



THE BLOGS

Yochi Rappeport

FEATURED POST

Middle ground Jerusalem: Encounter and embrace

Only through the capacity to truly meet the 'other' with full, deep acceptance, can we bring forth the unified Jerusalem we envision



Women of the Wall recite the Shacharit morning prayer on Rosh Chodesh Av, 2013. (David Katz)

“ R. Yohanan said: *“The Blessed One said ‘I will not come to Jerusalem on high until I come to Jerusalem below.’ And is there such a ‘Jerusalem on high’? Surely, as it is written ‘Jerusalem fully built, as a city interwoven together.’”* (BT Tractate Taanit)”

“Jerusalem on high” refers to the ideal city envisioned by the prophets, a place in which spiritual longings come to life. And “Jerusalem below” alludes to a city marked by tension and conflict, a “down-to-earth” Jerusalem that stands at a distance from grand visions of justice and peace. A “fully built” Jerusalem, as described in the verse cited by the Talmud, is one in which the many diverse elements of the city can join and be “interwoven together” in celebration and respect, not in spite, of their distinct qualities. In order to reach this lofty goal, perhaps we need a bridge, a meeting point; only together can we form a “Jerusalem in-between,” a point of contact and conversation.

Women of the Wall has embodied this “Jerusalem vision” for the past 30 years, uniting women from all denominations, from Israel and abroad, for the shared

goal of spirited and peaceful prayer. Focused on a mission of harmony, WOW centers our efforts where the pulse of our people lies. Jerusalem is “the light of the world,” and the Western Wall sits at its heart. WOW’s mission, anchored at the Western Wall, echoes Jerusalem’s traditional heartbeat, and our ongoing aspirations speak in consonance with Jerusalem’s spirit of renewal.

A campaign poster for a recent political candidate in Jerusalem featured a slogan promoting “unity,” across a photo featuring several individuals praying alongside one another at the Kotel. There was an IDF soldier in uniform, a man in traditional ultra-Orthodox garb, a teenage boy wearing a t-shirt and a knit *kippa*. Yet a major element of this supposed “unity” is missing: women. Women with *tallitot* and *kippot*, women who want to take an active role in their Jewish lives, but are pushed away repeatedly due to “offense to public sentiments.” Are we not part of that very public? Of course, bringing up such images complicates the otherwise heartwarming rhetoric of “unity,” and are therefore ignored entirely. But Women of the Wall continues to demand a deeper kind of unity, one that addresses *all of us*. WOW’s prayer for Jerusalem is a height of unification that is inclusive of differences and enriched by discourse.

Perhaps the ideal “middle ground” Jerusalem is one in which the “higher” and “lower” realms connect, a point of contact between elements that appear starkly opposed. In order to build a truly united Jerusalem, we must move beyond superficial rhetoric and instead embrace those with whom we disagree. WOW’s monthly prayer service at the Western Wall serves not only to energize and strengthen the women who join in song and support, but also to expand the horizons of Jewish practice for all.

An ultra-Orthodox friend, who listens respectfully and kindly to my perspectives on WOW’s mission, comments to me: “I hear you and all. The only thing is, I just don’t think I could ever bring my young daughter to the Kotel and have her see all that. She would have so many questions and I would not know what to say.”

I take a deep breath and consider her vulnerable admission. Her words break my heart. My friend is shaken by the notion of having to explain to her child that Judaism has many faces and voices. Perhaps she fears that by opening up a new set of possibilities through these new images, she might overwhelm her daughter with options, or worse — she may plant seeds of rebellion and disobedience. Yet, ultimately, I believe there is tremendous power in presenting this child with the vividness and depth of Jewish life, just as Jerusalem reveals new hidden treasures behind every narrow alleyway or stone wall.

Only through the capacity to truly meet the “other” with full, deep acceptance, can we bring forth the unified Jerusalem we envision. For this dream, WOW persists in our prayerful battle. Our voice is one that invites all Jews to feel at home at the Kotel, and our efforts aim to bring the “Jerusalem on high” down to the people.

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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