

Historic agreement on Western Wall ends long battle

Thursday, February 4, 2016 | by jta staff

Israel's government on Jan. 31 approved a compromise to expand the non-Orthodox Jewish prayer section of Jerusalem's Western Wall, putting to rest the decades-long fight between Women of the Wall and Israel's haredi Orthodox religious establishment.

The deal achieves what had been an elusive goal: an interdenominational consensus on Judaism's holiest site with official recognition. The non-Orthodox, egalitarian prayer section at the wall will become much larger and more accessible, and will be placed under the authority of a pluralist committee of non-Orthodox leaders and government officials. But haredi control of the Orthodox section will also be solidified, though non-Orthodox leaders have long protested that monopoly.

The size of the non-Orthodox section of the Western Wall will double to nearly 10,000 square feet — although it will only be half the size of the Orthodox main section just to its north.



The Western Wall in Jerusalem's Old City, with the Al-Aqsa mosque compound behind it, in October 2015. photo/jta-getty images-afp-ahmad gharabli

The Western Wall's haredi Orthodox management, called the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, also safeguarded its interests. Non-Orthodox leaders had campaigned for a share of control of the Orthodox section of the wall, but the Heritage Foundation will retain full authority over it and the larger plaza behind the prayer sections. And when the plan is implemented, Women of the Wall, the women's prayer group that holds monthly services in the Orthodox section, will move to the non-Orthodox section, one of the Heritage Foundation's long-standing demands.

"They all came to the conclusion that they must make serious compromises because they want it to remain one Kotel for one people," said Jewish Agency for Israel chairman Natan Sharansky, using the Hebrew term for the site. "It's the place that must unite us more than anything else, and

it turned into the most ugly war."

Plans for the non-Orthodox section's expansion, spearheaded by Sharansky, began in December 2012. In October of that year, police had arrested the Women of the Wall's chairwoman, Anat Hoffman, for wearing a tallit during the group's monthly service — an act that at the time was illegal at the site.

This week's agreement was negotiated among Women of the Wall, the site's haredi Orthodox leadership, the Jewish Agency for Israel, the Israeli government, and the Reform and Conservative movements. All parties praised the decision as path breaking.

"If and when this transition is complete, the new section will make way for great change," read a statement from Women of the Wall. "Women will pray at the Kotel as equals, as active participants and leaders in rituals, ceremonies and of course in reading from the Torah."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the deal "a fair and creative solution."

Not everyone lauded the deal. Moshe Gafni, a haredi Orthodox lawmaker who chairs the Israeli Knesset's powerful Finance Committee, said he would not recognize the decision.

"Reform Jews are a group of clowns who stab the holy Torah," Gafni said, according to Walla news. "There will never, ever be recognition for this group of clowns, not at the wall and not anywhere else."

A poll by the Ruderman Family Foundation released Jan. 31 found overwhelming Israeli support for accommodating non-Orthodox movements at the site. Four-fifths of Jewish Israelis said "all Jews, including Reform and Conservative, should feel that the Western Wall belongs to them."

The Israeli and American branches of both the Reform and Conservative movements also backed the deal.

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, CEO of Israel's Reform movement, said in a statement that the compromise is "just the beginning of our efforts to ensure that the Jewish State of Israel is indeed a state where all forms of Judaism are practiced freely and without state prohibition."

Kariv's counterpart with the Conservative movement, Yizhar Hess, said in a statement that the deal enshrines a legal precedent of ensuring non-Orthodox rights.

"The right to equality has received governmental recognition," Hess said. "From now on, solutions to arguments on issues of religion and state will require recognition of the legal right to freedom of choice."

The Jewish Federations of North America, which lobbied heavily for the compromise, said in a statement that it "sends a powerful message to Israelis and Jews across the diaspora about the permanent value of Jewish pluralism and about what we can do when we work together."

Local activists praise changes to prayer at Wall

Three local rabbis who have been heavily involved in the fight for egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall are praising the compromise deal announced on Jan. 31 — with some caveats.

"This is the first time that Israeli law will encode the legal presence and rights of non-Orthodox Judaism, and for that reason alone it's a significant victory," said Rabbi Menachem Creditor of Berkeley's Congregation Netivot Shalom, who co-founded Rabbis for Women of the Wall in 2010 and served as its international co-chair.



Rabbi Beth Singer of San Francisco Congregation Emanu-El dances with the Torah at a Women of the Wall service in Jerusalem in April 2015 photo/jta-flash90-miriam alster

While the compromise did not end discrimination against non-Orthodox forms of Judaism within the State of Israel, Creditor said, it did demonstrate the ability of the Reform and Conservative movements to work together, with other allies, to bring about "this incredible result for the worldwide Jewish people."

Rabbi Pamela Frydman, also a co-founder of Rabbis for Women of the Wall and its international co-chair for five years, has prayed with the group four times since she joined the cause — and she watches the monthly services live-streamed on the Internet.

"I'm very happy. It's an excellent compromise," she said of last weekend's agreement, adding that she wanted to "give a shout-out" to the Orthodox rabbis who lent their support.

Frydman, founding rabbi of Or Shalom Jewish Community in San Francisco, also noted that non-Orthodox rabbis are still not able to perform ritual functions within Israel, and not all of the Women of the Wall's goals were met.

But she applauded three important improvements the new system will bring: First, the one unified entrance for the Orthodox and non-Orthodox sections will give greater visibility to the egalitarian option ("The existing egalitarian section is so esoterically marked you have to know where it is," she said). Second, prayer shawls and Torahs will be provided in the egalitarian section for the first time. Finally, the new egalitarian section will provide an area for women-only prayer, which is important, Frydman said, because Women of the Wall includes Orthodox women who wish to pray with tallit and tefillin, which are now permitted, but also with Torah scrolls, which are not now permitted in the existing women's section.

"I believe pluralism won and the Orthodox won," opined Rabbi Beth Singer of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco. While many of the final details aren't known yet, she said, the fact that the Israeli government has earmarked a prayer section for non-Orthodox Jews "is momentous."

Singer, who danced with the Torah at the Wall last year at a Rosh Hodesh service, is involved in the cause through the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, one of the partners in the historic agreement.

Now that the agreement has been reached, she said, there's more to be done — and liberal Jews need to take action to enhance the stature of the future egalitarian section.

"It will be up to all of us to make it a holy place," Singer said. "We have to show up. We have to go there." — *sue fishkoff*