

# We Progressive Jews Are Celebrating the Western Wall Deal but We're Not Naïve

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***A member of 'Women of the Wall' group during a monthly prayer session at the Western Wall, Jerusalem's Old City, 2013. Reuters***

Finally, a victory for religious freedom. Israel's government has decided to reconfigure the Western Wall, creating a space for mixed prayer services for men and women.

The leaders of this government are experts in demonstrating contempt for the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism, but this time they have done the right thing. In its own bumbling way, the government has proclaimed by its actions that all Jews stood at Sinai, and not just Haredim. They have approved a plan for the Kotel that actually nurtures the Jewish people everywhere.

Creating an egalitarian prayer space at the Wall is a small step, and in some ways a mostly symbolic one. But it is important nonetheless. Since what is done in one small area can be expanded to others, it creates a legal and administrative precedent for equality among the

religious streams. And it serves as a grudging acknowledgment by Israel's government that Diaspora Jews matter. Jews throughout the world have fought for these changes; they are Israel's partners, and they will not tolerate being told that their Jewish way of life does not count in the Jewish state.

Our celebrations should be restrained, but we should celebrate. At the same time, we should remember the lessons of this long, grueling battle that culminated in the cabinet vote on Sunday.

### **1. Never stop demonstrating**

Israel's government did not make this decision because it suddenly developed warm feelings about Reform and Conservative Judaism. It did what it did because of 25 years of non-stop demonstrations by a small group of Israeli women who gradually won the support and admiration of large segments of Diaspora Jewry. Women of the Wall were unrelenting in their struggle, and their Diaspora backers were equally determined. Ultimately, their pressure forced the government's hand, over the objections of an entrenched and corrupt Chief Rabbinate. And if future changes are to be made, nothing other than equally unrelenting pressure will bring them about.

### **2. Make use of the media**

After 20 years of heroic efforts by Women of the Wall, their cause suddenly gained traction. An important reason was the videos appearing on social media of women being dragged away from the Kotel for the crime of wearing a tallit, singing during prayer, or reading from the Torah. These videos generated anger, outrage, and disbelief among North American Jews. Those who had paid little heed to newspaper headlines could not ignore seeing davenning criminalized or watching jeering hoodlums in the men's section cursing and spitting at women at the Kotel.

### **3. Build coalitions**

The original supporters of Women of the Wall included traditional women looking to pray at the Women's section of the Kotel and Reform and Conservative rabbis who supported their efforts. This pairing was a bit bizarre; the traditional women were not interested in mixed prayer, while the Reform and Conservative women were. Nonetheless, the coalition stuck, and others joined in. The Jewish Federations of North America offered critical support. Individual philanthropists provided quiet backing. And Jewish feminists, whether part of the Jewish community or not, signed on as well. The result was that a small group of activists, who barely registered as a political force, found themselves at the center of a grand coalition that the government of Israel could not ignore.

#### **4. Acknowledge those who got left behind**

The government's action this week was a victory for a religiously pluralistic Israel, and I agree with all those who chose to support it. But as always, there are winners and losers.

The new space to be created at the Southern Wall is primarily meant to provide for egalitarian prayer, to which I am committed. Yet as noted, many of those who originally joined Women of the Wall were never interested in participating in mixed prayer, or in praying in any space other than the Women's section of the Kotel. Their intention was to pray at the Kotel according to their understanding of Orthodox practice, and to do so at set times so as not to disturb other traditional women who might interpret the Halakhah differently.

These women are the losers of the process. Indeed, part of the reason that the Chief Rabbinate has reluctantly gone along with the compromise is that while it provides mixed prayer at the new location, it returns total control of the women's section of the Kotel to the Chief Rabbinate. Those looking for women-only prayer at the Kotel in an innovative but halakhically-permitted manner are out of luck.

It is ironic that Reform and Conservative Jews win while non-Haredi Orthodox women lose. But the compromise is still a good one for the Jewish people, and as the battle for religious freedom continues, the needs of these Orthodox women will need to be addressed.

#### **5. Assume the government will attempt to evade its commitments under the deal**

The basic rule of "compromise" between the government of Israel and the non-Orthodox religious streams is that the government cheats, or tries to. It will promise money and not deliver. It will promise action and not act. It will delay, delay, and delay, with one excuse after another. And when the Haredi representatives in this very rightwing government block implementation of the plan, secretly threatening to bring down the government, few voices, if any, will challenge them. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, who heads the Reform movement, has wisely pointed out that diligence is essential in assuring that the plan is carried out.

In short, there is much to do. The real battle has just begun. And in reading the reactions of Haredi ministers to this deal, I am aware that the misogynists and bullies who have governed the Wall for years are still there, and must be fought.

Still, the State of Israel has taken a small step of sanity, suggesting that it values all forms of Judaism and all Jews. And for this, we should all be grateful.

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