

Compromise Creates Two Western Walls for Two Peoples

Government decision to permit non-Orthodox prayer space recognizes Reform and Conservative Judaism, but overlooks any other form of Judaism, including liberal Orthodoxy.

Yair Ettinger

Jan 31, 2016 3:30 PM



A Jewish woman wears a prayer shawl as she prays at the Western Wall, the holiest site where Jews can pray in Jerusalem's old city, Monday, Nov. 4, 2013.

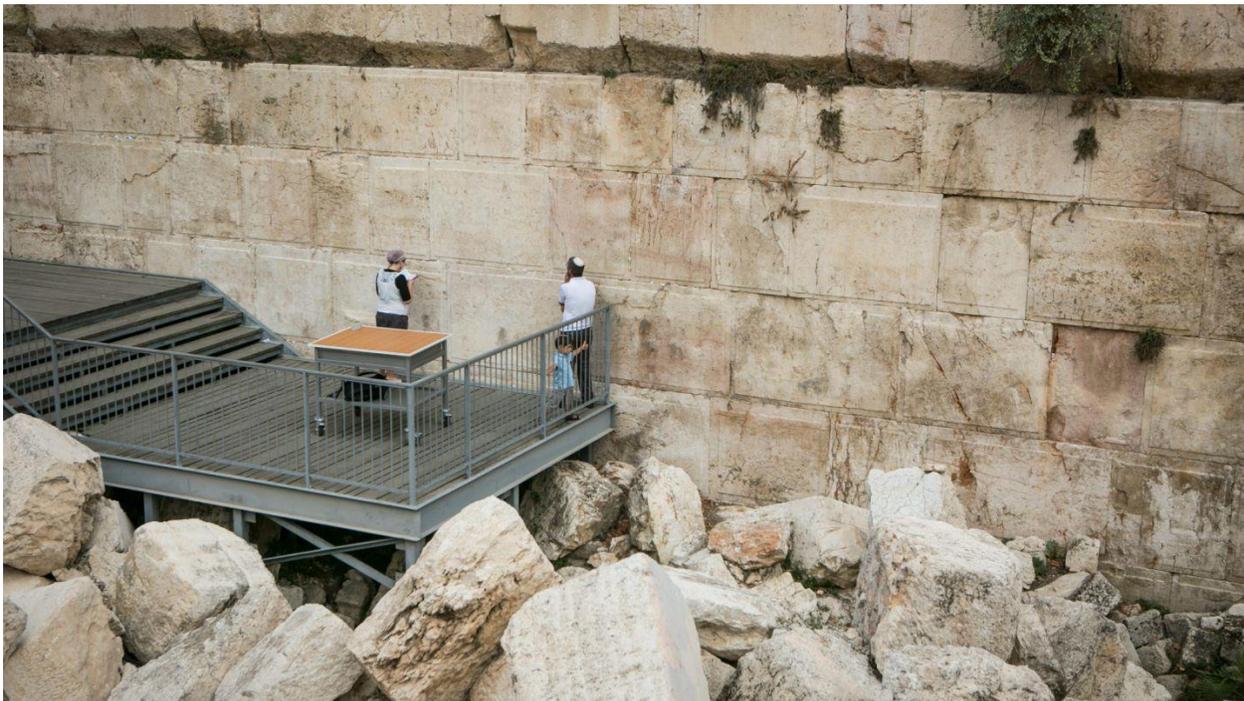
Anyone looking for reasons to oppose the new arrangement signed by the Women of the Wall organization, which states that they will be able to pray from now on in the archaeological park also known as the “Southern Wall,” will find them in abundance in the archives, in the words of Women of the Wall themselves.

In February 1996 attorneys representing Women of the Wall wrote to the committee appointed to find a solution to the dispute: “The assumption that there is no way to consider a solution at the Western Wall plaza is extremely unreasonable and discriminatory. The proposal to distance the women from the Western Wall plaza to other places is humiliating and painful, constitutes an order of expulsion from the Jewish People and is an attempt of sorts to turn them into an inferior brand of Jews.”

