

Israeli Government Approves New Egalitarian Prayer Space at Western Wall

After years of negotiations, non-Orthodox movements will be allowed to hold mixed prayer services for women and men at Judaism's holiest site.

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Reform Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson (with an empty Torah scroll left) and Women of the Wall board chair Anat Hoffman right at the Western Wall. Joan Roth

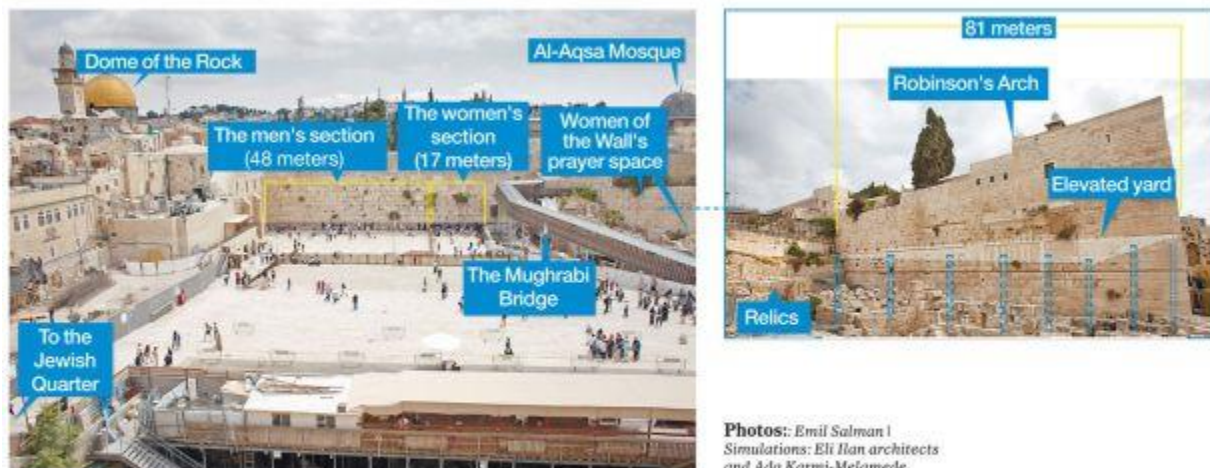
By a vote of 15 in favor and five against, the government on Sunday approved a long-awaited plan to create a new area by the Western Wall where the Conservative and Reform movements will be allowed to hold mixed prayer services for women and men. The ministers who voted against the plan, which has been hailed as historic, were all Orthodox.

The new 900-square-meter section is not expected to be fully functional until a few months from now, at the earliest. Under the agreement, this egalitarian prayer section will be located at the southern expanse of the Western Wall. A temporary platform set up there two years ago by former Religious Affairs Minister Naftali Bennett will be removed, and in its place, a permanent and much larger multi-level structure will be built.

The agreement stipulates that the existing gender-segregated prayer areas and the new mixed prayer section will be accessed by a common entrance. The new prayer section will also enjoy equal visibility.

Women of the Wall, a multi-denominational feminist prayer group, has agreed to move its monthly service to the new mixed section as soon as it is functioning. Under the terms of the new agreement, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the current custodian of the Western Wall, will no longer control the area known as the "upper plaza" situated outside the official prayer areas. As a result, it will now be possible to hold official national ceremonies in this area where men and women can sit together and women can sing.

Rabinowitz said that since the Women of the Wall, which he called "a marginal and impassioned group," began what he called its "media activity," the Western Wall has been transformed from a "unifying and uniting place" into what he called an arena for unceasing confrontation.



Infographic by Haaretz

"The desecration of God's name that this group and its supporters have caused is terrible and will require years to repair," he stated, adding: "Prayer in general and at the Western Wall in particular needs to be in accordance with Jewish religious law [halakha] and Jewish tradition handed down from generation to generation." He concluded his statement by affirming: "The Western Wall will continue to be open to every worshiper, both male and female, at every hour of every day with respect and devotion to Jewish tradition and Jewish heritage of which the Western Wall are clear symbols."

The new agreement does not explicitly ban women from wearing prayer shawls and tefillin in the traditional segregated area once the new plan takes effect. It stipulates, however, that in the

existing sections that will remain under Orthodox control, prayer regulations will be governed by the Orthodox interpretation of *halakha* (Jewish law) and by “local custom,” as defined by the Chief Rabbinate. Since these terms are open to interpretation within the Orthodox movement, it is not yet clear whether women will be allowed to continue wearing prayer shawls and tefillin – practices shunned by the ultra-Orthodox – when they pray in the segregated women’s section, as Women of the Wall have been doing until now.

