

Women of the Wall: The debate



Over the years of publishing The Weekly, many folks have asked us to unpack the Women of the Wall and the issue of prayer at the Western Wall. We've been asked, "How do I talk about this with my students when they come from families on both sides of this heated issue?"

Why should we teach our students about this? The issue of prayer at the Western Wall has taken on outsize symbolic meaning, representing not only issues of religion and state within Israel, but also the divide between Israeli and World Jewry over how

Israel addresses different practices in the Jewish community.

For Women of the Wall, this is a fight for the right to pray and read from the Torah at the Western Wall (even among the Women of the Wall, there is a debate over how to best achieve this, as we explain below).

For many Orthodox worshippers, this is about preserving Orthodox Jewish tradition at one of Judaism's holiest sites. And for many other Israelis and Jews, as **Shmuel Rosner**, senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, told The Jerusalem Post, this issue simply isn't a high priority.

We hope that this Weekly will help you bring this complex topic, including diverse perspectives on this issue from Israeli society and across the Jewish world, into your classroom, your homes and your conversations.

As a wise person once said to me, "An awkward but important conversation had is better than an awkward and important conversation not had." We hope this Weekly provides you with the tools you need for a meaningful conversation on this vexing challenge.

Best,

Noam

We're curious...

Last week, clashes broke out between Orthodox protesters and Israeli police as the "Women of the Wall" activist group held services for Rosh Hodesh (the start of the new Hebrew month) at the Western Wall. Hundreds of protesters gathered at the site to demonstrate against the controversial women's group.

Meanwhile, members of the Women of the Wall carried empty Torah mantles in protest of site rules that prohibit bringing Torah scrolls into the women's section.

"This is to illustrate that there is no Torah in the women's section," **Anat Hoffman**, a founder member of the group, explained as she held a Torah cover. "Here's the revolutionary notion: women are people and we want to read from the Torah!"

Why did this happen? Shas party leader **Aryeh Deri** had called for the protest against the women's group. In a tweet the day before the event that was later shared by former Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**, Deri wrote, "I call on everyone for whom the sanctity of the Western Wall is important to come and pray with us, so that, God forbid, the holy place will not be desecrated."

Meanwhile, **Gilad Kariv**, a Knesset member in the Labor party who is also a Reform rabbi, planned to bring a Torah scroll for the women's group to use. Since becoming a Knesset member seven months ago, Kariv has been using his parliamentary immunity to bring Torah scrolls to the women's group.

Haaretz reported that Haredi leaders "had threatened to physically prevent Kariv from handing over the Torah scroll, should he show up."

As tensions mounted leading up to the event, in an effort to prevent a serious conflict from taking place, President **Isaac Herzog** asked Kariv to stay away from the site.

"The possibility of elected officials brawling at the remains of the temple, Judaism's holiest place...gives me great anguish, especially when we remember how fights at this site ended 2,000 years ago," Herzog explained in a statement.

Kariv agreed to the President's request not to attend. Following his announcement, Deri and other Haredi Knesset members said that they too would skip the event. (The only Knesset member who *did* show up was **Itamar Ben-Gvir** of the Religious Zionism party, who could be heard shouting at the women's group and their supporters, "You will not harm the Western Wall!")

Despite Herzog's last-minute intervention and the rest of the Knesset members cancelling their visits, there were still minor clashes as police created a barrier to push

back the protesters from reaching the women's group.

With this recent conflict at one of the holiest Jewish sites, we wanted to unpack the Women of the Wall and the longstanding dispute over women's prayer at the Kotel. Who are the Women of the Wall and why are they at the center of so much controversy? And how did Israelis and the Jewish world react to the protests?

Who are the Women of the Wall?

First, let's unpack the Women of the Wall and the debate over prayer at the Western Wall. According to their website, the group's mission is "to attain social and legal recognition of our right, as women, to wear prayer shawls, pray and read from the Torah, collectively and aloud, at the Western Wall."

"We don't feel at home in a place where we cannot wear our *tallit* and read together from the Torah," **Lesley Sachs**, the group's executive director, explained. "It's our right as Jews in the Jewish state."

