



THE BLOGS

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Rosh Hodesh Haredi Riot

March 8, 2019. The Thirtieth Anniversary of Women of the Wall. International Women's Day. And Rosh Hodesh, when the Women of the Wall traditionally come to the Women's section of the Western Wall to pray. They pray, as they would in synagogue, or at home, with tefillin, Torah and tallit, as they have since 2013, in accordance with Israeli court rulings, that officially permitted the women to wear a tallit and read from a Torah scroll. In the most part, their prayers, while not accepted by Haredi Jews, have been relatively peaceful, with heckling most months and items thrown at them occasionally.

Last week, the protest against women's prayer by the Haredim took a serious turn when they rioted against their fellow Jews. Thousands of girls, bussed in from local seminaries before the usual start of the Women of the Wall service at 7:00 am, occupied the Wall's women's section while Haredi men and boys filled the plaza behind both the men's and women's worship space. Haredi women and girls infiltrated the WOW group members, keeping WOW members apart from each other and making it impossible for them to conduct their entirely lawful service cohesively and in a dignified manner. They also stole WOW's Torah pointer and klaf, a section of parchment on which the Torah portion for Rosh Hodesh is written. The police did nothing to prevent this hecklers veto.

Outside the woman's area, Haredi men and boys cursed, spat at, knocked down and injured WOW worshippers and the men who were there supporting them. The police did not intervene much in the area where men supporters stood, but the police did intervene when women were in danger in the main plaza to prevent loss of life.

This was a two-phase Haredi riot — women and girls inside the women's area, and men and boys threatening violence in the main plaza.

Why did the Haredim empty their seminaries just before Shabbat to attack other Jews? First, the government had welched on an agreement to set up a safe prayer space set apart from the main plaza and run by an interdenominational Jewish authority at the Robinsons Arch. Robbed of an official egalitarian site with a women's balcony for WOW's worship, WOW returned to the women's section as they do each month, to celebrate its 30th anniversary. This thoroughly understandable return elicited the Haredi anger that provided their excuse for their attack. Second, the government's recent approval of the Kahanist Party, Otzma Yehudi, essentially sanctioned violence by those who felt they had the mantle of God for their conduct. Third, the campaign of Haredi hatred against non-Orthodox Jews is bearing bitter fruit. When a government minister like Aryeh Deri accuses liberal Jews of being little better than Nazis, then he directly incites the violence that just happened.

What are the consequences of this riot? Probably dire. As of yet, many secular Israelis have not shown much concern about the events at the Wall. Last week's riot, however, could change that attitude. For, if the Haredim can riot over the Wall, would they not riot, too, over the closings of stores and movie theatres on the Shabbat, over marriage equality and over the continued deferment from military service by yeshiva students?

Rioting and other forms of obstruction will provide the foundation for the undermining of the Rule of Law and, ultimately, of Israel's democracy, itself. So

what is to be done?

A good suggestion was just circulated by the Jewish Review of Books. Its editor quotes writers Yuval Jobani and Nahshon Perez who suggest disestablishment of the religious administration of the Wall as follows:

What is the best way to govern such a contested sacred site? Our answer is: (almost) not at all. The government should adopt an approach of non-interference, restricting itself to providing law and order. It should abolish the position of the Rabbi of the Wall; cancel bans on religious activities on account of their supposedly offensive nature; dismantle the Western Wall Heritage Foundation; and remove the permanent mehitza (temporary, portable dividers would remain permissible). Simply put, all matters of religious decision-making at the site would lie with the individual rather than with the state.

While no solution is perfect, such an approach would diffuse tensions and eliminate the seed bed for hatred that currently exists. Hopefully, the recent riot, injuries, and incitements, will cause a change that will help to heal the situation at the Wall, and within Israeli society.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Buchsbaum is a graduate of Cornell University and Harvard Law School. He clerked for Joseph Weintraub, Chief Justice of NJ and served as a Judge of the NJ Superior Court from 2004 to 2013 after a career as prominent municipal land use lawyer. Peter was listed in Who's Who in America for 25 years. Today, he sits on the Board of Trustees for Har Sinai Temple in Pennington, NJ; and he is a co-founder of J-PLAN (the Jewish Pluralism Legal Action Network), which advocates for marriage equality in Israel.