

THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER TRADITIONS AT THE WESTERN WALL IN JERUSALEM

Stuart Charmé

In recent years the Western Wall in Jerusalem has become a site of conflict and contention between liberal and feminist Jews, on the one hand, and strictly religious Jews, on the other hand, over the permissible roles for women in the religious rituals and activities that take place there. It would be easy to characterize this struggle as an effort to claim for Jewish women a larger share of a sacred space that, like an Orthodox synagogue, is currently dominated, regulated, and controlled by Orthodox men. Of course, like many religions, traditional Judaism offers rationales for different gender roles in religion, such as the supposedly higher “spiritual” nature of women, which makes certain religious obligations of men unnecessary; and women’s central role in child care and the domestic realm of the family. Orthodox Judaism defends the practices at the Wall, moreover, in light of what it regards as the clear demands of Jewish law and custom. This article will challenge the unproblematic acceptance of these religious explanations by analyzing some of the unarticulated political and social functions that such gender roles serve and ways in which those functions have become further complicated by Jewish nationalism and the place of religion within Israel, both before and since the creation of a modern nation-state.

Although there is little question about the strength and antiquity of patriarchal traditions in Judaism that limit female power and participation, this may not be the most fruitful starting point for a feminist analysis of this controversy, for in this case we are not confronted by a historically continuous policy of female exclusion from the activities at the Western Wall.¹ Accordingly, acknowledging the antiquity of the Wall itself does not justify any presumption of antiquity in the gender practices currently in place there; it is simply not true that

¹ Many excellent analyses of the patriarchal roots of Judaism are available, including Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

the way things are done now is the way they have been done for thousands of years. Rather, what we find at the Western Wall is the re-creation of patriarchal power as a reaction to shifting political conditions in the past century. These external factors heightened latent patriarchal ideas and helped to transform a place that had been characterized by relative gender neutrality and informal religious devotions into a male domain governed by the formal rules of the Orthodox synagogue.

Over the past century the imposition of stricter rules for women's behavior at the Western Wall has corresponded with two different struggles for power: one between Jews and non-Jews in Jerusalem during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period when Arabs and the British successively controlled the area of the Wall and Temple Mount; and one between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews (liberal and secular) in the period since 1967, when Israel gained political control over this sacred spot. In both cases the assertion of Jewish power took the form of enhanced expressions of Jewish masculinity and the increasing marginalization of Jewish women.

Gender issues became highlighted in reaction to changes in the size and composition of the Jewish population in Israel and the politicization of Jerusalem by nationalism. In the 1920s, for example, efforts to install a fence at the Western Wall to separate men and women were a reflection not just of the growing presence of ultrareligious Jews from Europe but also of Zionist demands for Jewish autonomy at the Wall area in the face of competing Arab claims. By the latter part of the twentieth century, the same fence became a potent symbol of Orthodox religious authority in Israel in the face of liberal Judaism's increasingly more vocal insistence on recognition. In other words, the suppression of women's power and participation was exacerbated by modern political struggles in which the regulation of women's religious rights and status served a new symbolic purpose. As traditions limiting women's involvement were reinvented and reinvigorated there, the latent traditions of female inclusion that are also associated with the Wall were lost.

A feminist analysis of the past two centuries of history at the Western Wall must examine the ways in which women's religious rights were undermined by these modern power struggles. One of the most striking aspects of this development of gender policies at the Wall is the ironic parallel between Jews' general struggle for the right to pray as they saw fit that took place in the early part of the twentieth century and the struggle of Jewish women for the right to pray as they see fit that came to a head in the final decade of the twentieth century. In both cases a relatively powerless group demanded freedom of worship at the Western Wall from the powers in control. But after the Jews in Israel gained control of the Wall in 1967, few argued that the inclusion and empowerment of all Jews at the Wall, which earlier generations of Jews had demanded from the ruling Arab and later British powers, ought to be extended to women.

Rather, the Orthodox authorities who now controlled the arrangements at the Western Wall adopted precisely the same arguments, rhetoric, and strategies as had been used *against them* by Ottomans, Arabs, and the British to prevent a growth in Jewish power—only now these arguments were used to maintain restrictions on *women's* participation at the Wall. For Arabs in the 1920s, fear of loss of power to the growing Jewish community was the primary concern, whereas for Orthodox Jews in the 1980s and 1990s, it was fear of losing power to liberal Jews that posed the greatest threat. The categories of tradition, custom, and their legal correlative in Israel—"the status quo"—were deployed and manipulated to undermine both the Jewish demands for rights in the 1920s and Jewish women's demands for the same rights sixty years later.

The Construction of the Western Wall's Reputation

There is a fairly universal assumption among modern Jews that the Western Wall has been the most sacred Jewish religious site and an object of pilgrimage and veneration for nearly two thousand years, from the time the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the first century until today. This idea assumes an unbroken continuity between the joyous pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem in earlier times, through the mournful pilgrimages during the time of exile, up until the Jews' victorious return to the Wall in 1967.² Yet the symbolic presence and meaning of the Western Wall within the pilgrimages of the imagination that have inspired Jews for centuries are far more complex.

The symbolic prominence of the Western Wall within modern Jewish life carries with it a presumption of antiquity and authenticity that attaches itself to the current practices at the Wall. Thus, traditions of gender segregation at the Wall are taken for granted by most contemporary Jews as ancient traditions, although they are in fact relatively recent innovations to earlier practices observed at the Wall. It is startling to discover not only that the Wall assumed its centrality as the most sacred spot in Judaism relatively late in Jewish history but also that the use of a partition, or *mechitzah*, to segregate and silence women in religious observances may not have been as rigid as was previously thought.³ Indeed, the *mechitzah* was not a universal feature of synagogue wor-

² Beneath the claims of fidelity to an unchanging past that one routinely finds among competing religious adherents, one discovers a dynamic process of construction, innovation, and change that is based on *both* continuity *and* discontinuity with the past. See Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious," *Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385 (1984): 273–90; and Jocelyn Linnekin, "Defining Tradition: Variations on the Hawaiian Identity," *American Ethnologist* 10, no. 2 (May 1983): 241–52.

³ Susan Grossman, "Women and the Jerusalem Temple," in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue; A Survey of History, Halakhah, and Contemporary Realities*, ed. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 15–37.

ship until the Middle Ages, and the codification of the exact religious laws governing the *mechitzah* was a relatively late phenomenon that became even more important as liberal Judaism embraced mixed prayer as a congregational norm.⁴

Before the Middle Ages, the Western Wall enjoyed no special status, either as a symbol or as a site for pilgrimage and worship. Jewish visitors were more likely to mourn the loss of the Temple from the Mount of Olives, facing the eastern wall of the Temple Mount.⁵ Standard descriptions of the Temple and Jerusalem up through the fifteenth century did not mention the Wall.⁶ Ironically, until the eighteenth century the most common recognizable symbol of Jerusalem in Jewish iconography was the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy place. Only in the nineteenth century did the Wall begin to show up consistently in Jewish folk art.

In the sixteenth century the Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent engaged in a major restoration of the walls, gates, and towers of Jerusalem. At this time, an eighty- to ninety-foot stretch of the western wall was cleared of debris and opened to Jews for prayer. This section of the western wall soon became an accepted center of Jewish religious attention that was appended to the list of previously recognized holy sites in Jerusalem.⁷ The basically new tradition of the sacredness of the Western Wall became established precisely by denying that it was a new idea at all.

In this case different ideas were stitched together to create a seamless account of the special sacredness of the Western Wall from the moment of the Temple's destruction. For example, early Talmudic references to the eternal presence of God at the western wall of *the Temple* (the location of the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant)—references that were likely spiritual and metaphorical in their original context—became elided with the actual western wall of *the Temple Mount*.⁸ Over time the difference between these two walls became erased. All the walls of the original Temple in Jerusalem, including the western wall, were destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.; there are no real remains of this temple. The Western Wall revered in Jewish tradition since the

⁴ Norma Baumele Joseph, "Mehitzah: Halakhic Decisions and Political Consequences," in Grossman and Haut, *Daughters of the King*, 117–34.

⁵ Francis E. Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 227.

⁶ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Western Wall."

⁷ Peters, *Jerusalem*, 225; Meir Ben-Dov, Mordechai Naor, and Zeev Aner, *The Western Wall*, trans. Raphael Posner (Tel Aviv, Israel: Ministry of Defence, 1983), 33.

⁸ The oft-cited twelfth-century report of Benjamin of Tudela is probably not a reference to the site of the present Western Wall. *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (London: Adler, 1927), 222–23.

sixteenth century is not a piece of that temple but a small section of the wall of the elevated area, or Temple Mount, on which the original Temple stood.⁹

The subtle transfer of Judaism's most sacred spot from the virtual western wall of the Temple to the actual western wall of the Temple Mount provided a solution for the awkward situation whereby Islam had appropriated the Temple Mount as a sacred site of its own from which Jews were barred. Although religious Jews had visited the Temple Mount in earlier periods without apparent concern, Jewish tradition now emphasized *religious* reasons for why Jews were forbidden on the Temple Mount. Muslim control of the Temple Mount was certainly easier to tolerate once Jews internalized this exclusion in a tradition that insisted that devout Jews would not ascend the Temple Mount even if they were allowed to.¹⁰

The Western Wall as a Female Symbol

Modern restrictions on women's religious participation at the Western Wall have made the Wall into a symbol of unrepentant patriarchal hegemony to many Jewish women, but the less-developed folk traditions about the Wall remain an unclaimed resource for Jewish women's empowerment. Indeed, one could easily imagine that the Wall might have been developed as the major symbol of female inclusion rather than a place where women huddle in the corner.

