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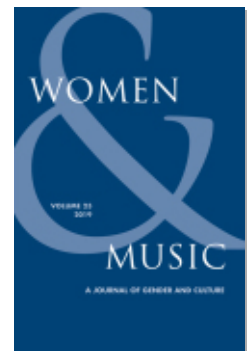
Women of, for, and at the Wall: A Performative Analysis of  
Gender Politics at the Western Wall in Jerusalem

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Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture, Volume 23, 2019, pp.  
48-74 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wam.2019.0003>



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# Women of, for, and at the Wall

A Performative Analysis of Gender Politics at the  
Western Wall in Jerusalem

Tanya Sermer

For more than twenty-five years the Western Wall in Jerusalem has been the focus of heated controversy over gender roles in Judaism, the character of public space in the city, and the relationship between religious and state authority. At the center of these controversies is the women's prayer group Women of the Wall (WoW, Neshot Hakotel in Hebrew) and a group convened to work against them, the Women for the Wall (W4W).<sup>1</sup> In this study, I examine performances by and of the WoW and the W4W through the lens of bodily practices and power relations, building upon theories regarding performativity, agency, and the material manifestation of discursive norms. By considering how governing authorities control movement, access, and bodily practices in order to impose a particular framework of gendered behavior, I look at how each group reclaims its voices and bodies to challenge and reinscribe gendered religious practice. I analyze how the WoW's practices are affected and mediated by the presence of a large viewing audience (supporters, opposition, police surveillance, and the media), ultimately articulating a critique of liberal agency and the extent to which the uncritical valorization of choice and voice can distort scholarly perspectives across a range of cultural and religious contexts.

The central focus of Jewish religious geography is the since-destroyed Holy Temple, originally built by King Solomon more than two millennia ago at a location chosen by King David in what is today called the Old City of Jerusalem. Though the original temple is long gone, the rectangular base of the enormous Temple compound built by King Herod at the end of the Second Temple period

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<sup>1</sup> Neshot Hakotel is an irregular Hebrew grammatical form in which the feminine noun *isha* (woman), which normally takes a masculine plural ending, *nashim*, reverts to the feminine plural, *neshot*, in an "X of Y" structure. This is not a linguistic intervention to make a feminist statement, but the grammatical form conveniently supports the WoW's politics.

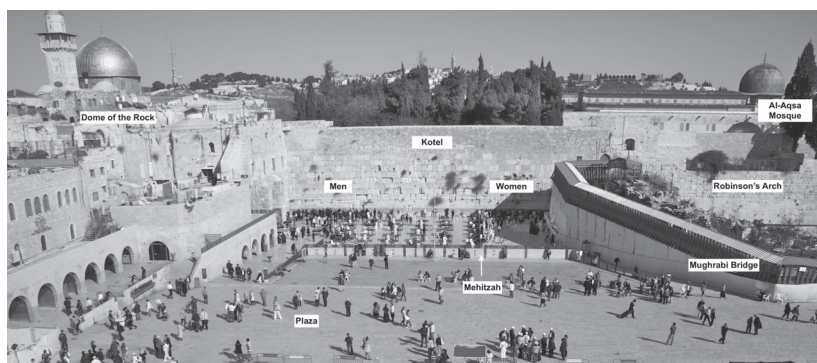


Fig. 1. Division of space at the Kotel plaza and Robinson's Arch area. January 29, 2010. ©Tanya Sermer.

does survive. The Western Wall, called the Kotel in Hebrew (al-Ha'itu 'l-Buraq in Arabic), is a part of the western retaining wall of this compound and is believed to be the site closest to what was once the Holy of Holies—the most sacred space in the Temple. The Kotel has therefore become the central religious and historical site in Jewish tradition. Men and women, locals and tourists, Jews and non-Jews congregate in this plaza for sightseeing, celebration, and worship. The area closest to the Kotel is divided by a barrier (*mehitzah*) into women's and men's prayer spaces in accordance with orthodox standards for gender segregation during prayer.<sup>2</sup>

Founded in 1989, the Women of the Wall is a group of Jewish women from across the religious spectrum, both Israeli and from around the world, who gather to pray at the Kotel every month on Rosh Hodesh, the festival of the New Moon and traditionally a women's celebration. The group conducts its worship according to Jewish law, *halakhah*, but in a manner that does not resemble the individual, silent recitation that is normative for orthodox women. The Women of the Wall conducts its services in the women's section of the prayer plaza using a Torah scroll, which ultraorthodox Jews forbid to be touched by women; wearing *tallit* (pl. *tallitot*) and *tefillin*, the prayer shawl and phylacteries traditionally worn only by men; and involving communal singing and recitation, prohibited by women in the presence of men, according to the dictum of *kol isha*—rabbinic laws that regulate whether or not and in which contexts men may listen to or hear the voices of women, the interpretation of which varies depending on history and commu-

<sup>2</sup> The site has a dynamic and problematic history in terms of how the plaza came to be in its current form, but it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss it here. For further reading on the Kotel, see, for example, Michael Dumper, *The Politics of Sacred Space: The Old City of Jerusalem in the Middle East Conflict* (New York: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); Tamar Mayer, "Jerusalem in and out of Focus: The City in Zionist Ideology," in *Jerusalem: Idea and Reality*, ed. Tamar Mayer and Suleiman Ali Mourad (London: Routledge, 2008), 224–44; Daniel Bertrand Monk, "Diskotel 1967: Israel and the Western Wall in the Aftermath of the Six Day War," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 48 (2005): 166–78; Simone Ricca, *Reinventing Jerusalem: Israel's Reconstruction of the Jewish Quarter after 1967* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