In the view of the Orthodox protesters, all prayer at the Western Wall should follow Haredi Orthodox rules. This means that women and men must be separated with a high wall or partition, and that women are forbidden from wearing *tefillin*, *tallitot* and *kippot*, and from reading from the Torah, practices that are restricted to men in some Orthodox communities.

So, how did the Women of the Wall form? The group was founded in December 1988 during the first International Jewish Feminist Conference in Jerusalem.

Here's what happened: A group of 100 women who were attending the conference went to the Western Wall and attempted to read from the Torah in the women's section. They were physically and verbally assaulted by a group of Orthodox worshippers at the site.

The police stopped their service due to objections from other worshippers. However, a group of Jerusalem women resolved to gather there each Rosh Hodesh that followed

with a Torah, *tefillin* and *tallitot*. They eventually formed the Women of the Wall.

This podcast from Israel Story tells the history of how the movement was born, their history, and the opposition they have faced over the years, which has sometimes turned violent. We recommend listening to the episode for the full story, but here is an update on the group in recent years.

In 2013, then-Prime Minister Netanyahu tasked **Natan Sharansky**, who was then head of The Jewish Agency with resolving the conflict over prayer at the Western Wall. Sharansky proposed creating three equal sections at the Wall plaza: one for men, one for women and one for egalitarian mixed prayer.

Later that year, under a commission headed by then-Cabinet Secretary **Avichai Mandelblitt**, the plan was revised, and the egalitarian section was moved to Robinson's Arch, an archaeological site at the southern end of the Western Wall plaza that does not have direct contact with it and has a separate entrance.

In 2016, after three years of negotiations, the government approved *this* plan, which is now known as the "Kotel Agreement" or the "Kotel Compromise."

The Women of the Wall were deeply divided over how to respond to this offer. Anat Hoffman, the founder of the group, supported the plans because it would provide state-level recognition and funding of non-Orthodox forms of Judaism. This represented a major gain for their movement.

But others, like **Shulamit Magnus**, *another* founding member of the group, felt very differently, noting that in exchange for the gains made at Robinson's Arch, they would have to leave their regular space in the women's section at the Kotel. This faction viewed the deal as giving up on everything they had been fighting for: to pray and read Torah at the Western Wall.

Ultimately, this debate over pragmatism and idealism tore the group apart. The faction who opposed the Kotel Compromise broke off and formed their own group, calling themselves "the Original Women of the Wall." ("We're sticking to the founding goals of the whole thing, and they've departed from it," Magnus, who became a leader of the

splinter group, explained.)

But the entire debate ultimately became moot: the Kotel Compromise never happened. Netanyahu, facing pressure from Haredi parties in the government, suspended the plan just a few months after it was approved. However, the group continues to be split into two factions who rarely speak to each other.

Now, with the swearing in of a new government in June, and the Haredi parties in the opposition, some of the Women of the Wall are renewing their calls for the Kotel Compromise.

And it looks like this could actually happen soon: yesterday, Prime Minister **Naftali Bennett** (who has supported the plan since it was created in 2013) told The Jerusalem Post that he will work to get it reapproved by January.

("I believe that the Kotel belongs to all the Jews in the world," Bennett said in 2013. "Not to one stream or another. That is what the new *Ezrat Yisrael* [egalitarian prayer] section is about... In my eyes, *Ezrat Yisrael* is a wonderful thing. It makes unity and peace possible at the Kotel.")

A majority of Israelis also support having an egalitarian prayer plaza at the Western Wall. A poll conducted by The Jerusalem Post in 2016 found that "61% of Israelis favored creating such a site and 39% opposed it." But among Orthodox respondents, 83% opposed creating the site.

The United Torah Judaism party said that it would "fight with all its force" against efforts to revive the plan. "The Reform and Conservatives are sticking their hooves into the holy of holies of the Jewish people, and getting a foothold in the Western Wall," they said in a statement. "We will protect, without compromise, the Western Wall and its sanctity, and we will not allow anyone to desecrate it," the party added.

Diversity of perspectives

Anat Hoffman, the founder of Women of the Wall, underscored to The Associated Press that the group is "fighting for equality and religious pluralism and justice. We cannot read from the Torah in the women's section in 2021. Why not? Why the hell

not?"

