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Why the Kotel Compromise Just Isn't Good Enough

By [Gabriela Geselowitz](#)

January 31, 2016

Image: Getty Images

When I woke to the news about the new policy for the Kotel, I was surprised to see so many of my friends celebrating. I suppose I should be, too: I've been wearing tefillin since I was bat mitzvahed over a decade ago. In that time, I have been to Israel twice, first with my high school, and then on Birthright one year ago. I've always closely followed the Women of the Wall and waited for a time when I, too, might worship the way I want at the Kotel.

The new compromise is just that: a compromise. While it's nice that now it won't take a treasure map to find the egalitarian section, and that the section will no longer be the size of a New York City loft, it hurts that if I want to pray at such a holy site in a way that feels meaningful to me, I have to go to a part that isn't from the postcards, the documentaries, the images of Jewish Jerusalem that the world knows.

When I was 18 — my first time in Israel — my greatest wish was to get to the Kotel, which I visited twice that trip. I knew going in that I wouldn't be able to pray there with my tefillin, an act that makes me feel closer to God. I didn't know that I had picked the wrong T-shirt; the "Modesty Police" told me that my sleeves were too short, and made me wear a shawl that felt as though it had touched lots of sweaty shoulders already that day. But despite this, I had a rich spiritual experience. I felt like I had spent my life waiting to fulfill clichés that felt rich with meaning anyway: to daven, to find a spot to slip in a note, to kiss the stone.

When I returned at the age of 23, I looked forward to the Kotel once again. But when the group got there, the experience felt more strained, more frustrating. A few short years of living as a woman in the “real world” had drained me. As I tried to pray, a group of Orthodox women behind me giggled and took selfies. I tried to remind myself that their experiences were just as valid as mine; that not everyone had to be rocking and mouthing words to have a spiritual connection. But I felt almost naked; I wanted my tallit and my tefillin, and I felt that I desperately needed those things to have the experience that my boyfriend might be having on the other side of the wall — the much, much larger area where the men were unafraid to loudly celebrate.

As we walked away from the Kotel as a Birthright group, I started shaking, and then crying, something that I rarely do. I felt suffocated, and distanced from that which was holy to me. I thought about all of Israel’s dreams and contradictions, and how immediate they had become. I also looked up from the back of the plaza and saw the Dome of the Rock. I remembered that I was at the tip of a complicated, painful iceberg of history.

My boyfriend (now fiancé) and I extended our trip when Birthright drew to a close, and during our extra day in Jerusalem, we decided to go to Robinson’s Arch together. It had been years since I was there last, and it was difficult to find. We navigated a labyrinth of old ruins before we finally found the spot, where an American boy was having a bar mitzvah. We tucked ourselves unobtrusively into a corner and began wrapping our tefillin. We prayed, and I felt so glad to be in Jerusalem, to be praying at the site of the Temple, to have my partner at my side.

But I still felt the pang of a sort of banishment. I had to acknowledge that the sight around me, while beautiful, was not what I had dreamed.





Image: Michael Spitzer-Rubenstein

We finished davening and took a photo of our arms, striped from the tightness of the tefillin. We posted it on Facebook with a facetious, overly hashtagged caption: “...#Tefillin #Feminism #RobinsonsArch #Egalitarianism...” And the comments and likes from our friends reminded me that we’re not alone in how we feel.

After all, the Kotel is so special because of its unifying association for so many Jews coming from a wide spectrum of religious backgrounds. But as such, no one is thinking of Robinson's Arch; no one is thinking of the back of the Wall. When tourists come to see the Western Wall, are they going to feel that they've had the "authentic" experience after only going to the egalitarian section? Or will they feel that they need to run to the "real" part (women: better cover your shoulders)?

Should I let this impact my comfort level the next time I'm in Jerusalem? Maybe not, but I do. Because this is an emotional issue.

I don't only want to pray at the site of the former Temple; I want to participate in the shared experience of people who have come to the same spot that immediately reads as a symbol of our history and ongoing connection to God.

Maybe after some time the egalitarian section will gain that sort of status; after all, the image of the Kotel as we think of it is a fairly modern conception. Maybe this new system will work.

But I can't help thinking that we've agreed to the idea that being shunted out of the way, to something "technically" part of a holy experience, is enough.

It's not.

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Tagged as: Kotel, Western Wall, Women of the Wall

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