

'The only way in an egalitarian space for an Orthodox woman to pray is in a box'

Activist women say new plan 'banishes' them from Western Wall

In the face of her 'sisters' disappointment, head of Women of the Wall Anat Hoffman explains why the Diaspora passion for equal rights they brought from America is not taking root here

BY AMANDA BORSCHEL-DAN | February 4, 2016, 4:40 pm |

Undeterred by the early hour and brisk Jerusalem weather, a small group of pissed-off women met at the Western Wall on Wednesday morning for a prayer protest.

As is customary, the group of 20 or so stood together in the women's section of the Western Wall, among other women's solitary whispered prayers, and together prayed the traditional morning service, complete with phylacteries and prayer shawls.

And although they were just one of many prayer quorums in the minyan market that is the Western Wall, being female, their presence did not go unnoticed.

A pair of heckling ultra-Orthodox teens climbed up the adjacent Mughrabi Bridge and attempted to sing and shout over the women's prayers. They desisted only when they got close to the rampart's top, where it is forbidden for Jews to pray or sing: The bridge leads to another, even more contested religious hotspot, the Dome of the Rock, known to Jews as the historical Temple Mount.

However, despite that minor disturbance, the service was later called "peaceful" and "beautiful" by those in attendance. These women, who call themselves the Original Women of the Wall, have been subjected to much worse — physical violence, arrest, thrown feces — in the 27 years they've been raising awareness for gender equality at the Western Wall.

So one may think that these women, who are part of a group that calls itself Original Women of the Wall, would be pleased with the much-lauded compromise announced after a cabinet meeting on

Sunday, which was brokered by Jewish Agency head Natan Sharansky and former cabinet secretary Avichai Mandelblit. The agreement was also signed by the Reform and Conservative movements, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which is responsible for archaeological concerns, and the feminist prayer group called Women of the Wall.

The proposal hugely amplifies the mixed-gender prayer section at Robinson's Arch and cements access to the Western Wall for women's prayer groups. It calls for a joint entrance for all sections of prayer, further driving home the idea of parity while raising awareness for a pluralistic choice.

Additionally, the Mandelblit plan decriminalizes women's prayer at the Western Wall, including at the women's section even after the completion of the separate pluralist pavilion. Noncompliance with "local custom" at the Western Wall, which frowns upon women's prayer groups, was previously punishable by up to six months in prison or a fine of NIS 500.

The cabinet decision was joyously praised all over international media by non-Orthodox Diaspora leadership this week as a victory long in coming. The hashtag #WesternWall trended on Twitter as the world tuned in to what seemed like, for a change, a "positive" story coming out of the Holy Land.

However, the planned mixed-gender prayer pavilion also drew widespread criticism — predictably from the ultra-Orthodox community, from concerned archaeologists, and from the [Palestinian Authority](#), which sees any building near the Dome of the Rock as an alteration to the status quo and potential incitement to violence. (Just hours after the women's prayer service, Wednesday saw [another in a series of lethal terrorist attacks](#) in the Old City.)

The most vehement objectors to the passage of the separate-but-equal-style pluralistic pavilion compromise are the women praying in protest at the Western Wall this week, a splinter group from the Anat Hoffman-led Women of the Wall. They and their international supporters don't see the government decision as a solution for them.

Publicly decrying the decision, some of these feminist activists even say they were "thrown under the bus" by the liberal Jewish movements, who co-opted their struggle for their own pursuit of prayer parity. Their pain and sense of betrayal is palpable.

"This is not what I was spit on for, or had chairs thrown at me for, or eggs thrown on me for. Anat Hoffman is only a politician, and this time she is very wrong," wrote one male Original Women of the Wall supporter on the group's growing Facebook page.

Another OWOW commenter, Rabbi Vanessa Ochs, wrote of the deal's "serious consequence — collateral damage, so to speak. Women who now have the right to pray as a group at the Kotel [Western Wall] — the real one — will be BANNED."