According to one ancient legend, God protected the Western Wall because of the love shown by the poor men, women, and children who were said to have built it. The Wall was thus associated with the simple devotion of the weak and powerless, both male and female, rather than the power and authority of the religious elite, those who control it today.

Another legend stems from medieval rabbis at the kabbalistic center of Zefat (Safed), in northern Israel. They insisted that the Shekhinah, the mystical female presence of God, dwells eternally at the Wall. To one pious, ascetic rabbi who made a pilgrimage to the Wall, the Shekhinah appeared as a woman dressed in black, her hair disheveled, weeping because of the Jews' exile. The Shekhinah offered the pious man healing, comfort, and hope for the return of the exiled Jews to Jerusalem.¹¹ A greater emphasis on this female presence of

⁹ Ironically, the Western Wall that is routinely accepted as the *sole-surviving* wall of the glorious Temple of Jerusalem is neither sole surviving (since much of the walls on the other sides of the Temple Mount remain intact, if not accessible) nor a *wall of the Temple* itself. See Peters, *Jerusalem*, 226.

¹⁰ Ben-Dov, Naor, and Aner, *Western Wall*, 35.

¹¹ Menachem M. Kasher, *The Western Wall: Its Meaning in the Thought of the Sages* (New York: Judaica), 40–41; Allan Rabinowitz, "Legends of the Wall," *Jerusalem Post*, August 4, 1998; and Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 338.

God might have impeded the Wall's transformation into a place where male religious power is enshrined.

In kabbalistic thought, the physical exile or separation of the Jews from their holy land is reflected in the spiritual alienation or separation of the female side of God from the male side. Redemption is therefore associated with the process of reunion. In the realm of sacred time, it is the Sabbath, also symbolized as a woman, that offers a fleeting glimpse of a reunion of the male and female sides of divine and human reality. Similarly, in the realm of sacred space, the female symbol of the Western Wall represents the possibility of a redemptive process marked by the physical reunion of the Jewish people with the land at the Wall and the spiritual reunion of male and female aspects of the divine.¹² Although such legendary material might someday be retrieved as the basis for new feminist traditions at the Wall, this was not the reaction of religious and secular Jews when they and their Wall were permanently reunited in the latter half of the twentieth century. Rather, this reunion was constructed as a heroic male victory, as the "female" Wall was rescued from its evil captors. Strictness about proper gender roles became a key factor in preserving the sanctity of the Western Wall, and a more relaxed attitude about such matters was blamed as one of the reasons for the Jews' long exile from that spot.

The Informal Traditions in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

To recognize the power of the Western Wall as a unifying symbol for Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is not to imply it was any kind of egalitarian utopia for Jewish women. But gender relations were less restrictive for women during the period when activities at the Wall were less formal or organized. As an object of pilgrimage, the Wall was equally valued by men and women.¹³ In earlier periods, prayer at the Wall was fairly simple, with both men and women reading psalms, weeping, and kissing the stones of the Wall.¹⁴ An

¹² The weeping and healing female presence of the Shekhinah at the Western Wall may also be associated with a modern story of water oozing from the Wall in 1940, as though the Wall or the Shekhinah were weeping as the Holocaust began to unfold. Women were said to gather the water and use it in various folk remedies. Zev Vilnay, *Legends of Jerusalem: The Sacred Land* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 1:169–70; Ben-Dov, Naor, and Aner, *Western Wall*, 117. A recent ethnography of the practices at the Western Wall reports that some women position themselves under one of the bushes growing out of the wall, a spot some claim to be "the precise seat of the exiled, but compassionate Shekhinah." Danielle Storper-Perez and Harvey E. Goldberg, "The Kotel: Toward an Ethnographic Portrait," *Religion*, 24, no. 4 (October 1994): 323.

¹³ Susan Starr Sered points out that pilgrimages to tombs and to the Western Wall were the preferred religious rituals of elderly Jewish women in Jerusalem whom she studied in the 1980s. *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 114.

¹⁴ Armstrong, *Jerusalem*, 327.

early eighteenth-century account reports that on holidays, and especially on Tishah B'Av, the commemoration of the destruction of the Jews' two great Temples, the women would "weep bitterly" without objection from others.¹⁵ These activities occurred at the Wall within both sight and earshot of the men, for whom they apparently were of little concern. They are the kind of typical ritual activities that women continue to perform at sacred tombs in Israel as well as at the Wall.¹⁶

Perhaps the most important consideration that determined behavior at the Wall was the fact that Jewish visitors and pilgrims neither compared it to a synagogue nor assumed that the rules of the synagogue would apply there. There was no sense in which the Wall was regarded as a particularly male sacred space at which specific issues of Jewish law (*halachah*) might pertain. The Wall was governed more by popular folk traditions than by rabbinic authority. Most people—male and female—prayed "like women," that is, individually and quietly. It is not that men and women commingled a great deal (Jewish society clearly prescribed different religious roles for men and women), but simply that the degree of interaction at the Wall was not a particularly charged issue.

Nineteenth-century accounts record the regular presence of modest numbers of devout Jews at the Western Wall, where psalms and other prayers were recited. Rabbi Isaac Yahudah, a leader in the Sephardic community, reports that his mother and grandmother often took him to the Wall when he was a small child: "Often only women were there. No one disturbed or insulted the women who assembled in this holy place."¹⁷ As a young man, he witnessed Ashkenazic Jews bringing Torahs, tables, and chairs to the Wall, where he would find "men and women praying and reading."¹⁸ A report on the Wall from the 1840s describes the crowd that gathered there on Fridays, noting that "women walk up and down the small area, occasionally approaching the wall to kiss it, pouring forth lamentation and prayers."¹⁹ One Friday afternoon in 1843, a visitor to what non-Jews then called the "Jews' Place of Wailing" observed that "about 30 men and half as many women were assembled together, all without shoes, the ground whereon they trod being in their estimation holy."²⁰

¹⁵ Peters, *Jerusalem*, 529.

¹⁶ Sered points out that, although tombs in Israel are a kind of female sacred space, control of these shrines by the Ministry of Religious Affairs has resulted in a variety of new male-imposed rules and restrictions. *Women as Ritual Experts*, 116–18.

¹⁷ Isaac Yahudah, quoted in Cyrus Adler, *Memorandum on the Western Wall: Prepared for the Special Commission of the League of Nations on Behalf of the Jewish Agency for Palestine* (Philadelphia, 1930), 35. Undoubtedly, Yahudah is referring to the fact that the women were not disturbed or insulted by local Arabs; there was no issue for Jewish men to be concerned about.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹ Quoted in Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, *Jerusalem in the 19th Century: The Old City* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), 310.

²⁰ Ridley Hershell, quoted in Adler, *Memorandum on the Western Wall*, 46.

Other visitors likewise remarked on this tradition of removing one's shoes before approaching the Wall out of respect for its special sacredness.²¹ The presence of shoes, not women or their voices, was the most obvious threat to the sanctity of the area.

Visitors in the mid-nineteenth century viewed the Western Wall as a place of communal gathering, a place where "men, women, and children, of all ages, from infants to patriarchs of fourscore and ten, crowded the pavement and pressed their throbbing foreheads against the beloved stones."²² In *Nach Jerusalem*, an 1859 book by Ludwig Frankl, there is a description of a more elaborate Friday-evening service at the Wall that did include a spatial separation of men and women, but this scene also includes a powerful display of the impact of women's voices and physical presence on the prayers being recited there:

Jews were gathered there in their hundreds, some in the dress of the Ishmaelites and others in the style of Poland, and facing the Wall, they bowed and prostrated themselves. At a great distance from the men, stood the women all totally enveloped in white gowns—white doves, tired from their flying, resting on the ruins. When the cantor reached those parts of the prayers to be said by the congregation, *their voices rose among the choir of male voices*, and spreading their arms on high, they looked in their wide white gowns for all the world like wings spread upwards to the open gates of heaven.²³

Not only did women seem to be an important component in the activities at the Wall, but also their voices were accepted as part of the more frequent public, communal prayers taking place there. A little more than a century later, participation of this kind would be forbidden.

By the late nineteenth century, the growth in the Jewish population of Jerusalem had transformed Sabbath at the Western Wall into an emotionally dramatic spectacle. On Friday afternoon the Wall was a must-see stop for the non-Jewish traveler seeking an exotic experience in Palestine. Hundreds of Jews congregated there to read Jewish texts, to pray, and to weep. In some cases, visitors noticed that the tourists greatly outnumbered the Jews praying. Indeed, some travelers began to question how much of the wailing was staged for the sake of visitors, who were quickly solicited for donations.²⁴ This was obviously

²¹ Ben-Arieh, *Jerusalem in the 19th Century*, 309.

