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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 8, 2016

Dear Friends

Since the beginning of the rabbinic era Jews have embraced the ideal of creative debate, makhloket l'shem shamayim (M. Avot 5:17), and contrasted it with the political notion of a conflict for self-aggrandizing and strictly political reasons, like Korach's rebellion against Moses (Numbers 16).

The Report of the Advisory Team for the Issue of Prayer Arrangements at the Western Wall [\[link\]](#) quotes the famous section in B. Yoma 9b regarding baseless hatred, sinat hinam, as the underlying cause for the destruction of the Second Temple. Clearly, the Jewish people again faces the choice between self-destructive political wrangling and tapping into the creative

WESTERN WALL AGREEMENT RESOURCES

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Rabbi Pamela Frydman regarding the Kotel Compromise

From the RRFEI Executive Committee Chair

The Kotel compromise is like manna. (Exodus 16:4) The sages say that manna tasted like whatever the Israelites felt like eating, but Rashi quotes Midrash Sifri to explain that manna could not taste like cucumber, melon, leek, garlic or onion, because those foods were not good for infants and nursing mothers refrained from them. The Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt to enjoy adults' flavors.



HaKotel HaMaaravi (the Western Wall) is the western side of the retaining wall built by the Romans in 20 B.C.E. to secure the Temple mount from mud slides. The entire expanse of the western wall is needed so everyone can pray in peace and dignity. The Kotel Compromise will allow Haredim and Orthodox Zionists to pray in separate men's and women's sections according to their custom. Egalitarians will pray in a new egalitarian section. Women of the Wall will pray once a month and on special occasions in a women's

forces that have advanced Judaism for millennia. Which path shall we choose?

In this week's Newsletter you will find opposing arguments l'shem shamayim to advance the complexities of the practical arrangements to advance religious pluralism and diversity in the State of Israel and, and hence, among Am Yisrael. One way or another, this historical moment demands thoughtful contemplation from knowledgeable religious leaders regarding adjusting and improving Israel's inclusion of the entirety of the Jewish people in the brit, at the very site in which that brit was maintained by prayer and sacrifice for over 1,000 years.

Clearly we confront many challenges. As the **Report** makes clear, the skeptics regarding implementation by Israel's Government are raising important practical issues. Rabbi Uri Regev, President of Hiddush, asks whether the Prime Minister will use this agreement to deflect diasporan arguments regarding marriage and official inclusion of all Jewish religious streams in Israeli life. Haaretz columnist Anshel Pfeffer sees the current "compromise" as

section surrounded by a portable mehitzta. That mehitzta will be in the egalitarian section because the egalitarians are the only ones willing to welcome Women of the Wall in their prayer section.

On the occasion of the Kotel compromise, I want to acknowledge all of our colleagues who negotiated the agreement. I want to also give a shout out to our colleagues in the Reform Movement who have stayed the course while being called every sinat-chinam-filled name in the book. I want to also give a shout out to our colleagues in the Conservative Movement who engaged in, and absorbed the costs of the pay-to-pray-and-by-appointment-only egalitarian arrangement at Robinson's Arch for over ten years. That arrangement only ended when Naftali Bennett used 80,000 sheqel from his budget to build a temporary platform that will now be torn down to make way for an egalitarian plaza. In addition, I want to give a shout out to Anat Hoffman and Batya Kallus for their courageous leadership in negotiating the compromise on behalf of Women of the Wall and the board and staff they represent. I also want to acknowledge the Conservative and Reform Movements for insisting on a truly egalitarian section that is not encroached upon by mehitzot. And last, but not least, I want to acknowledge Rabbi Rabinowitz, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Avichai Mandleblit, the supportive Cabinet Ministers and Natan Sharansky.

