



THE BLOGS

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Blaming the Canary



WOW Chairperson Anat Hoffman attempts to enter the Western Wall Plaza with a Torah scroll on Rosh Hodesh Heshvan 2019, and faces obstacles from security personnel. (SS Photography)

Would you blame the metaphorical canary for chirping in the coal mine? Its alert to danger is, after all, its role. But those in power bristle at inconvenient reminders of the need for change.

Several recent and seemingly unrelated events in Israeli society have inflamed the discourse around gender, religion, and democracy. Beyond examining the events themselves, the critical responses they have awoken are particularly revealing. In the face of discrimination and exclusion, resistance is in order. However, nonviolent action taken to oppose injustice has become framed as the culprit, shifting the blame entirely away from the structural forces that demand vocal dissent.

A large charity benefit concert for the medical assistance organization Ezra L'Marpe, run by Rabbi Avraham Elimelech Firer, was canceled recently, following controversy surrounding Firer's instructions that no women perform at the event. Headlining artist Shlomo Artzi himself tried to persuade Firer to change his mind and allow women to be included, to no avail. "Indeed, [Artzi] might as well have suggested that Firer dine on pork during the concert in order to smooth ruffled feathers" ([Jewish News Syndicate](#)). Why is it that women asserting their right to engage in the public sphere are simply marked *treyf*?

Defenders of this exclusionary stringency "argued that fulfilling the rabbi's wish would be a negligible price to pay." That women's rights to participate fully in a public event would be considered a mere token for transactional use should alarm us all. Pushing back on such sentiments, Israel Women's Network praised the decision to cancel the show due to the refusal to erase women, [stating](#), "Even a good goal cannot come at the expense of women."

Beyond the incident itself, accusations of "liberal intolerance" are more infuriating yet. In a similar instance, Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) won a [recent discrimination case](#) against a cable-car service provider for refusing to allow women to board the car, based on requests from an ultra-Orthodox man who would not ride with women. *Why couldn't the women just wait for the next car? Why did they have to make a fuss?* Such questions are a distraction from the fundamental and frustrating underlying issue:

Why are women consistently expected to acquiesce and bend to the whims of male-dominated systems that do not respect our rights as equal participants in the public sphere?

When Women of the Wall arrived at the Western Wall on Rosh Hodesh Heshvan 2019 with five Torah scrolls in our arms, we were not surprised by the backlash. After more than thirty years of activism, we would be naive to expect otherwise. And yet, it would be unthinkable for us to submit to injustice, even if our presence, a challenge to existing conditions, leads to disruption.

Claims of “disruption,” including the charge by Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz (Western Wall Heritage Foundation) that WOW and others have “[tried to turn the Kotel into a site of dispute](#),” ignore entirely the catalysts for these displays of resistance. True, if we had not brought the Torah scrolls, if we had passively obeyed the senseless policies, if we had prayed in whispers, there would have been no such chaos. But passive submission to Rabinowitz’s unchecked authority is not the same as peace.

Rabinowitz’s and others’ gaslighting tactics in accusing activists of “disruption” read as akin to the old-fashioned, patriarchal guidance to women to avoid staying out late or wearing short skirts to avoid harassment. We see through this victim-blaming.

A primary goal of social action and activism is to call attention to untenable and unjustified conditions. WOW identifies the true problem in order to mobilize support and to bring healing and transformation. We remain optimistic that we can effect change, even after three decades, and that WOW will continue to denounce the system until it represents us all – and is no longer a tool of manipulation for those in power.