²² Willima C. Prime, quoted in Adler, *Memorandum on the Western Wall*, 50.

²³ Ludwig Frankl, *Nach Jerusalem*, quoted in Ben-Dov, Naor, and Aner, *Western Wall*, 71 (emphasis added).

²⁴ David Klatzker, "Sacred Journeys: Jerusalem in the Eyes of American Travelers before 1948," in *Jerusalem in the Mind of the Western World, 1800–1948*, ed. Yehoshua Ben-Arieh and Moshe Davis, With Eyes toward Zion 5 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 52. Theodor Herzl complained in his diary in November 1898 about misery, squalor, and pervasive begging at the Wall that

enough of an issue that other visitors went to pains to deny such accusations. In one 1895 account, a traveler observed, on Fridays at the Wall,

Hebrews of all countries, and of all ages, of both sexes, rich and poor alike, weeping and bewailing the desolation which has come upon them, and upon the city of their former glory. Whatever may be their faith, it is beautiful and sincere; and their grief is actual and without dissimulation. They kiss the walls, and beat their breasts, and tear their hair, and rend their garments; and the real tears they shed come from their hearts and their souls, as well as from their eyes. They ask for no *backsheesh* [contributions]; they pay no attention to the curious and inquisitive heretics and Gentiles.²⁵

The presence of both men and women is consistently mentioned in travelers' accounts from the period.²⁶ To be sure, visitors sometimes reported that the men and women were in separate groups, but the separation was not formalized with a partition (which was officially forbidden), and the space between clusters of men and clusters of women was minimal. There is no indication that men alone were permitted to pray aloud or in groups. In many cases, pictures and descriptions indicate no gender division at the Wall, and men and women stood there in close proximity. Sometimes they would sit together in a circle to listen to Jewish scholars read.²⁷

What stands out in these nineteenth-century descriptions of the Western Wall is the sense of unity of the Jews who were drawn to it. This unity was a particularly powerful experience in contrast to the relatively hostile feelings of the non-Jews who controlled Israel and Jerusalem at the time. Abraham Moses Luncz, a fifty-year resident of Israel, wrote in the late nineteenth century:

Every Sabbath eve, masses of Jewish men, women, and children from all of the various community groups hasten to the Wailing Wall from noontime onwards. . . . One hears the noise of hurried preparations emanating from every home in the city as people ready themselves to go to the Wall. Dressed in their best clothing and clutching holy texts, they rush through the streets from all directions. Old men and women leaning on their canes, little children holding their parents' hands, all with a common destination. . . . This scene so amazes anyone who sees it that

made a deep emotional reaction to the place impossible for him. See Martin Gilbert, *Jerusalem: Re-birth of a City* (New York: Viking, 1985), 227.

²⁵ Lawrence Hutton, *Literary Landmarks of Jerusalem* (New York: Harper, 1895), 20.

²⁶ William H. Bartlett, *Walks about the City and Environs of Jerusalem, Summer 1842*, 2nd ed. (London: Virtue, 184?; Jerusalem: Canaan Publishing, 1974), 140–41; Charles W. Wilson, *Picturesque Palestine* (New York: Appleton, 1881), 41.

²⁷ John M. Oesterreicher and Anne Sinai, eds., *Jerusalem* (New York: Day, 1974), 312; Adler, *Memorandum on the Western Wall*, 39.

foreigners visiting the country try to be present at these times; they write endless descriptions of the event in their diaries so as to etch it in their minds forever.²⁸

Although the Western Wall was a place of lamentation over the ruin of Israel's past glory, it also embodied the displaced sacredness of the Temple that once stood above it. In addition, it marked the spot of Israel's future restoration. Beyond mourning, it also offered the opportunity for hope in the future. It thus constituted a small oasis of Jewish sacredness and pride where differences of ethnicity, gender, and age were temporarily erased or at least ignored.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a variety of postcards of the Western Wall were becoming available for the growing number of travelers visiting it. Men and women are often pictured on these cards standing within a few feet of each other, sometimes in separate groups but almost never with any formal partition. Rarely are chairs or benches shown, nor are other religious accessories, such as prayer shawls (tallitot), tefillin, or Torahs, visible. Visits to the Wall were informal, and the materials that would be used in formal prayer services were mostly absent; there was usually no need for them.

The Western Wall was certainly not a totally gender-integrated place. Sometimes women are shown on the postcards dressed in white in small groups off to the right or left side, particularly on the Sabbath. Margaret Thomas's report on Jews reading and praying at the Wall one Friday in 1900 describes "men in one group and women in another."²⁹ On some occasions, probably special events, men are shown gathered together, seated on benches, without any women present. Other times, equal numbers of men and women are spread along the Wall, and in still other pictures women seem to fill most of the Wall. Photography of the time also shows women and men standing beside one another at the Wall.³⁰ Even when men and women were shown separated, this occurred only directly next to the Wall, where people stood one person deep.³¹ The zone of sacredness where one might separate men and women

²⁸ Abraham Moses Luncz, quoted in Armstrong, *Jerusalem*, 372; also quoted, in different translation, by Adler, *Memorandum on the Western Wall*, 35.

²⁹ Margaret Thomas, *Two Years in Palestine and Syria* (London: Nimmo, 1900), 161.

³⁰ Micheal Join-Lambert, *Jerusalem*, trans. Charlotte Haldane (London: Elek, 1958), 80; James E. Hanauer, *Walks in and around Jerusalem*, 2nd ed. (London: London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, 1926; Jerusalem: Ariel, 1981), 152–53; Thomas A. Idinopulos, *Jerusalem Blessed, Jerusalem Cursed: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Holy City from David's Time to Our Own* (Chicago: Dee, 1991), 122; and Vivienne Silver-Brody, "Selected Sectarian Postcards, Texts, and Snapshots of Jerusalem: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Ben-Arieh and Davis, *Jerusalem in the Mind*, 207.

³¹ Teddy Kolleck and Moshe Perlman, *Jerusalem: A History of Forty Centuries* (New York: Random, 1968), 226.

on certain occasions did not extend far back from the Wall, or at least no one seemed to observe it.

For a relatively long time, norms at the Western Wall were not explicitly articulated and the practices there were somewhat fluid. There is evidence that a partition of men and women was occasionally installed at the Wall. A 1907 tourist account describes a canvas screen dividing the courtyard into sections for men and women.³² One Mendle Hacovan Pakover testified to a later British commission that, from 1900 to about 1910, he arranged for a separation of men and women on Sabbaths and holidays, though other witnesses contested this.³³ During this period there was increasing formalization of prayer services at the Wall on Sabbaths and holidays, but there was still no overall consensus that the area in front of the Wall should be operated like an outdoor synagogue, where gender relations would need to be more strictly regulated.

Growing Jewish Diversity at the Western Wall

Growing concern for gender separation at the beginning of the twentieth century was partly a manifestation of increasing diversity in the Jewish community and tensions between a growing *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) presence and other Jews.³⁴ In the early nineteenth century there were only a few thousand, mostly Sephardic, Jews living in Jerusalem. By the early twentieth century the Jewish population had grown tenfold, to around 35,000, and European Ashkenazim, who tended to be more restrictive about the presence of women at the Western Wall, easily outnumbered the Sephardim. One Orthodox woman in Jerusalem reported that some ultrareligious Jews insisted on a higher degree of gender separation than had been the tradition at the Wall:

The orthodox women, I among them, often went into [a] little enclosure to say prayers, as many of the strictly observant Jews strenuously object, then as now, to praying in the presence of women. No objection to this use of the enclosure was ever raised by anyone. *Sometimes a particularly devout worshiper in the community or an important visitor, a Gaon for instance, would not like women to be in sight at this place and*

³² Herbert Rix, quoted in Adler, *Memorandum on the Western Wall*, 63.

³³ Eliel Löfgren, Charles Barde, C. J. van Kempen, *Report of the Commission appointed by His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with the Approval of the Council of the League of Nations, to Determine the Rights and Claims of Moslems and Jews in Connection with the Western or Wailing Wall at Jerusalem* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1931), 31.

³⁴ As Menachem Friedman points out, the *haredi* Jewish community developed a stringent view of Jewish observance, reacting against what they perceived as an erosion of religious standards among other Jews. "Life Tradition and Book Tradition in the Development of Ultraorthodox Judaism," in *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 238–41.

*then a screen would be put up. . . . I remember vividly how in 1902, when there had been no proper rain for several seasons, the communities of all religious denominations were asked to have special prayers, [but] the Chassidic elements said we could not expect an answer to the prayers for the blessings of rain when we had let the Jewish custom of the separation of the sexes at prayer lapse at the Wailing Wall, though we kept it in synagogue, and a screen was put up.*³⁵

Apparently, many Jews did not see any necessity for a screen (*mechitzah*) to be set up at the Western Wall, which was not really a synagogue in their minds. When gender separation was maintained at the Wall, it was in deference to a particular “strictly observant” group of Jews who were demanding a standard beyond the customary practice. It was not so much a matter that gender separation at the Wall had “lapsed” as that it never had been a universally accepted practice to begin with. The use of a *mechitzah* that these ultrareligious Jews demanded was not the standard arrangement but was reserved for special occasions and special visitors. As the proportion of these Jews who adhered to stricter standards increased, pressure for more stringent adherence at the Western Wall also increased. Clearly, the norm of gender practices at the Wall was inconsistent at best, reflecting the diversity of Jewish opinion and observance, the gradual formalization of prayer services, the influx of ultra-Orthodox Jews from eastern Europe, and the intensification of nationalistic conflict between Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem.

