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## After Historic Deal At Kotel, Next Steps Seen As Elusive

Liberal streams hail egalitarian prayer at holy site, but push for greater religious pluralism faces strong headwind.

02/03/16 | [Hannah Dreyfus](#) Staff Writer

The Israeli government's decision Sunday to approve a compromise expanding the egalitarian prayer section of the Western Wall is being hailed as a historic moment by leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements.

The compromise emerged after a decades-long stalemate between Israel's charedi Orthodox religious establishment and their liberal counterparts, including Women of the Wall, a multi-denominational feminist organization in Israel.

"For the first time, people have a real alternative and choice when they come to pray at the Kotel," said Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, who called the decision "historic."



Mixed-gender prayer gets boost at Western Wall. Getty Images

"It's also significant because now, for the first time in the State of Israel, there is an oversight body compromised of non-Orthodox leaders," he said, referring to the joint committee that will oversee the policies and day-to-day operations of the expanded section.

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Plans for the non-Orthodox section's expansion, spearheaded by Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Natan Sharansky, began in December 2012. Previous scuffles – especially between police and Women of the Wall chair Anat Hoffman, who was arrested in October of that year for leading a prayer group in which women recited the Shema out loud and wore shawls in violation of Israeli law – heightened the need for a solution. Though the deal still contains a few unknowns, including how long construction will take and how visitors will be directed to the non-Orthodox section, it is being heralded as a victory for religious pluralism.

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But questions remain this week about whether the Western Wall deal is a one-off decision, or might lead to further advances for those advocating for religious pluralism in Israel. Leaders of the liberal denominations have been pushing for years for greater government funding for their streams, and for state-sanctioned civil marriage. But they admit that, given the makeup of the current ruling coalition in Israel, these efforts will face strong headwinds.

“This was a big step forward, but there are many more steps to take,” said Rabbi Steven Wernick, chief executive officer of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. He stressed that “parity” in terms of funding Conservative rabbis, communities and synagogues, does not exist. “The state is either going to have to break the Orthodox monopoly, or fund the different streams,” he said, referring to the Conservative and Reform movements in Israel. The challenge of the moment is remaining “hopeful and pragmatic,” even in the face of new gains.

Though Rabbi Jacobs praised the “support” he and other non-Orthodox leaders received from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister of Diaspora Affairs Naftali Bennett with regard to the Western Wall compromise, he said other changes are bound to be stymied by the heavily right-wing government.

“I’ll be candid – it’s unlikely that a new bill about civil marriage will make its way through the Knesset under this government,” he said, referring to the many charedi ministers committed to opposing such a bill. Currently, Jewish marriages in Israel must be performed under the auspices of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and the rabbinical courts, both strictly Orthodox bodies. “This is not an acceptable reality for a democratic country,” said Rabbi Jacobs. Still, he added, while the “bridge” of civil marriage may be a pipe dream in the current climate, the “symbolism” of the Western Wall compromise is heartening.

“The majority of Jews around the world are not Orthodox, and there was no way to justify the status quo before Sunday’s decision,” said a Reform leader, who asserted that his movement in the U.S. “continues to stand whole-heartedly behind Israel.” (According to the 2013 Pew Portrait of American Jewry, the biggest stream of Judaism in the U.S. is, at 35 percent, the Reform movement.) “It’s nice when the state of Israel acknowledges that we exist and that we have a place in the religious life of Israel.”

To be sure, ultra-Orthodox groups here and in Israel have been quick to criticize, and even mourn, the new compromise.

“Designating an area at the Kotel Maaravi [Western Wall] for feminist and mixed-gender prayer not only profanes the holy site, it creates yet a further lamentable rift between Jews,” wrote the Agudath Israel of America in a statement. The group represents one of the largest charedi Jewish communal organizations in the United States. In Israel, Shmuel Rabinowitz, the ultra-Orthodox head rabbi of the Western Wall, greeted the news with a “heavy heart.”

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Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the international membership association of Conservative rabbis, said that equal access to “administration, governance and funding” is the most promising accomplishment of the compromise.

“Separation between synagogue and state is simply not happening today in Israel, but it is feasible to expect equal access and funding for all streams of Judaism,” she said. “This is a first step.” She noted that the new liberal section would still receive far less funding than the northern Kotel, the part of the Western Wall that will remain under Orthodox control. “But,” the rabbi said, “this is finally a chink in the armor of the ultra-Orthodox monopoly.”

“We’re moving from episodes of outrage and a painful lack of religious freedom to actually having a strategy and a voice,” she added, referring to the body of Reform and Conservative rabbis who will oversee the upcoming changes. “It’s a step in the right direction for equal funding of the streams.”

Steven Bayme, director of contemporary Jewish life at the American Jewish Committee, said that the compromise is the “right step in the larger trajectory towards religious pluralism.” While next steps for non-Orthodox movements in Israel remain hazy, the gains thus far are “quite significant” when weighed against the challenges the Reform and Conservative movements faced in years past, he said.

“One generation ago, the Reform and Conservative movements weren’t allowed any inroads in Israel,” he noted, speaking of his experiences in Israel in 1989 while part of an AJC delegation. “These movements were seen as American phenomena.” He recalled a charedi intellectual leader at the time telling him that Reform and Conservative Judaism might be alright as a solution in America, but they were “not right” for Israel.

Though Reform and Conservative Jews are celebrating for the moment, Jonathan D. Sarna, professor of Jewish History at Brandeis University, said the “big losers” of the agreement are Modern Orthodox women – those who want to preserve a mechitza, the traditional separation between male and female worshippers, but who also want to play a larger and more active role in services.

Still, in theory, the deal represents an “important step” in the official recognition of non-Orthodox movements, he said. The proof promises to be in the details. “Will it really be two equal options? That remains to be seen,” he said. Charedi efforts to “subvert the deal” before it goes into effect are also likely. “Nevertheless, the very fact that there was a deal matters,” he said.

Whether or not the compromise will pave the road for more significant wins – mainly with regard to civil marriage and non-Orthodox conversions and religious courts – is tenuous. But the compromise does promise to “embolden folks” to take on bigger issues, according to Sarna.

“The agreement was made notwithstanding the significant and vociferous objections of the charedi element,” he said. “That will impact what happens next.”

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