The Reform and Conservative movements, as well as Women of the Wall, welcomed the new agreement, while acknowledging that reaching a compromise with the ultra-Orthodox authorities required some painful concession. For example, under the original plan unveiled by Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky three years ago, the new prayer area was supposed to have been a contiguous extension of the existing prayer areas, equal in size as well. Under the agreement hammered out in recent weeks, the non-Orthodox movements and Women of the Wall reneged on their demand that the new section be a copy of the existing prayer areas.

Calling the decision “groundbreaking,” Rabbi Gilad Kariv, executive director of the Reform movement in Israel, noted that this was the first time the government of Israel had provided official recognition to the pluralistic movements. “Once and for all, the government has put an end to the ultra-Orthodox monopoly at the Kotel and has determined that at this most holy site for the Jewish people, there will be more than one way of praying and connecting to Jewish tradition,” he said.

In a joint statement, leaders of the world Conservative movement said they were “thrilled to witness our efforts resulting in recognition of the diversity and pluralistic nature of the Jewish people, as well as the legitimacy of the Conservative and Reform religious streams.”

Yizhar Hess, the director of the Conservative Jewish movement in Israel, called the move “historic,” saying that “the right to equality” has received government recognition. From now issues such as conversion and marriage and kashrut will all have to be approached based on “the simple, basic and natural fact that there is more than one way to be Jewish.”

Signed by movement leaders in the United States and in Israel, the statement said: “Twenty-five years in the making, the decision brings us measurably closer to the simple, basic fact that there is more than one way to be Jewish and that there should be ‘One Wall for One People.’” The Conservative movement leaders noted that they were the first to support the creation of an alternative space for the non-Orthodox movements and have consistently made use, at their own expense, of the archeological excavation known as “Robinson’s Arch” in the southern expanse of the Western Wall for prayer services and bar- and bat-mitzvah ceremonies.

Under the terms of the agreement, the new prayer area will qualify for government funding and be operated by a council comprised of representatives of the government, the Reform and Conservative movements, the Jewish Agency, the Jewish Federations of North America, and Women of the Wall.

Negotiations over the agreement were overseen by outgoing Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mendelblit, who this week takes up his new position as attorney general. Intense efforts were made in recent weeks to reach an agreement before he moved on.

The original Sharansky plan, announced in April 2013, followed months of clashes at the Western Wall between ultra-Orthodox worshippers and Women of the Wall activists. Under pressure from leaders of the Conservative and Reform movements in the United States, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu assigned Sharansky the task of resolving the ongoing controversy over prayer at the Western Wall.

The decision to enter into negotiations with the government over a plan that would require the feminist group to move its monthly prayer service out of the women's section was opposed by several of the initial founders of Women of the Wall, who consequently left the group.

In a statement, Women of the Wall lauded the new plan as “the first step to women's full equality and empowerment at the Western Wall – the holiest site for Jews and a public space in Israel.” The group said that the creation of a third egalitarian section “sets a strong precedent in women's status in Israel – women as administrators of a holy site, women as leaders, women as an influential force not to be ignored or silenced.”

By contrast, a leader of the dissenting group, which is named Original Women of the Wall, said she and her fellow activists had no intention of abandoning the women's section. “We are not going to take any orders from the Chief Rabbinate about how to pray,” said Shulamit Magnus.

Also expressing deep reservations was Dr. Hannah Hashkes, a member of the Executive Committee of Rabbis at Beit Hillel, a progressive Orthodox group. “It's very nice that they've understood there's more than one type of Jew in the world, but this agreement provides no solution for Orthodox women who want to continue praying in the gender-segregated area – but not according to the dictates of the ultra-Orthodox,” she said. “Beyond that, the Western Wall is supposed to be one united holy site for the entire Jewish people, while this agreement turns it into a collection of synagogues for different movements.”

Hiddush, an organization that promotes religious freedom in Israel, expressed mixed feelings about the deal. “The Reform and Conservative movements, as well as Women of the Wall, should be applauded for agreeing to the difficult concession of creating a new prayer space in order to calm things down,” said the organization's executive director, Rabbi Uri Regev. “But it should be clear that this was a painful compromise. While liberal Jews will be forced to move over to Robinson's Arch, the ultra-Orthodox continue their occupation of the traditional Kotel.”

Voting against the plan at today's weekly government meeting were Interior Minister Arye Dery, Health Minister Yaakov Litzman, Religious Services Minister David Azoulay, Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel and Immigrant Absorption Minister Ze'ev Elkin. The ultra-Orthodox parties have traditionally opposed granting government recognition to non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.