

Rosh Hashanah 2nd Day 5774 Rabbi Faith Joy Dantowitz

Women of the Wall

Religious Pluralism in Israel is important for Klal Yisrael—
Why it matters to North American Jews.

The Kotel. The Western Wall. It is considered to be one of, if not the, holiest sites to the Jewish people. If asked to think of Jerusalem, it is the image of the Wall with the Dome of Rock in the background, we tend to picture in our minds. The Kotel is the outer remnants of the Temple from thousands of years ago. Many travelers go there to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah. Before any Israel trip, guaranteed someone, friend, family, will ask, please place this note in the Wall for me.

For almost 25 years, a group of women, known as [Women of the Wall](#), have been praying monthly at the Kotel. Their attempts to pray together as women have been full of challenges.

In March, 1989, I awoke before sunrise and set out for the Kotel. As I got closer, the crowd thickened. The dark sky was lightening with daybreak. The quiet of the morning turned into varied voices. At last, I had arrived...the Wall.

I was with my friends, my first year classmates from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's Year in Israel program, as we were beginning our schooling to become rabbis, cantors and educators. We were full of love for Israel, excited to be living in Jerusalem, eager to partake in new religious experiences.

The custom was to gather on Rosh Hodesh, the new month. I had learned of this mini-holiday for women. According to tradition, women are exempted from all work as a reward from God for not having taken part with men in the sinful worship of the golden calf.

It is traditional to daven/pray and read Torah on Rosh Hodesh.

At that time, I was a young, innocent rabbinic student. It sounded like a neat idea to arise early in the morning to pray again with Women of the Wall.

We gathered together on the women's side while our male counterparts who had joined us that morning went to the men's side. We began our service, praying and singing but were soon disrupted by noise from the Men's side.

Ultra-orthodox women on the women's side also yelled and threw objects. The sounds of screaming and hatred escalated into projectiles. Soon, a chair from the men's side landed on one woman's head and she fell. I was terrified. A morning of peaceful, joyous prayer had turned into one of hatred, violence and fear.

The police were there and tried to protect the women. For the first time since the 1967 War, a tear gas canister was released at the Kotel. The intention was to protect the women and disperse the ultra-orthodox men. However, in a surreal action, one ultra-orthodox man wrapped his face with his tallis in order to approach the canister. He picked it up and then threw it at the women. We Women of the Wall had to leave the Kotel.

I remember being nauseous and frightened. How could Jerusalem, my city, my home for the year, be a place of such baseless hatred among Jews? Among Jews? How could the Kotel, holy site for all Jews, be a place of animosity and prejudice.

The women would not back down. This group of women is a pluralistic group—Orthodox to Reform, Israelis and often visitors—who believes in the right to pray freely as women at the Kotel.

It is almost 25 years since WOW began.

Separate is still NOT equal. Black, white, gay, transgender, straight, Orthodox, atheist, liberal, Reform, Conservative. An attack on religious and civil rights is an attack on all of us created B'tzelem Elohim, in God's image.

Women across the religious spectrum, a pluralistic group, deserve a place to pray aloud at the Kotel

Egalitarian, mixed minyanim, deserve a place to pray aloud at the Kotel. This is no crime!

WOW began filing petitions and working through the legal system to pray according to their customs. For while halakhically it was not forbidden to do what they wanted, the rabbis of the Wall declared it was against the custom of the place, minhag hamakom, and therefore a disturbance to the peace.

Halakha, Jewish law, requires men to observe time-bound commandments such as reciting Sh'ma, wearing tefillin and tallit. Women are exempt from time-bound commandments. But, as the Talmud explains, women are

permitted to observe them. It is, however, not orthodox custom to do so.

The Knesset signed a first law imposing restrictions on WOW in 1990 stating that there could be no prayer at the Kotel against the customs of the place. This meant that women were not allowed, legally, to wear a tallit as a prayer shawl, wear tefillin or read from the Torah. Consequences for transgressing included a prison sentence of at least 5 months. In 2000, the Knesset tried but failed to pass a law banning women from wearing tefillin, tallitot and reading from the Torah with a 7 year prison sentence as punishment.

I prayed again with Women of the Wall in February 2000 on a women's rabbinic trip to Israel. After the first months of WOW, the women would read Torah away from the Wall to avoid controversy. I was honored to chant Torah with WOW. It was a joyous celebration of Rosh Hodesh yet devoid of full access and equality.

In 2003, the Supreme Court of Israel ruled that WOW must leave the Wall plaza for Torah reading and instead go to Robinson's Arch, which is located adjacent to the main area. BUT, Robinson's Arch is not immediately accessible. You need to walk around and go through the Davidson Archeological center and pay to get into the site if you arrive after 9 am. This is where WOW was told they could read from the Torah.

