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## The two Kotels solution: Cheer it with a grain of sadness

by Shmuel Rosner  
23 hours ago

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Tourists walk by part of the Western Wall, following the Israeli government's approval to create a mixed-sex prayer plaza near Jerusalem's Western Wall to accommodate Jews who contest Orthodox curbs on worship by women at the site, in Jerusalem's Old City January 31, 2016. Reuters/Amir Cohen

I am taking a short break from US election coverage. It is caucus day in Iowa, where I'm currently staying, and nothing means much until we have the results tonight (read my three latest stories from Iowa: [Sanders and Israel: Please say something](#), [Des Moines Diary: Duped by Trump Power?](#), [Des Moines Diary \(2\): Are you interested in the rest of us?](#)).

I am taking this break to write about the "historic" compromise in the Kotel (the Western Wall) that was [passed by the Israeli government](#) on Sunday. The details are simple: a second platform in the Kotel area will serve as a place for non-Orthodox Jewish expression – mixed prayers, family gatherings, women with Tefilin, you name it. This area will not be controlled by the rabbinate. It will have its own management of Jews sympathetic to the cause. It will present Jews – Israelis and non-Israelis – with an alternative, an option. A market economy of Kotel attendance. Two competing products from which to choose.

Indeed – the decision is "historic" in some ways. The government recognizes Jewish "streams" other than the Orthodox, it gives them official status in governing part of the Kotel area, it funds their effort

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to make this area attractive, even competitive, with the other area – the Orthodox Kotel.

Indeed – the decision justifies a moment of celebration, as rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Reform movement, encouraged on his [Facebook page](#). Maybe even more than a moment of celebration: A long and frustrating process has been concluded (theoretically speaking – implementation could always prove trickier than making a decision). A grievance has finally been remedied by the Israeli government. The compromise should be celebrated, and applauded. It was “the right thing to do,” as Natan Sharansky [says](#). The right thing, and not a minute too soon. Alienating Jews – making the Kotel less appealing to Jews, making Israeli Judaism less appealing to Jews – benefited no one. Not even the Orthodox establishment. Now Israel has a plan that could potentially improve a situation that has become untenable.

The plan is really a compromise in two ways. Firstly, because it is not a victory for one side or the other. Secondly, because it is an arrangement that is not all positive. It is a necessary compromise not just between Jewish streams or between the Israeli government and non-Orthodox Jewish streams; it is also a necessary compromise of ideals with certain Jewish realities. One set of ideals – Jewish unity, joint Jewish celebration, Jewish coherence – was pushed aside to make room for another set of Jewish ideals – pluralism, free expression of religious values, variety, choice.

Orthodox grumbling is understandable: The Haredis did not want the government of Israel to give Reform and Conservative Jews this seal of official recognition. They also do not want – and this is surely coming – to see Israeli and non-Israeli Jews abandon the old Kotel for the new, shiny, more accommodating site. Some of them [use harsh language](#), even [unacceptable language](#), as they make their fears public. The language should be condemned – especially when it comes from members of the cabinet – yet the sentiment should be respected: these people feel that the compromise threatens the future of the Jewish people.

Non-Orthodox grumbling is understandable: the old Kotel – that is, for many Israelis, the “real” Kotel – is going to remain strictly Orthodox. And it is not at all clear that visitors to the Kotel will be willing to forgo the historic site for what many would surely see as an artificial invention. And the rabbinate will further tighten its control over the areas over which it retains responsibility.

There are also other people grumbling, notably Feminist Orthodox women: they wanted a women minyan at the old Kotel, and they will not have it. The old Kotel will be Orthodox, Haredi style. The new Kotel will be progressive, Reform and Conservative style. Orthodox Feminist women have no solution. Other Jews who are neither Orthodox in the rabbinate mode nor Reform or Conservative have no solution. As my friend Yair Ettinger of Haaretz [succinctly put it](#) yesterday: “This agreement assumes only two types of Jewish



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existence – on the one hand ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) and on the other non-Orthodox, namely Reform and Conservative.” Today’s Israel has a lot more than these two types to offer. In fact, the two-type model is gradually becoming obsolete (and with it, the traditional division of Israelis into “religious,” “traditional,” and “secular”).

And of course, there are those for whom no decision that this government reaches seems reasonable. If this government made such a decision – it must be bad.

And there are [those for whom](#) compromise is worthy of its name only if the other side is subjected to total capitulation.

Yet in spite of all these complaints, we ought to cheer the compromise. Cheer it – with a grain of sadness. No good action comes without a price. And in this case, the action itself is the reward and the price. The compromise tells us some good things about the Jewish world – with all of its shortcomings, it is still capable of conversation and is capable of finding a solution to complicated, highly charged problems.

But it also tells us some bad things about the Jewish world: We have become so polarized that we have to separate even in the holiest, most symbolic place. We have become so insistent on our own ways that we can no longer tolerate the other in our midst. The two Kotels solution is not that dissimilar from the two state solution – an arrangement of separation between two groups that find it difficult to live in a shared territory (except, of course, for the fact that the two Kotels solution is achievable, while the two state solution seems to be more elusive).

No one should underestimate the price that Israel and the Jewish world pay for such solutions. When I was growing up in Israel, it had only one TV channel. It was hardly a sufficient solution for people looking for entertainment – but it made Israeli society coherent, because everybody was looking at the same thing at the same time.

When I was growing up in Israel there was also just one Kotel. And now, since it is hardly a sufficient solution for people looking for Jewish spirituality and meaning, there is no choice but to add a second Kotel. To let us have a choice. But as we aim to expand our variety, as we compromise and separate and pluralize, as we strive to have a choice – do what we ought to do – one should still wonder about the unintended and undesired consequences of choosing to become two.

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