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THE JERUSALEM POST



The Western Wall (Photo by JWRP)

Western Wall deal hailed as historic victory for non-Orthodox

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LINDE
02/01/2016

“This is victory for the Jewish people - The promise of the Jewish state is that it will be the Jewish state of all the Jewish people, and the Kotel should be a space for all Jewish people to pray,”

The Women of the Wall organization, the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel and North America as well as political leaders in Israel and the Diaspora hailed the agreement approved on Sunday to formally designate a prayer area for non-Orthodox prayer at the Western Wall.

The Orthodox political establishment, in particular the haredi leadership, was, however, greatly angered by the recognition of the rights of non-Orthodox Jews inherent in the change, although they realized they were essentially powerless to avert it.

The proponents of the new arrangement alighted on a central theme, that the recognition of their rights would lead the way for them to demonstrate to Israelis en masse a different type of Judaism than they have been exposed to in the past.

“This is a historic day for Women of the Wall and women in Israel in general and anyone who thinks there is more than one way to be Jewish in Israel,” said Anat Hoffman, the chairwoman of the Women of the Wall and one of its most vocal and prominent leaders over the last 27 years of its fight for prayer rights.

“We are happy that the government of Israel took this first step to establish an egalitarian, pluralist and tolerant section to which all will be welcome. We will promise that it will welcome everyone with open arms and that no one will be harassed as occurs in the current plaza.”

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, the head of the Reform Movement in Israel, described the agreement as a compromise but nevertheless a historic moment in which the prayer services and customs of the

non-Orthodox denominations will for the first time receive official status and standing in Israeli law.

He described it as a crucial landmark in advancing the idea of Jewish pluralism in the country.

“This will be the best symbol that there is more than one way to be a Jew in the State of Israel,” Kariv told The Jerusalem Post.

“In the holiest place for Jewish people it will be legislated that there is an egalitarian, progressive place of worship, and this signals that such places of worship can spring up everywhere else around the country.

“We are in an ongoing battle for recognition of our communities and denominations, and this is a starting point for our legal and moral demand for full equality,” he said.

Kariv said that the WOW and the non-Orthodox movements had made a concession in allowing the main Western Wall plaza to be defined as an Orthodox prayer space, but said that WOW had been “brave” in taking this decision.

Jewish Agency chairman Natan Sharansky hailed the cabinet decision to approve the egalitarian prayer section as an “unprecedented” decision for Israel and world Jewry.

“It is the culmination of three years of an negotiations I conducted that were initiated by the prime minister to make the Western Wall ‘one Kotel for one people,’” Sharansky told journalists attending a Limmud FSU conference for Russian-speaking Jews in Los Angeles.

Sharansky said there had been ups and downs, including several crises, in the negotiations among Western Wall Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, Women of the Wall’s Hoffman, the Jewish Agency’s Jerry Silverman and leaders of the different streams of Judaism in the US, but that ultimately “a historic compromise” was forged.

“It is the most ancient synagogue in the Jewish world, and it must retain its importance to Jews all over the world,” Sharansky said.

Asked by the Post what he told the cabinet, Sharansky said he had reviewed the difficult negotiations with the sides.

“I said the most important point was that a big part and maybe a majority of American Jews identify themselves with the Reform and Conservative movements, and the fact that they cannot pray near the wall with the same prayer that they do in their synagogues is viewed by them as the refusal of the State of Israel to recognize them as a legitimate part of the Jewish people,” he said.

He argued that there was a growing interdependence between Israel and world Jewry.

“Jews in the Diaspora are increasingly dependent on Israel for strengthening their identity, but Israel, which is attacked every day and every hour by our enemies, and Jewish communities in the Diaspora are giving us their solidarity,” he said. “But they say, how come when we are

fighting every day against the delegitimization of the State of Israel, the State of Israel delegitimizes us?" Sharansky said it was very important to change this situation, and it was up to the cabinet to do it.

Jerry Silverman, president and CEO of the Jewish Federations of North America, said he was "thrilled" with the agreement, also describing it as a historic departure for Israel.

Silverman said it was a major step forward for Israel-Diaspora relations which have frequently been strained over prayer rights at the Western Wall.

"This is victory for the Jewish people," he told the Post. "The promise of the Jewish state is that it will be the Jewish state of all the Jewish people, and the Kotel should be a space for all Jewish people to pray in the way they want to pray."

Silverman praised Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for his commitment to finding a solution, as well as Sharansky and Hoffman in particular.

He added that pressure from the Diaspora was critical in bringing the issue to front and center of the agenda for Israel-Diaspora relations, in particular from the Reform and Conservative movements in North America.

Rabinowitz said he accepted the plan "with a heavy heart," and that the Women of the Wall had turned the Western Wall into a place of "constant fighting."

"The desecration of God's name this group and its supporters has caused is awful and will require many years to rectify," Rabinowitz said.

"My personal opinion on the issue is known: Prayer in general, and in particular at the Kotel, should be in accordance with Jewish law and the traditions of the Jewish people which has been transmitted to us through the generations."

Rabinowitz said he and the haredi leadership accepted Sunday's agreement because of "legal pressures" and the fear that continuing the battle would create "an even worse situation in the struggle which has broken through the walls of holiness and has desecrated the name of Heaven."

Haredi members of the government decried the agreement despite the fact that they had chosen not to fight against it. Senior United Torah Judaism MK and Knesset Finance Committee chairman Moshe Gafni railed against the non-Orthodox movements, saying they would never gain official recognition in the State of Israel.

"The Reformers are a group of clowns who stick a knife in the holy Torah," said Gafni, using the word "Reformers" as a catchall for all non-Orthodox groups. "There will never, ever be recognition of this group of clowns, not at the Kotel and not anywhere else."

Interior Minister and Shas chairman Arye Deri said before the vote that "the State of Israel runs according to traditional Judaism. This whole problem of the Reform and Conservatives has not existed in the State of Israel until now, and I have no intention that it will occur now. There is

nothing to compromise over here.”

Could you add in the following after the paragraph beginning "Kariv said that the WOW and the non-Orthodox movements..."

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), celebrated the agreement, saying it was the result of “the extraordinary commitment shown by those in Israel who wouldn’t agree to the second-class status imposed by the ultra-Orthodox religious establishment, and by all of us outside of Israel whose unconditional love for our Jewish State compels us to tirelessly advocate for a more equal, pluralistic, and Jewishly vibrant Israel.”

Rabbi Steven C. Wernick, the CEO of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism in the US, emphasized the unprecedented new partnership between the government of Israel and the non-Orthodox movements.

“We’re now partners with the government in the maintenance of a national, religious, historical site and this is tremendous, it’s a huge accomplishment,” he told the Post.



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