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Jewish Women vs. the Jewish State

By LESLEY SACHS JULY 1, 2017

TEL AVIV — In 2012 I was arrested for the first time. I was 54 years old — a mother, an executive and a leader of my community. My crime? Praying while wearing a tallit, a Jewish prayer shawl, at the Western Wall. My father, an immigrant to Israel of German descent, never got a parking ticket. He would have rolled in his grave if he knew his daughter was being cuffed and fingerprinted by the Israeli police.

In the years since, I have been arrested on four other occasions for the same crime. So have my friends — other members of Women of the Wall, the feminist organization I lead — which for the past 28 years has defied fundamentalist religious decree by wearing prayer shawls and reading the Torah, rituals traditionally restricted to men, at the Western Wall at the beginning of every Jewish month.

In January 2016, it seemed that our civil disobedience finally paid off: The Israeli government announced that it would create a new egalitarian area at the Wall where men and women would be free pray together and practice non-Orthodox rituals. But earlier this week, the government reneged on its promise. I'm girding myself for many more trips to the police station.

It's hard to explain the absurdity of this situation to people who are unfamiliar with religious reality in Israel. Despite the fact that the vast majority of Jews in Israel and around the world are not Orthodox, in Israel, Orthodoxy has a monopoly on Judaism. The Chief Rabbinate (all male and all Orthodox) controls all religious aspects of a person's life, cradle to grave — a baby's circumcision, a bride's prenuptial education, a wedding, a divorce, a burial. It also controls the country's

holy sites, including the Western Wall, the only remnant of the ancient Jewish temple, which was recaptured by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War. Judaism doesn't have a Mecca, but the Western Wall is the closest thing to it.

What does that control look like? First, it means that the prayer area is divided into a men's and women's section; the women's section is far smaller. The partition that divides the two is seven feet high and "modesty regulations," enforced by security guards and ushers paid by the Western Wall Heritage Foundation and controlled by the Western Wall rabbi, are medieval. Women are given rags to cover their pants, and sleeves to cover their elbows. The same guards expect women to pray silently so that their voices don't send men on the other side into a sexual frenzy.

The National Menorah, where Hanukkah candles are lit in a televised ceremony (like a Christmas tree lighting) stands at the men's section. Only men can light it. Women, be they politicians or Supreme Court Justices, are forbidden to do so. When Tzipi Livni was Minister of Justice (2013-2015), she was sent to light the candles elsewhere.

The fact that this is the religious reality for women in a country that prides itself on being a bastion of liberal ideals in an illiberal neighborhood is unacceptable. It's also an untenable situation for a country that is the homeland of the Jewish people. The Jewish people come in all different religious stripes, and American Jews, critically, are overwhelmingly non-Orthodox: Only one in 10 is Orthodox. For the majority of Jews to feel at home in the Jewish homeland, they can't feel like they are invisible — or worse, punished for praying according to their custom.

All of this is the reason Women of the Wall, the Reform and Conservative movements, and the Jewish Federations of North America entered into negotiations with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's representatives beginning in May 2013. The process was painstaking and demanded sacrifices from both sides, but ultimately we struck an agreement that the Western Wall rabbi signed off on.

The agreement called for an egalitarian prayer plaza, south of the traditional prayer area, in a place called Robinson's Arch. Here, families would be able to worship together, girls could read from the Torah for their bat mitzvah and women wouldn't be forced to pray quietly. The agreement also called for an independent

governing body to oversee this egalitarian prayer plaza, with its own regulations, budget and policies.

The greatness of this agreement was that it didn't take anything away from anyone. It created an entirely new space, keeping the status quo at the current men's and women's sections.

The government of Israel approved the agreement by a 15-5 vote on Jan. 31, 2016. But in the 17 months since, it had taken no steps to implement it, despite a petition by Women of the Wall and others to the High Court. Roughly three weeks ago, the justices' patience ran out and they refused to grant the government another extension on implementation. On Sunday, June 25, Prime Minister Netanyahu, who initiated and approved this agreement, succumbed to political pressure by ultra-Orthodox members of his coalition and called a quick, unscheduled vote. The ministers who voted for the deal 17 months ago now voted to repeal it. This from a prime minister who stood before a room of American Jewish leaders in November 2015 and promised: "I will always ensure that all Jews can feel at home in Israel, Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Orthodox Jews" and that his government would ensure that the Western Wall "will be a source of unity for the Jewish people, not a point of division."

Mr. Netanyahu's broken promise is a disgrace and a betrayal of Israelis committed to religious liberty; of diaspora Jews who are being told that they don't matter to the Jewish state; and of Judaism itself, which insists on loving your neighbor as you would love yourself.

This betrayal put me in mind of the first time I was arrested and led to the police station, which has been there since the early 1800s under Turkish rule and, later, under the British. There is a plaque on the wall there commemorating the bravery of a Jewish boy who dared to defy the British by sounding the shofar on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. I felt a deep sense of kinship with that boy, who was arrested and led to the same place years before me for the same type of "crime": worshiping according to our faith. But he was rising up against a foreign regime. I'm a woman fighting against her coreligionists and her government.

I won't ever give up. It is thanks to generations of relentless women that I can wear pants, vote, drive a car and lead an organization. I want my daughter and the next generation of girls to stand on my shoulders as I stand on those of the women that came before me. I want what is forbidden for me to be most natural for them: to pray out loud.

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