Jews, Arabs, and the Status Quo

Although a whole generation of contemporary Jews has grown up in a time when Israel has maintained total control over the Western Wall, the situation at the Wall was quite different when the entire city of Jerusalem was governed by others. Muslim rulers of Jerusalem permitted Jews to visit the Wall from the sixteenth century onward merely as a courtesy, not because they recognized any Jewish entitlement to that spot. From their point of view, Jews were allowed to pray at the Wall as long as they were quiet and behaved themselves. Increasing Jewish settlement in Jerusalem and Jewish traffic to the Wall in the nineteenth century became a growing source of concern to local Arabs. The leader of the Moroccan Quarter opposite the Western Wall complained in 1839 about large numbers of Jews coming and the fact that they “caused annoyance by raising their voices as if the place were a synagogue.”³⁶

Muslims insisted that the place was not a synagogue, which might imply a

³⁵ Quoted in Adler, *Memorandum on the Western Wall*, 42–43 (emphasis added).

³⁶ Abdul L. Tibawi, *Jerusalem: Its Place in Islam and Arab History*, Institute for Palestine Studies Monograph Series 19 (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1969), 25–26.

more permanent Jewish presence. In 1911, Arab residents complained that Jews should not be allowed to bring chairs in order to sit but, rather, ought to stand during their visits, “lest in the future Jews claim ownership of the place.” Chairs, tables, and screens separating men and women were all regarded as “innovations” that might later be used to support a Jewish claim of possession. For this reason Muslims insisted that it was necessary “strictly to maintain the ancient custom” that prohibited Jews from bringing such things to the Wall.³⁷

During the British rule of Palestine, the Western Wall became a flashpoint of struggles between Jews and Muslims. Both sides were aware that benches and partitions at the Wall were political as well as religious accessories that furthered Jewish claims to the site and confirmed Arab unease about the nationalistic aspirations of the Jews. As a British official testified in 1927, if chairs were allowed, next would come benches, then permanent seating, “and before long the Jews would have established a legal claim to the site.”³⁸

For an increasingly nationalistic Jewish population, the Wall was the last and only vestige of Jewish sovereignty, and the *mechitzah* came to be one expression of redeemed Jewish manhood. For secular Zionists, the Wall symbolized the goal of rebuilding an autonomous Jewish state filled with strong Jewish men after two thousand years of “womanly” weakness.

The British policy sought to maintain the religious status quo at the Western Wall, namely, the rules governing the place under Ottoman rule. But the British quickly discovered that there was little consensus about what had been the standard practice there. Whereas the Arab mufti of Jerusalem raised complaints about Jewish violations of the status quo, Jews pointed to occasions when the prohibition of benches, chairs, and partitions was not enforced.³⁹

On September 23, 1928, on the holiday of Yom Kippur, Jews set up a *mechitzah* at the Western Wall. This was not the first time Jews had done so, but neither was it a standard practice; it was probably a response to the special holiness and larger crowds associated with Yom Kippur. In response to a Muslim complaint that the screen, additional lamps, mats, and a larger ark than usual were “innovations in established practice,”⁴⁰ the British authorities requested that the *mechitzah* be removed. When the Jews at the Wall refused to remove it, the British police intervened during Yom Kippur morning services and forcibly tore it down.

The British had no more interest in Jewish gender regulations at the Wall than the Muslims did; their removal of the *mechitzah* was part of the effort to

³⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 27–29.

³⁸ Quoted in International Commission for the Wailing Wall, *The Rights and Claims of Moslems and Jews in Connection with the Wailing Wall at Jerusalem* (1931; repr., Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1968), 31.

³⁹ Ben-Dov, Naor, and Aner, *Western Wall*, 128–30.

⁴⁰ Löfgren, Barde, and Kempen, *Report of the Commission*, 51.

mediate conflicting claims between Arabs and Jews over what constituted the status quo at the Wall. Accordingly, a British white paper of November 1928 affirmed both Muslim ownership of the Wall and Jewish right of access for worship. Such worship could include limited “appurtenances of worship,” but all screens or partitions were specifically proscribed.⁴¹ Nevertheless, following the *mechitzah* episode, tensions between Arabs and Jews worsened, culminating in Arab riots against Jews in 1929 that began at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and spread throughout the country.

To resolve the problem of the Western Wall, the League of Nations appointed a commission in January 1930, at the request of the British. The commission met twenty-three times in June and July of that year. Cyrus Adler, the president of Jewish Theological Seminary, prepared for the commission a memorandum on the Wall representing the Jewish side. Adler presented the view that the Wall had always been held holy by the Jewish people and was the site of continuous Jewish devotion.⁴² His goal was to establish that, even before the arrival of the British, the Wall had been regularly used for formal prayers, not just individual prayers, for it was important for Jews to establish for the British that this had been part of the status quo. Furthermore, rabbinic witnesses testified to the commission that “prayers at the wall and those in every synagogue are identical,” at least on the Sabbath and on holidays.⁴³ Such formal, collective prayers, of course, meant men’s prayers, not the “feminized” individual, private prayers that were less threatening to the local Arabs’ claims of ownership.

The nature of prayer at the Wall had important consequences for the “appurtenances” that would be used there. Formal group prayer would require Torah arks and scrolls, reading tables, and partitions of men and women. Collectively, these objects would reproduce the structure of a synagogue, elevate rabbinic authority, and thereby establish claims to the space as a (male) Jewish sacred site, not a Muslim site that Jews happened to visit.

But the commission also heard evidence that formal services at the Western Wall probably dated only to sometime in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Arabs insisted that actual religious services had not been the norm of Jewish

⁴¹ Secretary of State for the Colonies, *The Western Wall in Jerusalem* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1928), 2–4.

⁴² It is worth noting that Adler dismissed Muslim claims about the sacredness of the Western Wall as the site where Muhammad tethered his horse prior to his “ride to heaven” from the Temple Mount (*Memorandum on the Western Wall*, 67–75). Adler saw this as an invented tradition that appeared only in response to increasing Jewish presence at the site. Thus, he was aware of the political motivation underlying certain claimed traditions, though he understandably remained silent regarding Jewish claims about traditions at the Wall.

⁴³ Adler paraphrasing the chief rabbi of Jaffa, in *ibid.*, 25–28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

religious behavior at the Wall,⁴⁵ and Muslim witnesses testified before the commission that during regular visits to the Wall they had never seen any partitions or fixed religious objects such as chairs, benches, or tables.⁴⁶ It is obvious that religious practices at the Wall were not static or constant. Hence, the British effort to determine a single status quo dating at least to the eighteenth century was probably destined to failure from the start.

Cyrus Adler argued that the practice of *mechitzah*—which even in his own evidence seems to have been only sporadically observed, and mostly in the twentieth century—was in fact the norm. In the conclusions to his memorandum, Adler wrote:

As among all orthodox Jews there is a separation of men and women at religious services, the women used to stand huddled in one corner of the alley way and the men distributed themselves along the rest. When these services became long, a small screen or flat form of separation was set up to satisfy ritual requirements. Testimony is given from various authoritative sources for this practice, and in additional illustrations furnished from Palestine itself. The practice should not be viewed unsympathetically by the Moslems, as it is also their own custom.⁴⁷

Though by now it is clear that the *mechitzah* was a late development, Adler nonetheless asked the British to guarantee Jewish access to the Wall for “prayers to be conducted in accordance with their ritual in a decent and dignified manner.”⁴⁸

Curiously, Adler acknowledged that the Wall had become a universal symbol for Jews around the world, and so he also suggested the need for authorities in Israel to consult with rabbis outside Israel: “Recognizing that the Wall is a Holy Place not simply for the Jews who reside in Jerusalem or Palestine, but for the Jews in the entire world, [it is recommended] that the Rabbinate of Jerusalem may from time to time associate with the Rabbinate of the rest of the world in framing rules for the regulation of these services.”⁴⁹ Surely Adler did not anticipate that the non-Orthodox rabbinate of the rest of the world would be demanding the right for egalitarian (mixed-gender) prayer at the Wall fifty years later. It is not at all clear what Adler envisioned as the role of the non-Orthodox rabbinate, if any, in determining these rules.

The British accepted the Jews’ intention to keep men and women separate, even though prior evidence of that separation was inconsistent. The British report noted, “As men and women could not on account of the local

⁴⁵ International Commission for the Wailing Wall, *Rights and Claims*, 30–31.

⁴⁶ Löfgren, Barde, and Kempen, *Report of the Commission*, 31.

