

## The Kotel compromise: Recognizing there is more than one way to be a Jew | Cover Story



*Rabbi Laura Geller journeyed to Israel with three North American missions from the Reform movement to honor the 25th anniversary of the Women of the Wall. Photo courtesy of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills*

Margaret Mead once said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” In the case of the recently announced historic victory regarding egalitarian prayer at the Kotel (the Western Wall), it was not just citizens. It was Jews from around the world who believe that there is more than one way to be a Jew. It was a small group of brave women — Orthodox, Reform and Conservative, native Israelis and immigrants, and the men who support them — who have been going to the Kotel for the past 27 years, early on the morning of Rosh Chodesh (the new moon), to pray together as a group.

For all those years, there has been abuse and sometimes violence from those opposed to women praying together in public. I have been a part of Women of the Wall over these years, whenever my travel in Israel coincided with Rosh Chodesh. Once, I had my *tallit* confiscated; once, my husband was the man who smuggled the *siddurim* past security; once, I stood on a chair holding an empty Torah mantle to protest the prohibition imposed by the Western Heritage Foundation against women reading from a Torah scroll. For 27 years, many Israeli and North American friends told me not to waste my time on this issue. After all, who really cares about the Kotel? They challenged me by arguing that worship at the Kotel is just a kind of idol worship and that there are more important issues of separation of religion and state, such as civil marriage, divorce and burial.

But ... I really care. This is very personal. I care about the invisibility of women. I care about the access of all Jews and Israelis to public space. I care that women's voices have been silenced when public celebrations and commemorations have taken place on the upper plaza just beyond the prayer sections of the Kotel. I care because these concerns, while just the tip of the iceberg, force people to pay attention to the crucial struggle for the separation of synagogue and state. I care because many of the next generation of American Jews will not be eligible to marry in Israel, because they would not be considered Jewish according to the ultra-Orthodox understanding of Jewish law now accepted in Israel. I care because people whom I have accompanied through conversion have been denied their right to make *aliyah*.

I care because I believe with all my heart that there is more than one way to be a Jew, and Israel, of all the places in the world, must be a beacon of religious freedom. That is what this struggle is ultimately about. That is why this issue has been so important to me over these past 27 years.

And it is personal ... because Anat Hoffman, founder of Women of the Wall, who has led the fight within Israel, is my friend. I have had the great privilege of bringing her to speak at Temple Emanuel over the past 20 years. The last time was a little more than a year ago, at Purim. She began her remarks by telling us all the ways she was different from Queen Esther. She didn't say, but could have, that she was closer to Queen Vashti, who stood up against patriarchal authority. But there is one important way in which Hoffman is exactly like Queen Esther: A woman who changed history because, when push came to shove, she wasn't afraid to do what was necessary.

Two years ago, when I was in Israel celebrating the 25th anniversary of Women of the Wall, our delegation met with Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel. He told us that Hoffman was a hero for two reasons: First, that during 25 years of serious abuse and threat, she and her colleagues never gave up. And second, that even at that moment of greatest political power, because the whole Jewish world was watching, she was willing to accept a compromise that recognized the voices of others who understand Judaism in a different way from how she does.

This week, the Israeli government agreed. The compromise proposal is the result of years of negotiating involving the Israeli and North American Reform and Conservative movements, The Jewish Federations of North America and Women of the Wall, along with Sharansky, Israeli Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mandelblit and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office. Among the decisions reached are: There will be one main transformed entrance for three sections — men, women and egalitarian; the plaza above the Kotel where national commemoration and celebration can take place will be free of gender-based discrimination; the new egalitarian section will not be under the control of the Western Heritage Foundation, but rather a council of representatives from Women of the Wall, The Jewish Federations, and the Reform and Conservative movements.

This level of recognition for non-Orthodox denominations is historic. Women's prayer groups will have full access to Torah scrolls. The office of the administrator of the Western Wall formally recognizes other

Jewish denominations, and there can no longer be criminal sanctions for not obeying “local custom” defined by the ultra-Orthodox. After its construction is complete, the new section will host visiting groups, including Birthright, dignitaries and private and public ceremonies.

The last time I prayed with Women of the Wall was Rosh Chodesh Av this past summer. Then, as at other times, the most moving part of the service for me came right after Hallel, as we read the prayer for Women of the Wall:

“May it be Your will, our God and God of our mothers and fathers, to bless this prayer group and all who pray within it: them, their families and all that is theirs, together with all the women and girls of your people Israel. Strengthen us and direct our hearts to serve You in truth, reverence and love. ... And for our sisters, all the women and girls of your people Israel: let us merit to see their joy and hear their voices raised before You in song and praise. May no woman or girl be silenced ever again among Your people Israel or in all the world. God of justice, let us merit to see justice and salvation soon, for the sanctification of Your name and the repair of Your world, as it is written: Zion will hear and be glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, over Your judgments, O God. And it is written: For Zion’s sake I will not be still, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be silent, until her righteousness shines forth like a great light and her salvation like a flaming torch. For Torah shall go forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem. Amen, selah.”

*For Zion’s sake I will not be still, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be silent until her righteousness shines forth like a great light, and her salvation like a flaming torch. (Isaiah 62:1)*

For Anat Hoffman and that small group of committed people who were not silent and would not rest over all these years, I am deeply grateful. They have changed the world.

There is more than one way to be a Jew... even in Israel.

*Rabbi Laura Geller is senior rabbi at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills; she was the first Reform female rabbi to be selected as the senior rabbi of a major metropolitan congregation, and in 1994 was honored with the California State Legislature’s Women of the Year Award.*