

Women of the Wall
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I can't get my head around the sight of any Jewish women being arrested for wearing a tallit or reading from the Torah scroll, especially in our beloved Jewish homeland. The Kotel, the Western Wall, is the most sacred icon of the Jewish religion. The Kotel belongs to all Jewish men. The Kotel certainly belongs to all Jewish women as well.

Tonight begins the 5th night of Passover – our festival justice and freedom. Tonight I want to talk with you about freedom and justice denied in our beloved State of Israel to the Women of the Wall. By the Wall, I refer to the sacred Western Wall in Jerusalem, the *Kotel*.

Composed of women from all of Judaism's denominations, Women of the Wall has been meeting at the women's section of the Western Wall to pray and to read from the Torah scroll once a month on *rosh hodesh*, the first day of the Hebrew month, for the last 21 years. Since most of the Women of the Wall are Orthodox Jewish women, they obey the rules of *halakhah*, Jewish law. They dress modestly and they recite only the prayers that do not require a minyan of ten men. And since women are not forbidden but only exempt under *halakhah* from wearing *tallitot*, prayer shawls, and reading from the Torah scroll, they choose to do both.

In response, the Women of the Wall have been harassed at the Wall by Ultra-orthodox men for all these years. Having suffered both physical and verbal abuse, the Women of the Wall petitioned the Israel Supreme Court in 2003 to recognize their right to religious freedom at the Wall, arguing that the Western Wall belongs to all Jews, not just Ultra-orthodox Jews. The Israel Supreme Court ruled against the Women of the Wall in the interest of public order. They ruled that the Women of the Wall may conduct prayer services at Robinson's Arch, an archaeological site that is nearby, but not considered a historical part of the Western Wall.

Currently, it is against the law in Israel for any woman to read aloud from the Torah scroll or even to put on a prayer shawl publicly by the Western Wall.

Tensions boiled over last November when Nofrat Frenkel, a Conservative Jewish woman, was arrested for reading from a Torah scroll and for openly wearing a *tallit* at the Western Wall. Ms. Frenkel is an Israeli medical student who served as an officer in the Israel Defense Forces. Then, last January, Anat Hoffman, the leader of Women of the Wall, and the distinguished director of our Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, was detained and fingerprinted by the police and threatened with possible criminal prosecution.

Now something is wrong with this picture. For the last 21 years, the Women of the Wall have come to the Wall to pray and to read from our sacred Torah. In response, ultra-orthodox men shout curses and insults at them, boo them, throw objects, and even spit at

these women. The police do nothing to intervene to stop the men's harassment. Instead, they intervene to stop the women from praying and make them leave the Wall. Now you tell me who is engaged in the criminal behavior here?

The Ultra-orthodox movement of Judaism believes that women are forbidden by God's will from reading the Torah or wearing *tallitot*. Jewish Ultra-orthodoxy believes that God does not want women to be equal with men. The Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, condemned the Women of the Wall as "stupid" for wanting equality.

As you might expect, as Reform Jews, we completely reject this premise. We believe that women are completely equal to men in the eyes of God. The inequality of women is not a divine decree but the product of a humanly-created patriarchal society. For us, women's equality is a matter of human and civil rights.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the President of our Union for Reform Judaism, suggests that the Western Wall be divided into three areas: one for men to pray according to Ultra-orthodox custom; one for women to pray according to Ultra-orthodox custom; and one for men and women to pray according to all forms of non-Ultra-orthodox custom.

Even Jewish Orthodoxy rejects the Ultra-orthodox position as a distortion of *halakhah*. An objective analysis of the *halakhah* clearly demonstrates that women were exempt in antiquity from the fulfillment of prayer-oriented commandments, never prohibited or forbidden from observing them.

This is the reason why Orthodox Jewish women now have doctorates in Talmud. This is the reason why Orthodox Jewish women are increasingly establishing their own *minyanim* in which women lead their own services, read from the Torah, and wear *tallitot*. And all this is in accordance with *halakhah*.

Jewish Ultra-orthodoxy has every right to practice non-egalitarian forms of prayer within its own community and synagogues. They should be free to pray as they see fit. But they do not have the right to impose women's inequality on all Jewish communities. They do not have the right to transform the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, into an Ultra-orthodox synagogue.

And because of Ultra-orthodox objection to singing by women, women soldiers in the Israeli army are not even allowed to sing HaTikvah during ceremonies at the Western Wall. Personally, I consider this outrageous.

In summary, I simply can't get my head around the sight of any Jewish woman being arrested for wearing a *tallit* or reading from the Torah scroll – especially in our beloved Jewish homeland. The *Kotel*, the Western Wall, is the most sacred icon of the Jewish religion. The *Kotel* belongs to all Jewish men. It certainly belongs to all Jewish women as well.