⁴⁷ Adler, *Memorandum on the Western Wall*, 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

conditions be separate from each other as in the synagogue, the women kept apart in a separate corner.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, as the British understood it, “[T]he Jews also claim a right to decide, without interference from others, in what form and to what extent their devotions at the Wall are to be held.”⁵¹

Ultimately, the British clarified their view of the status quo at the Wall. They reaffirmed that, although Muslims held ownership rights to the Wall, Jews had the right to worship there. To avoid what Arabs saw as Jewish provocations, the British forbade the Jews to sound the shofar or to bring furniture or partition screens to the Wall. The status quo as interpreted by the Ottomans and preserved by the British maintained strict limitations on the kind of acceptable Jewish presence at the Wall. The preferred form for Jewish prayer was private lamentation. By silencing the expression of a Jewish “voice”—the blowing of the shofar—and by discouraging the Jews from conducting any collective activities that might lead them to think they were entitled to the Western Wall rather than merely tolerated there, first the Ottomans and then the British had limited Jews to a kind of “feminized” private praying. It is no wonder that sounding the shofar and, to a lesser extent, bringing benches and partitions to the Wall became acts of Jewish political resistance as much as Jewish religious observance. They were declarations of the Jewish “voice” that had been silenced. In 1948, control of the Western Wall passed from the British to the Jordanians, who barred all Jews from the area until Jordan lost control of the area in 1967.

Changes in the Political Meaning of the *Mechitzah* after 1967

The Six-Day War in 1967 was a transformative event in the symbolic meaning of the Western Wall, which had finally returned to Jewish hands. For the secular Zionists, the recapture of the old city of Jerusalem was the apex of collective Jewish heroism and confidence in the military power of the Jewish nation. For many religious Jews, the reclaiming of the Temple Mount and the Western Wall was nothing short of messianic redemption. This mix of triumphant militarism, nationalism, and religious messianism enabled the Wall to quickly become the center of Israeli civil religion and to symbolize the resurgence of a powerful and heroic male ideal.⁵² Particularly for a people who had internalized the stereotype of their Diasporic existence as weak and effemi-

⁵⁰ Löfgren, Barde, and Kempen, *Report of the Commission*, 48.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵² Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 158–59.

nate, Jewish nationalism had to rehabilitate Jewish masculinity and manhood.⁵³ Jerusalem had always been portrayed in Jewish imagination as a nurturing mother of the Jewish people, and the Western Wall had long been associated with the Shekhinah, a kind of divine wife and mother. So, the battle to reclaim the Wall also had resonances of an epic battle in which the strong new Israeli soldiers rescued at last the long-kidnapped female Jerusalem and Wall. The image of victorious Israeli paratroopers weeping and praying at the Wall gave archetypal expression to this theme. In neither the triumphant nationalism that finally purged Jewish men of their female weakness nor the messianic reunion of the religious Jews with the presence of God at the Wall was there a proper role for women. Now that the Wall was a sacred spot, its purity needed to be maintained. That purity would be compromised by the mixing of the genders in activities there.⁵⁴

Of course, the earliest forms of socialist Zionist thinking envisioned a new utopian society shared in equally by Jews regardless of their gender or ethnicity. Indeed, to some degree the Western Wall had already served as a symbol of this ideal. Yet, as many critics have pointed out, there was a considerable gap between this ideal and the fact that women remained consistently associated with family and home, and it was expected that their most important contributions to the nation would be made through their roles as wives and mothers. Even Israel's declaration of independence enshrined two potentially incompatible principles: in a single sentence the state promised "to ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex" and also "to safeguard the Holy Places of all religions."⁵⁵ It later became obvious that the policies developed by the strictly religious Jews to "safeguard" the Wall regarded the "equality of social and political rights" for women as inappropriate at best and dangerous at worst.

The dramatic reconfiguration of the Western Wall began almost immediately after its recapture during the Six-Day War. Military rabbis arriving at the Wall shortly after it fell into Jewish hands enacted those religious practices which Jewish men had been forbidden to do by both the Turks and the British. They triumphantly carried and raised a Torah, blew the shofar, and brought benches to sit on. (There are some reports that one of the people who blew the shofar was a man who had been arrested years earlier by the British for blow-

⁵³ On the role of nationalism in the construction of masculinity, see George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Leah Shakdiel, "Women of the Wall: Radical Feminism as an Opportunity for a New Discourse in Israel," *Journal of Israeli History* 21, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Autumn 2002): 153.

⁵⁵ See Tamar Rapoport and Tamar El-Or, "Cultures of Womanhood in Israel: Social Agencies and Gender Production," *Women's Studies International Forum* 20, nos. 5–6 (1997): 574; and Nitza Berkovitch, "Motherhood as a National Mission: The Construction of Womanhood in the Legal Discourse in Israel," *Women's Studies International Forum* 20, nos. 5–6 (1997): 605–19.

ing the shofar at the Wall.) In this way they expressed both Jewish national and religious autonomy at the Wall. Immediately after the war, the Arab Maghreb (North African) Quarter abutting the Wall was demolished to create a large public plaza that would accommodate the anticipated crowds of Jews converging there. This created the image of the Western Wall that is familiar to current generations of Jews around the world. The Wall, previously located in a narrow, twenty-foot alley and now dwarfed by the immense plaza, was itself enlarged by unearthing two more rows of stones, in effect making it eight feet taller than it had been before. Four hundred years' worth of pilgrims had earlier touched rows of stone that were now well out of reach to new visitors to the Wall.⁵⁶

In the euphoria surrounding its recapture in the Six-Day War, in June 1967, the Western Wall served, momentarily at least, as a unifying symbol both of God's grace (for religious Jews) and of Jewish autonomy (for secular Jews). At the celebration of the first Shavuot at the Wall after its liberation, there was an overwhelming sense of the oneness of the Jewish people. (Shavuot is one of three ancient pilgrimage holidays. It is associated with the Jews' receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.) Isaac Judah HersHKovitz described the tens of thousands of people converging from all directions:

All roads and paths led them to the *kotel* [the Western Wall] . . . and spontaneously, of themselves, the people burst into spirited singing and dancing, hardly caring where or how they were thrown about. So we saw soldiers among *hassidim* with their long sidelocks and black coats, old mixed with young, European westernized *ashkenazim* among some oriental *sephardim*. Who noticed differences or distinctions? All barriers fell, became null and void, as though they had never been. . . . [T]he entire throng was functioning as one body, in a noble exalted unity; a powerful love for every fellow-Jew burned in each heart. Everyone made room for his neighbor. . . . Never before have I seen such a variegated, diverse gathering with so strong a single yearning to gather crumbs, fragments of holiness from the source of holiness. People prayed *Musaf* [a special prayer service], joining one of hundreds of *minyanim* that formed in the twinkling of an eye. . . . On the way back you could see again all the barriers down, fallen between Jew and

⁵⁶ These important gestures of Jewish rights of sovereignty were not lost on the Arab population. A 1970 report of the Institute for Palestine Studies, *The Israeli Violation of the Religion Status Quo at the Wailing Wall, Jerusalem*, protested that the status quo as defined by the 1930 international commission had been violated by Israel in the following ways: (1) the length and height of the Western Wall and the area front of it all were enlarged, the Maghreb Quarter cleared, and innovations in Jewish worship such as the introduction of chairs and benches had been introduced; (2) a screen separating men and women had been installed; (3) the shofar was being blown; (4) Torah scrolls were brought to the Wall; and (5) the area was being used for political gatherings.

fellow-Jew. We witnessed expressions of affection and friendship that we had never seen before.⁵⁷

One journalist described the pilgrims as “ordinary citizens, not the privileged who had already had a glimpse of the Wall since its capture last week. Old people made their way, and the lame, mothers with infants in carriages, and a multitude of children, and soldiers with a few hours’ leave.”⁵⁸ For days, the reports on the mass pilgrimage to the Wall emphasized both the diversity and the unity of the people who gathered on that first Sabbath:

They came wearing holiday *streimels* [fur hats worn by Hasidic Jews], black silk *kaftans* [cloak worn by Middle Eastern men] and white stockings, but also mini-skirts and a *kova tembel* [small cap typically worn by Israeli kibbutzniks], or a colorful, Kurdish gown. No one was too young to be carried or too old and infirm to be helped along the way. Saturday saw many complete families joining the procession, many young couples, and groups of youths from *yeshivot*. There was unaccustomed good feeling between the religious and the non-religious—the latter obviously feeling that in this great demonstration of the entire nation at the Western Wall, it is tradition that has proved itself invincible.⁵⁹

An estimated two million people visited the Western Wall in the first six weeks after the war.⁶⁰

Some religious Jews interpreted the rebirth of the Jewish nation of Israel, the recapture of the Wall, and the reunification of Jerusalem as evidence of the unfolding of divine redemption, drawing two millennia of Jewish exile to an end.⁶¹ Yet the reuniting of the male and female parts of God associated with final redemption in some Jewish traditions did not extend to a reunion of men and women praying at the Wall. To whatever degree women were included in the initial spontaneous sense of Jewish fellowship and unity at the Wall, it was not to last. In July 1967, a spokesman for the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which was dominated by Orthodox religious parties and rabbis, announced that separation of men and women at the Wall would be maintained, because, “to many Orthodox persons, it would be intolerable to have the sexes mix at the Western Wall.”⁶² Within weeks a *mechitzah* was installed at the order of the chief rabbis of Israel, creating a men’s section and a women’s section half its size. Now under Orthodox supervision by way of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the area at the Wall became a *de facto* Orthodox synagogue. At this point

⁵⁷ Isaac Judah HersHKovitz, quoted in Kasher, *Western Wall*, 62.

