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## Rabbis for Religious Freedom & Equality in Israel



“The State of Israel... will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience...”  
Israel's Declaration of Independence (May 1948)

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### Editorial

February 2, 2016

Dear Friends

Is this an historic moment? Only time will tell. I have often wished for the gift of prophecy, alas, it has never been granted.

We come to this crossroad in history: the expansion of the praying area of the Kotel and a sort of recognition of liberal Judaism, specifically the Reform and Conservative movements, in the eyes of the current Israeli government. Some would say for the first time. That, we would all agree, is a good thing.

The modern Orthodox have been left out of this step forward, and indeed there is a group within *Nashot HaKotel* who vow to fight on for the right to worship according to their custom at The Wall. *(In this article [\[click here\]](#), you'll see how*

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### The Kotel compromise agreement

#### RRFEI responds



RRFEI gives great credit to the Reform movement and Conservative movements, and the Women of the Wall for making the painful sacrifice of giving up their demands of being allowed to hold egalitarian prayer services and women's minyanim at the traditional Western Wall plaza. While a section of the Wall, which hitherto

*one synagogue in Israel has established a kind of egalitarian mehitza.*) Others protest that separating *Am Yisrael* destroys the unity of *Amcha*. Haaretz contends this is a solution aimed, in part, at the Diaspora, but also cites the support of the Conservative and Reform streams in Israel for the long awaited opportunity to pray in accordance with their own minhag at The Kotel.

In the 70s I took groups to Israel and we prayed together without disruption in the back courtyard at The Wall. In the 80s we were disrupted by the watchman, but continued praying. In the 90s and 2000s we were not only disrupted, but it became difficult and then impossible to continue praying as a group. I haven't tried since.

Why did we pray together near The Kotel? Our people had an innate sense that they had been here before, that they were praying as their families had prayed in a sacred location in which they had gathered, that somehow this experience connected them to *Amcha* joyously, as the Holocaust connected them mournfully. It was different than just being in Israel. Not land, but experience, Judaism as they knew it at home, a prayer life, connected them

functioned as an archaeological garden, and had never operated under the dictates of the Orthodox rabbinic establishment, has now been designated as a pluralistic prayer space, it must be underscored that this compromise stipulates that the main Western Wall prayer plaza will officially remain under ultra-Orthodox authority.

Most positive, from RRFEI's perspective is that the vast majority of world Jewry, the liberal streams, will, at long last, possess an official area in which to pray according to the customs and theology of the modern Jewish world.

However, RRFEI remains concerned that in recent months, Prime Minister Netanyahu has sent very mixed messages regarding the equal status of the non-Orthodox streams in Israel - one for external consumption, abroad, and one for domestic Israeli policy. When Netanyahu speaks with leaders of the Diaspora Jewish community, he voices his support for equality, while the persistent discrimination and denial of key religious freedoms and equality within Israel only continues to degrade. The Ministry of Education's recent, public freezing of funds designated in the State budget for Jewish renewal, intended for non-Orthodox and secular educational initiatives, serves as a clear reminder of this.

The Western Wall compromise, which requires no substantial concession on the part of the ultra-Orthodox, only further highlights the willingness of PM Netanyahu to trade away the core values of religious freedom and equality, in exchange for the religious parties' votes, necessary to keep him and his party in power. Therefore, we fear that the Western Wall agreement will simply be used as a smokescreen, aimed at convincing Diaspora Jewry that this represents the implementation of the PM's promise to ensure that every Jew will feel at home in Israel, while in truth it avoids addressing the real issues that impact the lives and dignities of so many Israeli and Diaspora Jews. So, as welcomed as the Kotel compromise is, it must not distract world Jewry from the need for dramatic changes in Israel in such critical arenas as freedom of marriage and divorce, Who is a Jew, and state-sanctioned, religiously-based gender discrimination."

## **A response to Kotel agreement skeptics**

**By Rabbi Stanley Davids, RRFEI Executive Committee**

1. This agreement IS a compromise. The Rabbanut has won full legal control over what the world normally considers to be the

directly to their people.  
Praying touched souls.

The politics has taken more than 25 years to work through. But the Jewish *neshama* will not be denied. We witness, all over Israel, an indigenous Judaism seeking recognition even as it wells up spontaneously among the people. Religious theory would contend that an indigenous religion will grow over decades within a nation, a "civil religion." Much has been published both about American and Israeli civil religion. But, perhaps not astonishingly, I believe we are witnessing the birth of a religious and Jewish, not socialist, civil religion in Israel. It's not just the Diaspora that has won, it's the entirety of the Jewish people.

I have said before in this space that I believe that we are fulfilling a sacred mission. I believe that. But the speed at which we arrive at our destination, and the breadth of the Judaism lived in Israel, these are yet to be determined.

Our work will be reflected in Jewish life for millennia. God bless all those whose work has brought us to this moment, and may we be invigorated and more determined in the

Western Wall and its plaza. In return, liberal forces have gained a promise and guarantee (for whatever that is worth) that within two years a large space next to that other side of the Western Wall will be fully open for pluralistic services with no control by or influence of the Rabbanut. The plaza will be available for national ceremonies which will permit women's voices and equality among the genders in such national events.



2. Those seeking the right of women to read Torah and wear Tallitot and Tefillin in the traditional area of the Western Wall have lost.
3. Those seeking to totally take the traditional area of the Western Wall out of the hands of the Rabbanut currently controlling them have lost.
4. The compromise does nothing to address the pursuit of marriage equality and true civil rights with an Israeli society.
5. But as with many compromises, there is much to celebrate here. Gilad Kariv struck a proper note indicating that we should celebrate for today and use the gains of this compromise, however limited, to re-energize our efforts to strengthen all of our liberal religious causes in Israel.
6. For whatever it is worth, this compromise points again to the importance of diaspora influence in the shaping of some aspects of decision-making in Israel. RRFEI should be able to pounce upon this fact in a drive to further strengthen its own significance within the North American community.

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## Resources

- [Western Wall compromise agreement](#)
- [Chief Rabbi Lau attacks Bennett over pluralism](#)
- [J-REC / AJC Mission to Israel](#)
- [Giyur K'halacha](#)
- [Acts of violence](#)
- [Kashrut regulations for hotels and event halls](#)

knowledge that this sacred mission expresses a *mahloket l'shem shamayim*, and we cannot be denied as long as we seek to connect *Amcha with Tsur Yisrael v'Goalo*.

Kol tuv,  
Mark

## Contact us

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Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel represents a broad spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, and champions the values of religious freedom and equality fundamental to World Jewry, in partnership with Hiddush for the realization of these principles in Israel and the Diaspora.

Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel

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