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The Wall of Disputes

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By ARIEL PICARD

King Herod, builder of the mountain on which the Second Temple stood and the walls that held it up, aroused disputes and quarrels walls in his lifetime and in his death. Even now, 2,000 years later, a part of his magnificent building still stands and continues to shape our conflicted identity.

The Israeli government's decision to change the layout of the Kotel plaza and create a space for egalitarian, mixed-gender prayers and ceremonies, once again sets up the Western Wall as a microcosm of today's Jewish existence. All of the conflicts, disputes, and quarrels that shape our world are gathered together in one small area.

The Western Wall and the mountain above it symbolize the greatest and most dangerous conflict between Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians. The Temple Mount is the most explosive place in Israel, and maybe in the entire Middle East. All of the contradictory and conflicting aspirations of Jews and Muslims are concentrated in that one place.

The Jews who come to the Wall and the Temple Mount represent different worldviews about redemption. Those who look for the Messianic activism that would build the Third Temple on the mountain here and now, call it "the retaining wall" of the holy mountain. Many of them regard with contempt Jews who pray "outside" and "down" and do not strive for a complete redemption and the rebuilding of the Temple.

Others, on the contrary, regard the Wall as a necessary barrier preventing people from going up. For religious, halakhic, or political reasons they pour their hearts out at the Wall and do not ascend the mountain. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel has posted a sign at the foot of the ascent to the Mughrabi Gate, exactly between the old and the new plaza, prohibiting Jews from entering the Temple Mount.

As for the plaza, it used to be small. Immediately after the Six Day War, the State of Israel destroyed the Mughrabi neighborhood and evacuated its Arab residents, in order to build a plaza large enough to contain all the Jews wanting to visit the Wall. The gate's name is the only reminder left of the neighborhood and its residents.

Today's plaza is divided into two, and then into two again. The part closest to the Wall is under the rabbi of the Kotel's authority. It is a prayer space with a clear separation between men and women, according to Orthodox doctrine. The other part, which is separated and

elevated from the prayer area, is used mostly for military ceremonies and VIP parking. Usually, this fragment is full of tourists from all over the world, listening to explanations about the place where they are standing. Thus, this huge plaza reinforces distinctions between men and women, and between holiness (prayer) and secularity (military ceremonies, tourists).

With this new government decision, the Western Wall is now the only place in the Jewish World where the debate between Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations overtly materializes, as well as the rift between Israeli Jews and the Jews of the world, because the representatives of liberal American Jewish organizations have been integral in administering the decision.

This new plan renders two different governmental authorities responsible for the two different plazas. The northern, old plaza will be managed by the rabbi of the Kotel and the holy places, according to the Chief Rabbinate's policy, while the new, southern mixed-gendered plaza, by the prime minister's office itself.

This creates yet another example of an anomaly unique to Israel, where religion and state relations are held by different legal authorities: the Chief Rabbinate and the other government institutions. It is important to note, though, that the rabbinate is subordinate to the State, and therefore, the government's pronouncement does not require the Chief Rabbinate's approval, even as it did, indeed, object to the decision.

Never before has there been a more accurate demonstration of the complex situation of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Forget the textbook on citizenship; bring students to the Western Wall. There they will realize what kind of world they are living in, and ask them this one question: After all of this, is it still possible to pray in this place?

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