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Cabinet approves 'historic' decision to create Western Wall egalitarian prayer space

By JEREMY SHARON
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WOW, Reform, Masorti movements say compromises were necessary, haredim vote against decision but did not fight to defeat it.

In what is being hailed as a historic landmark for Jewish pluralism and the non-Orthodox movements in Israel, the cabinet on Sunday voted to radically upgrade an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall and to anchor the arrangement in law.

Leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel and North America welcomed the agreement as a breakthrough in their struggle for recognition in the Jewish state and their campaign to present an alternative to Orthodox Judaism in Israel.

The haredi (ultra-Orthodox) leadership, however, along with parts of the conservative national-religious leadership, strongly denounced the agreement and voted against it in the cabinet vote, but did not fight against the arrangement or threaten to bring down the government.

The plan passed in the cabinet by a vote of 15-5. The nay votes were cast by Interior Minister Arye Deri and Religious Service Minister David Azoulay, both of Shas, Health Minister Ya'acov Litzman (United Torah Judaism), Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel (Bayit Yehudi) and Absorption Minister Ze'ev Elkin (Likud).

Following the vote, Eli Groner, the director-general of the Prime Minister's Office whom Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu selected to both oversee implementation of the plan and serve as the administrator of the committee set up to govern the new area, told The Jerusalem Post the plan should be viewed as "a practical compromise, not an ideological compromise."

The government is allocating some NIS 35 million for the construction of the new area, and also to purchase religious items – such as prayer books, Torah scrolls, arks, ark covers and prayer shawls – for the running of services there.

There will be no rabbi for the new area.

The source of some NIS 25m. of the budget has already been found, including NIS 5m. from the Prime Minister's Office, NIS 5m. from the Finance Ministry, and the rest from other government bodies. Groner will still need to come up with another NIS 10m. from other government ministries.

The plan adopted by the cabinet will see the current prayer platform for non-Orthodox prayers at the Robinson Arch area at the southern end of the Western Wall formally designated as a prayer space for non-Orthodox worship.

At the same time, the main Western Wall plaza as it is known today will be formally designated as a place for Orthodox worship.

All visitors will be able to visit any prayer section they wish, but will only be able to pray there in accordance with the designated customs at the site.

This means that once the egalitarian prayer section is complete in accordance with Sunday's agreement, the Women of the Wall organization will no longer be able to pray in the women's section of the upper Western Wall prayer site.

The egalitarian section will be governed by a committee headed by the chairman of the Jewish Agency, and will include representatives from Women of the Wall, the Reform Movement, the Masorti (Conservative) Movement, the Jewish Federations of North America and the government, with an administrator appointed by the prime minister.

The pluralistic nature of the egalitarian section and its governance will be established in law by changes that will be made to the Law of the Holy Sites (1981).

The current prayer space at the Robinson's Arch area will dramatically remodeled, upgraded and enlarged, will be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, will not entail any cost to enter, and will constitute a "fully functional and operational" prayer space with the requisite infrastructure, such as provide prayer books, prayer shawls, Torah scrolls, and other necessities for regular prayer services.

Prayer in the egalitarian section will be mixed gender but will include space for women's- only prayer as demanded by Women of the Wall. It will be fully accessible and visible to all visitors to the Western Wall from the main entrance to the site and within the site, another key demand of Women of the Wall.

There will not, however, be any signs in the site marking the upgraded prayer section as designated for egalitarian and pluralist prayer.

During the time it will take to upgrade the site and make the necessary changes in the infrastructure at the Western Wall site, Women of the Wall will continue to pray in the women's section of the main Western Wall plaza.

Once the changes are implemented and the provisions of the cabinet decisions anchored in the Law for the Holy Sites, Women of the Wall agree to move their services to the egalitarian section.

Under the terms of the deal, the current men's and women's prayer sections will remain under the authority of the administrator of the Western Wall and the Holy Sites, currently Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation.

However, the clauses in the Law for the Holy Sites that until 2013 were used to prevent members of the Women of the Wall prayer group from praying with prayer shawls and tefillin will be deleted.

The upper section of the main Western Wall site will serve only as a gathering place and a passage to the prayer sections, while also hosting national ceremonies. It will not, as WoW and the non-Orthodox groups wanted, be removed from the authority of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation which governs the main Western Wall plaza and prayer area.

Herb Keinon contributed to this report.



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