

**Statement of the North American Reform Movement:
North American Reform Movement Applauds Passage of Plan to Enhance
Egalitarian Prayer Space at Western Wall
*Years of Organized Efforts Yield Significant Victory for Reform Jews,
Women of the Wall: New Area to be Under Non-Orthodox Oversight***

January 31, 2016, NEW YORK, NY- In the most significant development in the nearly generation-long campaign by Women of the Wall and their allies for religious equality at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the Israeli government today approved the creation of an enhanced egalitarian prayer space at the Wall, which, for the first time, will be under the authority of non-Orthodox leadership.

The government's proposal - which is the result of a coordinated effort by the Reform and Conservative Movements, both in Israel and in North America, Women of the Wall, and the Jewish Federations of North America - calls for a significant revamping of the Western Wall area to create a more unified relationship between the three prayer areas (men's, women's, and egalitarian). The existing egalitarian space - near the area known as Robinson's Arch - will be enhanced by the creation of an expanded platform with more access to the Western Wall, including from the ancient Herodian street. The site will be open through the main plaza by removing existing visual barriers and building a new, inviting entrance.

The approved proposal was the result of several years of intense negotiating, advocacy, and leadership, led by the North American Reform Movement and Women of the Wall and developed by Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mandelblit, Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky, and the prime minister's office.

In the weeks and months to come, the North American Reform Movement will work with its partners in Israel to implement the proposal and to celebrate this new arrangement, which will allow all Jews to experience an egalitarian prayer space at the holy site.

"This is a groundbreaking agreement," said Anat Hoffman, chairperson of Women of the Wall and the head of the Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center. Hoffman, an indefatigable crusader on behalf of this issue who experienced arrests and insults through the decades of struggle, said, "After years and years of insisting that we have an equal place for prayer, after enduring campaigns of abuse against us, and being encouraged by a wave of Jewish support from across the globe, we have accomplished this extraordinary first step. We will be able to stand as part of living history, read the Torah, and pray in the spirit of pluralism and equality that we believe is critical to a vibrant Judaism. Now, we look forward to the steps that will need to be taken to implement this plan."

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), celebrated the agreement: "This effort is the result of the extraordinary commitment shown by those in Israel who wouldn't agree to the second-class status imposed by the ultra-Orthodox religious establishment and by all of us outside of Israel whose unconditional love for our Jewish State compels us to tirelessly advocate for a more equal, pluralistic, and Jewishly vibrant Israel."

Rabbi Gilad Kariv of the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism proclaimed, "This struggle and this potential victory is just the beginning of our efforts to ensure that the Jewish state of Israel is indeed a state where all forms of Judaism are practiced freely and without state prohibition - and where those of us who represent the largest force in Jewish life in the world today, the Reform Movement, will be a powerful force inside of Israel and a more visible alternative for worship for Israeli Jews."

Signatory Organizations

American Conference of Cantors
ARZA - The Association of Reform Zionists of America
ARZA Canada
Central Conference of American Rabbis
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
North American Federation of Temple Youth
Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
Union for Reform Judaism
Women of Reform Judaism
Women's Rabbinic Network
World Union for Progressive Judaism