

Shabbat VAYIKRa and Women of the Wall's 30th Anniversary Celebration

Let's start with a little show & tell. In this lovely green bag, from top to bottom are 4 items: Rick's tallit in a protective plastic cover, my tallit in a stylish zip-loc bag, a siddur published by Women of the Wall, and a bulky blue velvet Torah cover (substituting for it is a towel). My second show & tell is this smart phone.

Last Friday, Rick and I were in Jerusalem. It was *Rosh Chodesh Adar Bet*, the first day of the 13th month of the Hebrew calendar. As has been customary for the past 30 years, Women of the Wall, known by its acronym WOW, gathered at the Kotel, the Western Wall, for its monthly service. It was by chance that Rick and I were in Jerusalem for this anniversary celebration, taking a few days of vacation following the Temple Sinai Israel Adventure (for which it now is too late to sign up, but there'll be another tour!). I was excited to celebrate WOW's milestone and signed up for its "Let Me Hear Your Voice" conference marking 30 years of activism. For those not familiar with WOW, it's a group of Jewish women from Israel and from around the world who strive to achieve the right to wear *tallitot*, pray collectively, and read from a *sefer Torah* out loud at the Western Wall. WOW is comprised of women from all streams of Judaism – Orthodox,

Reform, Conservative, Masorti, Renewal and Reconstructionist. Among its supporters are thousands of men, as well.

Back to last Friday. Rick and I walked from our hotel to the Old City. As we neared Jaffa Gate, we saw hundreds of Ultra-Orthodox students pouring into the Old City, walking quickly and with determination toward the same destination as we. This didn't bode well. We still had half an hour until the service began, but with the surge of people I feared we'd never get through security on time. There was a lot of publicity about WOW's 30th anniversary, which coincided with International Women's Day. Consequently, hardline national-religious organizations and Haredi rabbis had called on women and school girls to fill the women's section at the Kotel and for men and yeshiva students to flood the Kotel Plaza and men's section in protest.

After walking through the Old City to the Jewish Quarter, Rick and I waited for about 20 minutes at security. Knowing that the screening is especially tight on *Rosh Chodesh* and that the guards are tasked with confiscating WOW's paraphernalia like prayer books, *tallitot* and, if they should be so lucky to have one, a Torah scroll, I handed this green bag to Rick well before we got in line. When it was our turn, I placed my phone on the table, walked through the metal detector successfully, then was pulled

aside and patted down. Rick and the green bag sailed through effortlessly. Why was I tagged? Because I didn't fit the Haredi profile. Wearing pants and knee-high boots, I obviously was one of those Women of the Wall and automatically was suspect of smuggling in "contraband."

The sea of humanity in the Kotel Plaza was difficult to penetrate. Taking the bag from Rick, I maneuvered to the area usually barricaded for Women of the Wall. But there was no barricade. I had no idea where any of the WOW women were, which was problematic since I was invited to lead *Ashrei* near the beginning of the service. Eventually, I spotted a WOW board member who was as lost as I. Thank goodness for text messaging. She communicated with someone else, and together we elbowed our way to where the group was gathered. Barely able to put on my *tallit* because I couldn't lift my arms, I climbed atop a shaky plastic riser as one of the service leaders threw a whisper microphone around my neck so the WOW staff strategically placed could echo my chanting to those on the periphery. With enormous pride at having the honor to lead part of the service at this sacred site on this historic occasion, I belted out *Ashrei* as loud as I could. My voice was drowned by the shouting and shrieking and howling of thousands of protesters. As I stepped down from the riser, I was swept up into the suffocating crowd.

Many of you have read about what happened that morning. Many of you have seen photos or watched the videos until becoming nauseous from the unsteady footage. The service continued through the sheer determination of the women leading it. Despite being knocked off the risers and having their *tallitot* pulled and their *t'fillin* yanked off, these women plowed through the liturgy like warriors.

The protesters' harassment was insufferable. Near me, an older woman buffeted by the young students kept losing her balance. I put my arm behind her, trying to protect her, but it was no use. Two other women sitting on plastic chairs were thrown to the ground as the crowd surged. What kept running through my mind was a phrase from the holiness code, Leviticus 19:32: *mi'p'nei seivah takum*, be respectful of the elderly. Obviously these Haredi students, deeply passionate about their cause, had missed that day in class. As they surrounded us and squeezed us from all sides, it was difficult to breathe. There was nowhere to move. There was no way to escape even if one wanted to. It was oppressive. I knew that if one of us fell over from the excessive pushing, all of us would go down.

