

Making History at the Kotel

By RABBI ANDREW SACKS \ 01/31/2016

For many years a Masorti minyan prayed quietly in the back of the Western Wall Plaza on Shavuot and on Tisha B'Av (in addition to smaller minyanim throughout the year). In 1999 we were violently attacked by a large mob of zealously Orthodox Jews who, as reported in the media, threw stones, bags of milk, and even soiled diapers. The police escorted us out of harm's way but no charges were brought against those that rioted.

Recognizing that we all have a right to pray in keeping with our customary practice, that the Kotel belongs to all of us, and that violence is not to be tolerated, the then Cabinet Secretary, Yizhak Herzog agreed to allow the Masorti movement to daven in the southern area of the Western Wall. He provided us with our first Sefer Torah to be used at the spot. We were restricted in terms of the days and times we were permitted to pray. The first year there were about twenty minyanim. Last year some nine hundred.

In those days the Reform movement was not interested in joining the fight to daven at this spot. Women of the Wall were carrying on a separate but parallel fight, which we supported, to allow women to daven with Tallit, Tefilin, and Sefer Torah in the woman's section of the Kotel. Both of those groups came on board. With the exception of a small group who took on the name "Original Women of the Wall" all of the major pluralistic groups were determined to push the government to recognize that there is more than one way to daven. Three years of negotiations ensued. There were times when all seemed lost. But Natan Sharansky, the leadership of the Masorti/Conservative movement and the Reform Movement (both here in Israel and abroad), and the leadership of WoW persisted. So did Avichai Mandelblit, the outgoing cabinet secretary.

So what does all of this mean? It means that there will be a respectful and esthetic place in front of the Kotel for those who wish to pray in keeping with Masorti, reform, and other customs. It means the State of Israel will provide Sifrei Torah, prayer books, and other religious items. It will mean access that is 24/7 with guards, ushers, and staff to guide those who request help. It will mean that when Israeli school children, or Diaspora youth groups come to visit they will no longer need to separate into two groups. It will mean that the IDF, and the new immigrants, will be permitted to hold ceremonies in the Northern Western Wall plaza where women will no longer be barred from participation and women in the IDF choir may once again sing along side of the men. It means that upon entering the Kotel area each person will clearly see that there are three genuine options – men's section, women's section, and a section for all.

For those of us who have been involved in the negotiations it is exciting to see our efforts bear fruit. There is now recognition of the diversity and pluralistic nature of the Jewish people. The legitimacy of the Masorti and Reform religious movements is now real in the eyes of the Israeli government.

But all of this pales with regard to the true importance of this day. The Israeli government has, essentially for the first time, recognized the status of the Masorti and Reform movements as official. They shall provide funding. They shall sit on a joint body together with representatives of the denominations and of WoW, with the head of the Jewish Agency as Chair, to carry out policy for the new prayer area. This may send a signal to all Israelis that the non-Orthodox denominations – be it here in Israel or abroad – cannot be ignored and cannot be denied. And, it is my hope and prayer, that this is but a start to the realization that there is more than one way to live Jewishly.