⁵⁸ “Road to the Wall,” *Jerusalem Post*, June 15, 1967.

⁵⁹ “350,000 Have Walked to Western Wall,” *Jerusalem Post*, June 18, 1967.

⁶⁰ “IL5m. Allocated to Landscape Western Wall,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 1967.

⁶¹ Armstrong, *Jerusalem*, 399.

⁶² Quoted in “IL5m. Allocated to Landscape Western Wall.”

the presence of a *mechitzah* at the Wall was of much less importance to secular Jewish nationalists, and it did not interfere with their celebration of Jewish sovereignty over the Wall. Rather, the *mechitzah* became predominantly an expression of Orthodox religious power. The area of the Wall became the outward face of Judaism for the world, a place where Jewish and non-Jewish tourists—often vastly outnumbering the religious Jews praying—would develop a lasting image of Jewish religious practice. With another partition separating the area near the Western Wall from the larger plaza facing it, the Wall was now crisscrossed with literal and symbolic lines of separation: between tourists and religious worshippers, between the religious and the secular nationalists, between men and women, and, more recently, between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews.

By Yom Kippur in October 1967, the atmosphere at the Western Wall had changed. Ten thousand people came to hear the shofar blown at the Wall in a powerful spectacle. However, the sense of overwhelming national unity experienced at the Wall in June had given way to questions in a newspaper editorial about the control of the Wall by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, “which considers itself responsible only for the wishes and requirements of the observant and disregards . . . the wishes of other Jews concerning their own religious observation.” The editorial mentioned in particular “a narrow, screened pen for women, where the Wall is practically inaccessible owing to the three tables piled with prayer books which are pushed up against it.” The editorial further noted that, in a space that had never before been treated like an Orthodox synagogue, the powerful feelings of the non-Orthodox for the Wall should not be ignored. It closed with a plea that attention be paid to the new “traditions” that were being set in place: “Now, before temporary arrangements crystallize into ‘rights’ and ‘traditions,’ is the time for those who wish the Wall preserved as a national monument to make their voices heard, and insist that it shall be preserved uncluttered, in its ancient starkness, open equally for prayer and meditation.”⁶³

This plea was not heeded, and the new gender arrangements under Orthodox control solidified. The Western Wall could be a symbol of national and religious unity embracing the diversity of the Jewish people only as long as Orthodox norms were politely accepted as the common denominator. Indeed, Orthodox authorities expressed concern about the presence of archaeologists, tourists, immodestly dressed women, picnickers, and others near the Wall. In March 1968, Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim called for the creation of “a special executive authority for the Western Wall, which will be subject to the orders of the Chief Rabbis.”⁶⁴ In August 1968, 150,000 people, including an enormous

⁶³ “The Wall of All Israel,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 16, 1967.

⁶⁴ “The Wall: First a Place for Prayer, Says Nissim,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 13, 1968.

number of tourists, converged on the Wall for the fast day of Tishah B'Av. On the men's side, Jewish men from different cultural backgrounds assembled in small groups to chant mourning prayers, but on the other side, "some women complained of having no proper arrangements for services on their side of the Wall, and suggested that they might have been led in prayers over a loud-speaker."⁶⁵

To determine the policies at the Western Wall, the Israeli government, like the British before it, had invoked the principle of the status quo in an effort to resolve potential conflicts between religion and state. This notion was accepted as one of the founding principles of the Jewish state. In 1947, before the creation of the state of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, political leader of the Jewish community, enlisted the support of Orthodox Jews for the new state by agreeing to preserve the role of Judaism in society by guaranteeing certain Jewish religious regulations, such as observing Saturday as a national day of rest and giving religious courts jurisdiction over marriage and divorce. The idea was that there would be no change in the religion-state relations that had existed before 1948.

Eliezer Don-Yehiya notes that the status quo has "an almost sanctified aura to it." Although it inevitably has been interpreted in conflicting ways, it also offers a kind of mythic criteria against which disputes can be measured.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the principle of the status quo never recognized the historical diversity of religious perspectives in Israel. It merely created a crude dichotomy between the religious (i.e., Orthodox Jews) and the secular (i.e., non-religious as well as Reform and Conservative Jews).

When an international conference of Reform Jews meeting in Jerusalem in July 1968 announced plans for mixed-gender Reform prayer services at the Western Wall, they were opposed by the chief rabbi and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which considered the separation of men and women at the Wall nonnegotiable. An Orthodox newspaper called the Reform Jews "traitors" and suggested that they "build a wall near one of their synagogues and go there to pray with their wives and mistresses." Yeshiva students threatened to physically block Reform Jews from reaching the Wall.⁶⁷ Even the secular, right-wing newspaper *Yediyot Aharonot* opposed Reform Jews' using the Wall to make a

⁶⁵ David Landau, "150,000 at Wall to Mark Tishah B'Av," *Jerusalem Post*, August 4, 1968.

⁶⁶ Eliezer Don-Yehiya, "The 'Status Quo' Agreement as a Solution to Problems of Religion and State in Israel," in *Religion and Politics in Israel*, by Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, Jewish Political and Social Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 31.

⁶⁷ Mendel Kohansky, "Reform Judaism Meets in Israel," *Midstream* 14, no. 9 (November 1968): 55. See also Norman L. Zucker, *The Coming Crisis in Israel: Private Faith and Public Policy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), 94–95.

public statement about gender equality.⁶⁸ Ultimately, the Reform Jews were persuaded to call off their services rather than risk a violent reaction from their opponents, and two decades passed before the issue flared again.

The result of newly instituted practices at the Western Wall and the policies of the Ministry of Religious Affairs has been the creation of a new status quo, one that has effectively established male Orthodox hegemony at this site. This Orthodox control of the Wall has transformed some of the unifying experiences described more than a century ago. Whereas women were frequent visitors to the Wall on Fridays in the past, for example, today *haredi* men comprise the majority of worshippers at the Wall, and on Friday afternoons few married women from this community are seen there, “as Sabbath preparations at home receive their final touches,” though young religious girls may be seen praying there on Friday nights.⁶⁹

For the *haredi* community, the preservation of female modesty is a paramount value, and one way this is protected is by relegating women to the private realm (home and family), where women make their contribution to national honor. Any demands for greater visibility or participation at the Wall would be a violation of that principle. A devout Jewish woman would never do so, and those who do, violate female modesty and threaten the stability and honor of the nation. Liberal feminist Jews are seen as the products of permissive secular trends in modern society that must be resisted.

In the post-1967 arrangements at the Wall, Orthodox rabbinic authorities have forbidden women to bring Torahs, tables, and tallitot to the Wall, claiming that women praying aloud or as a group, or reading from the Torah, is not “according to the custom of the place.” They thus invoke past tradition as a means to limit Jewish women’s rights, much as the Arabs invoked Ottoman custom to prohibit Jews from bringing chairs, partitions, and shofars to the Wall. Perhaps the biggest irony is the fact that Jews were prohibited from erecting a *mechitzah* as a violation of the status quo in the 1920s, yet since 1967, Orthodox Jews have insisted that praying *without* a *mechitzah* is a violation of the status quo.

The bifurcation of the Western Wall into a large section for men and a much smaller section for women has created a symbol that implicitly deconstructs its status as a public expression of national strength and Jewish religious redemption. The men’s side of the Wall represents the new reality of the Jewish state, where Jews are free to worship and celebrate without interference

⁶⁸ The newspaper not only saw no reason to antagonize the Orthodox but also apparently feared the Reform Jews’ actions as a dangerous precedent: “And what if tomorrow an organization of hippies should decide to hold a religious orgy at the Wall with LSD and psychedelic music?” Quoted in Kohansky, “Reform Judaism Meets in Israel,” 56.

⁶⁹ Storper-Perez and Goldberg, “Kotel,” 321.

and where patriotic rituals and public expressions of collective prayer with sacred objects such as prayer shawls and Torahs take place. Embedded in the women's side, however, is the old reality, whereby Jewish behavior had to be quiet, unobtrusive, and subject to various restrictions and where only private, silent meditation without any extra accessories could occur. In this way the arrangements at the Wall have preserved the experience of preindependence Jewish subjugation alongside that of Jewish autonomy, but they have mapped it in a new gendered way wherein Jewish men dominate the official public realm and Jewish women are relegated to a more private realm.⁷⁰

The Campaign to Reclaim Women's Voices and Presence at the Wall

The past fifteen years or so have seen increased tensions in Israel between Orthodox Jews (especially *haredi* Jews) and liberal Jews over issues of religious legitimacy and gender equality. In American Judaism, widespread acceptance of equal rights for women has transformed liturgy, women's participation, and the nature of the rabbinate. Jewish women who are accustomed to carrying and reading from the Torah, wearing tallitot, and participating fully and audibly in group prayer often experience as a special irritant their inability to do any of these things at the Western Wall. American Jewish feminist Letty Cottin Pogrebin has described the ultra-Orthodox control of these practices at the Wall as an illegitimate appropriation of a remnant of ancient Judaism belonging to the entire Jewish people by "black-hat bullies."⁷¹ For non-Orthodox Jews, establishing the right for men and women to pray together at the Wall is central for asserting their own legitimacy as Jews. Thus, the issue at the Wall has become a lightning rod for the ongoing struggle between Orthodox and liberal (Reform and Conservative) Jews in Israel. As a result, the Wall has been transformed from a symbol of potential Jewish unity into a symbol of unresolved Jewish factionalism.