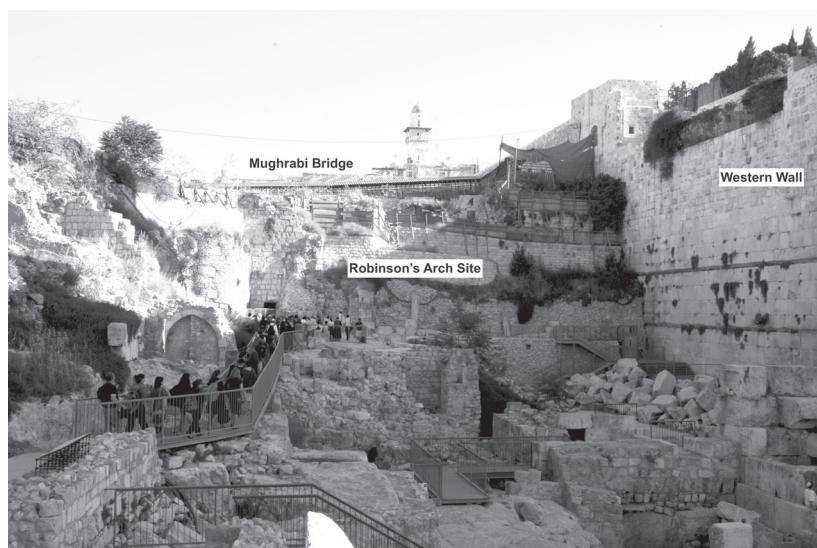


Fig. 2. Robinson's Arch prayer space as it appeared in May 2010. This site is located to the south and below the Mughrabi Bridge on the same western retaining wall as the Kotel. The prayer space has undergone a number of changes since this photo was taken. ©Tanya Sermer.

nity.<sup>3</sup> It is for the reason of kol isha that ultraorthodox women regularly “shush” the WoW, why the sections of the service with the most singing elicit the strongest opposition, and why men make noise—yelling, banging on tables, blowing horns (*shofars*) and whistles—to drown out their sound. The WoW has endured verbal and physical abuse at the hands of passionate ultraorthodox antagonists and has repeatedly sued the state for protection. Ultraorthodox women in the women's section of the plaza yell at the group and often slap individuals or physically try to push and break up the prayer. At times, chairs and other objects are thrown, causing bodily injury. Ultraorthodox men line the barriers yelling insults, their faces twisted in such rage that one participant told me she can see how male violence against women is possible.

Those who oppose the WoW and any other forms of nonorthodox Judaism invoke the dictum “kol Yisrael ‘arevim zeh bazeh” (all of [the people of] Israel are responsible for one another).<sup>4</sup> Orthodox Jews interpret this as the responsibility

3 In the majority of orthodox synagogues, women do not read from or touch a Torah scroll. It is a widespread belief that a woman is prohibited from touching a Torah scroll while she is menstruating; however, many scholars argue that this is a myth. Jewish law does, in fact, allow women to touch Torah scrolls, though they may not read in order to discharge the congregation's obligatory readings. Many women's prayer groups that do include the Torah reading treat it as an educational endeavor in which they choose to follow the standardized order of readings in the synagogue. Rivka Haut, “Orthodox Women's Spirituality,” in *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*, ed. Phyllis Chesler and Rivka Haut (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003), 269.

4 Sifra, *Behukotai*, 7:5; Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 27b and Shavuot 39a.

for their fellows' adherence to the commandments. (This maxim may also be applied to the concern for social justice; it is always interpreted in this vein by liberal Jews.) It is every observant Jew's responsibility to ensure that others are observing correctly and appropriately; deviations have consequences for the world's redemption and the coming of the Messiah. Thus, the ultraorthodox do not merely disagree with the Women of the Wall's practices. From their perspective, the defiance of orthodox norms both jeopardizes the future of the entire Jewish people and, specifically at the Kotel, constitutes a desecration of the holiest site in the Jewish world. The numerous arguments and studies that have demonstrated the halakhic legality of the WoW's practices have not appeased its opponents.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the enormous influence of the Chief Rabbinate and the ultraorthodox, as well as the Israeli government's desire to prohibit activities it believes have the potential to incite violence, the WoW has been prohibited by civil law from conducting public Torah readings and, until recently, from wearing tallitot in front of the Kotel. The religious authorities claim that the WoW violates the regulation that forbids the "conduct of a religious ceremony which is not according to the custom of the place and which injures the sensitivities of the worshipping public towards the place," an amendment to the "Regulations for the Protection of Holy Places for Jews" that the minister of religious affairs drew up while the WoW's petition was being deliberated.<sup>6</sup> Since 1998 the group has been allowed to conduct part of its service in the Kotel plaza and the Torah reading at Robinson's Arch, a neighboring archaeological site that is away from the view and earshot of the worshippers in the plaza.

