

Is the Kotel Deal Merely a Fig Leaf For Rabbinic Tyranny?

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Image: Getty Images

The historic Kotel Agreement represents laudable progress in Israel's stormy sea of religion, state and politics. Credit is due to the many partners who labored hard for three years to bring this about. The details have been widely covered, but it remains to be seen whether it will be fully implemented. Considering Israel's murky political landscape, it may turn out that it was easier to sign this important document than to implement it. Already we [read](#) that Shas's Minister of Religious Services, David Azoulay is refusing to cover the agreement's costs. In addition, three other relevant Israeli cabinet ministers have also refused to provide funding from their budgets.

The Israeli government has been sending conflicting messages regarding the status of the non-Orthodox streams in Israel - one for external consumption, abroad, and one for domestic Israeli policy. When Netanyahu speaks with Diaspora Jewish leaders, he voices his support for pluralism, while the

persistent discrimination and denial of key religious freedoms and equality within Israel continues to degrade. Netanyahu will undoubtedly point to this agreement as proof of his commitment to religious diversity, as expressed most recently at the 2015 General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America, where he declared: “all Jews - Reform, Conservative and Orthodox - will feel at home in Israel!” We must not allow this Western Wall compromise to serve as a smokescreen for the ongoing religious discrimination in Israel.

So, while we celebrate, it is important to remember that the issue of prayer at the Kotel is only one of many in the arena of religious freedom. Its impact on Israeli citizens is relatively limited. In other areas changes have usually been for the worse. The tyranny of the Rabbinate over marriage and divorce is ongoing, denying hundreds of thousands of citizens the right to family and denying women their right to equality and dignity. So is its rejection of modern Orthodox conversions, not only the non-Orthodox alternatives. The freezing of funds designated for pluralistic educational initiatives, the discriminatory recalcitrance regarding appointing women to religious councils, the surrender to the ultra-Orthodox who refuse to serve in the IDF, the non-implementation of core curricular studies in state funded Haredi schools...these and many similar issues make up Israel's religion-state landscape.

Netanyahu is only able to remain in power by trading the core values of freedom of religion and conscience, human dignity, and equality in return for the religious parties' votes. Yet, the massive American Jewish pressure on Netanyahu to end the discrimination against women's minyanim and non-Orthodox egalitarian worship at the Kotel has been effective. It is the real reason for this historic shift. It underscores the underestimated potential of bringing about fuller realization of Israel's founding promise for religious freedom and equality. We see once again that coordinated efforts between Diaspora leaders and like-minded Israeli activists and organizations, generating constructive pressure on Israel's policy makers, can be an effective tool for change. This is as encouraging a lesson of the Kotel saga as the merits of the agreement itself. But for the sake of Israel, Jewish unity, gender equality and religious diversity, we do not have the luxury of sitting back and relishing in the achievement of the Kotel agreement.

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