For the same reason that Arabs refused to acknowledge or condone Jewish collective prayer at the Western Wall with Torahs and other characteristics of synagogue services such as the *mechitzah*, Orthodox rabbinic authorities unequivocally reject women's demands for rights at the Wall: they realize that granting such rights could easily become the first step in acknowledging alternatives to Orthodox religious dominance and could embolden non-Orthodox Jews to make further demands. Surely if women wear tallitot and read Torah at the Wall, their reasoning goes, soon liberal women will demand their own services, and then people wanting mixed services will think they have rights, too. To accept men and women praying next to each other, despite the fact that

⁷⁰ See Shakdiel, "Women of the Wall," 136.

⁷¹ Letty Cottin Pogrebin, *Deborah, Golda, and Me* (New York: Crown, 1991), 73–74.

this often occurred in the past without incident, would potentially grant legitimacy to liberal Judaism and, by extension, to its rabbis and practices. Therefore, to strictly hold the line on *mechitzahs* and the associated rules for women is to hold the line against liberal Judaism in general.

The most organized movement for women's rights to female prayer services at the Western Wall began in December 1988, when more than a hundred feminist Jewish women gathered at the Wall to pray and read from the Torah. They wanted the opportunity to pray as a group with Torah and tallitot rather than as silent, solitary women. These women insisted that they were merely seeking equal access to Orthodox rituals and prayers observed by men, not trying to challenge Orthodox practice in any way. By making arguments rooted in halachah, this coalition of women hoped that they would be less threatening to the strictly Orthodox Jews who habitually prayed at the Wall. They insisted that feminism was not incompatible with Orthodox practice. As Phyllis Chesler points out, many Orthodox feminists were interested in ameliorating Jewish women's status within Orthodoxy, not transforming Judaism in a liberal, gender-neutral direction.⁷² This approach was criticized by both ends of the religious spectrum: on the one hand, most Orthodox women did not support this group or its demand for change; on the other hand, many non-Orthodox Jewish feminists who supported truly egalitarian services complained that this approach conceded the entire system of Orthodox gender separation.

In spite of the group's respect for Orthodox rules, the activities of the coalition were still an outrage to the *haredi* Jews, who repeatedly attacked the women. One of the *haredim* reportedly yelled, "A woman reading Torah at the Wall is like a pig at the wall."⁷³ The group's more refined opponents politely suggested that women's superior spiritual nature made it unnecessary for them to pray at the Wall at all.

In response to Orthodox complaints, the Israeli Supreme Court issued a temporary injunction in the spring of 1989 against women's praying aloud at the Wall (their voices were considered provocative by *haredi* men) or with a Torah or tallit. Regulations governing Jewish holy sites in Israel forbid religious ceremonies that are not "according to local custom."

Some of the women involved in the original group-prayer service at the Western Wall decided to seek a judicial remedy to the conflict. In 1989, they organized a group called Women of the Wall to petition the Israeli Supreme

⁷² Phyllis Chesler, "Toward a Psychology of Liberation: Feminism and Religion—A Conclusion," in *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*, ed. Phyllis Chesler and Rivka Haut (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003), 340–41.

⁷³ Pogrebin, *Deborah, Golda, and Me*, 71. Although most of the vocal and physical expressions of ultra-Orthodox opposition to these women were carried out by men, ultra-Orthodox women likewise expressed opposition.

Court.⁷⁴ Their suit, which dragged on throughout most of the 1990s, sought protection for women to vocalize collective prayer with the traditional religious accoutrements of Torah and tallit.⁷⁵

Rabbi Yehudah Getz, the official supervisor of the Wall for the Ministry of Religious Affairs, wrote to Women of the Wall, welcoming them but also asking them “to help me protect the holiness of the site from desecration, God forbid, and *not to change anything in our people’s tradition of many generations*.”⁷⁶ The Ministry ruled that “the custom of the place” at the Western Wall permitted organized prayer only in groups of ten *men*. Ministry spokesman Shimon Malkah said, “The tradition is what we received from our forefathers, from generation to generation. Moses received the Torah on Mount Sinai and gave it to Joshua and the elders. That is how we practice today. That is Jewish law. There is no room for reinterpretation.”⁷⁷ In this way, representatives of the Israeli government, like the British before them, invoked a status quo policy, oblivious to the problematic nature of this concept.

The practices at the Western Wall that had been in place for just one generation were now linked back to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Orthodox view of tradition could not acknowledge how recent some of these traditions really were. On the contrary, those seeking women’s rights at the Wall were seen as heretical and unnatural. Yigal Bibi, of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, compared women praying at the Wall to a man coming to the Wall in drag. For women to don tefillin or tallitot or to chant from the Torah was tantamount to religious transvestitism. More important, this position took the same approach that had been used to limit all Jewish prayer at the Wall under the British and turned it against Jewish women and men who rejected the newly imposed restrictions.

Critics have sometimes accused Women of the Wall of “politicizing” the Wall, suggesting that the organization is willing to offend many Orthodox Jews simply to make a “feminist” point.⁷⁸ In fact, Women of the Wall made a strategic decision not to join forces with Conservative and Reform Jews, in order to avoid unnecessarily politicizing the issue.⁷⁹ Some Orthodox feminists expressed

⁷⁴ For an analysis of Women of the Wall, see Bonna Devora Haberman, “Women beyond the Wall: From Text to Praxis,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 5–34.

⁷⁵ For details about the legal arguments in this lawsuit, see Chesler and Haut, *Women of the Wall*, part 2, “Legal and Political Analysis,” 115–204.

⁷⁶ Yehudah Getz, quoted in Shakdiel, “Women of the Wall,” 134 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁷ Shimon Malkah appears in Faye Lederman’s film *Women of the Wall*, VHS (Hohokus, NJ: New Day Films, 1999).

⁷⁸ Jonathan Rosenblum, “Confrontation: The Whole Point,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 15, 1997, <http://www.jewishmediaresources.com/article/138> (accessed December 13, 2004).

⁷⁹ Susan Aranoff, “The Politics of Women of the Wall,” in Chesler and Haut, *Women of the Wall*, 195.

concern that victory for Orthodox women would strengthen the arguments for non-Orthodox women's inclusion in egalitarian prayer, which they did not support.⁸⁰ Of course, the issue is really not about whether the Wall will be "politicized," for that process has gone on for at least two centuries and continues not only by advocates of women's rights at the Wall but equally by those who oppose them. All presentations of the traditions at the Western Wall inevitably conceal various political implications.

A good recent example of this issue is a special ninety-second film about the Western Wall put out by the contemporary Orthodox group Aish ha-Torah in preparation for Tishah B'Av 2003, the Jewish fast day associated with mourning over the destruction of the Temples and a day of special gatherings at the Wall.⁸¹ The film consists of still images with superimposed texts, such as, "There is only one place we have always called home," "The Western Wall is eternal," "From all corners of the world Jews unite here as one," and "A Shared Destiny." Although the text suggests Jewish unity, this idea is seriously undercut by the implicit gender messages in the accompanying images, which include groups of ultra-Orthodox men praying at the wall with tallit, tefillin, and Torah. Many of the pictures show groups of men, whereas the two pictures of women show solitary figures. In one picture a circle of young men can be seen dancing joyously, while in the lower corner a single woman's head looks over the *mechitzah*. One particularly poignant sequence shows a smiling young boy wearing tefillin and holding a Torah, surrounded by older men (captioned: "In times of joy") followed by a picture of a sad-looking old woman standing alone with her eyes shut (captioned: "And in times of sadness"). Rejoicing seems concentrated on the men's side of the Wall, where collective prayer with tallit and Torah occurs, whereas the women's side is still in quiet, silent mourning. For this group, there is no question that prayer at the Wall has always looked like this. They see themselves as the guardians of an unchanging and unchangeable tradition wherein the Western Wall is a shared home for Jews who share their perspective.

An even more dramatic challenge to the current Orthodox control of the Western Wall has been the demands of non-Orthodox Jews for egalitarian (mixed-gender) prayer. Liberal Jews make no attempt to preserve all aspects of Orthodox worship. When liberal Conservative and Reform men and women prayed together at the wall in the late 1990s (during a period of controversy over recognizing non-Orthodox conversions in Israel), they were harassed, cursed, and spit upon by hundreds of *haredi* men, who called the members of the mixed-gender prayer groups Nazis and blamed them for the death of six

⁸⁰ Ibid., 201.