What is the textual basis of the extreme response by the haredim/ultra orthodox and the basis for the court's ruling? The 'custom' of prayer at the Wall over the past 4 ½ decades has been those used in an orthodox synagogue. There is a concept known as Kol isha -a woman's voice, it prohibits woman from praying aloud. Yet, there is only one citation in rabbinic literature, from which the rabbis extrapolate. The passage from the Talmud [BT Brachot 24a] is focused on potential distractions for a man while reciting the Sh'ma. "If one gazes at the little finger of a woman, is it as if he gazed at her secret place? No, it means at one's own wife, and when he recites the *Shema*" (*Berachot 24a*).

In all of Talmudic literature, there are only three responses to this passage. One [Rav Hisda] says (B. *Berachot 24a*): A woman's leg is a sexual incitement, as it says, "Uncover the leg, pass through the rivers (Isaiah 47:2)" and it says afterwards, "Your nakedness shall be uncovered, your shame shall be exposed (Isaiah 47:3)."

A second, Rabbi Shmuel, comments (B. *Kiddushin* 70a): A woman's voice is a sexual incitement, as it says, "For sweet is your voice and your countenance is comely (Song of Songs 2:14)."

Finally, a third [Rav Sheshet] remarks (Y. *Hallah* 2:1): A woman's hair is a sexual incitement, as it says, "Your hair is as a flock of goats (Song of Songs 4:1)."

All three rabbis mention things that might distract a man while reciting the *Shema*. Most would agree, they would be distracted by seeing their partner naked before them while attempting to pray. But what follows in the Talmud is a list of what different sages find most enticing about women, ancillary to the main conversation. Since Shmuel's statement is included in this sidebar, later generations took it to mean that hearing a woman's voice is as distracting as having one's wife sit naked before him. Thus, the prohibition against *Kol Ishah* is based on a flimsy pretext, which in context, does not ban women from praying aloud at all.

Biblically, we see positive references to a woman's voice, including yesterday's Torah reading. When Sarah demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael, and he is pained to do so, God tells him *shema b'kolech-listen to her voice* (Gen. 21:12)

"In all that Sarah says unto you, listen to her voice."

And, in one of the most famous biblical passages, Miriam, sister of Moses, leads the women through a song and dance in praise of God (Exodus 15:21):

"And Miriam sang unto them: Sing ye to the Lord, for he is highly exalted."

In none of the above biblical passages do we hear mention of disapproval of *kol isha*.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, who was appointed by former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation in 1995, has the authority to oversee decisions at the Western Wall. Rabinowitz has chosen to issue his rulings based on certain strict Orthodox interpretations of *halakha*.

As liberal Jews, we are not bound by *halakha* and can certainly disagree. What is noteworthy here is that even the halakhic Jews lack support from

text for their behavior towards those who want to pray in a manner different from theirs.

Anat Hoffman, director of Women of Wall has led the group for decades, leading them through the courts. This week she was selected as Haaretz newspaper's Israeli person of the year. Anat has been arrested multiple times while praying with Women of the Wall for crimes including carrying the Torah and just last Winter she was arrested for reciting the Sh'ma aloud at the Kotel.

In addition to women's rights to pray together at the Kotel, there is the challenge for egalitarian, liberal Jews, who are not orthodox; who pray together as men and women, but are not able to do so at the Kotel. Why? Because the haredim control this open space—this public holy site of all Jews.

When I led a Birthright Israel trip this past Spring, the women were shocked at how much smaller their side was than the men's. ¼ of the size. It was difficult for many of them to gain access to the Wall, crowded out by other women pressed against the stones.

I told them about my experience with WOW as well as my friends who were arrested there this past year—for wearing a tallis. One was my roommate from the 1st year of Rabbinical school in Jerusalem. Rabbi Susan Silverman and her daughter Hallel Abramowitz are active supporters of WOW and their connection to Sarah Silverman the comedian, Susan's sister, helped with publicity as many of Sarah's followers saw her tweet about Susan and Hallel. Hallel hopes her younger sister Ashira will be able to become a Bat Mitzvah at the Kotel.

Now, 2013, as word spreads of their battle for what is right, their support grows. Women of the Wall have elicited support from men and women. This past Winter, a few of the paratroopers who liberated the Kotel in 1967 joined WOW for Rosh Hodesh. They emphasized their strong belief in full access to the Kotel for all Jews.

In April, there was progress for Women of the Wall in the Court. Jewish Agency Chairman, Natan Sharansky, and Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mandelblit proposed a prayer space for Women of the Wall and egalitarian worshippers to be adjacent to the current location, on the main plaza. The

geopolitical and physical challenges could make this a near impossibility, but they were determined to work towards a solution and the liberal Jewish community overall responded positively with the compromise. It would take a long time..if ever...

