

Setting the record straight: Women of the Wall

PHYLLIS CHESLER | FEBRUARY 5, 2016, 1:48 AM |

Anat Hoffman is [quoted](#) in The Times of Israel as having offered the [Original Women of the Wall](#) a seat on her Robinson's Arch express "bus" and of even having asked us to "help steer it."

This is a lie.

She did not take us into her confidence, nor did she wrestle with us ideologically nor did she say: "Okay, what I once called the back of the bus is now the only bus in town. We're going to beautify it. Please work with me. Tell me: How many thousands of feet do Orthodox women and/or men need for a permanent *mehitza*? How much space do you need so that you, too, can hold simchas in your fashion? I will fight for that as part of the deal."

Such a conversation never took place.

She is quoted as saying "We certainly did not throw them under the bus.."

Anat Hoffman did throw us under the bus.

In [Amanda Borschel-Dan's article](#), Anat Hoffman is quoted as saying that our own "pristine ideology" is what is "damning us" to "stay in a telephone booth." Ah, that "telephone booth" is precisely what Anat and the Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Haredi movements, together with the Israeli Cabinet, have just condemned us to with their after-thought about a portable *mehitza*, but by appointment only, at Robinson's Arch, the archeological dig that is also hotly claimed by Israeli archeologists and by the Waqf.

Unlike most of us, Anat turned what was a holy moment into a full-time and paid career. And into a political platform both for herself and ultimately for the Reform movement.

And, to my personal shame and sorrow, she did not hesitate to proudly and loudly criticize Israel over the matter of Women of the Wall — not just in Israel, but, *davka*, all over North America —

and she did so as Arafat's carefully planned and seemingly endless Intifada of 2000 raged in the Holy Land. She garnered headlines and funds as Israelis were blown up on buses, in nightclubs, and in their homes.

This was before she betrayed our halachic vision and our legal victory at the Kotel-proper for another style of davening and at another place entirely.

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I remember how transformed Meretz's Jerusalem City Council member was by our first prayer service. I am talking about Anat Hoffman who was and still is a left-wing politician. She was smart (really a smart-ass), outrageously funny — a regular comedienne — but she also had guts and *sechel*.

I believe that Anat was the one who brought the table for our Torah to rest on. Despite the nature of her politics and her political nature, like all of us, Anat was also sincerely moved, transfixed, by our extraordinary experience of prayer at the Kotel in 1988.

For a while, Anat also became something of a Chabadnik. She actually used to run after women in Kikar Zion to don a tallit for the first time, to say the *bracha* for the first time, as only our holy Chabad brothers can do.

Our first prayer service was organized by Orthodox women. It was in the style of the prayer groups that were pioneered by Orthodox women. It was halachic and, as such, was as strong an argument as was our legal argument.

We, the Original Women of the Wall, chose not to break with our Orthodox sisters, whether or not we ourselves are Orthodox. We owe them so much. And: all-female prayer is just as feminist as a mixed gender minyan is.

We lost and won many legal decisions. We were sent to Robinson's Arch in 2002, but politely rejected that option.

Anat generated lots of publicity — not quite *tziniusdik* (modest), but she was on a roll. Anat turned a religious struggle into a left-style political struggle. It was what she knew how to do. It was what she did best. And she kept the eyes of the Jewish world upon us. She did her best. And it made permanent enemies of our opponents, who, granted, would have opposed us anyway. She did her best, but at some point, decided to "opt" out of our struggle.

Maybe being arrested and jailed traumatized her. Maybe she decided that no decent compromise would ever be possible with the haredim and therefore, with the government. Maybe her Reform Movement advisers strongly suggested that she cut her losses and deliver the goods.

I understand the enormous frustration of the denominations for even a symbolic sign of acceptance in the Jewish state. I respect their desire. But not if it is obtained stealthily, secretly, by sacrificing our hard-won legal rights .

We began to receive reports from Jerusalem of Anat's betrayal of our mission, our legal and halachic foundation, our mandate, our vision.

Anat had traumatically ousted all women from WOW's board who did not agree with her plan to turn a woman-only prayer group at the Kotel in the *ezrat nashim* (women's section) into an egalitarian, mixed-gender minyan at Robinson's Arch.

The Reform movement began a series of secret meetings with representatives of the Israeli government. Anat may or may not have been included. But she was on board when Natan Sharansky announced his idea of sending us to Robinson's Arch.

Anat is not only the director of IRAC — she also deeply believes that their style of prayer is more feminist than a women-only style. She is absolutely entitled to her opinion, but she is not entitled to co-opt our struggle of 27 years and celebrate the imagined death of our struggle as their victory.

This is a shameless thing to do. So far, only Reform Rabbi Eric Yoffie has acknowledged this.

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Why did the various denominations never launch their own lawsuits for a third section at the Kotel?

Anat, I am ready to talk to you anytime about how we can all remain at the Kotel.

Anat, the movements who should launch their own lawsuits in their own name are the Reform and Conservative Movements, not the "Orthodox women" who, in the Times of Israel, you now suggest should form a coalition to fight for their rights.

That is precisely what we have done and we have prevailed. You have sold out our victory for a mess of pottage.

I do not think this will stand.

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Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site (2002). *Chesler sounded the alarm about rising anti-Semitism/anti-Zionism in the early 21st century* (The New Anti-Semitism, 2003) and has published four academic studies about honor killing in Middle East Quarterly. She is a Fellow at The Middle East Forum and is one of the [Original Women of the Wall](#).