

Orthodox Women May Stand to Lose Under Sharansky's Proposal

If it is the sole solution to women's rights at the Kotel, an egalitarian section at the Kotel will ultimately make things harder for Orthodox feminists who are trying to assert their rights within a Halachic framework.

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Natan Sharansky recently put forth a proposal to renovate and extend the Western Wall plaza to include Robinsons Arch, thereby creating an egalitarian prayer space alongside the ones currently designated for men and women. As an Orthodox woman I am not egalitarian, nevertheless, I think creating space to include all the denominations comfortably at the *Kotel* is a positive thing, nobody should feel excluded from Jerusalem's holiest site. Despite that, I am very disappointed with what this proposal might mean for Orthodox women.

Though *Kotel* access and inclusion for the progressive denominations is an important issue, Sharansky was specifically charged with coming up with a solution in response to the escalating conflict surrounding the Women of the Wall. Though some people may conflate those two issues they are in fact separate and distinct and in this case it looks like the issue of denominational access has won out over women's rights. And what is even worse is that it is the women's hard work which enabled this victory and yet is coming at their own expense.

As an active Orthodox feminist I have invested years of my life to advancing women's rights within the framework of *Halachah*, studying at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education instead of seeking ordination from one of the liberal movements, working at the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, serving as an intern at Congregation Ramath Orah on Manhattans' Upper West Side, founding and leading various women's *tefillah* groups where women could be represented and share their voices without having to abandon their communities to do so.

I was also a huge proponent of Women of the Wall (WOW) for many years. I saw WOW as my sisters in Israel struggling for women's *Halachic* rights at the *Kotel*, the same way I was struggling for them here in America. Not a violation of *Halachha*, but a fight against patriarchal social norms that prevent me, and millions of other women, from actualizing our *Halachically* permitted potential. Anat Hoffman, in an opinion piece she wrote in the Forward in 2010 states

Simply put, our goal is to obtain the freedom to pray and to do everything that is *Halachically* permitted for women on the women's side of the *mechitzah* (the barrier between men and women). This includes reciting prayers together that do not require a *minyan*, and, yes, most of all, it includes reading from the *Torah*. At a minimum, we want to be allowed to pray at the Wall for one hour each month, free of injury and fear. This should not be a provocative request. If I wanted to mount a

provocation at the Wall, I certainly wouldn't do so by inviting a group of modestly dressed women — most of them devoted Orthodox Jews — to show up early in the morning to pray in a manner entirely consistent with *Halacha*. That some are provoked does not make us provocative. We have been waking up early to pray every Rosh Hodesh for the past 21 years — this is no fad, no political act. It is done for the sake of prayer. Over the past week a number of people have questioned the premise that an egalitarian section at the *Kotel* does not address the needs of progressive Orthodox women. In response I would say firstly that I should not have to leave a space or community that I am an active part of in order to assert the rights afforded to me by *Halachah*, as an Orthodox women in a de facto Orthodox space shouldn't my actions be a valid part of the greater whole that determines the status quo by which we set our norms? Secondly, *davening* in an egalitarian space is probably not seen as a *Halachically* viable option for most Orthodox women for whom an allegiance to *Halachah* is paramount to their other needs.

Thirdly, the proposed space is not a free for all space, even if a group of women wanted to get together within that proposed space and hold a women's *tefillah* group, not a *minyan*, I question whether they would be able to. I have enough liberal friends and have been exposed to the progressive denominations sufficiently to see that they too have a bias and I question if such a group would be welcome.

Fourthly, attempting to set up a women's only group in a larger egalitarian space, even if theoretically viable, would presumably be incredibly uncomfortable in terms of constantly having to explain that men are not welcome, that no *devarim she b'kedusha* may be said, that we are not a *minyan*, and that we toe a *Halachic* line which nobody else there does. And lastly, though the men at the *Kotel* and everywhere else may think that the *mechitzah* is there for them, in truth it is there for me as a woman. Or at least just as much for me as it is for them. I don't want men wandering around

in my prayer space any more than they want me wandering around in theirs, they serve as a distraction and interfere with my *kavanah*(concentration during prayer).

The first time I visited Israel, about 15 years ago, I *davened Shachris* at the *Kotel*, wore my *tefillin*, pulled my coat hood up over them, and didn't really think much of it. I got a few strange looks but was basically left alone. On a Friday night a number of years ago I can recall dancing at the *Kotel*, in a circle with a number of other singing women, after about 15 minutes one woman suggested we were getting a bit loud and disruptive, not the best feeling in the world, but a far cry from getting arrested or having a chair thrown at us. Today I would be terrified to wear *tefillin* at the *Kotel*. And I am honestly not sure if that is because of the rightward trend in Israel in general, or because WoW has politicized these actions to such an extent that at the *Kotel* there is now zero tolerance for them, maybe a bit of both.

Having experienced firsthand this shift what I wonder is this: if Sharansky's plan is implemented what will happen in the future when I go to *Kotel* with my *lulav* and *esrog* on Sukkos? In the past nobody has cared and women have even asked to shake it. Will I now be told to go to the egalitarian section if I want to *daven* with them? I won't even bother to ask about *davening* with my *tefillin* in the *women's* section, that ship has clearly sailed. My genuine concern is whether this plan, which asserts the rights of the liberal denominations, will ultimately lead to a backlash that completely erodes the rights women do have in the women's section today? And what will that mean for those of us who call the women's section home?

I understand the decision WOW made in supporting the Sharansky proposal, however in so doing they have chosen solidarity with the liberal denominations and have betrayed the Orthodox women, who were, and are, huge supporters of the organization and for whom an egalitarian section does absolutely nothing. In the frequently asked questions section of the WOW website, WOW says,

The women are Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and self-defined Jews. WOW is unaffiliated with any group, religious or political, and is the only group in the Jewish religious world that brings together Jews from across the religious spectrum for the purpose of prayer.

In accepting this compromise WOW has forged an alliance with the progressive denominations over their allegiance to the sisterhood of women, resulting in factionalism within their own support base and thus cannot assert that statement anymore.

An egalitarian section will do much to grant comfortable access to many people, but if it is the sole solution to women's rights at the Kotel, it ultimately will make things harder for Orthodox feminists who are trying to assert our rights within a *Halachic* framework. While this proposal may be a victory for many Jews I love, and I am joyful for them, it comes at the expense of my rights and my freedoms.