

Mixed emotions about the Kotel compromise | Cover Story



Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

What's the definition of mixed emotions, asks the old gag line: Finding out that your business competitor and rival has just driven off a cliff — in your new Lamborghini.

The Orthodox community has to greet news of the Kotel agreement similarly. We can hope that it will bring relief from the ugliness of acrimonious battles between brothers and sisters, all under the critical gaze of the non-Jewish world wondering whatever happened to the much-vaunted Jewish unity.

But what a horrible price to pay for a cease-fire! The resistance of the heterodox movements to the *mechitzah* in the Kotel plaza means that they have erected an even larger, more ominous one between millions of Jews. With all our differences, all of us directed our hearts for centuries to that remnant of the outer wall of the two Temples. Having miraculously gained physical control of it in 1967, fulfilling what had long been only a dream, we find ourselves unable to maintain enough unity to preserve a single place in the entire world where we can come together and express our Jewishness in prayer. It is a tragedy that we will live with, but a tragedy nonetheless.

As an Orthodox Jew, I cannot help but wonder whether this agreement is not a tactical blunder on the part of the non-Orthodox denominations.

Visitors to the Kotel/Kotels will look out at two areas. The Orthodox area, the traditional Western Wall, will be alive with activity 24/7, with tens of thousands of people at certain times of the year. The non-

Orthodox Southern Wall will not be able to assemble large numbers on a regular basis. Likely, more cameras will be on hand than prayer books. The heterodox area will not display a fraction of the fervor and passion found on the traditional side. The contrast will speak loudly to the legions of Israelis struggling to find a religious identity.

I cannot forget my first visits to the Kotel decades ago, and the spirit of togetherness of our people, albeit from disparate backgrounds. This will now disappear. So when I will look out at the two areas and the successes and failures they bespeak, I will mourn, not gloat.

Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein is a co-founder of and contributor to *Cross-Currents*, an online journal of Orthodox Jewish thought.