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Kotel Deal Cuts Both Ways

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Special To The Jewish Week



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I have mixed feelings about the “historic” compromise reached about a week ago in Israel creating a new, egalitarian prayer space south of the Western Wall plaza. Worked out with the Israeli government by representatives of the Reform and Conservative movements, Women of the Wall and others, the compromise will create a large area for the liberal denominations and for the Women of the Wall to hold prayer services. The government and the Jewish Agency will fund the section, a precedent, perhaps, for official recognition of the non-Orthodox denominations in Israel.

These changes are a great improvement over the current arrangements, which confine the liberal groups to a cramped Robinson’s Arch, an archaeological site also used by the Women of the Wall for their Torah reading. That area will now be built up and expanded so that it touches the Western Wall and has an easily accessible and visible entrance.

So, with such good features, why are my feelings mixed? For the answer we need some history. I was a member of the original group of women from the United States who attempted to pray together and read from the Torah in the women's section of the Western Wall. It was 1988, and the action grew out of a conference held in Jerusalem by the American Jewish Congress. The late, great Rivka Haut and other Orthodox women were the forces behind the decision to hold an interdenominational prayer service at the Wall. I was given the honor of carrying a Torah scroll to and from it. The story of how we were pushed, spat at, and cursed by charedi men and women on either side of the Wall has been told many times. In the 27 years since that day, the group of Israeli and American women calling themselves Women of the Wall has continued to pray in the women's part of the Wall at the beginning of every Hebrew month. Although nothing in their prayer service runs contrary to halacha (Jewish law), the ultra-Orthodox rabbinic authorities in charge of the Wall have forbidden the women from wearing prayer shawls, praying aloud or chanting from the Torah. Some women have been dragged from worship, and some even jailed.

Now, after much negotiation, the compromise reached gives the women freedom to pray as they wish in a new area. That's fine, but in truth this compromise in no way changes matters at the Western Wall. For all the lovely plans the compromise holds, the Wall itself, the Kotel, is still the most revered site in Israel. It is the place to which tourists flock, the place where people pour out their hearts in little kvitlach (notes) stuffed into cracks between the stone slabs. And that place remains a monopoly of the ultra-Orthodox, controlled by them as if it were their exclusive shul. It was because of the sacred nature of the Wall that our group of women wanted to break through that monopoly and pray there all those years ago. Because of the compromise the Women of the Wall made last week, they cannot fulfill our vision then or the one they held onto through their many difficult years of struggle. The Wall continues to be an ultra-Orthodox enclave.

To be sure, compromises call for giving up things, and at least the women will have a nice space for their prayer services. Maybe the openness of their new space will attract more and more Israeli women, and maybe with time they will be able to make their mark on the Wall. They have, after all, drawn international attention to their cause.

When I returned from Israel in 1988, I phoned the editor of the Op Ed page of The New York Times hoping to write a column about the frenzy at the Wall. I had written one or two opinion pieces for the paper and had on my bulletin board a cherished letter from the paper's editor-in-chief encouraging me to submit additional ideas. After listening to me for a few moments, the opinion editor broke in: "That's exactly the kind of piece we DON'T want. Who cares about a bunch of women and their prayers?" In last week's New York Times, a report of the new prayer space appeared on page A8, with a photo of Anat Hoffman, chairwoman of Women of the Wall, with two other women. Word of the compromise also spread through radio, television and social media. Many people today do care about women and their prayers.

Attitudes change, even if it takes years. We can welcome the compromise the Women of the Wall have

made as a step forward. But we will be mistaken if we view it as a great victory. The women's goal of praying freely with other women at the Western Wall is yet to be reached.

*Francine Klagsbrun's latest book is "The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath Day." She is currently writing a biography of Golda Meir.*

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