

MIDDLE EAST

Netanyahu Criticizes American Jewish Leaders Over Western Wall Protest

By ISABEL KERSHNER NOV. 2, 2016

JERUSALEM — In a sign of a growing rift, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu criticized American Jewish leaders on Wednesday as a struggle over a stalled plan for equal prayer rights for both sexes at a Jerusalem holy site erupted with mutual recriminations and a tumultuous protest led by liberal rabbis wielding Torah scrolls.

Mr. Netanyahu's rebuke came as he was battling international moves that have belittled or ignored historical Jewish connections to sacred sites in Jerusalem's contested Old City. Wednesday's events underscored the deepening discord between the Israeli authorities and many Jews abroad.

In an unusual statement after the early-morning protest, Mr. Netanyahu's office accused the liberal Jewish leaders of causing "unnecessary friction" and of "the unilateral violation of the status quo at the Western Wall."

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, which has its headquarters in New York, countered that the liberal leaders were "not going to quietly wait and wait" for the promised egalitarian prayer space, and that they had engaged in "an act of spiritual disobedience."

The Western Wall, the holiest place where Jews can pray, has become the crucible of a fight over rituals and a sense of belonging. Together with their Israeli counterparts, North American Jews, who overwhelmingly identify with the liberal, non-Orthodox Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism, have challenged the

strictly Orthodox authorities who enforce the traditional practice at the site, in which scores of Torah scrolls are restricted for male use.

With Orthodoxy dominating many other aspects of Jewish life here, many liberal Jews abroad say they feel increasingly alienated from Israel.

After years of negotiations, the rancorous dispute over the wall was supposed to have been resolved in January, when the Israeli government approved the creation of an upgraded egalitarian prayer space where men and women would be allowed to worship together. Liberal Jews hailed the decision as historic at the time, but the government has failed to advance the plan because of opposition from the ultra-Orthodox parties that Mr. Netanyahu relies on for his governing coalition.

Frustrated by the lack of progress, and with a petition pending before Israel's Supreme Court, non-Orthodox rabbis and lay leaders defied traditional convention by marching to the Western Wall holding 14 Torah scrolls. Despite some violent pushing and shoving by orderlies and ultra-Orthodox counterdemonstrators, they broke through the security barriers.

Activists with **Women of the Wall**, a Jewish feminist group that has for decades fought the male-dominated establishment for equal prayer rights in the sacred space, held a prayer service with the scrolls at the women's section of the wall. The non-Orthodox rabbis then led a joint egalitarian prayer service in the upper plaza, where men and women read from the Torah.

Anat Hoffman, a founder of Women of the Wall, said, "It felt like a miracle, but this should be our reality every day."

Shmuel Rabinowitz, the Orthodox rabbi of the Western Wall, condemned Women of the Wall in a statement, saying he felt "shock and pain" over the morning's events and accusing the group of "degrading" Torah scrolls by passing them from hand to hand like cheap objects.

The statement from Mr. Netanyahu's office chastised the non-Orthodox leaders and noted that the prime minister had asked them a day earlier to engage in quiet

dialogue rather than public protests. The “unfortunate incident” at the Western Wall “undermines our ongoing efforts to reach a compromise,” it said.

Rabbi Steven Wernick, the chief executive officer of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, said it was “inappropriate” to say that the prayer gathering was a violation of the status quo because the current status quo “delegitimizes the rights of Jews around the world.”

He added: “We will continue to advocate and lobby and educate and negotiate with the government. Our goal is to get the government to implement its agreement.”

Rabbi Jacobs, of the Union for Reform Judaism, said the American leaders had so far “heard nothing specific” from Mr. Netanyahu regarding the advancement of the agreement.

“It is stuck,” he said. “There is no sense that another week or month, or frankly another year or two years, would bring a resolution.”

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