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THE JERUSALEM POST



One journey for one people

Men of the Women of the Wall pray behind the
Wall in the new prayer plaza, Jerusalem, Feb. 18, 2016.
(Photo by: MAAC ISRAEL SELLEM/THE
JERUSALEM POST)
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02/18/2016

Instead of pushing for a Pyrrhic victory that would have split our paths, they chose the only possible way to preserve the Wall as one symbol for one people.

The recent agreement over prayer at the Western Wall, which the Jewish Agency helped broker, has met with criticism from all sides. Some on the religious Right object saying that allowing non-Orthodox prayer at the Kotel undermines Halacha and threatens to sow religious division.

Others on the progressive Left argue that whatever recognition non-Orthodox Jews obtained is trivial and concedes too much power to the government to arbitrate religious expression in the first place.

Indeed, the solution we reached – which will create a prayer plaza at the Wall's southern section to be managed by Women of the Wall, the Reform and Conservative movements, and the government, under the leadership of the chairman of the Jewish Agency – required serious concessions from all sides.

Women of the Wall had to forsake its main demand for a share in the currently active section of the Wall. The Reform and Conservative movements had to accept that their new plaza would not, at least for the time being, be equal to the Orthodox one in size and grandeur. And the Orthodox establishment had to relinquish its monopoly over the official management of religious affairs in Israel and accept that non-Orthodox denominations will run their own section of the Wall under a different authority.

Why, then, if the solution required such wrenching concessions, did the parties nevertheless agree to it? The reason, I believe, is that through three long years of negotiations over this issue – which were lead with great skill and patience by then-cabinet secretary Avichai Mandelblit, with the full support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – all of the parties came to understand precisely what was at stake.

Women of the Wall may see the Orthodox religious establishment as an entrenched, archaic institution; the rabbi of the Wall may see these feminist activists as a small band of shrill provocateurs. But the negotiations showed that each group expresses the wishes of large parts of our Jewish family. Thus if any one group succeeded in fully achieving its aims, a great many who disagreed would feel disconnected from one of their people's most powerful sites – and with it, perhaps, from the Jewish people itself.

The Kotel is a singular symbol of Jewish peoplehood: a reflection of our ancient history, an embodiment of our national renewal, and a focus of our religious longings.

Everyone who wants to be a legitimate part of the Jewish family expects to have legitimate place there. In a way, the Kotel symbolizes the Jewish journey itself, a journey that started when we left Egypt together, and continues to this day. Our ability to preserve the Kotel as the unifying symbol of the whole Jewish people is indicative of our ability to continue our journey together into the future.

The Kotel doesn't simply symbolize our joint heritage: for many of us it served as a door into the millenia-old journey. The year was 1967, and a picture of a young Israeli soldier standing by the newly reclaimed Kotel, his eyes alight with wonder and awe, changed my life and that of many other Soviet Jews. Thanks to the victory that this image represented, our neighbors behind the Iron Curtain began to eye us with newfound respect. At the time I was 19 years old and almost completely assimilated, but for the first time in my life I realized I was not alone.

I belonged to a brave family, one whose endeavors and victories far away affected me as well. I could find inspiration in this family's glorious past to struggle against the regime that repressed me, and I could count on the help of my newfound brothers and sisters in that fight.

Nineteen years later, my path home ended where it began, at the Western Wall. On February 11, 1986, I found myself surrounded by well-wishers in Ben-Gurion Airport, clutching Avital's solid hand. "And now," she said, "we'll go to the Kotel."

Naturally, after passing from the Soviet Bloc to freedom in Israel in one day, I was exhausted. But my homecoming couldn't be complete without seeing the Western Wall, the same Wall I dreamed of through my long years of imprisonment. Only when I touched my forehead to the ancient stones, holding the Book of Psalms that in prison was my connection to Avital and to King David, was I truly home at last.

My journey started, then, when I realized it wasn't my journey at all: It was the journey of the entire Jewish nation.

We dissidents were well aware that there were disagreements and disputes within the Jewish family. As the unofficial spokesman of the refuseniks, I was in constant contact with representatives of Jewish organizations, and I watched, startled, as members of different groups chose to risk carrying their own copies of the same documents back to neighboring offices in New York rather than share the information and credit. But as long as we faced our external enemies, our disagreements were swept to the side: We were all marching out of Egypt together.

Once we defeated the Pharaohs of our age, however, our differences came to the fore.

The Jewish people's journey has always been both national and religious in nature, but over the course of our long exile the nation split into many communities with different religious characters. Now that we once again have our own independent polity, how can all of these communities join forces and share a vision of the future? How will we treat finite national resources such as citizenship, public spaces, and symbols? We cannot simply agree to disagree, for here in Israel the question is no longer theoretical; here our journey becomes concrete.

The Kotel represents both the ongoing necessity and the difficulty of this national project, and that is why, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu turned to me three years ago to explore solutions for the sensitive issue of prayer there, I knew that there was much more at stake than any particular division of space or responsibility. What was at stake was our shared future, and ultimately my negotiating partners understood this as well. When they chose to compromise to reach their historic solution, they chose to continue our national journey together.

Instead of pushing for a Pyrrhic victory that would have split our paths, they chose the only possible way to preserve the Wall as one symbol for one people, uniting us with both our revered tradition and all the different Jewish communities here in Israel and around the world.

I want to applaud my partners in the negotiations for this choice. Three decades ago, our joint national journey set Soviet Jewry free, and brought me and countless others to the Western Wall. Today, your commitment to the same millennia-old journey proves that the Kotel can continue to unite us. With the same commitment, we may be able to start resolving disputes over other shared assets: the entry way into the Jewish people (conversion), Israeli citizenship, and the Jewish public space.

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