Following the events, the group wrote on Facebook, "We smuggled in a Torah scroll but were of course not allowed to bring it into the women's section...Security surrounded [two members of Women of the Wall] in attempts to take the scroll. A mob surrounded the group and eventually physically pushed them out from the plaza. We were unable to read from the Torah this morning."

Meanwhile, after cancelling his plans to attend, Shas leader Aryeh Deri said that just as Jews prepare to "mark the victory of light over darkness" during Hanukkah, "Shas will continue to fight with all its might against those who seek to desecrate the sanctity of the Western Wall, and to harm the Jewish identity of the state."

Eliana Aaron, the director of a medical case management company in Israel, expressed a similar view on the Israel Story podcast.

In her eyes, the Women of the Wall are being disrespectful to Jewish tradition: "What's cool about the Kotel is that you'll see people from all different nations and all different religious backgrounds coming to pray. And putting on a kippah. And the women wearing something on their hair. And respecting the religion which is the Jewish nation." In Aaron's view, the gathering of Women of the Wall is an unnecessary provocation.

Similarly, **Dovid Meirfeld**, who has joined protests against the Women of the Wall in the past, told the Israel Story podcast that "A Jewish religious place, a place that's here for religion, has to be done in the Orthodox way. And therefore, when they're coming, that's interfering...That's something we cannot accept."

Itamar Ben-Gvir of the Religious Zionism party, who attended the protest, focused on a different issue. He said that "police violence" against the Haredi community, including at this protest, "has crossed a red line. The use of violence against the

ultra-Orthodox is intended to silence a protest against the Reform who want to stir up the winds.”

Yochi Rappeport, CEO of Women of the Wall, on the other hand, said that the problem is that security guards at the site are not adequately protecting the members of *her* group.

In a Jerusalem Post op-ed, she wrote that “any violence directed toward Women of the Wall is ignored,” adding, “A woman arrives at the Western Wall in the morning and does not know in what condition she will leave. Will she be pushed and dropped to the ground?”

Meanwhile, in a Jerusalem Post op-ed, **Oded Revivi**, mayor of Efrat who attends an Orthodox synagogue, and **Yizhar Hess**, deputy chairman of the World Zionist Organization, who prays with the Women of the Wall each Rosh Hodesh, called on Israelis to overcome their religious divides.

“We cling to the hope that we will be able to find a place for each of us — Orthodox, Conservative, Reform — at the Western Wall and in the Jewish world in general, to speak to each other lovingly, like family, even when our paths diverge,” they wrote. “We are brothers even when we do not agree.”

Meanwhile, Rabbi **Rick Jacobs**, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, told Haaretz that he was saddened that former Prime Minister Netanyahu shared Deri’s tweet calling for protests against the “desecration” of the site.

Jacobs noted that this contrasted sharply with some of Netanyahu’s previous statements and actions. In 2016, Netanyahu backed the Kotel Compromise that would have created a state-recognized egalitarian prayer space at the Plaza.

And in 2015, addressing the General Assembly of Jewish Federations of North America, Netanyahu said that “as Prime Minister of Israel, I will always ensure that all Jews can feel at home in Israel — Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Orthodox,” adding that he would ensure that the Western Wall “is a source of unity for our people and not a source of division.”

The bottom line

In 2013, Natan Sharansky, who was then the head of The Jewish Agency and working on a plan to resolve the conflict over prayer at the Western Wall, said the following about this issue: “When I listen to the very partial presentation, I am fully with them — when I listen to the other side, I have to accept that they also have logic. We do have to find a solution in which nobody will feel discriminated against.”

Sharansky’s message is just as relevant today as it was eight years ago. However this issue is resolved, what is clear to us is that — regardless of the sharp divides within our community — forging a path to peace and understanding should be everyone’s north star.

The Talmud states that the Temple was destroyed due to *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred), and we did not wait 2,000 years to return to a state of infighting. Instead, we have an opportunity to create a Jewish community with *ahavat chinam* (baseless love). Let’s embrace that challenge of figuring out a way to live with and love one another at the Western Wall and in our communities.