In November 2009 Nofrat Frenkel, an Israeli medical student and active member of the WoW, was arrested during a morning service for wearing a tallit and carrying a Torah scroll through the Kotel plaza. Frenkel was the first of several women to be arrested over the next few years. In April 2013, after five years of many arrests, a media explosion, and petitions and protests from around the world, both the Jerusalem Magistrates Court and the Jerusalem District Court ruled that the women do in fact have the right to pray in their manner in the Kotel plaza and are not in violation of any laws.<sup>7</sup> This dramatically changed the status of the WoW both legally and in public opinion.<sup>8</sup>

In the same month, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked the chair

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<sup>5</sup> For a more extensive explanation of the religious legality of the WoW's practices and the reasons for which they are not accepted by WoW's opponents, see chapter 4 of Tanya Sermer, "The Battle for the Soul of Jerusalem: Musical Language, Public Performance, and Competing Discourses of the Israeli Nation-State" (PhD diss., Eastman School of Music, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Regulation 2(a)(1a), Regulations for the Protection of Holy Places for Jews, 1981, quoted in Frances Raday, "Claiming Equal Religious Personhood: Women of the Wall's Constitutional Saga," in *Religion in the Public Sphere: A Comparative Analysis of German, Israeli, American and International Law*, ed. Winfried Brugger and Michael Karayanni (Berlin: Springer, 2007), 274.

<sup>7</sup> Appeal by the State of Israel 43832-42-33, State of Israel v. Ras et al., interpreting HCJ 2512/87 Anat Hoffman v. the Official in Charge of the Western Wall, IsrSC 48 (1774) 225 (2).

<sup>8</sup> "With Court Ruling, Majority of Israeli Jews Back Women of the Wall," Israel Democracy Institute, 11 May 2013, <https://en.idi.org.il/press-releases/12859>.

of the Jewish Agency (an international body that facilitates relationships between Israel and the Jewish Diaspora), Natan Sharansky, to come up with a proposal to address the conflict at the Kotel. Sharansky's ambitious plan envisioned an expanded plaza with a large additional third space—equally leveled and accessible—toward the south devoted to egalitarian, nonorthodox prayer. In August 2013 Netanyahu appointed Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mandelblit (now attorney general) to investigate the possibilities for implementing Sharansky's recommendations. What became known as the Mandelblit Plan was negotiated with many interested parties from all sectors in Israel and the United States and ratified by the cabinet in January 2016. Approval of the deal was considered a milestone victory by the WoW and liberal streams.<sup>9</sup> Under intense pressure from the ultraorthodox, however, Netanyahu put a freeze on the plan in June 2017, causing bitterness and strain in the relationship between the Netanyahu government and liberal Jews in Israel and abroad. At the time of writing, the WoW continues to conduct its Rosh Hodesh services in the women's section and is still forbidden from reading from a Torah scroll. The WoW's current campaigns are focused on access to Torah scrolls and putting pressure on the government to honor the deal.<sup>10</sup>

The Women for the Wall (abbreviated W4W) was founded in April 2013 in response to the two court rulings that the activities of the WoW are legal and do not constitute an offense of "local custom." This women's group, claiming to represent "religiously observant and traditional Israelis who are opposed to making any changes at the Holy Site," vehemently opposes the activities of the Women of the Wall and does not support the women's attempts to pray in their own fashion in the main Western Wall plaza.<sup>11</sup> W4W burst into the political arena by calling for a "tefillah [prayer] rally," a massive presence of orthodox women on Rosh Hodesh Sivan, May 10, 2013, who were to crowd out the WoW and prevent them from conducting their service. With the approval and encouragement of a few local rabbis, busloads of teenage students sent from orthodox and ultraorthodox girls' schools did indeed fill the women's section of the plaza before the WoW arrived; instead, the WoW conducted the service in the main area of the plaza farther back, which is

9 It is important to note that agreement with the Mandelblit Plan, in cooperation with the Reform and Conservative movements, caused a split in the WoW. The new group, calling itself the Original WoW, did not agree to hold prayers in a new and egalitarian space, arguing that its goal is women's-only prayer in the women's section of the historic Kotel. Neither egalitarian prayer nor "relegation" to a separate space was ever the goal of the group. For analysis of the problematic alliance between the WoW and the Reform and Conservative movements, see Yitzhak Reiter, "Feminists in the Temple of Orthodoxy: The Struggle of the Women of the Wall to Change the Status Quo," *Shofar* 34 (2016): 79–107.

10 For further analysis of the Women of the Wall, see Stuart Z. Charmé, "The Political Transformation of Gender Traditions at the Western Wall in Jerusalem," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 1 (2005): 5–34; Yuval Jobani and Nahshon Peretz, "Women of the Wall: A Normative Analysis of the Place of Religion in the Public Sphere," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 3, no. 3 (2014): 484–505; Prina Lahav, "The Woes of WoW: The Women of the Wall as a Religious Social Movement and as Metaphor," Boston University School of Law Working Papers No. 13-2 (January 23, 2013); Lahav, "The Women of the Wall: A Metaphor for National and Religious Identity," *Israel Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (2015): 50–70; Leah Shakdiel, "Women of the Wall: Radical Feminism as an Opportunity for a New Discourse in Israel," *Journal of Israeli History: Politics, Society, Culture* 21 (2002): 126–63.

11 "FAQ: Women for the Wall, <http://womenforthewall.org/faq>.

open to men and women and is not reserved for prayer. The activities of the W4W continued at the Kotel, as well as on Facebook and in the *Times of Israel* blog for about a year, and has since slowed down somewhat, though observant religious women with similar positions on the issue have been active both before and since the W4W's founding and continue to publicly oppose the WoW's prayer services.<sup>12</sup>

