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Western Wall Prayer Space Deal Is a Capitulation to Fundamentalists

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Whatever you call it, don't call it a "compromise." And no, it's not a "historical agreement" and certainly not "a victory" for Women of the Wall. The decision of the government on Sunday to approve a separate prayer area, south of the Western Wall plaza, for "progressive" services is a complete capitulation to the ultra-Orthodox establishment and acceptance of the fact that the most fanatical stream of modern Judaism continues to rule Israel, and the Jewish world's most revered sites, without having to see women performing their own prayers, with a sefer torah. That is the bottom line. The fundamentalists have won.

The fact that the government and the Jewish Agency have now promised to both allow and fund a secluded prayer-area for those who do not want to subject themselves to the fundamentalist hegemony is little more than a consolation prize. It is still subject to bureaucratic obstruction of the Shas-dominated Religious Affairs Ministry, as well as other obstacles.

No one is clear on who and how the new enclosure will be managed, and the ultra-Orthodox politicians will seek and find every opportunity to block it. The area was originally supposed to be an archaeological park - who knows what planning muddles are still down the road? The timetable of a year seems overly-optimistic. After long years of fighting for their right to pray at the Wall, according to all the laws of halakha, suffering crescendoes of whistles, water, nappies, ultra-Orthodox and police harassment and arrests, the women who valiantly arrived there at the start of every Hebrew month are now going to have to retreat. Their veteran leader, Anat Hoffman, tried to put a brave face on the deal, re-branding the Western Wall as "the northern kotel" but she knows that there is only one Kotel, the one she is now giving up on.

Some have called this a "historic" recognition of the State of Israel in the non-Orthodox, Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism, who will also pray in the new section, if and when it is finally in use. This is also ridiculous. Most Israeli leaders have always recognized the progressive streams, after all, they are the majority of American Jewry, only the recognition has had no relevance to Israeli public life. The ultra-Orthodox rabbinate continues to rule all matters of marital status in Israel, controls the conversion process and enjoys nearly all the public funding for religious institutes. That is not about to change. Even if Reform Jews get a small corner at the foot of the outer walls of Herod's Temple, that they can share with all the other non-orthodox Jews, their status within the Israeli establishment will not have improved.

The ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas, United Torah Judaism and the ultra-Orthodox rabbis made a grand show of voting against and protesting at the terrible spiritual travesty of giving the heretics a foothold in

the Holy of Holies but it is just for appearance's sake. They have already decided not to leave Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition over this. And why should they? They have given up nothing. But the state of Israel has.

The Jerusalem District Court ruled in April 2013 that Women of the Wall had every right to pray at the Wall as they wished, but it didn't change anything. The police refused to protect them and the government wouldn't enforce Israel's sovereignty. Forty-seven years after Israeli forces captured the Wall from the Jordanians, it has been surrendered. This is just a continuation of the cravenness of all Israeli governments, from right and left, in the face of ultra-Orthodox pressure, not history.

It is hard to blame the Women of the Wall, who fought a long and persistent battle, but it is impossible to ignore the fact that they have failed to motivate Israeli public opinion - and the truth is that they haven't really tried. Most of their lobbying efforts, beyond turning up at the Wall once a month, have been directed towards the Diaspora. Their social media campaign has largely been conducted in English and they never succeeded in bringing hundreds of Israeli women, and men, to join them. The ultra-Orthodox are the only ones who can mobilize thousands in Jerusalem; the outcome was clear from the outset.

Now Hoffman and her allies are talking of a "competition" between the two Kotel, and hoping that Israelis will flock to their new one. It is an optimistic vision, but unlikely to happen. The great majority of Israelis, on the rare occasion they come to the Wall, will look for the familiar Kotel, and that is the one which will continue to be dominated by triumphant fundamentalists.

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