For signing onto the long-negotiated compromise, Women of the Wall head Hoffman was both

praised and pilloried this week on social media and in the press. But for the critical OWOW activists, even Hoffman's loyalty to the cause is questioned because she is an employee of the Reform Movement as the leader of its legal action wing, the [Israel Religious Action Center](#).

Says Hoffman: Women are being offered 'a whole new bus, and the driver's seat, and a tank full of gas'

Hoffman told The Times of Israel this week that the disappointment of the feminist observant Jews she views as her "sisters" is hardest to hear among the criticism of the plan.

"I want to recognize on the emotional plane that these women are sincere in their sadness and outrage, I can understand that," Hoffman said in a preface to her remarks. "They had, and we shared for a long time, a vision of equal rights for women in the women's section in the northern plaza. We wanted to sit in the front of the bus, not in the back."

But in the compromise, which Hoffman unreservedly calls a "victory," she said, women are being offered "a whole new bus, and the driver's seat, and a tank full of gas."

She said she came to the realization that, having worked on the issue for more than 25 years and seeing an increasingly extremist religious atmosphere in Israel, that the time was ripe for a compromise after a trip to the Galapagos Islands where she walked in the footsteps of Charles Darwin.

"It is not the wise who survive, not the strong survive, not the beautiful, but the one who adapts survives," said Hoffman.

The Israel-born Hoffman described standing with a crowd of mainly American women in December 1988, the first feminist prayer group to bring a Torah scroll to the Western Wall, saying she was "privileged to be there" and thankful for the women who brought their "Dia-spore to Israel" — their "seeds" of equal rights.

"But once the Dia-spore is brought into Israel — where there is a different rain, different enemies — it has to adapt or it will not survive," said Hoffman. Over 27 years, she said, WOW "tried every way from Sunday" to fulfill the goal of full equality in the women's section. Today, she said, "we think the best way is to share, to make the pie bigger instead of smaller."

But is this plan, which is [spelled out in detail](#) on the WOW website, really going to enlarge the proverbial pie?

Prof. Aviad Hacoen, the dean of the [Academic Center of Law and Science](#) and an expert on religious and state law, said in a statement after Sunday's cabinet decision that "separate but equal is not equal," calling it a "clear victory" for the Orthodox stance of gender separation.

‘Separate but equal is not equal’

“The significance of the liberal Jewish movements being given a separate plaza will undoubtedly will be negligible in comparison to the main prayer pavilion. In exiling these groups to a separate prayer area, there is no state recognition for the right of the non-Orthodox movements.

On the contrary, it makes fact that women’s prayer and Torah reading is not part of the Jewish halacha, and that’s a painful blow to their entire perception of the world,” said the lawyer, who regularly takes cases relating to religion and state to the Supreme Court.

Hacohen said the decision reflects thinking from 20 years ago, and the only new spin is that the rules of Orthodox prayer “in its most conservative definition” are now binding at the main Western Wall plaza.

For Hacohen, another “slap in the face of all women who demanded full equality” is that the budget for the new egalitarian southern pavilion will not be given through the Religious Affairs Ministry. The situation is reminiscent of the case of Reform rabbis, such as Kibbutz Gezer’s [Rabbi Miri Gold](#), who are regional heads of communities but whose salaries, unlike those of Orthodox rabbis in parallel positions, are symbolically not paid through the ministry but rather through a convoluted workaround.

‘The new proposal eternalizes the discrimination and makes it permanent in a government decision’

“The courts decided years ago that separate but equal is not equal. The new proposal eternalizes the discrimination and makes it permanent in a government decision,” Hacohen said.

For Hoffman, however, this is a moot point. “The Haredization of the Western Wall is becoming complete as we speak. The extremists are taking over the world, and yes, this agreement will make the rabbi of the Wall in charge, and he will have a heavier hand now on modesty issues, and others,” said Hoffman. “In his extremist behavior, he will chase Jews from there to our section.”