The struggle of the WoW is situated within greater tensions between orthodox and nonorthodox streams of Judaism in Israel and in Jerusalem in particular. Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and other varying types of non-orthodox Judaism face huge challenges. Nonorthodox rabbis are not recognized by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and therefore for many years could not sit on municipal religious councils or receive funding for their salaries or congregations, as their orthodox counterparts do. Weddings, divorces, and conversions conducted by nonorthodox rabbis are, to this day, not recognized by the state. These streams have worked continuously for many years, with varying degrees of success, to combat the orthodox monopoly over the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Chief Rabbinate, kashrut certification, marriage, divorce, conversion, burial, and all nationally administered holy sites. Although the WoW was founded as an orthodox group, the orthodox establishment (and, thereby, the state) groups it with other streams of liberal Judaism, rendering it illegitimate and unrecognized. Many of the challenges that the liberal streams face apply equally to the WoW. In fact, the leadership of the WoW hope that any successes they enjoy will spill over into the rest of religious life and Israeli society at large.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to ongoing tensions between orthodox and nonorthodox streams of Judaism, of late the issue of gender roles and rights in public space has come to the fore in general (secular) society. Since the early 2000s, a number of religious, social, and activist groups have begun to warn of increasing gender discrimination and segregation in Jerusalem and nearby towns. Advertisements throughout the city and on buses stopped featuring images of women; certain streets, HMOs, and citywide events were segregated by gender; women were barred from singing publicly at municipal or military events; and on certain bus lines women were forced to sit at the back. Especially since 2011, activists were galvanized to protest what became called *hadarat nashim*, the "exclusion of women," a phrase adapted from the social sciences that refers to the exclusion of groups of people in society. The WoW worked successfully to connect its struggle to these protests, attempting to sway the public that the women's experience counted as gender discrimination.<sup>14</sup>

I began the fieldwork undertaken for this study in the summer of 2009. I

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12 Another interesting comparison would be to the orthodox activist group Women for the Temple, which advocates for Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, but that is beyond the scope of this article. See Lihi Shitrit, "Gender and the (In)divisibility of Contested Sacred Places: The Case of Women for the Temple," *Politics and Religion* 10, no. 4 (2017): 812–39.

13 Reiter, "Feminists," 84.

14 For more on the performance of broader gender politics in Jerusalem, see chapter 7 of Sermer, "The Battle."



spent a great deal of time at the Kotel and the Old City at different times of the day and week, on the Sabbath, Rosh Hodesh, and holidays, and I attended demonstrations, protests, and conferences related to the Kotel and religious pluralism. I conducted formal interviews with members and attendees and had many informal discussions on the politics of the Kotel with Israelis of varying stripes. I followed the WoW, the W4W, and their supporters' and opponents' public statements and debates on group websites, on Facebook, in email newsletters, and in various news media. My intensive fieldwork waned around 2013, but I continued to live in Jerusalem after that time and to follow the events and debates around the Kotel. In general, I support feminist interventions into Jewish religious practice and am passionate about the need to open up the Israeli public sphere to a plurality of religious lifeways. Although I approach my research and analysis from this personal position, I hope that I justly represent the worldviews of those who do not share these ideals. I have tried my best to be empathetic to all of my interlocutors while examining this complex situation with a critical eye.

### Performance, Space, and Discursive Norms

The conflict between the WoW and orthodox authorities is based on the WoW's challenge to orthodox norms of gendered behavior in sacred space. Following Judith Butler, we can understand the actions of both the WoW and the W4W as performative iterations that consolidate and critique discursive norms.<sup>15</sup> Ethnomusicologist David McDonald has called for an aesthetic criticism of performativity (of violence in particular) "as communicated through bodily practices *across various aesthetic fields*" (emphasis in original).<sup>16</sup> Singing, dancing, praying, and playing instruments; verbal expression of catchy slogans or insulting epithets; wearing particular clothing, being photographed, and handling ritual objects; performance within a designated space or movement through space; and the imposed acts of crossing a security checkpoint or being arrested work together to form a corpus of bodily practices that construct individual and communal subjectivities and reify, reconfigure, and challenge structures of power.

Jewish prayer at the Kotel is motivated by the theological idea that the closer one is to Jerusalem, to the Temple, and to the Holy of Holies (respectively), the stronger one's prayer, the more likely to reach God, and the more likely for the prayer to be answered. The WoW aspires to the spiritual elevation of praying at the holiest accessible Jewish site. Although Rosh Hodesh has rituals and commandments required of men, it has historically taken on significance as a women's celebration, inspiring all varieties of creative rituals and expressions of sisterhood. The service itself contains a special liturgy added to the regular weekday morning services (outlined below), but, as Rosh Hodesh does not require the same restrictions on travel as the Sabbath, it is possible for women to attend WoW services

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

<sup>16</sup> David A. McDonald, "Poetics and the Performance of Violence in Israel/Palestine," *Ethnomusicology* 53, no. 1 (2009): 60.



from around the city and country. (In the same vein, the WoW meets on Selihot, Chanukah, and Purim—holidays that do not restrict travel in vehicles or the use of electronic devices.) The impetus for the WoW to conduct regular services at the Kotel is to stake its claim as part of the People of Israel, who pray according to their practice and conscience in the place they hold most sacred. According to Rivka Haut, a founding member of the WoW, “Women are trying to pray the way Jews pray. . . . It’s not a matter of transcending gender at all. It’s not seen as a gender thing, it’s a Jewish thing.”<sup>17</sup>

The musical and sonic practices of the WoW are a combination of mainstream orthodox prayer practices and musical decisions unique to the group, representing strong ties to religious tradition and feminist interventions into that tradition. The manner in which the women’s services are performed has changed over time, depending on membership and political climate. In the time since my fieldwork began the WoW has published its own prayer book (both for convenience and fund-raising purposes), employing Ashkenazi *nusah* (versions of both liturgical text and chant) in its services. In addition to *nusah*, the WoW incorporates a number of tunes by known composers, especially Shlomo Carlebach—either tunes that were composed specifically for prayer texts or melodies that are commonly juxtaposed onto prayers.