In our euphoria that the Conservative and Reform Movements are finally recognized in Israel -- albeit in one tiny way with much more still needed -- we need to also be careful to not abandon the Modern Orthodox and Open Orthodox who pray with separation of the sexes; where men say amen to a women's Kaddish; or where men lead maariv, shacharit, musaf and mincha while women lead other parts of the service, give divrei Torah, etc.; or where women hold their own women's minyanim. It is unfortunate that there is no overt plan in the Kotel compromise to address these needs, but that is not a reason to blame those who have successfully negotiated the historic compromise. We can both support the compromise and call for a solution to address these additional needs. One possible way to do so is to envision an additional men's section and an additional women's section with a mehitzta between them and a dignified entrance and accessibility 24/7.

We are not going to achieve our future goals by continuing to beat up on one another. We are going to achieve our goals by laying down our swords and turning them into plowshares at the negotiating table. Moshe Dayan z"l reminded us that we do not make peace with our friends; we make peace with our enemies. The gem of the Kotel compromise is the joint meetings at least five times a year between those who oversee the Orthodox/Haredi men's and

capitulation. RRFEI's own Rabbi Pam Frydman asks how to include other groups, the Modern and Open Orthodox, into the agreement.

Yet, I have not seen articles regarding what I consider the greatest challenge to this opportunity. Assuming that the new prayer area at the Western Wall is built, who will use it? If thousands of liberal Jews from all over the world flock weekly to pray in a new egalitarian Kotel, to experience what they were denied previously in the gender segregated sections; if rabbis bring congregations to lead fervent and heartfelt prayer, with liberal Jews leaning their heads against the wall attempting to feel the presence of the shekinah, as I have witnessed so often in the Orthodox section; if wives and husbands and children, holding hands or simply standing together, open their siddurim or just spontaneously pray in the place their ancestors prayed because this sacred place holds historic continuity and meaning in their religious imagination; if all of this and more happens because Liberal Judaism is a vital force motivating Jewish lives to connect to God two centuries after Moses

women's sections and those who oversee the egalitarian and once-a-month-Women-of-the-Wall section. I look forward to the day when those who oversee the Modern/Open Orthodox men's and women's sections also have a seat at the table. If those new men's and women's sections and their attendant Modern/Open Orthodox governance turn out to be the present men's and women's section, that will satisfy some and horrify others; we need a compromise that does not leave our Haredi sisters and brothers out in the cold and also does not leave any of the rest of us out in the cold.

Manna was not a burden on the Israelites because it lacked diversity of flavor. Rather, manna was a burden because the Israelites lacked imagination. We need to imagine the manna of olam habah where adult flavors and the flavors for nursing mothers are side by side. The nursing mothers of our people are no longer the egalitarians and Women of the Wall; they are our mehitza adhering sisters and brothers of the Modern and Open Orthodox movements. If we abandon them, then we are in danger of being in collusion with those religious leaders who have abandoned us when fulfilling their governance roles in the modern State of Israel.

Rabbi Pamela Frydman is a leader in the Jewish Renewal Movement. She serves as Chair of the Executive Committee of Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel and was co-founder and former International Co-Chair of Rabbis for Women of the Wall.

Breaking down the arguments over the Kotel agreement

By David Bogomolny, Hiddush & RRFEI staffer



Even before the historic Kotel agreement was reached, the Internet was flooded with information and opinions about the compromise. RRFEI has compiled and categorized many pieces on our website here:

[\[link\]](#), in both Hebrew and English, recognizing that the Hebrew articles reflect the feelings of Israelis who have taken a stand on these issues, which may not have been reported upon in the English media. **We hope you'll take the time to explore these informational and opinion pieces, and share others with us** to include on the RRFEI website.

The controversy has been sharp, sometimes even harsh, and many

Mendelsohn and a century after Haim Nahman Bialik, then this "compromise" will have achieved its purpose of enabling a greater spirituality and Jewish practice among our people.

The success of this opportunity lies in the religious imagination of liberal Jewish leaders in Israel and worldwide. It's insufficient to watch others fervently embrace Judaism and wonder at their enthusiasm for accepting God. If that's our forte, then the new area will not avail us, and our people will continue to thrill at watching others at prayer in the Orthodox sections. But the Southern Western Wall is no less the containing wall of the Second Temple than the Northern Section, and God is no less present there. The only question is whether the Western Wall is a relic or a present spiritual reality in our lives.

