

THE WESTERN WALL BACKGROUNDER



The Western Wall Agreement refers to the decision to add to the egalitarian section at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel. Yet, this historic deal has come under fire and there are threats to undo the progress made by this momentous agreement.

Understand the background here.

- ❖ On January 31, 2016, the Israeli Cabinet reached an historic agreement regarding prayer sections at the Western Wall. While affirming Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) authority over the established Orthodox prayer spaces for men and women, the agreement would expand and grant legitimacy to a pluralistic, egalitarian prayer space just south of the of existing plaza, along a stretch of the Western Wall. The plan was approved by a vote of 15-5 in the Cabinet.
- ❖ This groundbreaking deal came under threat in June 2017 when Haredi political parties in the ruling coalition successfully pressured Prime Minister Netanyahu to renege on the agreement. This move fractured relations with Diaspora Jewish communities, offended egalitarian Jews living in Israel, and led to additional power grabs by the Haredi parties. The matter has been moved to the Israeli Supreme Court.
- ❖ Although PM Netanyahu's official decision to capitulate to extremist forces within his government took place in June 2017, opposition to the Western Wall Agreement emerged immediately after its passage. Haredi leaders and politicians quickly condemned the agreement for granting legitimacy to non-Orthodox Judaism in any way, shape, or form.
- ❖ The ferocity of this opposition is baffling, as the Western Wall Agreement never suggested changes to the existing gender segregated prayer spaces or their oversight. Haredi leaders (officially the "Western Wall Heritage Foundation" and the Rabbi of the Western Wall, Shmuel Rabinowitz) were always set to continue controlling the Orthodox sections of the Kotel and its adjacent plaza.
- ❖ What the Agreement does call for is recognition of progressive Judaism at our holiest site. It allocates NIS 35 million to create an "official and respected" egalitarian prayer space that will be 9,700 square feet and will run along a 31-foot section of the Western Wall, and can accommodate approximately 1,200 people. The deal also called for a visible and well-marked entryway to this section. The new egalitarian prayer space would be administered by representatives from the Reform Movement, the Masorti (Conservative) Movement, Women of the Wall, the Jewish Federations of North America, and the Israeli government.
- ❖ In response to the intolerance of many Haredi leaders, Executive Director of the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism Rabbi Gilad Kariv said, "We call on the prime minister to make clear to his ultra-Orthodox partners that the unity of the Jewish people and the connection between the State of Israel and world Jewry cannot be held captive [by] the ultra-Orthodox community, and to take a clear and public stand against the continued incitement of ultra-Orthodox politicians

against millions of Reform Jews.” PM Netanyahu has done exactly the opposite, sacrificing the rights of progressive Jews for his own political gain.

- ❖ As our most important religious site, the Western Wall has become a symbol of Judaism and even Jewish autonomy. Yet, the stranglehold of the Chief Rabbinate and Haredi political parties over both religious spaces and the government has turned the struggle for the egalitarian section into a symbol of the fight for religious freedom and women’s rights.
- ❖ When four women studying at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem were strip searched before entering the Kotel plaza on Rosh Hodesh Elul, it became clearer than ever that this fight is about the fundamental rights of egalitarian Jews, and women in particular, to be able to engage in prayer and religious observance with dignity.
- ❖ If we want Israel to be welcoming to all Jews and to be strengthened as a Jewish and democratic state, there must be religious equality.
- ❖ We are greatly disappointed by this latest setback in what has been a long and hard-fought battle. Starting in 1988 when 100 women gathered together to pray and sing, forming the group Women of the Wall, the cause of creating “one wall for one people” has been gaining ground. Each Rosh Hodesh these women with their allies from Israel and abroad pray at the Western Wall, sometimes enduring abuse, violence, degrading treatment, and even arrest.
- ❖ The Western Wall Agreement approved by the Cabinet attempts to balance the rights of all parties—to respect, equality, freedom of religion and freedom of expression—while preserving the special historic, national and religious status of the Kotel for all of the Jewish people.
- ❖ The struggle for an egalitarian section is about more than liberal aspirations and it is about more than the Western Wall. Religious freedom and democracy are at stake. With a 15-5 vote to approve the agreement, and 86% of Israeli Jews supporting religious freedom, the egalitarian section has become a symbol of the monopoly of the Haredi parties, and the need to free ourselves from it.
- ❖ The expanded and recognized egalitarian section of the Western Wall will become a beacon of enduring religious equality and progressive Judaism in Israel. The agreement makes the statement that there is a place for all of our people. This new prayer space would provide hope that if we can live our Jewish spiritual diversity in that holiest of places we can and will, one day soon, make the entire State of Israel a place of religious equality, acceptance and respect.

To ensure the future of the Jewish State as an open, accepting, pluralistic and democratic society, please join the Reform Movement’s [Campaign for Religious Equality](https://www.arza.org/donation/religious-equality). With your help we can:

- ▶ Support additional advocacy and legal work in Israel.
- ▶ Strengthen the Reform Movement in Israel by building additional congregations.
- ▶ Assist the reach of the Israeli Reform Movement's public awareness campaign.

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