The first section of the daily morning service, Shaḥarit (literally, “Dawn”), is largely recited quietly to oneself, with parts chanted aloud by the leader alone. The community sings only a few of the prayers together as a group. The second section, Hallel (literally, “Praise”), is a group of Psalms recited on the new month and festivals, typically conducted by the WoW as a series of group songs. The Hallel is therefore the most audible section of the WoW service and tends to elicit the most opposition. The Torah service (which includes the weekly reading from the Torah scroll, as well as a number of prayers and blessings and complex choreography) and the final Musaf section (included in the morning service on the Sabbath, Rosh Hodesh, and festivals) follow the fairly standard Ashkenazi *nusah*.

Typically, a different woman leads each section of the service. Since inclusion and participation are priorities for the WoW, the leaders make a point of choosing melodies with which the largest number of attendees will likely be familiar—this is not the forum for professional cantorial singing or teaching new repertoire. Depending on the atmosphere and the mood of the presiding police officers, the women occasionally break into dancing the hora (a typical Jewish/Israeli circle dance) at some point during the Hallel. It is very common for men’s prayer groups to dance the hora as well; this is also the dance typical of other celebrations that take place at the Kotel, such as Independence Day and Jerusalem Day. Until 2013, when they began to stay in the Kotel plaza for the Torah service, the group also sang songs during the procession from the Kotel plaza to Robinson’s Arch. They did so both as an attempt to make the service continuous and as part of their demonstration. They most commonly sang songs by Carlebach, with texts that

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<sup>17</sup> Rivka Haut, interview with the author, conducted via Skype, January 5, 2010.

were related to Rosh Hodesh or an upcoming holiday, or generic songs about singing to God, Jewish identity, or Jerusalem. Carlebach's "Hashmi'ini et kolekh," text from the Song of Songs (2:14, "Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your countenance is comely," the proof text for the sexual appeal of the female voice and therefore the basis of kol isha), is, because of its words about a woman's voice, the WoW's unofficial theme song. The mantric, two-part "Ozi ve-zimrat Yah" (Psalm 118:14, "My strength and the song of God will be my salvation"), composed by Rabbi Shefa Gold, a (female) Renewal rabbi, was another common favorite.<sup>18</sup>

The songs sung during this procession were not normally organized. Central members of the WoW generally initiated the first song, and other participants spontaneously offered possibilities. Members of the Reform and Conservative youth movements often took initiative here, as singing to generate enthusiasm or to pass time on trips is a common practice within these groups. After Frenkel's arrest, it became tradition for the participants present to sing outside of the police station where their members were detained. The songs they chose at this time were similar to those sung during the procession to Robinson's Arch. After a number of arrests interrupted their worship, WoW members began conducting their Torah reading and musaf outside the station in order to complete their service.<sup>19</sup>

Until the 2013 court ruling that ended the arrests of participants in the WoW, the police took it upon themselves to regulate singing, dancing, and the wearing of ritual garments. They watched like hawks throughout each service, singling out individual women for their behavior. Although neither dance nor the volume of singing was regulated in the various rulings given by the Supreme Court, more than one service leader reported being threatened with arrest if she did not lower her voice. Women were forbidden from wearing t'fillin (phylacteries) in the plaza and were only allowed to wear tallitot (prayer shawls) wrapped around the neck like a scarf (not over the shoulders like a shawl, as is traditional). In later stages of my fieldwork, the police took to differentiating between "men's" tallitot (white or cream-colored shawls with black or blue stripes) and "women's" tallitot (decorated with colorful designs and patterns); they decided to allow the women to wear "women's" styles and to forbid "men's."

At the Rosh Hodesh service in January 2013, women arrived at the security gate and were surprised by a new regulation: as of that morning, women were not allowed to bring prayer shawls into the Kotel plaza at all. To the great distress of the women, many shawls were confiscated. Some decided to wear the shawl underneath their coats to escape detection or to give them to male friends to carry for them. Men who were found with colorful shawls in their possession were assumed to be collaborating with a woman, even though one could find it conceivable that a man might own a shawl of his own with colors other than blue or black. A

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<sup>18</sup> Jewish Renewal is one of the international liberal movements. Nava Tehila is the Renewal congregation located in Jerusalem.

<sup>19</sup> For another ethnomusicological study of sound at the Kotel, including a discussion of the WoW, see Abigail Wood, "The Cantor and the Muezzin's Duet: Contested Soundscapes at Jerusalem's Western Wall," *Contemporary Jewry* 35, no. 1 (2015): 55–72.

number of years earlier, one participant recalled wearing a tallit that she had made of crimson wool, with a hood, armholes, four corners, and the prescribed knotted threads, but that did not look like a normative tallit and therefore passed nearly entirely unnoticed.<sup>20</sup>

The acts of subversion here are based on the desire to take on certain rituals within an environment of fear and surveillance. There is a certain amount of pride that comes with carrying out a subversive act without getting caught, but in some ways, wearing a tallit but hiding it defeats the purpose; the commandment to wear *tzitzit* (knotted threads on the corners of the garment that are the legally prescribed part of the tallit) is predicated on seeing them so that they may remind the wearer of the commandments, much like the old (secular) custom of putting a string on one's finger. The WoW is fighting for the right to conduct these rituals publicly; therefore, being seen is part of the performance. In recent years, when two hundred women or more were present at many of the services, some participants felt freer to wear their tallitot in the open, sing in full voice, and defy the police's orders to wear the shawl differently or lower their volume.

