – "*uchvod Adonai malei et ha'miskan.*" (Exodus 40:35)

We are all still shaping our *mishkan* today. May all voices be heard and respected at all the holy sites of our people. May we hold our Torah high for all to see, touch, and hear. Only then will God's Presence dwell within.