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The Kotel Deal Isn't Good Enough

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Special To The Jewish Week



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When the Israeli cabinet voted 15-5 last month to approve a new egalitarian section of the Western Wall, it was hailed as a landmark decision, a triumph for the cause of religious pluralism in Israel. After years of struggle by Women of the Wall and other progressive Jewish groups against ultra-Orthodoxy at the Kotel, it was indeed a noteworthy milestone. My celebration of this important decision, however, was more muted than many of my Conservative and Reform colleagues.

The religious symbolism of the Kotel is undeniable. For thousands of years, it was a symbol of

destruction and exile, a "Wailing Wall." After 1967, that symbolism shifted to one of the triumph of the Jewish people in returning to our ancient land. The prayers shifted from lamentation to celebration of *bnai mitzvah* and other life-cycle events and daily *minyanim*. With its bustling religious life, the Kotel eventually became a kind of national Orthodox synagogue: not only a symbol of our ancient past, but now a symbol of the Orthodox character of Israeli state-sanctioned Judaism.

For many progressive Jews not identified with the non-egalitarian values of Orthodoxy, the Kotel began to symbolize the ossified and impenetrable nature of the ultra-Orthodox hegemony in Israel. Like so many aspects of the Jewish state, the Kotel became a politicized, religiously charged fetish, an idol of stone upon which we project our hopes and dreams, as well as our anxieties and betrayals.

With the recent victory for pluralism, it's not that the Kotel as we know it will change. It will remain an Orthodox synagogue. Now, however, progressive Jews will also worship in their own separate space a few yards away. Ultimately, this is not progress.

In the Mishnah (Avot 5:7) we learn about the ten miracles that were performed for the Israelites at the Temple. One miracle describes how when the throngs of Israelites were pressed together on the mount (on the very site that the Kotel served as a retaining wall), they miraculously had ample room for each individual as they fell prostrate in prayer. This miracle implies that the retaining walls – the Kotel itself – ceased in that moment to be impenetrable, immovable, and unyielding. Instead, the walls became flexible and alive, dynamic and accommodating. And in that flexibility, each individual Jew had the space to express his or her worship in a way that was appropriate. If the Kotel, along with the rest of the retaining walls, symbolized anything in ancient rabbinic literature, it was the opposite of an idol. It was an instrument that served human beings to help each individual feel welcomed and spiritually at home.

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The Women of the Wall, the Reform and Masorti movements and others all deserve to be applauded for their courage, dedication and sacrifice in bringing about a meaningful change at Judaism's holiest site. There is no doubt that this new section of the Kotel symbolizes an important step toward greater pluralism. That being said, a true victory for religious pluralism at the Kotel would look like a dismantling of all separate sections that correspond to conflicting movement ideologies. It would cease to be any kind of synagogue at all. It would return to what it truly is: a national treasure, a non-sectarian site where people from all over the world could come to reflect, to touch the Jewish past, and even to pray in any way that they see fit. The Israeli cabinet's decision was indeed a landmark toward pluralism at the Kotel. But we must not forget that we still have a long way to go. Let's not lose the dream of an Israel where the Kotel is not an end to itself, but rather a symbol of how being Jewish miraculously transcends the limits time and place; a symbol of how every human being is welcome in his or her own way to feel the presence of the Divine.

Rabbi Gil Steinlauf is senior rabbi at Adas Israel Congregation, the oldest and largest Conservative Synagogue in Washington, D.C.

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