



Sh'ma | שמע

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH IDEAS

TO SUBSCRIBE:
CALL (877) 568-SHMA
ONLINE www.shma.com
EMAIL shma@cambeywest.com

44/703
October 2013 | Cheshvan 5774

Inside

The Meanings of the Kotel

Arieh Saposnik The Kotel: Contested Sacred Space.....	1
Moshe Sokolow The Western Wall: An Arabian Gift	3
Bonna Devora Haberman Toward Sacred Dignity....	4
Leah Aharoni Women at the Wall: An Agent of Contention ..	5
Prina Lahav Made in America, Grown in Israel.....	6
Aryeh Cohen I Cannot Stand with Women of the Wall.....	9
Stav Shaffir Pushing Politicians for Social Change	10
Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus Barring Women, Transforming Stones Into Idols.....	11
Stone by Stone: The Western Wall.....	12
Joshua Schwartz The Kotel: An Ancient Retaining Wall Became Holy	14
Hillel Cohen Jews, Muslims, and the Wall	15
Motti Golani Early Zionists: A Low-Key Approach to the Kotel ...	16
Ben Lynfield In a Few Hours, Losing Everything	18
Mahdi Kleibo A Story of a City: The 'Burak'	19
Sara Hirschhorn Meeting the Crown Jewel of Jewish History	21
<i>Sh'ma Ethics</i> Joanna Samuels The Complexities of Doing Good	24

The Wall, or the Kotel, is a mere 187 feet in length and 62 feet in height — a fraction of the 1,600 foot-long remnant of the Second Temple. This collection of stones has been, time and again, the focal point of great contention: In 1929, when riots erupted there that sent shockwaves throughout the Jewish world, and today, as Women of the Wall demands ritual equity at this site. The Wall is simultaneously a spiritual oasis, a place for reverence and prayer, and a fraught symbol, a flashpoint for anger and recrimination.

How truly significant a symbol should this Wall be in Judaism and Jewish life? Is the Wall, post-1967, more about Jewish nationalism than Jewish faith? Why has the battle waged by Women of the Wall (and countered by Women for the Wall) sparked such fierce reactions? This issue of *Sh'ma* examines these and other questions about the Wall's history — its construction, its archeology, and the creation of the Wall's plaza where visitors congregate. It includes six thoughtful and diverse viewpoints on the "Women of the Wall" movement. Our infographic on pages 12-13 is our attempt to visually represent a few key facts about this almost instantly recognizable structure in a readily accessible format, upending (we hope) some assumptions along the way.

At the heart of this issue is another question: What does it mean to call a place holy? I've asked several contributors to reflect on this question.

Also in this issue, in the second of our yearlong series on the ethics of parenting, Joanna Samuels considers the implications and invisibility of privilege. — Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

The Kotel: Contested Sacred Space

ARIEH SAPOSNIK

In June 2013, spurred by tentative Israeli plans for new changes at the Western Wall compound, the Palestinian Authority's Minister for Religious Affairs Mahmoud Al Habash, cautioned that "any change in the Temple Mount is unacceptable to the Palestinians or Arabs. It's a change of our heritage site and I believe that such a change will push us toward a new conflict."

To anyone familiar with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the often painful place that the Western Wall-Temple Mount area has in it, this might hardly sound new. Dating back at least to the 1920s, as both Zionism and the emerging Palestinian national movement increasingly placed this holy site at the center of their respective national identities, any perceived change to the status quo at the site has aroused bitter and sometimes bloody confrontations. What was striking in this case, however, was that the cause of this new tension had seemingly little to do with Jewish-Muslim or Israeli-Palestinian relations. It was, rather, a Jewish Agency for Israel plan to designate a section of the Wall compound for the egalitarian prayer services of multi-denominational Jewish groups, in particular, the Women

of the Wall. What had provoked the Palestinian response, in other words, was a conflict within Jewish Israel over the legitimacy of particular rituals at the Wall.

The Western Wall is widely held to be the "most sacred place in the world to the Jewish people," as the website of Israel's Ministry of Tourism puts it — a notion that evokes both historical continuity and a sense of universal Jewish unity. In fact, however, the Wall has been a site of contention among Jews for decades, a central axis around which two of the overarching and defining questions of Jewish identity in the modern world have come together — and come to a head. It has been at the very heart of struggles over questions of Jewish religiosity, ritual, and authority. And it has played a leading role in the changing relationships between Jews and non-Jews, which Zionism and other modern Jewish political movements set out to refashion, often by addressing a third modern Jewish dilemma — the thorny question of Jews, power, and morality.

