

Rabbi's Reflections: Public Places, Pluralism, Women and Israel

“Imagine, if you will, a group of devout Jews who regularly gather to pray at an ancient synagogue. Sometimes they are left alone, but other times they are verbally and physically harassed, spit at, cursed. If this were taking place in a country unfriendly to Jews, we would admire the worshippers’ dedication and perseverance, perhaps publicize their plight. Then, imagine that one day, one of the worshippers is arrested, hauled into police custody for doing nothing more than offending the sensibilities of others, whatever that means. A month later, the leader of the group is questioned by police, fingerprinted and warned that she is at risk of arrest. Imagine the uproar! Imagine if this were Sweden or France or Argentina, and suddenly prayer became a crime. The Jewish defense organizations would broadcast their collective outrage with the speed of a ‘send’ button. So what do we do when these real events happened in Israel, at Jerusalem’s Western Wall?”

This passage is from an on-line January 6 *The Forward* editorial (to be printed January 15). The issue will not go away. On November 18, police and Western Wall officials arrested Nofrat Frenkel leaving the Kotel (Western Wall) area wearing a *tallit* (not a big black-and-white one, but a smaller, multi-colored shawl-like scarf around her neck and under her coat) and carrying a Torah—it had been unrolled but not read because the Kotel Foundation (not the public) complained. She was banned from the Kotel for two weeks and a criminal file was opened. If convicted, she would be a felon and, as a fifth year medical student, she forever would lose the possibility to practice medicine.

Women of the Wall has prayed every *Rosh Hodesh* (New Moon) since 1989. In 2002, the Israeli Supreme Court upheld their right to pray in the women’s area. The ultra-Orthodox failed to pass a Knesset bill overturning the decision. In 2003, the Supreme Court reversed itself on the grounds of public safety, but required that accommodations be made at Robinson’s Arch. In 2000, the Masorti movement and the government agreed to use Robinson’s Arch for mixed weekday prayers, however services must end by 10:30 AM, or they are fined 30 sheqalim per person. Ten services were held the first year. In 2009, the number topped 450. Finishing by the deadline is impossible. The Masorti movement hopes to expand the hours when they renegotiate later this year.

A women’s group planned a Kotel *Rosh Hodesh* service in 1971. During *Hallel* prayers, the private security people hired by the Kotel Rabbi started to drag away the women (presumably he worried that police would not move the women). Many men screamed at the Kotel Rabbi that he was like a Nazi, dragging Jewish women through the street. The pulling and service stopped. In 1983, the Religious Affairs Ministry authorized an interfaith mixed prayer service under U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff. Religious Affairs representative Yonatan Yuval said the ministry was glad to organize such a service for such distinguished visitors and would do so again. When asked if this set a precedent for a U.S. civilian group led by a Conservative, Yuval said it would be impossible. Over the last few years, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which answers directly to the prime minister’s office, reduced the female praying area by moving the *mekhitzah* (barrier) farther south (and raised its height). Significant

events that used to take place in the ever-shrinking public space adjacent to the prayer sections--the symbolic distribution of ID cards to new immigrants, performances by the Israel Defense Forces choir--have been curtailed or cancelled by the authorities.

November 28, thousands of secular and religious protesters marched against ultra-Orthodox violence and coercion over a steadily increasing stream of issues. One banner read: "Iran is here – we're sick of *haredi* violence." At December's United Synagogue convention, Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren called the Frenkel story "widely misreported" for she was just "led away" from the area. On December 22, Ambassador Oren conceded he had misinformed Jewish leaders "based on information he had requested and received from Israel, but which was subsequently proven to be incomplete," and demanded "a full and thorough inquiry so he will not be misled." On January 5, police fingerprinted and questioned Anat Hoffman, leader of Women of the Wall and director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, and told her that she may be charged with a felony for violating the Kotel's rules of conduct.

United Synagogue Executive Vice President Rabbi Steven Wernick said, "The harassment of those who are progressive such as we saw with Nofrat Frenkel and now with Anat Hoffman is unconscionable." The USCJ statement remarks that these moves drive "a wedge between our communities at a time when working for unity within Israel and enhancing the connection between Diaspora Jewish communities and Israel should be a primary concern."

*The Forward's* editorial includes: "These outrages cannot be ignored by American Jews and must be viewed for what they are: another chapter in the ongoing struggle to determine whether Judaism's most sacred site will belong only to a distinct, intolerant minority or whether it can truly welcome all the Jewish people. This is not just an Israeli concern. There's a legitimate question as to how far American Jews can and should go in challenging the Israeli government on internal matters of defense, national security, domestic policy and so on, but this is different. The Kotel is not just another shul to be avoided for the more hospitable one around the corner. It is the iconic national, spiritual, religious heartbeat of the Jewish people, the destination of our prayers, the symbol of our survival. It cannot become the sole province of the ultra-Orthodox."

"Indeed, if Jerusalem...is to remain the capital of Israel, then it must truly be the capital for all Jews. The practices of a small number of fundamentalists--a minority in Israel, in the United States and around the world--cannot be allowed to dictate the religious future of the Jewish people. That is close to happening now, and unless this current destructive trend is stopped and reversed, the precious City of Gold will become a place of alienation to a sprawling Diaspora it, ironically, must count on to survive."

The U.S. State Department for the first time cited Israel for curtailing basic religious freedom in its latest report on International Religious Freedom. The Conservative and

Reform movements, *The Forward*, and others encourage you to write letters and send e-mails to Israel's ambassador to the United States Michael Oren stressing the need for pluralism and religious tolerance, and to raise it in meetings with other Israeli officials.

---- Rabbi Michael Rascoe