

When is a compromise not a compromise? | Opinion



Cheryl Birkner Mack

A month ago the board of Women of the Wall, leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements in North America and Israel announced that they had reached an agreement with the Israeli government that would for the first time give official recognition of these non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. What a victory! What a cause for celebration!

That is, until you learn the price of this accomplishment—the rights of women to pray at the Kotel, according to their custom.

The right of all Jewish women to pray at the Kotel “according to their custom” was recognized in an Israeli Supreme Court decision in 2003 and reaffirmed in an appellate court in 2013. This recognition was granted as a result of Women of the Wall’s consistent and regular prayer at the Kotel since 1988. This means that women who choose to pray as a group, some who choose to wrap themselves in a tallit, or others who choose to wear tefillin, and those who choose to read Torah may do so; just as any Jewish man has been allowed to do so at the Kotel.

Somehow, after 25 years of insisting that only the Kotel would suffice for their monthly Rosh Hodesh prayers, Women of the Wall have all of sudden said, “we all need to compromise.” Perhaps they were confused in their translation and actually meant “capitulate.” They have agreed to move their prayers to Robinson’s Arch, an archaeological site adjacent to the Western Wall once referred to as “the back of the bus,” while ultra-Orthodox Jews who oppose independent women’s prayer at the Kotel (and anywhere else), along with the Israeli government, have given up nothing!

These bullies are celebrating that they are rid of “these women.” They won’t have to see, hear or deal with them anymore.

A friend of mine, a Conservative rabbi in the US wrote me explaining why he supports the deal even while recognizing the injustice of it.

He writes. "I certainly understand your concerns that the agreement essentially cedes control of the main part of the Kotel to the ultra-Orthodox, that women's prayer groups are now effectively banned, and that women's prayer groups may be uncomfortable in an egalitarian prayer space. This deal is not what you, or any of us, really wanted. As a person of principle, it's no surprise that you are upset and disappointed."

As a matter of principle, every Jew should have equal access to the Western Wall. Every Jew should be able to pray there in his or her own way. The Western Wall belongs to all of us. We should be able to find a way to share the space that is respectful for everyone.

Why should those of us who believe in egalitarian prayer or in women's prayer groups be shunted off to the side? Giving up access to the main area of the Kotel in exchange for the promise of a smaller area on the side that has yet to be built, will not be fully funded by the Israeli government and may even get blocked in the Knesset is, from the standpoint of justice, a really bad deal. So, we are not giving up!

I believe in the principle that women should be allowed to pray as a group at the Western Wall; reading from the Torah and wearing talit and tefilin, if they so choose. Giving up our principled stand is a huge loss; something that does not have to happen. So, we are not giving up!

It may be that due to the power of the ultra-Orthodox in the coalition, there is almost no chance that things will change at the Western Wall any time soon. It may be that in fifty years from now, our granddaughters and great-granddaughters will still be going to the Kotel every Rosh Chodesh and fighting harassment and arrest to exercise their rights. We are not giving up!

Our granddaughters will be grateful that we didn't!

Cheryl Birkner Mack, formerly a board member of Women of the Wall, resigned her post after the decision was made to begin negotiations with the government of Israel to move to Robinson's Arch. She has joined with founders and other long-time supporters to create Original Women of the Wall. She is an educator living in Jerusalem.