

Why the Kotel compromise matters – and doesn't

Non-Orthodox and women's rights groups score major victory, but few Israelis care, and execution of the plan may face obstacles

BY BEN SALES | February 1, 2016, 4:39 am |

JTA –Sunday, after decades of conflict, leaders of Judaism's three major denominations reached a compromise on the future of prayer at the Western Wall, and got the Israeli government's backing. The deal comes with a few important unknowns and will take a while to implement. Here's why it matters, even though it might not seem to.

The deal's provisions aren't historic — but the deal itself is.

What is agreed on in the Western Wall deal actually doesn't change much.

Right now, at the Western Wall, there's a large gender-separated prayer area under haredi Orthodox control, next to a smaller non-Orthodox area run by non-Orthodox leaders. Under the deal, that will still be the case.

Yes, the non-Orthodox space will double in size. Yes, it will be physically upgraded and gain a more prominent entrance. But in the end, non-Orthodox leaders have simply won a makeover of their prayer space. The Orthodox area of the site and the plaza behind it — what people have historically meant when they refer to the Western Wall — will barely change.

What's historic here are not the particulars of the deal but the fact that it was made. For nearly three decades, a coalition of women's rights advocates and non-Orthodox Jews waged a fight against Israel's haredi Orthodox establishment. Now, the sides have signed a peace treaty — with the government's imprimatur. Save for a breakaway faction of Women of the Wall, every party involved has endorsed this deal.

When it comes to Israeli religion and state, that's really rare. No recent religious legislation — from the expansion of military conscription to 2014's failed conversion reform — achieved this level of consensus.

But the agreement won't mean much until it's implemented, which is why...

I'll believe in the expansion when I see it.

Construction in Jerusalem can be a nightmare — even when it's not at a sacred site that gets 10 million visitors a year. Beyond the inevitable obstacles that will come with planning, delegating and budgeting a public project, the expansion will have to contend with working in an archaeological site with remains from the Second Temple.

The government may also run into opposition from the Waqf, the Islamic religious body that controls the adjacent Temple Mount and has opposed physical changes to the area. A bridge to the mount threads between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox areas of the wall — right next to where the construction is slated to happen.

According to a document from Sunday's Cabinet meeting, the project will cost NIS 35 million, or \$8.8 million. Of that, only NIS 25 million of funding has been arranged.

Where will the rest of the money come from? What happens if there's an early election, and a new government forms with different priorities? What if there's another war, taking a chunk out of Israel's budget? What if haredi lawmaker Moshe Gafni finds a way to use his chairmanship of the Knesset Finance Committee to hold up funding? In response to the deal today, Gafni [called Reform Jews "clowns."](#) Twice.

It took nearly three years to move from an outline of the deal, in April 2013, to a final consensus. Implementing it could take even longer.

Israelis don't really care about this issue.

A range of American Jewish organizations campaigned for this compromise and released statements praising it Sunday. But for many Israelis, the Western Wall barely shows up on their list of policy priorities.

A poll by the Ruderman Family Foundation Sunday found that four out of five Israelis support space for non-Orthodox Jews at the wall. But just because Israelis support change doesn't mean they'll push for it. Compared to national security or economics, Israelis don't care very much about religion and state. Religious issues didn't even register in a poll about the most important issues ahead of last year's election.

And even within the realm of religious reform, the Western Wall ranks pretty low. Israelis are much more likely to campaign for changes that would affect their lives, like civil marriage in Israel, a liberalization of conversion policy or an expansion of military conscription. A holy site in a city some Israelis rarely visit just isn't as relevant.

This is good for Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Western Wall compromise might not be central to the everyday Israeli, but it's a boost for Israel's prime minister. American Jewish leaders who support Netanyahu's policies, in Washington, D.C. and nationwide, have pushed him hard on women's prayer at the Western Wall. Now, he has a concrete achievement to show them at a holy site they visit and care about.

Some non-Orthodox leaders have protested that it's hard to support a government that doesn't recognize their rabbis or religious ceremonies. Derogatory comments by haredi politicians have exacerbated that tension. This deal doesn't solve those issues: American Jews will probably still push Israel to enact civil marriage and recognize non-Orthodox rabbis. But now Netanyahu can show that he's listening to their concerns — and acting on them.

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