

The Sisterhood

Is the Kotel Compromise Another 'Status Quo' Agreement?

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Image: Getty Images

Yesterday the leaders of the Reform Movement in Israel and the U.S. personally thanked Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the deal to expand the egalitarian prayer plaza at Robinson's Arch.

Less than a year ago, on the day I was viciously stomped in the stomach at the Kotel, a friend cynically asked: "Why did you put yourself at risk that way? You're just being used."

I was more than happy to be used in the fight against ultra-Orthodox domination of the Kotel plaza. Here's the rub: the deal gives complete control of the Kotel to the ultra-Orthodox establishment.

On that April morning 10 months ago, a group of us took a Torah from the men's side of the prayer plaza, used it for our own prayers and then provided it to the women through a gate in the mechitza. The women celebrated. The men celebrated. Then we were attacked. My friend Charlie Kalech was grabbed by the neck and thrown to the ground, sustaining head injuries. I was stomped upon, sustaining internal organ injuries.

Two weeks ago, when the agreement to expand the existing egalitarian prayer space was announced, another friend asked: "Is this why you put yourself at risk?"

The answer. No.

I didn't help provide a Torah to women at the Kotel to earn a right that women already had, namely to read Torah at Robinson's Arch.

I didn't come month after month to the Kotel to see a group of my fellow Progressive Jews agree to sanction complete Haredi rule at the Kotel.

I didn't defend the prayer service that April morning in order to abandon the aspirations of the Original Women of the Wall, to be afforded their protected civil rights – to pray with tallit and tefillin, and to read from a sefer Torah – at the Kotel itself.

As a Progressive Jew, as a foot-soldier in the cause, the idea of trading hard-won court recognition of civil rights at the Kotel in return for an enlarged alternative space should never have been considered. It abandons Torah lessons I was taught in both the Reform and Conservative Movements.

Everything that's right about deal is happening at Robinson's Arch. Everything that's wrong about it is happening at the Kotel plaza. Everything that's not being discussed is taking place in the private halls of political and religious power.

What's right about this plan is the creation of an officially-sanctioned space for egalitarian prayer at an important historical site. Although it's not the Kotel, Robinson's Arch is indeed a continuation of the Western Wall of the Temple Mount. For the first time, Reform and Conservative Judaism will have a place to pray that's recognized in the regulations implementing Israeli law.

What's wrong about this plan is that it abandons the victories already won at the Kotel. The plan accepts absolute ultra-Orthodox rule over a public space, also enshrining that acceptance into the government's "Regulations for the Protection of Holy Places to the Jews."

For the Original Women of the Wall – the group of women who founded WOW, the first arrested, harassed and tear-gassed, and the plaintiffs in the original law suits – the fight has never wavered. It's always been about enforcing Israeli law and the court's interpretation of that law. That's why they've filed two new lawsuits demanding that the State of Israel enforce their rights.

For the current leaders of WOW and their U.S. backers, demanding civil rights at the Kotel plaza itself has proven to be a tool to a different end.

The egalitarian space will be run by a 13-member committee, 11 appointed by the prime minister. Of them, six are to be appointed from the leadership of the Reform Movement, the Conservative Movements and WOW, two each. They'll have a voice in managing the platform and in spending the millions of Israeli shekels that come with it.

Those seats and that budget are the real platform, the place from which liberal Judaism says it will launch a new drive to capture the hearts and minds of Israeli Jews. They say it's the crack into governmental circles that will lead to a greater role in the official conversation about Judaism and Israeli life.

The ultra-Orthodox leadership will also attempt to use this compromise as their own platform, a template to further entrench their control of religious life in the public sphere as their direct political power rises in the Knesset.

Meanwhile, the impact that deal will have upon the lawsuits filed by the Original Woman of the Wall is uncertain. There's no doubt, however, that attorneys for the State of Israel will attempt to use the deal to get the new lawsuits dismissed.

Only time will tell if this arrangement creates the great vaunted platform for Progressive Judaism in Israel. Only time will tell if conceding control of the Kotel plaza will be used by the ultra-Orthodox to seize greater control of public life.

This may be another “Ben-Gurion” moment, when Israel’s first prime minister conceded military exemption to the ultra-Orthodox. Beware. Our history shows that enshrining religious power and authority in law only deepens the ultra-Orthodox hold on life in Israel.

This is certain: the deal attempts to trade protected civil rights at the Kotel for indirect political power. For whatever perceived political victory this may bring, the cost is far too high. It’s a spiritual loss. The Torah of justice taught in Reform and Conservative congregations is clear: fight for the oppressed, fight ceaselessly for their rights, and never, ever become the oppressor.

In abandoning the Original Women of the Wall – by using the struggle that they started 27 years ago for different ends – Progressive Judaism traded away something more important than 100 cubic meters of prayer space.

We traded our sisters for a platform.

Alden Solovy is the author of “Jewish Prayers of Hope and Healing,” and a three-time winner of the Peter Lisagor Award for Exemplary Journalism.

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