Women of the Wall director Anat Hoffman told Haaretz in 2003 in reference to the nearby Robinson's Arch complex that "even if it were a marble palace, it's still not the Kotel [Western Wall]." She later repeated that "nobody feels that it's the Kotel," and when the idea picked up speed, starting in 2013, Hoffman and her colleagues were quoted innumerable times, in Israel and the United States, citing the example of a bus. They weren't willing to accept the idea that they would be thrown "to the back of the bus," in other words, Robinson's Arch, "even if the air conditioner works better there."

The Robinson's Arch compromise has been on the table for exactly 20 years, and from the first moment Women of the Wall opposed it. They opposed it even when it became an official recommendation submitted to the government in 1998, even when the Supreme Court validated it in 2003, and even when Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky suggested a grandiose plan to turn the Southern Wall into the biggest ever Reform-Conservative synagogue.

Now this plan, somewhat more modest than Sharansky's, is becoming a government decision, with the consent of Women of the Wall. It is meant to put an end to one of the most fascinating basic disputes in Israel regarding freedom of worship, religion and about the state.



The platform at the Western Wall built at the behest of Naftali Bennett. Women of the Wall disparagingly refer to the space as "the sundeck." Michal Fattal

Not parking the bus

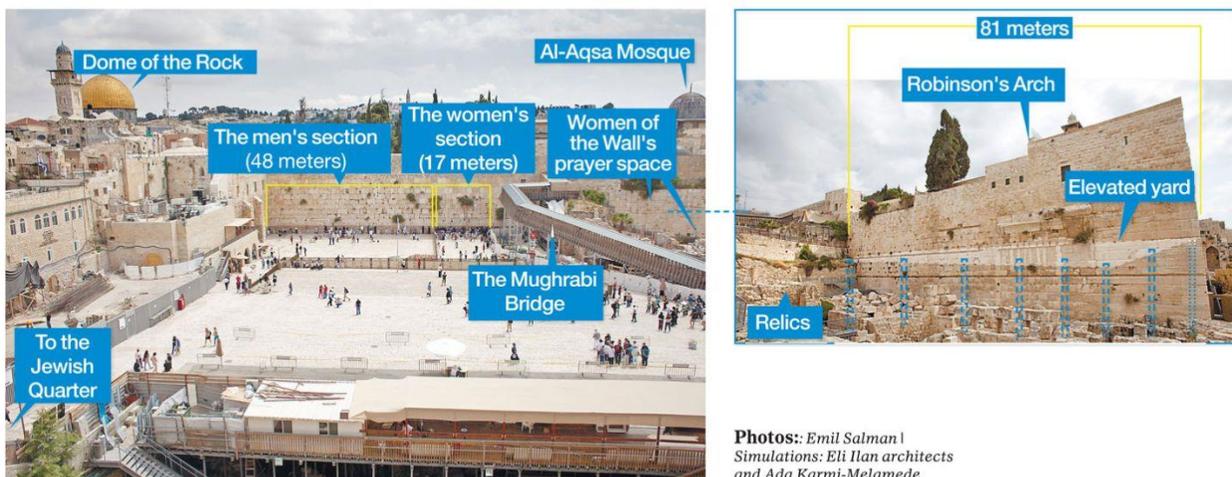
Of course, there is nothing wrong with people changing their minds, and in this case Women of the Wall had several good reasons for doing so, even if belatedly. The Southern Wall is a site no less sacred than the northern plaza, and in many senses is a more dignified, quieter and more

beautiful site, and Jewish history is strongly present due to important archaeological finds scattered there.

The present plan has been upgraded, with a new construction plan and including recognition of the women's status in the context of the statutory body that will administer the site. When Women of the Wall first petitioned to discuss the Robinson's Arch compromise, in 2014, during a split in the organization, they once again referred to the example of the bus, explaining that the situation had changed since then and now they were being offered a "private bus" of their own.

But the importance of the present arrangement is far more weighty than the issue of Women of the Wall, an organization with a few dozen regular worshippers at most. This is a first arrangement made by the State of Israel with millions of Jews the world over, mainly in the U.S., who are not Orthodox; every year tens of thousands of them come to Israel and are interested in visiting the Kotel or celebrating their son's bar mitzvah there. They are receiving historical recognition that will enable them to express the tradition of their Reform and Conservative mothers and fathers at the Kotel, 24 hours a day, all year round.