Singing songs was and continues to be an important mode of reclaiming voice for these women. Among the songs sung when they followed Frenkel to the station during her arrest were "Etz Haim Hi" (Proverbs 3:18, "It [the Torah] is a tree of life to those who hold it fast, and all of its supporters are happy") and "Pithu Li" (Psalm 118:19–20, "Open for me the gates of righteousness, I will enter and give thanks to God").<sup>21</sup> Many participants cited this as a deeply moving and memorable experience. Frenkel could apparently hear the singing while she was being questioned. Bonna Devora Haberman recalls being among a later group of women arrested and singing songs inside the truck on the way to the police station, "a traditional Reb Nachman song about the precept to live in joy" and "a medley about Jerusalem and peace, singing and clapping heartedly together through traffic descending from Mount Zion."<sup>22</sup>

The most recent subversion tactic, initiated in November 2014, was smuggling a tiny (real and kosher) Torah scroll into the plaza. The primary struggle of the WoW since the 2013 ruling securing their right to prayer is the right to use a Torah scroll, which, at the time of writing, the rabbi who administers the Kotel still forbids. I was not at the service to see it, but the WoW publicized the moment as the first bat mitzvah at the Kotel, musing that the scroll was most likely originally designed for purposes such as these—for the use of persecuted groups of Jews under an oppressive regime who were forced to smuggle their scroll and hide their reading. Without citing evidence of the origins of the scroll, the WoW conflated their struggle with the persecution of Diaspora Jews—precisely

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20 Anecdote from February 2002, recounted by Rahel Jaskow in Chaia Beckerman, Betsy Kallus, and Rahel Jaskow, "Epilogue: Rosh Chodesh Adar 5762 (2002)," in Chesler and Haut, *Women of the Wall*, 360–61.

21 Miriam Farber, "Here Is a Wall at Which to Weep," Israel Religious Action Center blog, December 15, 2009, <http://www.irac.org/blog/post/Here-is-a-wall-at-which-to-weep.aspx>.

22 Bonna Devora Haberman, "Israeli Judaism—under Arrest," *Times of Israel, Ops & Blogs*, December 18, 2012, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israeli-judaism-under-arrest/>.

the persecution that the Jewish state was supposed to alleviate. This defiant act (repeated the following month and many times since) allowed the women to claim the right to Torah reading with a scroll by performing the act itself and at the same time proliferating the discourse that supporting the WoW means supporting the Zionist vision.

Delineations of boundaries in men's and women's dress and behavior such as those enforced by the Kotel authorities are methods of imposing power and control over groups of people who threaten the status quo within a defined space. These methods focus specifically on controlling women's bodies and bodily practices. In response, these women use various performative strategies as a way to reclaim the autonomy of the body against police who attempt to suppress and control it. As McDonald writes, "More than simply allowing for multiple interpretations of violent experiences, a performative analysis reveals how those bodies are themselves given materiality within varying discourses of power. Whatever state ambitions for making bodies legible (material) within a determined occupied space, individuals inevitably resist such legibility in performance, constructing place differently by means of physical subversion, subterfuge, and re-appropriation of the state's power."<sup>23</sup> Given McDonald's ethnographic subject, namely, Palestinians living in the West Bank, his focus too is on resistance and subversive forms of performance, and he builds his theoretical framework on that of Butler. I am in no way trying to suggest an equivalence between the WoW and Palestinians; what is interesting here is McDonald's theoretical incorporation of performance, the element of space (especially occupied space), and the particular interests of the state. The Kotel is a highly regulated space that is administered by a nondemocratic body (although appointed and supported by a democratic government) and controlled heavily by police; access to it is regulated by security checkpoints, within which opposition is subject to arrest and legal action and in which the state has a deep interest. (The Kotel's status as an occupied space in terms of its having been annexed by Israel in 1967 and being part of the discourse of the occupied Palestinian territories is connected, but it is beyond the scope of the present discussion.) The WoW see the Kotel as being unjustly occupied by the ultraorthodox, as do Jewish liberal movements that fight against the orthodox religious status quo in Israel. Most Israelis, however, have given up the idea of the Kotel as a national space and accept that it has become an ultraorthodox synagogue with the same rules as any other ultraorthodox synagogue. The language of occupation and domination gives the WoW a rhetorical currency that helps frame its struggle as a political issue rather than as strictly religious.

The WoW is not actually performing any acts that it cannot perform in other places. The reason the WoW exists is to create the possibility for women to engage—within the space of the Kotel—in the practices they are accustomed to following elsewhere. The goal of the WoW is not to create something new (although in creating a cross-denominational group, this may have been a side-

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<sup>23</sup> McDonald, "Poetics," 77.

product) but rather to bring its practices into a new space. Nowhere else in the country would these women be arrested or even policed for their actions nor receive so much national and international publicity. In the context of their religious practices, it is the space that is unique, the character of which is ostensibly the basis of the tension between them, their opponents, and the state. The actions of the WoW and of the police and governing bodies are framed by the space in which the struggle is enacted, and each of these three corporative agents works to construct the space differently.