⁸¹ This movie can be viewed at <http://www.aish.com/a/Wall.asp> (accessed December 13, 2004).

million Jews.⁸² The deputy mayor of Jerusalem, a member of the United Torah Judaism Party, said, “The very fact that the Conservative Jews, who symbolize the destruction of the Jewish people, came to the place that is holiest to the Jewish people is a provocation. They have no reason to be in this place.”⁸³ For Conservative and Reform Jews, apparently, the Western Wall is neither “home” nor a place to experience unity with other Jews.

Resolution of these conflicts has not been easy. In September 1998, an Israeli government commission proposed a compromise by suggesting that women’s prayer services and mixed-gender services could be held at the southern end of the Wall, at an area known as Robinson’s Arch. This area is technically part of the same wall, though it is not a section traditionally associated with Jewish worship. It offers limited access and has been developed more as an archaeological site than a religious one. Conservative Jews accepted the use of this area as a temporary compromise; Reform Jews refused.

In 2000, describing prayer at Robinson’s Arch as the religious equivalent of “praying ‘in the back of the bus,’” Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, proposed a new partition at the primary Western Wall site that would create a section of the wall for egalitarian non-Orthodox Jews. For Yoffie, authentic Judaism is egalitarian; it is the *mechitzah* that is an artificial and partisan innovation. Echoing Cyrus Adler’s defense of Jewish religious rights to the British, but in a very different context, Yoffie said, “It is unacceptable that a majority of world Jewry should be denied the right to pray according to their custom at Jerusalem’s holiest place.”⁸⁴ Unlike the goals of Women of the Wall, which accepts Orthodox religious law, the demands of Reform and Conservative Jews for egalitarian prayer at the Wall directly contest the legitimacy of gender separation for Jewish prayer.⁸⁵

Governmental and judicial responses to efforts to expand women’s rights at the Western Wall have been painfully slow and resistant. The Israeli Supreme Court has struggled to balance its sympathy with the equal-rights arguments that have been proposed, with its reluctance to ignite a political and religious firestorm. Responding to a decade of petitions from Women of the Wall, the court, in May 2000, affirmed the right of women “to exercise the right to pray

⁸² Phyllis Chesler, “Wailing at the Wall,” *On the Issues* 6, no. 4 (Fall 1997), also available at http://www.phyllis-chesler.com/publications/wailing_at_the_wall.html (accessed December 13, 2004).

⁸³ Quoted in Serge Schmemmann, “Orthodox Israelis Assault Other Jews at Western Wall,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1997.

⁸⁴ Eric Yoffie, press release of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, May 22, 2000.

⁸⁵ Reform Jews point to biblical passages that imply that the Jewish people as a whole were assembled together without separation for public worship and reading of the law (Deut. 31:12; Neh. 8:2–3). Depending on who is asked, men and women stood together or separately at Sinai.

according to their custom in the Western Wall plaza.”⁸⁶ This included the right to conduct collective worship services once a month, as well as to read from the Torah and to wear tallitot. In a sense the ruling resembled the earlier British position that the Arabs owned the Wall but the Jews had rights to pray there. The Israeli Supreme Court effectively acknowledged Orthodox “ownership” of the wall but felt that Jewish women had some limited rights to pray there as well.

The court continually referred to the need to respect *minhag hamakom*, the “custom of the place,” the arbiter of which was the Western Wall administrator, an Orthodox rabbi. The idea that the Wall is tantamount to an Orthodox synagogue, moreover, was already firmly part of some justices’ thinking. Orthodox justice Menachem Elon’s minority opinion in response to one of the early petitions of Women of the Wall reasoned that women’s prayer groups would be a violation of Orthodox synagogue customs and that the Wall was “the most sacred synagogue in the Jewish religion.”⁸⁷ Likewise, the arrangements there were seen as legitimated by generations of supposed tradition. For many people, the *mechitzah* was already considered part of the status quo. Justice Elon said, “[T]he local custom and the status quo are one and the same.”

Orthodox rabbis have resisted challenges to the newly enforced gender traditions at the Western Wall by both Orthodox and non-Orthodox feminists with the same vehemence with which Arabs met Jewish efforts to establish Orthodox worship at the Wall some seventy-five years ago. In 2000, the Orthodox chief rabbis in Israel insisted that women’s services at the Wall would violate Jewish tradition. Some people considered such services to be a “stab in the back” that would desecrate Judaism’s holiest place.⁸⁸ One representative of United Torah Judaism characterized the conflict with Women of the Wall as “a war to the end” with “destroyers of Judaism.”⁸⁹ Despite the fact that Women of the Wall accepts Orthodox rules, including the *mechitzah*, its attempt to weaken male Orthodox control in any way was intolerable. Ultra-Orthodox religious parties introduced bills to criminalize women who read from the Torah, wear tallitot or tefillin, or blow the shofar at the Wall and to officially designate the Wall an Orthodox synagogue.⁹⁰ In the name of protecting tradition, these opponents of women’s religious rights prepared to introduce wholesale new restrictions.

⁸⁶ Joel Greenberg, “Israeli High Court Rules for Women’s Services at Western Wall,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2000.

⁸⁷ Menachem Elon, quoted in Frances Raday, “The Fight against Being Silenced,” in Chesler and Haut, *Women of the Wall*, 128.

⁸⁸ Greenberg, “Israeli High Court.”

⁸⁹ Yossi Klein Halevi, “Up against the Wall,” *Jerusalem Report*, July 3, 2000, 19.

⁹⁰ Nina Gilbert, “Knesset Bill: Women Who Read Torah at Wall Can Be Jailed,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 31, 2000.

The intense and violent reaction to Women of the Wall is ultimately a desperate effort to preserve “patriarchal hegemony” at Judaism’s most symbolically loaded location.⁹¹ Orthodox insistence on rules of behavior and regulation of genders is invariably a defensive response to the reality that most Jews do not follow Orthodox rules.⁹² Centuries of reference to a singular Jewish people cannot obscure internal divisions that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have become more dramatic and irreconcilable. Increasingly, Orthodox Jews in Israel, particularly the ultra-Orthodox *haredim*, have had to reassert themselves in response to the ideas and practices of the larger non-Orthodox Jewish society.

Following its May 2000 ruling, the Israeli Supreme Court accepted an appeal from the government for the issue to be heard by an expanded set of judges on the court. Finally, three years later, in April 2003, the expanded court issued a 5–4 decision that rejected the petition of Women of the Wall, arguing that allowing women to pray at the Wall would be a threat to public safety. The court essentially ruled that what the *haredi* Jews at the Wall find acceptable is the status quo. They could not see how *haredi* rabbis themselves have been responsible for the innovations that were equally part of the problem. Things that are seen today as sacrileges or defilements of the sanctity of the Western Wall would not necessarily have evoked the same degree of resistance in the past.

Just as Arab violence in 1929 had led the British to restrict Jewish behavior at the Western Wall, it was the new threat of *haredi* violence that led the Israeli Supreme Court to reject the petition of Women of the Wall. In both cases the ruling government authorities argued that the victims of potential abuse and violence were ultimately responsible for provoking it.⁹³ The court’s decision to limit women’s rights out of fear of the disruptive response that might otherwise occur from opponents is a startling deviation from the typical refusal of the Israeli government to make policy decisions in reaction to actual or threatened violence.⁹⁴ Where the “voice” of the shofar had been provocative to Arabs in the first half of the twentieth century, Jewish women’s voices were deemed too provocative to Orthodox Jewish men in the final third of the century. Although women’s voices had been heard at the Wall before, women’s

⁹¹ Raday, “Fight against Being Silenced,” 118, 124.

⁹² See, for example, Phil Zuckerman, “Gender Regulation as a Source of Religious Schism,” *Sociology of Religion* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 353–73.

⁹³ Sherry F. Colb, “The Israeli Supreme Court Denies Women the Right to Pray at the Western Wall: A Misguided Decision Parallels the U.S. ‘Fighting Words’ Doctrine,” April 23, 2003, FindLaw, <http://writ.corporate.findlaw.com/colb/20030423.html> (accessed December 13, 2004).

⁹⁴ Obviously, many examples from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be cited in which the exercise of “rights” by some is seen as extremely provocative by others. Ariel Sharon’s decision to visit the Temple Mount in September 2000 comes to mind. A very different logic seems to be at work in the government’s response in such cases.

new demands for equal rights made the silencing of those voices all the more imperative.

The *mechitzah* at the Western Wall was once a proxy for a political power struggle between Arabs and Jews, but now it has become one for the struggle between stricter Orthodox norms for women and more liberal alternatives. A century ago the Wall offered a symbol of the Jewish quest for religious autonomy. For many Jews today, however, the Wall is a place of both homecoming and exile, where their full identities as Jews are symbolically delegitimated. The most recent court ruling has not ended the issue any more than the British imposition of the status quo that precluded Jewish voice, Torah, and *mechitzah* at the Wall ended the matter for Jews. The Western Wall will remain a symbol of religious redemption and of the rights of all to pray in their own fashion. The quest for such rights is not a revolutionary challenge to the ancient traditions of the Wall but, rather, a recognition and appreciation of lost traditions that were less fearful of women's presence.