The customs of Reform and Conservative prayer are being recognized for the first time in Israeli law, a fact of ethical and symbolic importance that will probably not harm Israel in the opinion of American Jews, many of whom blame their alienation toward Israel on the contempt for their Jewish identity. Women of the Wall are therefore not the main issue of this compromise. All this means that the compromise regarding Robinson's Arch is the only reasonable compromise on the table – as full as it is with holes and shortcomings – and practically speaking, it also has quite a good chance of success.



Infographic by Haaretz

And still, we should not ignore a major problem underlying the compromise, based on a few lines from the government decision being approved Sunday: “In the northern prayer compound, prayers will be conducted according to Orthodox custom, based on the laws the Torah, which is practiced by the Chief Rabbinate, with separation between the women’s and men’s section, and with women’s prayer conducted according to this custom. On the other hand, the southern plaza is supposed “to provide a solution to worshipers from the various non-Orthodox denominations, primarily the Reform and Conservative denominations.”

No room for liberal Orthodox

This agreement assumes only two types of Jewish existence – on the one hand ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) and on the other non-Orthodox, namely Reform and Conservative. The former is defined by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, in other words a Haredi interpretation, and the latter is defined by the rabbinical schools in the U.S. This arrangement ignores everything in the middle, or anything that is not covered by definitions that to a great extent have lost their validity on both sides of the ocean.

The Israeli Chief Rabbinate is Haredi, and not all Orthodox people accept its authority, not to mention secular Jews. On the contrary – in recent years it has been clear that it is losing its legitimacy even among a growing number of members of the religious public, and there is now also a considerable group of Orthodox rabbis who have crossed the boundary of despairing of the rabbinate and its stringencies and offer avenues that bypass the rabbinate in areas including marriage and conversion. Today the Israeli government is making it clear to them that it considers them transparent.

This is not the first time that the liberal Orthodox community is losing out when the Reform and Conservative Jews receive recognition. Since the Supreme Court recognized Reform and Conservative conversions conducted abroad, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has had a free hand to demonstrate hostility toward Orthodox rabbis from abroad only because they are not Haredi, and there are other innumerable examples of the Jewish absurdity of the State of Israel.



Women pray at Western Wall Plaza, July 8, 2015. Lesley Sachs

Now, with a wave of a government decision, any possibility that women and men will be able to pray at the Kotel in a manner that does not suit the Haredi interpretation has been erased. What will happen for example when an Orthodox woman wants to recite the Mourner's Kaddish for her dear ones in the women's section? According to a large number of halakhic authorities (on religious law) this is permitted, but the Chief Rabbinate, which by government decision will be the determining body, rejects it.

The government decision refers to Women of the Wall, a group of several dozen women, and ignores a far more important movement that exists today in Orthodox Jewry, which aspires to reduce the inequality between men and women in the context of halakha or halakhic conversion. As a result of this aspiration, for example, hundreds of 12-year-old girls in Israel and worldwide choose every year to celebrate their bat mitzvah by reading from the Torah and having an aliyah (being called up to the Torah). There is no place for them in the northern plaza of the Kotel, not now and not in the foreseeable future.

Of course, we can't even mention having a woman as a prayer leader in the northern plaza, which after all is what the entire battle is about, but the arrangement legitimizes everything belonging to the category of the "status quo" at the Western Wall. This includes the modesty inspectors who are posted at the entrance to the women's section, or another small infuriating fact, which nobody talks about: The women in the territory of the rabbi of the Western Wall, Shmuel Rabinowitz, must make do with a women's section that is 17 meters in width, as compared to 48 meters for the men's section – 26 percent of the area for 50 percent of the Jews. Demands to change this distortion will from now on encounter a waving of the government

decision of January 31, 2016, to the effect that the Western Wall is Haredi territory that has no room for reforms, God forbid.



The Western Wall plaza in the Old City of Jerusalem, where a proposed office building and museum will be smaller than originally planned.