



THE BLOGS

## Yochi Rappeport

# Change Happens between Love and Hate



(Hanna Taieb photography)

Working at WOW, there are stories I love to tell, uplifting moments of encounter and engagement. There are plenty of these inspiring anecdotes: girls and women finding power in their own voices during prayer, B'not Mitzvah lifting

up the Torah scroll with pride, women who have waited their whole lives to be asked, “Would you like to wrap *tefillin*?” Their radiant faces, inquisitive and longing, remind me of the importance of religious feminist activism, and re-energize my commitment to WOW’s mission.

On the other hand, there are other stories too. These interactions — the aggressive insults, dismissive comments, and derisive sneers — are painful to share but also require reflection to address hatred and advance a more tolerant culture. Each act of harassment, incitement, and intolerance awakens WOW’s sense of urgency and empowers us to continue the battle for equality.

And yet, I see another set of stories unfolding before me, a more subtle and mysterious force of change in the public sphere. When WOW recently hosted a booth in Jerusalem offering women the chance to wrap *tefillin*, both encouragement and vitriol were triggered by our public engagement. And we also heard from less sensational voices, those who were “on the fence” about the whole scene.

Puzzled looks and bewildered questions were thrown at us. Even behind the guise of criticism, soft curiosity could be discerned. “Rashi’s daughters did it, I guess. But *you’re* not Rashi’s daughters...” an onlooker avers. A few passersby decline our offer to wrap but remark that they appreciate our presence on the street. Some say they simply do not have time; others are avowed atheists. A few wish us a good day and thank us for our work. Are these moments anticlimactic, unremarkable pauses in the scheme of a day marked by notable triumphs and setbacks?

Yes, there is much richness in the meaningful stories of women’s tears of joy as they recite the *tefillin* blessings for the first time. There are also eye-opening lessons in the moments of intolerance and violence we face. Still, the encounters in between hold significant value as well. Transformative moments are easy to celebrate, holding up in self-congratulation the snapshots of sweet

successes. But in focusing solely on these overt victories, we sell ourselves short as activists. The positive changes WOW has accomplished in expanding access to religious involvement for women have been achieved through processes of ongoing gradual shifts in public awareness. For each passerby on Jaffa Street who witnesses women wrapping *tefillin* and embracing ritual with confidence, barriers of judgment between us dissolve, and the potential for true unity reveals itself more strongly.

The traditional commentary on Jerusalem's downfall and the destruction of the Temples is that these tragedies were set off by "baseless hatred," *sinat hinam*, among the Jewish People. Accordingly, the antidote to this ill is an outpouring of *ahavat hinam*, "baseless love," a strange and abstract aspiration. What is love that is "free" or "baseless"? One way to understand this ideal is by focusing on the ways our seemingly small, "*hinam*" – literally "free" – actions can touch others for the better, in ways that expand their ways of thinking about and accepting differences.

Those seemingly neutral moments when people decline our offer to wrap *tefillin*, or ask in a skeptical tone about the design of my prayer shawl, are vital steps on the way to transforming perceptions. By standing proudly and inviting dialogue, WOW is changing the landscape and standing up as a voice for diverse Jewish life in Israel and beyond.

Success is not measured by the number of women who agree to wrap *tefillin* or chant Torah, by how many allies join "our side." Such is in fact a polarized way of thinking, feeding into the very divisions that promote "baseless hatred." Instead, growth is marked by each moment of connection, each point of contact that chips away at someone's preexisting assumptions or limited conceptions of what is possible for women in Jewish life. By remaining a public face and a vocal force for critical conversations, WOW enriches Jewish discourse in the hopes of promoting *ahavat hinam* and acceptance.

Among the words recited when wrapping *tefillin* is the verse “*And I will betroth you to me forever...in justice, righteousness, kindness, and compassion (Hosea 2:21).*” The statement describes the unbreakable and timeless bond between G-d and the Jewish People, and also applies to how we might approach one another. The multifaceted Jewish People are inextricably bound together — we must act intentionally to strengthen this connection through love.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Yochi Rapoport is the executive director of Women of the Wall. She was born and raised in the Orthodox environment of the Safed Old City. Upon turning 18, Yochi joined the IDF and served as a commander in a course for Judaism and Zionism for soldiers who aren't Jewish and new immigrants. Following her service, she studied Political Science and Middle Eastern studies at Bar Ilan University, and then served as an executive assistant at an Israeli news agency. Realizing she wanted to be a part of something more meaningful, she happily started working for Women of the Wall in 2016, as director of Education and Community Outreach. Today, Yochi lives in Jerusalem with her husband and daughter, where they live an open-minded and feminist Orthodox lifestyle.

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