Although the Wall had been a site of Jewish pilgrimage and prayer for centuries, only beginning in the 19th century — first,

continued on next page



Shima | שומא

S H M A . C O M

Arieh Saposnik is a historian of Zionism and Jewish nationalism. An associate professor at the Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, he is currently on leave from his position as associate professor and the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Chair in Israel Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, and as the founding director of the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies there. He is the author of *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of a Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine*, published by Oxford University Press. Saposnik's current research focuses on imagery and symbolism of the sacred in the making of Jewish nationalism, generally, and in Zionism and Israeli culture, in particular.

with the so-called rediscovery of the Holy Land by the Christian West, and later, with the rise of Zionism — did the Wall and its symbolism emerge as central in some of the profound changes taking place in Jewish life. First, as Christian interest in the Holy Land began to grow in the 19th century, “the Jews’ Wailing Place,” as it was most frequently referred to, was depicted as a site of mourning, destruction, and degradation that was in many ways a confirmation of traditional Christian theological views. To many early Zionists, the Wall was similarly seen as a symbol of degradation and destruction — a site for “exilic” Jews to mourn, weep, and wail. They sought to create a different Jerusalem, and by the first decade of the 20th century, one resident could speak of two distinct cities — a living new, modern, Western city, contrasted with “the dead Western Wall.” For many Jews, in other words, the Western Wall was not a site relevant to the renaissance of Jewish life, but rather a retrograde stronghold of archaic rites and an outdated orthodoxy.

Things began to change in the wake of World War I, with the critical turning point surrounding the 1929 riots. This outbreak of violence — unprecedented in scope and casualties — reflected the growing centrality of the Wall in a changing Zionism and in the Jewish world, as well as within the now crystallizing Palestinian Arab national movement. With tensions escalating, the Wall was increasingly adopted as a central Zionist symbol. No longer a manifestation of exile, destruction, and degradation, the Kotel was increasingly perceived as “the Wall of Heroes,” as one prominent journalist had called it — a radically different representation than

had been common in the past. The Wall had not merely been adopted; it had been transformed into an entirely new symbol, redolent with new meanings and a new sacredness that stood in stark contrast to its traditional Jewish holiness. New rituals were fashioned for the site in this process, at once generating and communicating the new, modern sacrality now associated with it. Inevitably, these, in turn, entailed (and continue to entail) further struggle.

By the early 1930s, the Wall had been transformed from a site of ultra-Orthodox mournful prayer largely shunned by Zionists and other non-Orthodox Jews, to an all-Jewish site, resonating with a new symbolism of sacred heroism at once ancient and new. It was not an accident that it was precisely around this time that the common appellation “the Jews’ Wailing Place” was replaced with the designation “Western Wall,” a translation of the Hebrew “*Kotel Ma’aravi*.”

Its new status as a religio-national sacred site would naturally make the Wall a site of new frictions and contestation, a central axis in many of the struggles over shifting understandings of Judaism and Jewishness that have characterized Jewish life in Israel and the Diaspora over subsequent decades. These have found expression in a number of developments — the rise and decline of military swearing-in ceremonies at the Wall, battles over archeological excavation between Israel’s Antiquities Authority and Haredi groups and between Israel and the Palestinians, and competing approaches among archeologists themselves. Perhaps most familiar to Jews outside of Israel, these frictions have also found expression in the campaigns by liberal Jewish groups to carve out both physical and figurative space at the Wall compound (which, like Israel itself, was dramatically transformed after 1967) for their own versions of Jewish ritual and identity.

The sacred nature of a site such as the Kotel seems to suggest (and to beg for) an absolute. But the sacred, as it turns out, has many faces. The Jewish encounter with modernity, moreover, brought with it a Jewish politics that was based on a profound sense of rupture, a splintering of Jewish identities. The multiple meanings of the Western Wall and the ongoing struggles for the sacred it represents are, in this sense, faithful reflections of the trajectory of modern Jewish history and integral pieces of its unfolding drama.



Can Stones Be Holy?

What is the point of Judaism, if not to redeem us from worshipping “wood and stone”? Standing in the Kotel plaza, squinting in the harsh Mediterranean sun, I see that the Kotel is visibly darker about two feet above the ground. That darker strip is where visitors, pilgrims, tourists, and davenners (prayer-sayers) have placed their hands on the stones. They have come face-to-face with the Kotel, perhaps standing awkwardly, perhaps pouring out their hearts, or perhaps simply reaching out their palms to feel its cool touch. In return, they have left on the stones a strip of human touch and human prayer — a monument to human aspiration. I don’t know if the stones themselves are holy. But the residue from all those hands — that, I know, is holy.

Rabbi **Mishaël Zion**, co-director of the Bronfman Youth Fellowships (bronfman.org), is the co-author, with Noam Zion, of *A Night to Remember: The Haggadah of Contemporary Voices*. He blogs at textandcity.blogspot.com.