

What's So Holy About the Western Wall Anyway?

The farcical agreement over cloning the Kotel has taken the debate over the future of Judaism to a parochial and demeaning place.

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The area where the new egalitarian prayer space will be built at the Western Wall.

A battalion of faceless trolls, funded by shadowy billionaires, were on high alert this week. They were ready to fire off angry emails and tweets from their sticky keyboards, the moment the government approved the agreement on prayer space allocation at the Western Wall. Every time a news organization reported on the deal, describing the wall as “Judaism’s holiest site,” a salvo was launched. No! It isn’t the holiest! That’s the Temple Mount, you ignorant anti-Semites!

Like most trolling, it is a pathetic argument that only the naive or those who have nothing better to do with their time engage in. No one has a holiness Geiger counter which beeps louder when crossing through Mugrabi Gate. But at times this week, reading and listening to the public debate in Israel and the Diaspora over the agreement, it felt like respectable rabbis and veteran activists from both sides had themselves become trolls. Whether they called it a “historic victory” or a “terrible desecration,” no one seems to have accurately described what has been agreed upon.

The bottom line of the deal brokered by former cabinet secretary and now Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit is that, having failed to agree on a degree of tolerance toward diversity and

progressive forms of Jewish services within the Western Wall enclosure, the government and Jewish Agency are now going to spend 35 million shekels (about \$9 million) building a second Western Wall plaza to the south, to be used by the heretics. The Kotel is so special, so holy, so unique that all we have to do to settle the fight is clone it! A year from now, we'll have two Kotel. Mind you, neither of them will be Judaism's holiest site.

What is holy to us anyway? It's not a theological question – atheists and agnostics can have holy places as well. Why is a place holy to us? For all the news generated over the years by the indefatigable campaign of the Women of the Wall, at no point did more than a few dozen Israelis turn out on the first day of each Hebrew month to show solidarity. Even in Israel, with its rather weak tradition of environmentalism, you get larger numbers than that when the contractors try and build on a rare, pristine waterfront. Maybe the holiest place in Judaism is Jerusalem's Gazelle Valley? How about Palmachim Beach?

Whatever the Western Wall means to you, its true historical importance has been obscured by political and religious mythology.

The massive retaining walls built by Herod around the Temple compound are not the actual Temple walls. Jews began praying at the current location only from around the early 16th century when, under the Ottoman Empire, Jerusalem began to spread in that direction and it became the most convenient spot at the foot of the walls. Also at that time, the Muslim population was using the area next to the southern wall as a cemetery. The Midrash says that “the Shekhina (divine presence) has never left the western wall.” However, it isn't referring to today's Western Wall, but a wall that was long since destroyed and built over by Romans, Persians, Mamluks or Ottomans.

Before Jews began praying at today's Western Wall around 500 years ago, in the 1,945 years since the Temple's destruction they congregated at other sections of the Wall – when the various occupying powers allowed them – and, when possible, on Temple Mount itself (as Maimonides is supposed to have done).

I'm not writing any of this to detract from the current centrality of today's Wall in the Jewish consciousness. It's just to say that the consideration of where to pray – on the Mount or beside one of its walls – was always a matter of political circumstance and convenience, not holiness.

There's a myth that Jews fought and died for the Western Wall. It's a myth because it never happened. In 1948, the battle was for the Jewish Quarter in the Old City, the oldest enduring presence of Jewish life in Jerusalem, not for the Wall. The defenders were murdered by local Arab armed gangs and then the occupying Jordanian army.

In 1967, recapturing the Jewish Quarter was never part of original operational plans, which focused instead on the Egyptian front. The fighting in Jerusalem began in response to Jordanian shelling of the Israeli side of the city, and the reserve units stationed on the “dividing line” first fought for other locations. When the Paratroopers Brigade finally entered the Old City, the Jordanians had fled – the casualties were nearly all from previous battles and skirmishes outside.

Is it worth dying, and killing, for a wall? I suppose that depends on how you see life. But there is certainly no Jewish religious commandment to endanger one's life to reach the wall. Last October, when the current rash of stabbings began, the Gerrer Rebbe – Rabbi Yaakov Alter, leader of the largest Hasidic group in Israel – ordered his followers not visit the wall until the violence dies down. The Haredim are very brave when it comes to pushing around a few women who want to pray at the Wall according to their own Jewish belief, but a few Palestinian youths with kitchen knives is another matter.

Personally, the Wall fascinates me for its historical resonance and contradictions, and the discoveries constantly being made in the tunnels beneath it, which reveal intriguing details of life and death in the oldest Jewish city. It also disgusts me for the empty nationalism and ultra-Orthodox fanaticism that has become part and parcel of its reverence, and its rabbi who won't allow women to pray there holding a Torah scroll but will make sure he's in the frame whenever a visiting Hollywood celebrity stops by for a photo opportunity. But that's just me. It can mean whatever anyone wants it to mean.

What depresses me about the agreement, though, is how meekly the leaders of “progressive” Judaism have accepted it. Not only because they, in effect, basically agreed to the continuing dominance of the fanatical rabbinical establishment at the Wall, in return for future promises of their own wall. But also because, in doing so, they have allowed the crucial debate on what it means to be Jewish nowadays to boil down to a squabble over holy real estate.

It is particularly dispiriting that the Reform and Conservative movements, whose American leadership should value the importance of keeping state and religion apart, are rejoicing over what they're now calling a “historic recognition” by the State of Israel of the non-Orthodox streams. It isn't that and, even if it was, since when was it the business of the state to recognize what people choose to believe in? Victory will be achieved on the day the State of Israel legislates civil marriage and frees its citizens from the need to have an Orthodox rabbi recognize us as Jews so we can be allowed basic civil rights.

Instead of leaving the arguments of what and where is holy to the trolls, we have all now descended to their level.