Recognizing that this 30th anniversary celebration would provoke controversy, Women of the Wall had requested permission to hold their service in a barricaded area of the women's section. They had asked for

extra police protection. Both requests were denied. Despite placards in the Kotel Plaza with the message *na lishmor ahl k'dushat hamakom*, “please respect the holiness of the site” and frequent announcements over a PA system stating “that the Western Wall plaza is not a...demonstration area,” the violence and rage persisted. After an hour, the police ordered WOW to move to the egalitarian platform near Robinson’s Arch. Why? Our service had created a public disturbance. Suddenly the police appeared and, with great effort because they weren’t given room by the protestors, escorted us, a few at a time, out of the women’s section.

Women of the Wall’s 30th anniversary celebration included an awards ceremony on Thursday evening. Among those honored were 3 of the Israeli paratroopers who liberated the Old City and other parts of Jerusalem in 1967. Micah Eshet, one of the paratroopers, remarked: “We won over the Jordanian Army, but we didn’t liberate the Kotel. The Kotel is still in captivity, held by the extreme-right Orthodox under the protection of [Israel’s] Chief Rabbinate and government.”

This Shabbat, we read from the beginning of the 3rd Book of the Torah. Both the Book and the *parashah* are called Vayikra, meaning “God called.” What’s unique about the word Vayikra is how here it’s written with a small *aleph*. Although it stands at the head of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*

is a silent letter; it makes no sound. Because of its silence and its diminutive size in this text, it draws our attention. It compels us to offer an explanation. Like this letter, Women of the Wall sometimes feels diminished by the treatment they receive from the government of Israel, from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and from the Rabbi of the Western Wall. Theirs is an uphill battle against the Haredi and Ultra-Orthodox who view themselves as the stalwart keepers of the Jewish faith. Some detractors say WOW should just give up. Their cause won't progress until extremist right wingers in the Knesset lose their seats of power. Besides which, the Kotel is just a wall, despite its iconic status as Judaism's most sacred site, the principal symbol of Jewish peoplehood and sovereignty. Truly, if WOW wants equal access to a wall, the Southern Wall of the Temple Mount is even more significant than the Western Wall. In ancient times more Jews went up to the Temple Mount via the Southern Wall than the Western Wall.

For Women of the Wall, the issue is fairness and equal rights. The sacredness of each person is a basic tenet of Judaism. Moreover, innovation and adaptation of religious practice have enabled us to survive 2000 years of Diaspora existence. The despicable behavior demonstrated last Friday morning by the fanatical students and their supporters is an embarrassment to the Jewish people and a stain on Israel as a democratic

nation. Providing safe and respectable prayer spaces for all Jews, of all denominations, should be a priority for leaders of the Jewish state.

Earlier this week, The Jerusalem Post ran an article about Soraya Deen, a Muslim activist from California who participated in WOW's anniversary celebrations. Like everyone else, she was caught up in the altercations on Friday. Why was Deen even there? She wants to change how women are treated within Islam. She wants women to be able to speak in holy places and lead prayer. She is inspired by WOW and, in her words, "looks up to my Jewish reformist community to lead me in a lot of activism....No matter where we live," she continues, "women's struggles are the same, and some of these struggles are deeply entrenched in religious dogma."

It's not surprising that Deen is inspired by WOW. WOW's heroic efforts these 30 years are exemplary. Their tenacity is admirable. Despite being heckled and shouted at and spit upon, despite being shoved and pushed and often arrested, these women make their voice and their cause heard.

We've addressed how the small *aleph* at the end of the word Vayikra captures our attention because it's different. It's also important to note that *aleph* is the first letter of the first word of the 10 Commandments. It

introduces the word *anokhi*, I. Women of the Wall may be a relatively small movement, but it is comprised of strong individuals who boldly and proudly say: “I count! I have a voice! I have a connection to God and to Torah and to Israel and to the Jewish people. I have the right to pray as is my custom, and I will not be silenced prejudice or diminished by bullying.

I was proud to stand with Women of the Wall last week, and I was appreciative of Rick who was there not just to schlep the bag, but to stand in support of me and all Jewish women who know that it is our right to wear *tallitot*, to pray out loud, and read from a Torah scroll collectively in public. As Reform Jews who appreciate and celebrate non-fundamentalist expressions of Judaism, I hope you’ll express your support for Women of the Wall and for religious pluralism in Israel. In your service handout is WOW’s contact information, as well as the contact information for the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism. Write to them. Let them know you care. Tell them that you support their efforts and advocate their cause. The *aleph* in Vayikra may be silent, but you have a voice. Vayikra! Call out! The struggle for religious equality in Israel is too important a cause for us to lay low and keep silent.