In an appellate decision this past Spring, Jerusalem district court judge Moshe Sobel, who is orthodox, ruled that women praying at the Kotel do not violate local “custom” nor create a provocation. Therefore, there was no reason to limit their movement or inhibit their prayer practice. He ruled that WOW has the legal right to engage in the 4T’s--Tefillah, Tefillin, Tallit and Torah are now allowed for Women of the Wall. In May, my friend Rabbi Julie Gordon prayed at the Kotel for Rosh Hodesh with tefillin, as is her custom, without being arrested. On Rosh Hodesh Elul—one month ago—for the first time, women blew the shofar. But, despite these positive changes, the detractors amassed in such large numbers the past two months that the police decided it was unsafe for the WOW members to pray at the Kotel. Though the ‘custom’ of the place is to pray in peace, the ultra-orthodox, many young women who showed up at the urging of their rebbes, threw eggs, rocks, blew deafeningly loud whistles, hurled abusive language, spat and distracted drastically from the Women’s prayer.

A week and a half ago (8/25/13), Cabinet Secretary Mandelblit offered a ‘gift’ before the holidays of making an accessible prayer space now at Robinson’s Arch, while waiting for the Sharansky plan of allowing all to pray at the Main Plaza to be implemented. For the past 10 years, groups have been allowed to pray here free of charge before 9 am but after that incur the fee of visiting the archeological center.

Now, an expanded area atop scaffolding is available to hold up to 450 worshippers, with free access 24/7. And they’ll be allowed to pray aloud, wear tallit, tefillin and read from the Torah. But, this site is not in view of the main section of the Kotel, is lower/below it, nor can one touch the Wall while on this platform.

If it feels unequal---it is. While a nice gesture to allow groups to pray without fee---it is pushing women and egalitarian groups out of view.

WOW issued this statement: ‘What has been proven today is that the bullies were victorious – with their assault, spitting and cursing at women,’ [the statement said.] ‘[Mendelblit and Bennett] the Israeli political arms have

given in to the threats and violence of the Haredi extremist minority in Israel and this is a dangerous precedent for our democracy.’

The Kotel—the outer remnant of the Walls ---is next to the sacred place we read about this morning in the Torah. God called Abraham to bring his son to Mt. Moriah. Abraham awoke early—eager to serve God. Women of the Wall are eager to serve God in joy and show harmony across the spectrum of Judaism, from Orthodox to liberal.

It is traditional to begin blasting the shofar on the 1st of Elul—one month before Rosh Hoshana. And that is what the women did. But, like Avraham, it is time to wake up and respond to the emphatic call, as God called out like the blast of a shofar, Avraham, Avraham. Will we hear the shofar’s call? When we truly listen, we are led to action.

This past Sunday, Women of the Wall members joined in a prayer service at the Kotel for Selichot. The ultra orthodox rabbis decided not to rally against them and it was a mostly peaceful evening ending with a tekiah gedola.

The shofar calls us to wake up
Wake up to the work of Teshuva
Wake up to the sounds of brokenness
Wake up to religious intolerance
Wake up to injustice

If you will be in Israel on a Rosh Hodesh, join WOW at the Kotel or a service in solidarity from afar here in NYC. All women are welcome to join together for Rosh Hodesh celebrations here in an evening of sharing, learning, spirituality and inspiration.

The 25th anniversary Women of the Wall Rosh Hodesh service at the Kotel is in two months, Rosh Hodesh Kislev, Monday morning, November 4th. [show my tallit—WOW tallit]

Each month, WOW participants join together in raising their voices to God and sing their anthem—this passage from Psalms.
Ozi v’zimrat yah vay’hi li l’y’shua. [sung] God is my strength and my song.
God is my deliverance.

If the Wall could talk.
What would it say?

It hears the songs of women
Earnest in their prayer

It feels the fervor of the men
Dancing around a Bar Mitzvah.

Jews born in Israel
Jews from around the world
Non-Jews
All come to this place,
The Kotel

A public monument
A place where all should be welcome
Where a young girl's voice
And an old man's voice
A new father's voice
A grandmother's voice
Can all rise in prayer.

Where women's harmonies
Create heavenly sounds
With unbridled joy
Heartfelt prayers to God

Israel
Our homeland
A place for all Jews
The Kotel
If the Wall could talk
I know what it would say
Let all who come speak
Lift your voices o Israel
To our God.

May the sound of the shofar inspire us to pursue justice for all and May 5774
be a sweet year where we can all pray together in harmony for peace. Amen.