But for many longtime activists, only the Women of the Wall and liberal Jewish movements are being chased out of the Western Wall plaza.

Cheryl Birkner Mack, a former WOW board member and founder of the splinter group OWOW, told The Times of Israel shortly after praying at the Western Wall on Wednesday that while she’s glad about the egalitarian plaza, “I think there must have been another way to gain recognition and rights than to trample on women’s rights that have already been recognized by the state.”

The fight for further recognition is ongoing, she said, with several cases pending in the Supreme Court.

For example, Birkner Mack, who self-identifies as a Masorti Jew (which North Americans call Conservative), is one of the plaintiffs in an ongoing Supreme Court case against the State of Israel for discrimination. Represented by lawyer Susan Weiss and the [Center for Women's Justice](#), the women petitioned the Supreme Court to prevent discrimination at the Western Wall, as the women were not allowed access to the public Torah scrolls available in the men's section, and to void "the directive regarding [the ban on] bringing in Torah scrolls to the Kotel."

Birkner Mack rejected the notion this week that the government decision reflects a compromise position for all sides.

According to [an interview with JNS.org](#), the ultra-Orthodox rabbi of the Western Wall, Shmuel Rabinovich, called the government's plan a desecration of God's name and that while this plan was better than others that were discussed, he said he did not consider himself a partner in the negotiations.

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"I don't see that the Haredim [ultra-Orthodox] have compromised: they are thrilled. 'We won't have to see these women, we won't have to hear these women,'" said Birkner Mack.

Women of the Wall and the splinter group are proudly "multi-denominational." But, said Birkner Mack, "When you move to an egalitarian area there will be no room for the Orthodox women," who do not wish to pray in mixed company.

"The only way in an egalitarian space for an Orthodox woman to pray is in a box," said Birkner Mack.

"Anybody who wants to go to Robinson's Arch should go. The truth is you can go to Robinson's Arch today, just as you can pray in the Central Bus Station, and I'll even support your right to do that. But don't give up the rights women have established over 27 years, at the Kotel [Western Wall], in the women's section. Leave us alone, don't give up our rights for somebody else's rights," said Birkner Mack.

Such criticism of the deal is gaining steam across the Diaspora.

Feminist scholar Phyllis Chesler wrote of the compromise in an [op-ed in Tablet](#), "This is a travesty, a trick, a joke, an Orwellian use of language employed to persuade perfectly good Jews that a defeat is really a victory; that being banished is a form of acknowledgement; that capitulation to fundamentalism is actually a triumph over it; that allowing misogynists to turn the Kotel into a Haredi shul is a progressive accomplishment; that being allowed to fund this travesty with Diaspora money—the Haredim are on record as refusing to pay for it themselves — represents acceptance; in short, that selling one's birthright for a mess of pottage is tantamount to obtaining

that birthright.”

When questioned about some of this criticism on Wednesday, Women of the Wall leader Hoffman sighed, then took a deep breath.

“I will not attribute to the angry sisters any negative motivations. Their feelings are pure and real. But I would say to them, ‘Sisters, you are not reading the political and religious map of Israel,’” she said.

“Orthodox women are the bravest feminists I know,” added Hoffman. But, she said, “they need to form their own coalition to challenge Orthodoxy on what is *din Torah*,” or accepted religious practice.

“Our sisters, and I see them as sisters, opted out, because they said there is nothing to negotiate. But I said, when the prime minister offers to sit and negotiate, you go and negotiate... And if you say ‘I want to stay in my pristine ideology,’ then you are damning yourself to stay in a telephone booth,” said Hoffman.

Checking herself, Hoffman reiterated that these women are visionaries of a better world, and are to be admired.

“We certainly didn’t throw them under the bus,” she said. “I’m inviting them onto the bus, and to help us steer.”