### **Panopticism and Synopticism: The Police, the Media, and Other Viewers**

The presence of the WoW does not only impact the character of the Kotel; the high level of visibility and contestation of the Kotel has an impact on the performance of the WoW. The Kotel manifests certain features of panopticism, a system of surveillance in which an invisible few see the visible many in such a way as to make the many regulate themselves and thereby sustain the efficiency of the system.<sup>24</sup> As Michel Foucault famously argued in his 1975 *Discipline and Punish*, the concept of panopticism may be used as a metaphor for the ways in which discursive means may be employed to control populations within a specific space and, even more broadly, to impose power on an entire society. The general impressiveness of both the Kotel's physical site and the discourse surrounding it, as well as certain internal mechanisms, serves to regulate visitors: a large open space surrounded by high walls (the Wall and other walls) on all sides, multiple security entrances, and signs posted by the Western Wall Heritage Foundation outlining appropriate dress and behavior. The population that frequents the Kotel manifests its compulsion to self-regulate: young women hand out shawls to women whose sleeves and skirts are deemed too short, and numerous traditionally observant Jewish visitors do not hesitate to take it upon themselves to tell others when they are not dressed or behaving appropriately. Members of the Women for the Wall and others participate in the self-governing mechanism of the panopticon. Although they are imbued with no religious or civil authority whatsoever, the powerful discourses governing both orthodox women's practice and the space of the Kotel motivate them to take the initiative to protect the status quo.

During WoW services, however, the group becomes the object of what Thomas Mathiesen calls "synopticism"—a situation in which "the many see the few" and which he argues exists in tandem with panopticism as characteristic of modernity. Primarily by way of mass media and advanced computer technologies, Mathiesen contends that we "live in a *viewer society*" (emphasis in original), simultaneously panoptic and synoptic.<sup>25</sup> On Rosh Hodesh, the police presence and surveillance are

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24 A panopticon is an architectural design that is most commonly and famously applied to prisons; in it a guard post is stationed in the middle of a circular building, and the inmates are stationed in cells around the periphery. In this way, only one guard is necessary to supervise many inmates, and because the inmates never know when they are actually being watched, they continuously act as if they were.

25 Thomas Mathiesen, "The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited," *Theoretical Criminology* 1, no. 2 (1997): 215–34, quote at 219.



Fig. 3. Male supporters and onlookers watch from behind the women's section as the Women of the Wall dance at the end of Hallel. An ultraorthodox woman (with a policewoman standing next to her) prays in opposition and ends up in the middle of the dance circle. March 12, 2013. ©Tanya Sermer.



Fig. 4. Men looking over the mehitzah at the Women of the Wall. April 11, 2013. ©Tanya Sermer.





Fig. 5. Police standing on the Mughrabi Bridge, overlooking the Women of the Wall. March 12, 2013. ©Tanya Sermer.



Fig. 6. Journalists clamor to get the best shots of the Women of the Wall Torah service, taking place in front of the police station near the Jaffa Gate of the Old City, in protest against arrests of a few members. Some women are wearing silly hats in honor of Rosh Hodesh Adar, the month in which Purim takes place. February 11, 2013. ©Tanya Sermer.



heavy and explicit, as is the presence of media, supporters, opponents, and curious bystanders.<sup>26</sup> Curiously reminiscent of the Roman amphitheater (which Foucault perhaps mistakenly argues is no longer a feature of modern society), the WoW is observed by both eyes and cameras in all three dimensions: from behind the back barrier by male supporters and tourists; from the right side by women entering the women's section, who either stare or confront the WoW worshippers; from the left by men on the other side of the divider, both supporters and opponents, who stand on chairs to watch, yell, or record; from the front by a line of police and barrage of media; from above by police officers stationed on the Mughrabi Bridge (leading up to the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock), both watching and taking video; and from within by members and visitors joining the group, who record with smartphones and personal cameras (including this ethnographer with her camera and audio recorder). The multiple intersecting gazes of observers present to watch is multiplied exponentially by the technologies that have allowed for the development of "the viewer society." The digital documentation (audio, photo, video), subsequently distributed around the globe through news and social media, creates a network of evaluation and judgment, multiplying the number of interested parties who weigh in on the debate—many of whom could ultimately exert power and influence in different ways. Due to pressure by numerous Jewish leaders both locally and abroad, the prime minister was eventually forced to put a plan into action that would solve this dispute.

The situation of being highly observed impacts the nature of the WoW's performance, as well as the performance of the women's opponents. The uncertainty of what the police videos were going to be used for and by whom—a kind of opacity characteristic of a panoptic mechanism—made some of the women express uneasiness. The majority of the time during the period of my fieldwork, neither the leaders nor the group followed directives to lower their voices—they had developed a certain degree of confidence. In earlier years, however, the group did try to be as quiet and inconspicuous as possible. The leaders of the WoW would decide whether or not to dance based on their assessment of the police officer in charge; Hoffman, the WoW chairwoman, would turn to the group and declare in a loud whisper, "He's in a good mood today! Let's dance!" Until the 2013 ruling, a small number of women wore ritual garments in the plaza. In the absence of surveillance at Robinson's Arch, the majority waited until the second part of the service to put the garments on, and the group broke into dance circles more often in that space. Hoffman told me that the WoW board was discussing the possibility of giving up on the plaza altogether and conducting the entire service at Robinson's Arch for the sole reason that women had reported to them feeling

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26 A team of police officers (I have seen anywhere from one to ten) is assigned to patrol the Women of the Wall each month while they conduct their service at the plaza: one policeman who is the head of the team and a number of subordinate policewomen. (In 2013 during the massive ultraorthodox protests, tens of officers were dispatched to keep the peace. The situation has since returned to normal.) The officers are present both to protect the group from aggressive antagonists and to monitor the actions of the women. At least one of the policewomen records the service with a video camera.

much more comfortable there. In an interview, Noa Raz, an active participant, told me that she viewed the part of the service in the plaza as “the demonstration” and the part at Robinson’s Arch as “the prayer,” the difference being that the first part was conducted under police surveillance and with a diverse and often unfriendly audience watching and interacting.

