

# Women of the Wall

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**T**HERE WAS THIS ISRAELI MAN who from time to time put a slip of paper in the cracks between the stones of the Western Wall, asking God for favors—as Jews have been doing for centuries. They believe that the gates of heaven are located directly above the Wall, making it easy for their missives to arrive quickly.

The man always wondered what all the other petitioners were requesting from the Almighty. One night his curiosity got the better of him. In the wee hours of the morning he stole to the Wall, extracted all the pieces of paper and checked them. All of them were stamped “Request Denied”.

This joke is typical for the attitude of a great many Israelis towards the edifice that every few months or so sets off a political and religious pandemonium.

NOW IT is happening again. A group of feminist Jewish women (mostly of American origin, of course) insists on praying at the Wall clad in praying shawls (talith) and wearing phylacteries (tefillin). They are physically attacked by the orthodox, the police have to restrain them, the Knesset and the courts intervene.

Why? According to Jewish religious law, women are not allowed to wear praying shawls, and certainly not phylacteries, which orthodox men put on their brow and forearm. They are not allowed to mingle with men at the holiest place of Judaism.

The part of the Wall set aside for prayer is about 60 meters long. 12 meters are reserved for women, separated by a low divide.

It seems that most religions are obsessed with sex. They assume that if a religious male sees a woman, whatever her age and looks, he is aroused and cannot think about anything else. So, logically, women must be hidden away.

The “Women of the Wall”, many of whom are not religious at all, want to break the taboo by provocation. So there you are.

TWO YEARS before the birth of Israel, I went to look at the Western Wall for the first time. It was a moving experience.

To get to the place, you had to pass through a maze

of narrow Arab alleys. In the end you found yourself in a narrow enclave, about three meters wide. To your left was the Wall—an awe-inspiring monumental structure, consisting of huge rocks. To see the top you had to lean back and look towards heaven.

On your other side was a much lower wall, behind which the ancient, poverty stricken Mughrabi (Maghribi, Moroccan) Quarter was lodged.

Very few people know—or care to know—that this enclosure did not come into being by accident. In 1516 Jerusalem was conquered by the rising world power, the Ottoman Empire, which was at the time one of the most modern and progressive states. Soon after, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent built the—well, magnificent—wall of Jerusalem, as it stands today, a hugely expensive work which testifies to the immense devotion of the Ottoman Turks to this remote town in their realm. Suleiman’s chief architect was Sinan, who also designed the Damascus Gate, which many people (including myself) consider the most beautiful structure in the entire country.

The benevolent Sultan instructed Sinan to set aside a special place of worship for the Jews in the town, so the architect created this enclosure at the Western Wall (not to be confused with the city wall). To make the wall more towering, he lowered the floor of the alley and put up the parallel low wall cutting it off from the surroundings.<sup>1</sup>

Legend has it that when the city wall, with all its 34 towers and seven gates, was finished in 1541, the Sultan was so overcome by its beauty the he had the architect killed. He did not want him to build anything else to compete with it.

UNTIL THEN, the Western Wall was not the main praying place for Jews.

Pilgrims from all over the world came to Jerusalem and prayed at the top of the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Temple Mount. But this holy place had become unsafe, because while the preceding Mamluk Empire was crumbling, roaming Bedouins had been robbing the pilgrims. Also, for the local Jews, who lived side by side with the Muslims in the town, the Western Wall was much nearer to their homes. So the holy place on the Mount of Olives was abandoned. Today, a luxury hotel stands there.

<sup>1</sup> Anyone interested in this history would be well advised to read the book “Jerusalem” by Karen Armstrong, a British ex-nun and historian.

Since then, the Western Wall remains the holiest place in the world for the Jews, a place where multitudes assemble on holy days, army units swear allegiance to the State of Israel, rich Jews from all over the world bring their sons for Bar Mitzva and the Women of the Wall are kicking up the latest ruckus.

