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THE JERUSALEM POST



Women of the Wall. (Photo by SHANA MEDLER)

A new vision of Kotel future: Part one

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RAS

01/31/2016

As a member of Women of the Wall, I look forward to a time when we have a beautiful and welcoming prayer space at the Kotel.

Looking back at the past five-and – a half years of my life in Israel, a significant part of it has been invested in the fight for my religious rights at the Kotel. It seemed that we had won a significant victory in 2013, when the Sobel ruling said that Rabbi Rabinovitz did not set the minhag of the Kotel and that women could pray together with tallitot, Tefilin and with a sefer Torah but that victory was never really complete.

An organized group started filling the Kotel bodies to deny us a place to pray. An organized group used any means necessary including throwing bottles and hot water on us and blowing shrill whistles to prevent us (and anyone else at the Kotel) from praying. The Western Wall Heritage Society refused to uphold the law and prevented us from bringing in a sefer Torah – and sometimes siddurim – to prevent us from having a proper Tefilla.

And during this time, we were told that if we refrained from wearing Tefilin, or bringing in a Torah, or even showing up at all on Rosh Hodesh the Haredim would become accustomed to the new idea and it would eventually quiet down. The riots stopped since the negotiations began – that was a concession that we demanded – but the Sobel decision has never been fully enforced.

So when the government asked us to join in negotiations, at the end of 2013, with other Jewish movements (Reform/Progressive, Masorti/Conservative, The Federations of North America, and the Jewish Agency) over the creation of a third section of the Kotel, we first had to decide if we would ever consider leaving the women's section. This is something we never considered before because there was never any other place at the Kotel for us to pray. The southern wall was never set up as a proper prayer space or for women's only prayer. We never had a viable choice.

We met, we argued, we cried, and the majority agreed we should at least talk. Many of us felt that if we were not part of the negotiations, a third section could be built that would not meet our

needs. Many of our board members believed that we could have a place of leadership in bringing about great changes for women in Israel and in the Diaspora. But some of our board and some of our founders and supporters believed that we should not even consider ever moving from the women's section that led to a very painful rift that has not healed.

Before we could agree to sit down and talk with the government, we had to look deep into ourselves and find what our vision of the Kotel future could be. So we brainstormed and came up with some key points of what we believed the Kotel should be. We believed that the Kotel is a national historic site and that the upper plaza should be able to be used for national and military events that are not gender separated and where women can be seen and heard. The Haredization of the upper plaza in recent years has disenfranchised most of Israeli's from the Kotel and we wanted that to change.

We wanted one entrance to the Kotel with three choices for prayer. We wanted there to be equal grandeur and visibility. We wanted there to be governance outside of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation and an adequate budget.

But most of all, we wanted to show all the Israeli children who visit the Kotel every year, that there are choices in Judaism. We wanted to show girls that they can become a bat mitzvah at the Kotel. That women can fully participate in Judaism and that they had a voice. That 10 percent of the population did not control how one is Jewish in Israel.

We wanted not just a place at the table but an equal share of the table.

The agreement that was voted on and approved this afternoon is a road map. One that we hope is achievable. There are clearly opponents who want to strangle any chance of this historic agreement from succeeding. Only time will tell if these commitments are kept.

As a member of Women of the Wall, I look forward to a time when we have a beautiful and welcoming prayer space at the Kotel. Until that vision is complete, we will continue to pray in the Women's section and continue to struggle to pray with a Torah scroll.



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