

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### *Who Decides Where We Can Pray?*

#### *A History of Gender Equality and Separation at the Western Wall*

If you've ever been to Jerusalem and visited the Western Wall – also called the Wailing Wall, or the Kotel – you've seen a spectacular phenomenon. There is naturally, a very strong security system in place for anyone who wants to enter the Plaza. Once inside the Plaza, you will see countless people approaching a tall, yellowish structure. You can see the greenery bleeding in between the massive stones, and if you look closely, you can also see thousands of small pieces of paper squeezed into the cracks. These are notes and prayers that visitors put in the wall as their private messages to God. You'll also see a structure dividing the Wall into two sections; one section to the left where men are praying and a smaller section to the right with women praying. Both sections have people at the entrance; men are required to cover their heads (someone will give you a paper head covering if you don't have one) and women are required to be dressed modestly (someone will lend you a scarf or a skirt if they believe too much skin is showing). Looking to the left of the men's section, you will see a cave like corridor with libraries of holy books and even real Torahs. People are praying and studying all day and all night. If you are a woman, of course, you can't enter the caves because the only entrance is on the men's side.

The Wall itself – about 187 feet wide by 62 feet high -- is said to be the only remnant of the Holy Temple believed to be originally built by King Solomon hundreds of years before the Common Era began. It was destroyed by Babylonians in 586 BCE. The Second Temple was rebuilt and dedicated 70 years later, in 516 BCE and renovated by the Roman figure "Herod the Great" in the years shortly before the beginning of the Common Era (CE – measured by the time following the birth of Jesus. The time before Jesus' birth is called BCE, Before the Common Era, by historians). Herod's Temple was destroyed by the Romans, along with the rest of Jerusalem, in 70 CE during the first Jewish-Roman War. It has not been rebuilt since, and only the outer Western Wall remains standing. For centuries, Jews have prayed at this Wall as a connection to ancient biblical history. This last remnant of the Temple has spiritual significance for millions. Over the years, when Jerusalem was controlled by various empires, Jews did not have access to the Wall during certain time periods. In 1948, the Wall was not part of the land that was designated for Israel, but was part of Jordan. When Israel was attacked by three nations in 1967, the famous "Six Day War" resulted in Israel gaining control of the Wall. *Finally!* The Jewish people were once again able to pray at this holy monument.

And then, politics and philosophy and differences began to rise. Worship protocols at the Wall became the purview of the government, who appointed chief rabbis from the Orthodox world who dictated that worship at the Wall must be consistent with Orthodox tradition, especially on the issues of gender separation during prayer. So, the men's section and the women's section remain. Though only 10-15% of the Jewish people worldwide are Orthodox,

with similar numbers even in Israel, the Orthodox control the worship area that is sacred to all Jews.

There is a spot away from the main plaza that is not under Orthodox control called The Robinson Arch. There, men and women pray together. I've been there. It is around the corner from the main plaza, down a steep set of stairs. It's not exactly easy to get there; you have to know what you're looking for. Families that want to have a bar or bat mitzvah at the wall, if they want to have everyone together for the service, go to this out-of-the-way corner.

The other issue regarding gender is about women who wish to read Torah out loud and wear traditional garb, like a *tallit* or *tefillin*, which are usually reserved for men. There is a huge difference of opinion about the acceptability of this. Jewish law does not prohibit women from praying with traditional garb; custom does. Some Orthodox Jews feel so strongly about this custom that when they see women praying in ways that they don't feel is appropriate, they take drastic, sometimes even violent action. Women have been attacked, berated and arrested during prayer.

In 2016, progressive Jewish leaders reached a historic agreement to grant space, recognition and authority to non-Orthodox Jews at the Western Wall. In a 15-5 vote the Government of Israel passed a bill that would allow for a third section of the main plaza at the Wall, so there would be separate prayer spaces for men and women, and another section where men and women could pray together consistent with their customs. Those who wished to maintain an Orthodox practice would still have space reserved for them, and there would also be space for non-Orthodox to practice in their own section without disturbing the traditional sections. A year later, this idea was frozen due to ultra-Orthodox political leaders who opposed any non-traditional worship at the Wall.

Now, instead of progressing toward more equal rights, there is a bill proposed to the Israeli government to give the Chief Orthodox Rabbi complete authority over everything that happens at the Wall. It has even been proposed that anyone praying in a way that the Chief Rabbi finds objectionable (including women wearing ritual garb, singing their prayers out loud and reading Torah) can be imprisoned for up to seven years. The progressive groups protesting this bill paused when the war with Iran began; those pressuring the government to pass the bill kept going.

Why is this important to those living in the United States? Here, each community decides for itself their own style of worship. Many American Jews never travel to Israel or visit the Western Wall. But this spot has become a pilgrimage for millions to connect with a sacred piece of history. I believe it is possible for differing groups to be respectful of each other. There will always be space at the Wall for Orthodox, gender separated worship. Why not add another section that is respectful of a different interpretation? There are enough people in the world who do not understand Jews without having Jews fighting with each other about how to pray.

We must be grateful at how strongly the Orthodox communities have kept Judaism thriving for centuries. It is also essential to embrace the concept of *K'lal Yisrael*, **the whole community of Israel**, which is vital to our existence. Talmudic study has always included differences of opinion. When we respect each other's differences, we strengthen our worldwide community. My own mission is for mutual respect. When I am in Orthodox spaces, I adhere to their customs without question. I will continue to advocate for equality at the Wall, hoping and praying for the day when everyone feels at home while worshipping. After all, ***we are all the children of Israel***. ALL of us.

L'shalom,

*Rabbi Dan Gordon*