But basically there is nothing holy about the Wall. It was built by King Herod, a great builder and bloody monster, who was not even a real Jew. He belonged to the people of Edom, who had only recently been forcibly converted to Judaism. I doubt whether the present Chief Rabbinate would have recognized him as a Jew and have allowed him to enter the country, marry a Jewish woman or be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

Contrary to common belief, it was not a part of the Temple Herod built. To create the large platform on which the Temple stood, (and on which now stand the magnificent Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa mosque) he had to bring in a lot of earth and raise the floor. To hold this mass together, he built a wall around it. The Western Wall is nothing but a remnant of this supporting wall.

WHEN THE Israeli army conquered East Jerusalem in the June 1967 War, one of the state's first acts was an outrage. At the time, the mayor of West Jerusalem was Teddy Kollek, a convinced atheist. But he was quick to realize the political and touristic significance of the place and ordered the immediate expulsion of the entire population of the adjoining Mugrabi Quarter, some 650 Muslim human beings. He then razed the whole quarter to the ground.

I happened to be in the Old City of Jerusalem on that day, and I will never forget the sights—especially the tear-covered face of a 13-year old girl carrying a large cupboard on her back.

On the site of the destroyed quarter, a huge empty space was created. This is now the Western Wall piazza, resembling a huge parking lot, which attracts tourists and prayer-shawl-wearing women. It faces the Western Wall, which has completely lost its awe-inspiring character and now looks like just another large wall.

The late Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, an orthodox Jew, called it the Diskotel (kotel means wall). He was full of praise for the Wahhabis, a fundamentalist Sunni sect which, upon conquering Mecca, immediately destroyed the tomb of the prophet Muhammad, claiming that revering stones as holy places was nothing but idolatry. They would surely have condemned the Western Wall rabbis as rabid pagans.

In the Jewish myth, the burial site of Moses is unknown, so it could not become a site for adulation.

It must be mentioned to Kollek's credit that he prevented another outrage. After the destruction of the Mugrabi Quarter, David Ben-Gurion, by that time a simple member of the Knesset, demanded that the entire Old City Wall be also razed to the ground. In the newly united Jewish capital, he asserted, there was no place for a Turkish wall. Kollek, a former chief assistant to Ben-Gurion, calmed the old man down.

MANY ISRAELIS believe that the Western Wall should be declared a secular national monument, irrespective of its religious connotations. But the State of Israel declared it a holy place and put it under the sole jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbinate. Bad for the Wall Women.

Lately, Nathan Sharansky has proposed a compromise: clear an additional space near the wall and allow everybody—man or woman, with or without prayer shawl, and presumably straight or gay or Lesbian—to pray there. The Egg of Columbus.<sup>2</sup>

The rabbis may accept the compromise or they may not. The women may be allowed to pray without risking arrest or not. But the real question is why the state gave complete control over this place, that is so important to so many people, to the orthodox rabbis. After all, they represent a minority in Israel, as well as among the world's Jews.

The answer may be political, but it touches upon a far more important aspect: the lack of separation between state and religion.

This situation is being justified—even by atheist Israelis—by the argument that Israel relies on the support of world Jewry. And what unites world Jewry? Religion. (By the way, Leibowitz once told me that the Jewish religion had been dead for 200 years, and that what united world Jewry was the memory of the Holocaust.)

Under state doctrine, Israel is the Nation-state of the Jewish people. Under Zionist doctrine, the Jewish people and the Jewish religion are one and the same. Ergo, there is and can be no separation.

Anyone wanting to turn Israel into a normal country must reject both these doctrines. Israelis are a nation, and the State of Israel belongs to this nation. Every citizen, male or female, should be able to pray to whoever he or she wants, in any public place, including the Western Wall.

The Temple Mount (known to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, the venerable shrine), including the Western Wall and, at a short distance, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, are of immense importance to billions of people and should be a factor for peace.

We can only hope that sometime in the future they will fulfill this mission.

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<sup>2</sup>Sharansky, the former much admired rebel against the KGB in the Soviet Union and later a failed politician in Israel, has been secured a sinecure as chief of the Jewish Agency, an anachronistic institution mainly occupied with raising money for the settlers.