From the 70s through the 90s, when I brought congregants to Israel, we prayed together in the Kotel Plaza, and people thrilled at the experience. It touched their hearts and souls. Women of the Wall and the others at the table have succeeded in giving us an opportunity for enhanced spirituality. The great question that confronts liberal Judaism is: will we

have made conflicting factual and/or legal claims in regard to the Kotel agreement and its broader context. **If you encounter a murky issue related to the compromise, which you would like to have clarified, RRFEI would be glad to provide you with further analysis and accurate information.** Please contact us at organizers@rrfei.org with your questions, suggestions & comments - we look forward to hearing from you.

Below, we present you with an outline of arguments - in favor, against, and ambivalent toward the compromise, as well as several illustrative quotations. **[The resource links on the RRFEI website](#) are organized according to these categories**, as of Monday, February 8; we hope to add additional links and flesh out the arguments further with your input.

- **IN FAVOR OF THE AGREEMENT**

- Good for pluralism / diaspora relations
- Change in the right direction towards religious freedom
- Support for total separation (Orthodox from Heterodox)

"Creating an egalitarian prayer space at the Wall is a small step, and in some ways a mostly symbolic one. But it is important nonetheless. Since what is done in one small area can be expanded to others, it creates a legal and administrative precedent for equality among the religious streams. And it serves as a grudging acknowledgment by Israel's government that Diaspora Jews matter. Jews throughout the world have fought for these changes; they are Israel's partners, and they will not tolerate being told that their Jewish way of life does not count in the Jewish state." -Rabbi Eric Yoffie

- **OPPOSED TO THE AGREEMENT**

- The agreement is a betrayal of Modern Orthodox women and women's prayer groups at traditional Kotel plaza

"We have no objection, of course, to prayer at Robinson's for those who wish it. We reject any deal that would infringe upon, let alone deny, the hardearned and historic rights of Jewish women at the Kotel. No one can concede someone else's rights. Anyone who says she speaks for us in doing so, does not. We say clearly: any deal that delegitimizes, let alone bars, tefillah in our minhag at the Kotel has no bearing on us. We stay at the Kotel. -Dr. Shulamit Magnus

make it real?

Please go to our FB group [\[link\]](#) for further debate, and send your comments to me at organizer@rrfei.org.

Kol tuv,

Mark

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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](#)

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- The agreement is damaging to Jewish unity:
 - Unity will be achieved through diversity
 - Unity will be achieved through religious uniformity
 - Unity will be achieved through cultural uniformity
- The agreement is a capitulation to the ultra-Orthodox establishment / Robinson's Arch is "less than" the traditional Kotel plaza

"The time has come that we take responsibility for what happens to the Kotel. It can't be that the same Kotel, which we all have pictures of, which my grandparents had a picture of at home... that when we arrive to the Land of Israel and the State of Israel, we decide that the Kotel will not belong to all of us; rather it will belong only to one small group." -MK Rachel Azaria

- The State of Israel should not recognize or validate the non-Orthodox streams
 - The pluralistic plaza violates Waqf jurisdiction over Jerusalem's holy places
 - This is A hollow victory in the war over religion-state in Israel
- **AMBIVALENT TOWARDS THE AGREEMENT**
 - The Western Wall is not the most important religion & state issue in Israel / The agreement may distract from other issues of religion & state
 - The agreement may be damaging to Jewish unity
 - It is unlikely to lead to further necessary policy changes

"While we celebrate, it is important to remember that the issue of prayer at the Kotel is only one of many in the arena of religious freedom. Its impact on Israeli citizens is relatively limited. In other areas changes have usually been for the worse. The tyranny of the Rabbinate over marriage and divorce is ongoing, denying hundreds of thousands of citizens the right to family and denying women their right to equality and dignity..." -Rabbi Uri Regev

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.

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