



Print



Print

Select Language ▼

# THE JERUSALEM POST



## Better seats at the back of the bus?

By BARRY LEFF  
02/04/2016

This is a big deal, and a huge victory for progressive forms of Judaism and pluralism in Israel. The government recently announced an agreement to create a permanent, full-time home for non-ultra-Orthodox prayer at the Western Wall. This is a big deal, and a huge victory for progressive forms of Judaism and pluralism in Israel.

The government has committed to spending NIS 35 million to create the new section and a new entrance to the Western Wall Plaza that will give equal prominence to the new space. Visitors to the Wall will go through security and then decide if they want to visit the men's, women's, or pluralistic sections.

The State of Israel will provide Torah scrolls, prayer books and security, with access available 24/7.

Yizhar Hess, CEO of the Masorti/Conservative Movement in Israel, said, "A historic compromise that redefines the relationship between religion and state in Israel has been reached."

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism said, "It is a statement that at the holiest site in Judaism there is room for everyone, no matter what your beliefs or your practices are."

It is not surprising that the ultra-Orthodox are up in arms about the agreement.

They say the shouting during the cabinet meeting when the agreement was approved was so loud it could be heard outside the room.

It is also not surprising that the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, is upset. Hussein claims that the new prayer space at the Western Wall is "the property of the Islamic Wakf, taken by the Israeli occupation in 1967."

Perhaps more surprisingly, there are those from the more liberal streams of Judaism, as well as some Orthodox former members of Women of the Wall, who aren't happy with the agreement.

What's their problem? One critique says the new space is "separate but equal" – a reference to American "Jim Crow" laws that resulted in segregated facilities for blacks that were anything but equal. As one critic put it, "Aren't these just shinier seats in the back of the bus?" They are not.

The "separate but equal" analogy is inapt. The realm of religion is different than the realm of civil rights. For example, the Catholic Church's refusal to ordain women as priests is often viewed as a religious issue, not a civil rights issue.

The State of Israel made a major mistake in the wake of the reunification of Jerusalem: it allowed the ultra-Orthodox to turn the Western Wall into an ultra-Orthodox synagogue.

What the government should have done is made the space a national park.

If you look at old pictures of the Western Wall, there is no mehitza ("separation barrier"). People came and offered their individual prayers, men next to women. It was not a synagogue.

Given coalition politics, it's utterly unrealistic to expect that the government is going to make the Western Wall a national park. What Women of the Wall have been doing is trying to get an ultra-Orthodox rabbi to treat his synagogue – which he no doubt believes is the most important synagogue in the world – as something other than an ultra-Orthodox synagogue.

If we have to have synagogues (rather than a national park) at the Western Wall, the best solution is what the new agreement does: it establishes a pluralistic synagogue, run without interference from the ultra-Orthodox.

It is important to note that the new space is best described as "pluralistic" – not "mixed gender."

"Liberal" Orthodox people, including women who want to pray in a minyan without men, or even men who want an exclusively male minyan, but don't want a mehitza (perhaps to allow women to see or participate in a simha) – will be welcome.

This also addresses the objection of those who ask whether this isn't "liberal Judaism throwing the Orthodox among the Women of the Wall under the bus to get something they want." As long as you view the space as "pluralistic," and the existing women's section as an ultra-Orthodox synagogue, there's no issue. Those liberal Orthodox women now have a home, and can make their own "women's section" (complete with a temporary mehitza) if they wish.

There are also those who argue "But it isn't the 'traditional Kotel!' It's not as good! It's not as holy!" If you look at old pictures of the Western Wall, it's clear that most of the current Kotel is in "expanded territory." It's not in the exact spot where our ancestors prayed hundreds of years ago. The new space is simply another expansion.

There will be access to the stones of the wall. People will be able to leave notes to God. In some ways the new space is better than the existing space.

I always find it especially moving to pray at Robinson's Arch, looking at the stones that still lie where the Roman soldiers cast them down 1,946 years ago.

The architects came up with an excellent plan to preserve the area with the stones below while still providing access to the wall itself.

To focus on needing to pray in one exact spot along the wall veers dangerously close to idol worship. Should everyone insist on praying only at the spot inside the men's section that is closest to where the Holy of Holies once stood? Being truly pluralistic means also allowing the ultra-Orthodox to pray in their fashion. Let them have their space, as we have ours.

For liberal Jews, this deal is not a compromise.

It's a clear-cut victory for all who value religious pluralism, for all who value freedom of religion – without coercion.

The ultra-Orthodox are already trying to torpedo the deal by denying funding from the Religious Affairs Ministry.

While we can celebrate the deal, we should save the true celebration for the inauguration of the new space. There are still obstacles to overcome.

The writer is a rabbi and entrepreneur. He is an active supporter of Women of the Wall along with his wife and two of his five daughters.



JPost.com: [Arab-Israeli Conflict](#) | [Israel News](#) | [Diaspora](#) | [Middle East](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Premium](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Not Just News](#) | [Edition Francaise](#) | [Green Israel](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

**Copyright © 2014 Jpost Inc. All rights reserved •**  
**[Terms of Use](#) • [Privacy Policy](#)**