

After Kotel compromise, dramatic changes still needed | Cover Story



Rabbi Uri Regev

There is much to rejoice over when considering the details of the Kotel compromise agreement. For the first time, there is going to be a section of this ancient site open to egalitarian and non-Orthodox worship alternatives, as well as partnership and women's *minyanim*. It's the first time that non-Orthodox representatives will be appointed as part of a governmental authority overseeing such an important site. It presents an option for the general public other than the Charedi-controlled Kotel area.

With all of this significant progress in mind, we should also recognize that, until it reaches full implementation, there will be obstacles and much time elapsing. Moreover, the painful sacrifice involved is mostly on the part of Women of the Wall (WOW) and the non-Orthodox movements that are now removed from the historic Kotel site — a move WOW leadership has fiercely criticized in the past, and which some of its members, as well as many Modern Orthodox women who are not part of WOW, resent because it denies them their free religious expression without their consent and without consulting them. Furthermore, the compromise cements the ultra-Orthodox control over the historic Kotel section while giving their challengers a section behind a tall partition, which was never under Orthodox authority.

The key concern, though, is over the larger challenge of religious freedom and equality in Israel. The celebratory messages expressed by the parties to the agreement will undoubtedly be used by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a demonstration and actualization of his promise “to ensure that every Jew will feel at home in Israel,” while in truth it avoids addressing the real issues that impact the lives

and dignity of so many Israeli and Diaspora Jews. So, as welcomed as the Kotel compromise is, it must not distract world Jewry from the need for dramatic changes in Israel in such critical arenas as freedom of marriage and divorce, who qualifies as a Jew, and state-sanctioned, religiously based gender discrimination.

Stanley P. Gold, chairman of Hiddush — Freedom of Religion for Israel, pointed to an important lesson to be drawn from this change in Israeli governmental policy. Namely, that Diaspora — and especially Jewish-American — pressure is an effective vehicle when applied in partnership with Israeli activists and organizations to bring about changes to the problematic alliance of religion, state and politics.

“It should encourage us,” Gold said, “not to treat Israel as if it were some delicate china doll, too sensitive to touch, let alone criticize.

“On the contrary,” Gold continued, “the progress made over the Kotel should convince our fellow communal leaders that we need to further engage in the religion-state clash, and that Israelis need our support and partnership in advancing the Jewish state’s own core founding principles of religious freedom and equality for all.”

Rabbi Uri Regev is president of Hiddush — Freedom of Religion for Israel, an organization fighting for religious freedom in Israel.