

RELIGION

New Western Wall Rules Break Down Barriers For Jewish Women

Updated February 6, 2016 · 10:26 AM ET

Published February 6, 2016 · 9:12 AM ET



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Within the current prayer area, to the left of the wooden bridge, a division between the men's and women's sections is marked by a barrier. The new prayer space will be to the right of the bridge.

Emily Harris/NPR

Israel made a decision last week that supporters are calling game-changing. Men and women will be allowed to worship together at the holiest place where Jews can legally pray. This could lead to other changes in Israel.

Batya Kallus, who helped negotiate the deal that led to the government decision, is jubilant.

"This is groundbreaking," she says. "We've reconceived what the Western Wall includes."

That's a big statement. The Western Wall is historic; all that remains standing of an ancient Jewish temple complex. In the heart of Jerusalem's Old City, it's considered the holiest place in Judaism where Jews are legally allowed to pray.



Batya Kallus, 59, helped negotiate the deal that led to the government decision to create space where women can pray alongside men.

Emily Harris/NPR

Prayer rules there are set by an Orthodox government rabbi. That means men and women worship separately at the Wall. Women have not been allowed to pray aloud, use a Torah scroll or wrap themselves in prayer shawls as men can.

Kallus, 59, belongs to Women of the Wall, a group with roots in the American feminist movement that has protested these policies for decades. Now, in a new prayer space at the Wall, those rules will not apply.

"Any Israeli who wants to be with their family, to connect with the spiritual experience of being near the Western Wall can come and be fully welcomed," says Kallus. "And with government funding."

In her eyes, that's perhaps the biggest breakthrough.

"The fact that there's now government funding, and there's separate but equal in the spaces means that what we did around prayer at the Western Wall can equally apply to marriage and divorce, which are all today controlled by religious law, not by civil law."

That's Orthodox religious law. Reform and Conservative movements, popular in the United States, are tiny and unofficial in Israel. Even among secular Jews there's a joke: The synagogue I don't go to is Orthodox.



The future egalitarian prayer space will be built here, replacing a temporary platform and reaching all the way to the Wall.

Emily Harris/NPR

Kallus, a dual U.S.-Israeli citizen, believes the government recognition of only one denomination of Judaism alienates many American Jews.

"The fact is the state of Israel needs the support of the Reform and the Conservative movement, American Jews," she says.

Americans were involved in the negotiations to create a government-supported egalitarian prayer space.

A statement issued by the Worldwide Conservative Movement called the decision historic, "conveying official government legitimacy on religious streams other than Orthodox" and recognizing the "diversity and pluralistic nature of Jewish people."

But the rabbi of the Western Wall, Shmuel Rabinowitz, blamed the "fringe and

vociferous" Women of the Wall group for creating "incessant quarrels" at a sacred site.

He says he was relieved that would end with the new space.



MIDDLE EAST

Women In Prayer Shawls Detained At Judaism's Holiest Site

Separated from the current prayer area by a smaller old stone wall, the area that will become a government-funded egalitarian prayer space has been used by the Conservative movement for more than 15 years.

The plan is to rebuild it to accommodate more people, provide better access for prayer directly next to the wall and make various ceremonial items including Torah scrolls available for anyone to use.

Women who wish to pray separately, but outside Orthodox rules, will be able to set up a small, temporary barrier.

Kallus says part of the deal was to make the space high profile.

"One of our demands was that there be a grand entrance," she says. "That it be a place that is very visible, welcoming."

If Jews see choices at the Western Wall, she says, that will shape their understanding of Judaism.

But another religious Jew says these choices undermine unity.



Leah Aharoni founded an organization to try to keep prayer at the Western Wall unchanged. "I don't feel insignificant, no matter what prayer practices I adopt," she says.

Emily Harris/NPR

Leah Aharoni is a business consultant who focuses on helping women entrepreneurs. Like Kallus, she is an immigrant. Born in Russia, she only began practicing Judaism as a teenager in the United States. Aharoni moved to Israel at 18, and practices Orthodox Judaism now. She says she does not find it restrictive.

"As a devout woman, I don't find shortage of ways to become close to God," she says. "I don't feel insignificant, no matter what prayer practices I adopt."

She founded an organization to try to keep prayer at the Western Wall unchanged. It's a place Jews can come together in tradition no matter how they pray elsewhere, she says.

"And I think Jewish unity is the most supreme value that we need to preserve as a people," she adds. "Because otherwise we would just stop being a people."

The new prayer space, showcased by a revamped entrance to the Western Wall area, could be built within a year.

western wall israel

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