

Giving away the Kotel

ALDEN SOLOVY | FEBRUARY 5, 2016, 2:27 AM |

When did “separate but equal” become the goal of any civil rights movement?

When were civil rights leaders ever proud of trading one group’s rights for another?

When did Robinson’s Arch magically become “the Kotel”?

Sunday. That’s the day. On Sunday, the State of Israel, via the Prime Minister’s cabinet, blessed the creation of an enhanced egalitarian prayer plaza at Robinson’s Arch.

An [enhanced prayer plaza](#) at Robinson’s Arch is an important advancement. Control of that plaza by Progressive Judaism is a victory. Funding from the State of Israel — if it comes from the State — would be another.

At what cost?

The deal [plays into the hands of the Haredi extreme](#) by moving women’s prayer away from the Kotel. With the consent of the Reform and Conservative Movements, it legitimizes Haredi governance there. The cost is simply too high. Some observations:

- Proponents say that the deal represents critical political acceptance of non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel. Here’s the rub: it comes with accepting ultra-Orthodox rule over a national historic site. The Kotel shouldn’t be run by the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which the deal concedes. We’ll rue the day Progressive Judaism agreed to let a public treasure be controlled by the Haredi establishment.
- There’s already an egalitarian prayer plaza near the Kotel. The enhanced space will be in the same spot, [Robinson’s Arch](#), an archaeological park once declared unacceptable by those touting this deal. The enhanced plaza will share an entrance with the main Kotel plaza, but it’s behind the Mughrabi Bridge, separate and segregated. When did segregation — when did ‘[separate but equal](#)’ — become the goal of any civil rights movement?
- Progressive Orthodox women are [the losers](#). Rabbi Eric Yoffie, past president of the Union for Reform Judaism, wrote: “Many of those who originally joined Women of the Wall (WOW) were never interested in participating in mixed prayer, or in praying in any space other than the

women's section of the Kotel... These women are the losers of the process." When was any respected civil rights leader proud of trading one group's rights for another?

- Calling Robinson's Arch 'the Kotel' is an obfuscation, pure spin. Yes, this is the same external wall of the Temple Mount. When you say you're spending the day Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, it's understood that you're downtown, not on the South Side. Same street name; different meaning. Robinson's Arch has not been the focal point of our prayers for 2,000 years.

Robinson's Arch has its own special beauty. I've heard Eicha read there on Tisha B'Av for the past two years. A newly-stated goal of WOW, making Robinson's Arch into the new Kotel for a new age, is also beautiful. To be clear, I support the concept of a prayer plaza at Robinson's Arch. In this deal, however, the cost is too high.

When it's done, women's voices in prayer and Torah at the Kotel will [never be heard](#) there again. Silencing women has been the goal of Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovitch, administrator of the site, who declared that [women will not be allowed](#) to wear tallit and tefillin at the Kotel. We've become a willing partner in his tyranny.

Timing is everything

This has been a hard fight. Feminist proponents and opponents of this deal — women and men who've championed women's rights at the Kotel — have been harassed, threatened and arrested. We've earned a right to our opinions the hard way.

I know [these struggles first hand](#). I've been shoved, egged, kicked and called a Nazi in my years as a WOW supporter here. When I helped pass a *Sefer Torah* to WOW in April 2015, I was [physically brutalized while defending](#) the women's Torah reading.

It's been a stalemate at the Kotel for the past few years, a stalemate that favored Rabinovitch. Why should he budge? Why now?

It turns out that January 29 — the day pre-publicity for the deal appeared in the press — was the deadline for the State to respond to a private civil case asking the Supreme Court to enforce previous rulings giving women the right to pray with tallit, tefillin and Torah at the Kotel. As the deal was announced, the State was granted a one-month delay in responding. After three years of negotiations, what are the odds that undermining this case was part of the government's incentive to concluded a deal now?

What's at stake is American Reform and Conservative Jewish leadership [gaining a voice in the religious politic](#) of Israel. Sidelined as irrelevant throughout the history of the State, the real victory was being invited to the table. That's huge. Proponents see this deal as a watershed moment in both Israeli consciousness and governmental policy toward Progressive Judaism.

It's hard to fathom that giving up our claim to the Kotel is anything but reckless and optimistic.

Bye-bye, non-Jewish Jews

From a Haredi point of view, we went to the back of the bus. Women have been silenced. The non-Jewish Jews willingly left the Kotel plaza. They'll continue to believe that they can harass us out of the public sphere. We just agreed to let them do it.

Sunday may well go down in history as the day the split between Haredi and Progressive Judaism was officially sanctioned and enshrined in Israeli policy. A "Church of England" moment. Perhaps more fittingly: the division of Judaism into Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

It may be remembered as the day that Progressive Judaism sanctioned Haredi Judaism as the official religion of the Jewish state, yielding control of a national historic site to ultra-Orthodoxy.

The spin, however, is about forgetting.

When the hype ends, when women are silenced at the Kotel, after we've given away a national treasure, what we're supposed to forget is clear: this isn't what we were fighting for in the first place.

We were fighting for the Kotel.