

Religion News Service

Why we will not negotiate our rights to pray at the Western Wall (COMMENTARY)

Vanessa L. Ochs | February 5, 2016



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Members of the Original Women of the Wall say morning prayers at the Western Wall in Jerusalem on Feb. 3, 2016. Photo courtesy of Shmuel Browns

This image is available for web and print publication. For questions, contact [Sally Morrow](#).

(RNS) This week, a group of women gathered to chant the morning prayers at the Western Wall (in Hebrew, the “Kotel”), a pilgrimage site holy to Jews as a remnant of our ancient Temple, destroyed by the Romans.

Some wore the “tallit” (the prayer shawl) and “tefillin” (prayer straps).

Many Jewish women — including many Orthodox women — have prayed in this fashion for over half a century, exercising rights that were confirmed in historic rulings by Israel’s civil courts in 2003 and 2013.

But the future of women praying while wearing tallit and tefillin at the Western Wall is now in jeopardy.

On Jan. 31, the Israeli government announced it would create an alternative site for women and for the liberal Jewish denominations.

This deal would undo 26 years of incremental efforts, through the various courts, including Israel’s Supreme Court, to win official recognition of the rights of women to pray together according to our custom at the wall.

Now, we and other women who continue to wish to pray at the wall need to start all over again to regain those rights.

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The deal, brokered by Jewish Agency head Natan Sharansky and former cabinet secretary Avichai Mandelblit, was motivated by a promise Judaism’s liberal Reform and Conservative leaders made to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has long sought ways to placate ultra-Orthodox members of his coalition.

Desperate for a crumb of validation in Israel, the Jewish movements agreed to persuade the Women of the Wall, a group led by Anat Hoffman, to abandon its monthly prayers at the wall.

In exchange, the government would use Israeli taxpayer dollars and foreign donations to renovate and declare holy an archaeological site in the vicinity of the Western Wall called Robinson’s Arch, already used for mixed-gender prayer.

Hoffman, an employee of the Reform movement, expelled those on her board who refused to leave the wall and betray its organizational mandate: to pray at the wall. In exchange, she was promised some influence on how the new prayer space would be run.

This would not be the first time in history that a woman has been co-opted as an instrument of patriarchy.

While some proclaim this deal finally recognizes Jewish religious diversity in Israel, I see it as an act of betrayal, particularly on the part of the liberal Jewish movements who are fully aware that they are forfeiting the rights of observant women who seek to pray together at the wall.

As one of the founding directors of the International Committee for Women of the Wall and now as a leader of Original Women of the Wall, I am profoundly saddened.

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We are the ones who for 26 years dedicated ourselves to serving the pristine and realizable vision of the late Rivka Haut: to pray together in the women's section of the wall, according to our customs as Jewish women of many denominations. We are neither a splinter group nor a breakaway. We continue to do what we have done all along. We will pray with tallit and tefillin. We will risk arrest.

My fears are not based in an unfounded sense of dread. When the deal was announced, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the ultra-Orthodox administrator of the Western Wall Foundation, announced that prayer at the wall will continue as always: "Women will pray in accordance with Jewish tradition and heritage — without tefillin and prayer shawls."

The deal, should it come to pass, gives him the right to forcibly remove any Jewish woman whose prayer practices he opposes.

I wonder if Hoffman's group will continue to call themselves "Women of the Wall," for they have chosen to leave the wall. I understand that they are exhausted and frustrated after years of heroic spiritual engagement at the wall in the name of women's rights. At this juncture, they have decided to give up the struggle. They have stated that what they can get by leaving exceeds what they went through while staying put.

As a feminist, I understand that when you don't have a voice, your human dignity suffers. When your dignity has been degraded for so long, you scrape for recognition. This was their choice. Yet they, along with the liberal movements, along with the Jewish Agency and the leadership of

the Jewish Federations of North America, knowingly took away the rights of many Jewish women to pray at the Kotel.

A compromise requires two sides, but the ultra-Orthodox Jews are giving up nothing at all. They get complete control of the Kotel and they will no longer have to tolerate the presence of Jews who do not pray as they do.

Hoffman's group is giving up its right to pray at the Kotel in exchange for a nice entrance to a site adjacent to an archaeological park. It is the very place where Women of the Wall have already been exiled to for many years.

The Original Women of the Wall will be staying at the Kotel.

(Rabbi Vanessa Ochs is a professor in the Department of Religious Studies and the Jewish Studies Program of the University of Virginia. She is the author of "Inventing Jewish Ritual," "Sarah Laughed" and "Words on Fire." One of the founding directors of the International Committee for Women of the Wall, she is now a leader of the Original Women of the Wall.)

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