

Whose Kotel Is It?

Sophie beamed as she was called to the Torah as a bat mitzvah in front of her congregation, family, and friends. She took great pride in learning her Torah portion and prayers, and in writing a deeply personal *d'var Torah*, which she eloquently presented. Sophie's family is very involved in the leadership of their Conservative synagogue; her father is a well-respected teacher in the religious school, and her mother has served as education vice president. Both of her parents are regular volunteers at the synagogue, and the whole family considers the synagogue to be at the center of their lives. At her bat mitzvah, Sophie felt as though she was participating in a tradition that spanned millennia.

As a bat mitzvah present, Sophie's parents surprised her and her older brother Gabriel with a trip to Israel. Sophie could barely contain her excitement. On the second day of their trip, they visited the Kotel (Western Wall) in Jerusalem. Sophie was overwhelmed by the beauty of the wall, but as she got closer, she became disheartened. She saw that in order to pray at the wall, she and her mother would have to be separate from her father and brother. She did not understand why there was not a place where her entire family could stand together and pray, touching the wall. To her, it was as though this sacred place was not intended for her.

The Kotel, considered the most sacred religious site in the world for Jews, is the remaining retaining wall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in 70 CE. All around the world, Jews face in the direction of the Kotel for their prayers. Israel was founded in 1948, and the Kotel, for the first time in modern history, came under Israeli control in 1967. This raised a number of questions about the layout of the space adjacent to the Kotel and the rules governing it.

It was decided that religious practices at the Kotel were to be made according to Orthodox law, and Israel's sacred religious sites, including the Kotel, were placed under the authority of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, along with the Orthodox Western Wall Heritage Foundation.

Since under Orthodox practice men and women pray separately, there are separate sections for men and women. Non-Orthodox movements have continually protested the Orthodox rules at the Kotel. A section that allows for men and women to pray together was eventually established near Robinson's Arch, an archeological area to the southwest of the main Kotel plaza. Today, many non-Orthodox Jews continue to be dissatisfied with this arrangement.

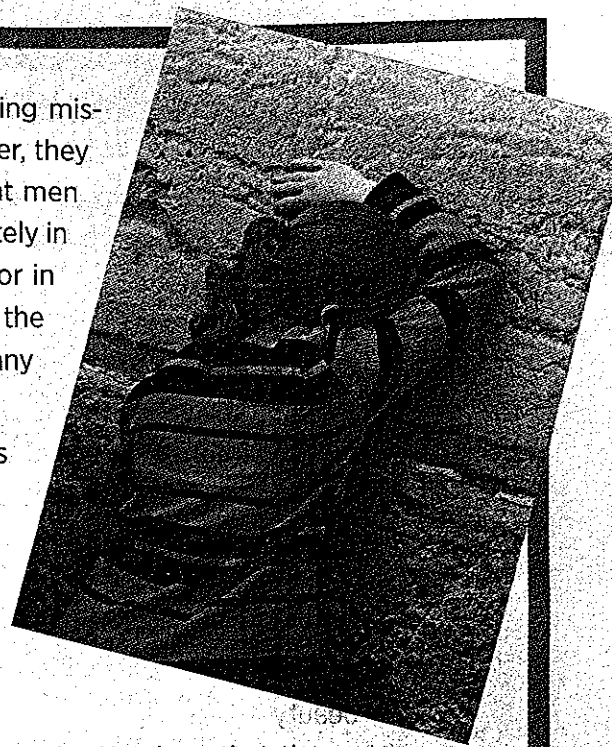
Of particular note is Women of the Wall (*Nashot HaKotel*), a group that advocates for equal access for women to Jewish rites such as reading Torah and donning *tallitot* and *tefillin* at the main women's section of the Kotel. Some members of Women of the Wall have defied the rules at the Kotel, sometimes leading to their arrest.

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Many Orthodox women do not feel that they are being mistreated by praying separately from men at the Kotel. Rather, they see the separation as a function of the different roles that men and women have in Jewish life. Men and women sit separately in Orthodox synagogues; women often sit behind the men or in the balcony. Thus, having men and women side by side at the Kotel allows women access to the wall and is seen by many as very accommodating.

Despite the diversity of Jewish practice that exists in the world, the Kotel remains under Orthodox control. Changes in the rules at the Kotel would open up space for non-Orthodox Jews to pray in ways that are comfortable for them. If women and men are mixed together at the Kotel, many Orthodox Jews, according to their beliefs, will no longer be able to pray at the Kotel.

What do you think is the best way to handle access to the Kotel, so that the people's religious and spiritual needs are met?



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Source Sheet

-1-

Why was the second Sanctuary destroyed? In its time they were occupying themselves with Torah, [observance of] laws, and the practice of charity?

Because there was hatred without cause.

(Yoma 9b)

-2-

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.

And Miriam sang unto them: "Sing ye to the Lord, for He is highly exalted: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea."

(Exodus 15:20-21)

-3-

Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from reciting Shema and from [wearing] tefillin; but they are obligated [to recite] the Amidah, [to affix a] mezuzah, and [to recite] Birkat Hamazon.

(Mishnah, Berachot 3:3)

-4-

In the image of God did God create humankind;
male and female created He them.

(Genesis 1:27)

-5-

These and these are the words of the living God.

(Talmud, Eruvin 13b)