The woman leading the service always stood in the middle of the group both so that the other worshippers could hear and so that the group could shield her from the police and antagonists. I quote here Batya Kallus, one of the earliest members of the group and a member of the board, from an interview in which she discussed strategies of nonviolent protest that she experienced during her participation in protests against nuclear reactors in the 1980s and how she applied them to the WoW. I include a lengthy quote because it offers a picture of the positioning of the group, its internal dynamics, the complex conceptual relationship between the performance of prayer and the performance of protest, and the effects that outsiders have on the group.

I follow a practice that a member of our group from the early days, Chaia Beckerman, taught me, which is a form of nonviolent protest, where . . . you’re doing an action that is not welcomed by the other side. But you believe in that action, so you just keep doing what you’re doing, and you ignore them. . . . What I learned from that experience [of nonviolent protest against nuclear reactors in the 1980s] was to encourage the group to just keep going, to not be distracted by the shouting, the yelling, the rage, the anger. As long as nobody is physically in danger, I tell the group not to interact with the distraction. That’s why I put Rahel [Jaskow, a longtime member and service leader] in the middle, because I don’t want Rahel to be the center of the anger. You know, she needs to focus on her davening [praying], and I want the women who are there to daven, to daven. They’re not there to have a political protest, they’re there to daven. And so my idea is to make the container, to keep the container whole, as it were, if you visualize the prayer circle as a container. So my idea of what I’m doing as a field commander is keeping that container whole so that the women can daven safely. And then me and Peggy [Cidor] and Anat [Hoffman] become kind of the people who run interference outside of the container so that Rahel and the others can continue to do what they came there for. That’s why I tell women who start getting into arguments with these women, like you know, a woman comes up and says, You have to stop! It’s terrible! You’re reformiot [reform Jewish women]! You’re lesbiot [lesbians]! You’re naziot [Nazi women]! You’re whatever! You know, there’s a million things they call us. And I tell them, Don’t respond, just don’t respond to it. Just keep going. You’re here to daven, and that’s all you have to do.<sup>27</sup>

As Kallus articulates it, the focus on the prayer is both a distancing from the protest and a strategy of the protest itself mediated by the presence of “distractions.” Kallus, Hoffman, Cidor, and other members of the WoW leadership pull the group

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<sup>27</sup> Batya Kallus, interview with the author, February 1, 2010, Jerusalem.

together more tightly in particular for the Hallel, the most audible part of the service, specific to Rosh Hodesh and the festivals. Doing so protects individuals, creates a stronger wall of sound moving outward, and configures the unity and strength of the group.

Aside from the police surveillance, WoW took advantage of mass media and developed a sophisticated communications strategy. Hoffman, Lesley Sachs, and other board members wearing custom-designed WoW tallitot stood in the front, face-to-face with the cameras of the police and the media. Special guests and other figures were brought to the front as well: an eleven-year-old girl who started joining regularly with her mother, three Knesset (parliament) members who joined in solidarity, and other high-profile members of the Jewish community who came from abroad. The WoW's forty thousand Facebook and Twitter followers can look through pictures of every month's gathering, read announcements of how the service is progressing, watch short edited videos that are posted to YouTube, and even live-stream certain services. This publicity is essential to maintaining the crucial support of American Jewry, the population from which the WoW was born and whose majority belongs to nonorthodox movements and agitates for religious pluralism in Israeli law and society. The WoW leaders knew that they could only forward their cause if the cause became bigger than their own numbers. The prime minister was eventually forced to appoint Natan Sharansky to find a viable solution because the plight of the WoW grew to be an urgent matter of Israel/Diaspora relations.

The existence and effects of the synopticon (although it is not named as such) have entered the discourse around the WoW. Opponents criticize the WoW for creating a "media circus" at the Kotel, citing the media's interest and the WoW exploitation of it as proof that the women only aim to provoke and seek attention. Yet some members told me that their favorite days are the quietest ones, when no one cares or watches, and they simply long for the time when they can conduct their prayers without any attention at all. Raz told me about multiple times when she and Frenkel went together to the Kotel, just the two of them, and put on tallit; they received no more than curious glances. The WoW announced on Facebook one day in 2012 that a few women had gathered at the Kotel one morning other than Rosh Hodesh in order that one of their members could say Kaddish (the prayer recited by mourners) for her mother. They did not announce in advance that they would be doing so, and they conducted their service at the back of the women's section as usual; apparently, no one said a word to them. The WoW promoted this moment to argue that it is, therefore, their opponents, the police, and the state-sanctioned religious authorities who are in fact responsible for the disturbance and provocation. (Recognizing this, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz requested in October 2013 that the large groups of ultraorthodox girls that had been coming regularly to protest and block the WoW not come and fill the plaza for the next service.<sup>28</sup>)

The W4W appeared in the synopticon in order to push the WoW out of it.

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28 JTA, "Western Wall Rabbi to Haredi Girls: Avoid Plaza for Women of the Wall Service," October 3, 2013, <https://www.jta.org/2013/10/03/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/western-wall-rabbi-warns-haredi-girls-not-to-fill-sites-plaza>.

Their arguments and those of many other opponents to WoW center around the relative statistics of each group: the WoW is a very small group of women who only show up once a month, whereas traditionally observant women constitute a significantly larger number of women who come to pray every day at all hours. How dare a tiny and marginal minority impose their views on the overwhelmingly dominant ideology? (WoW supporters use the same data in their argumentation: How can they be so intolerant as not to tolerate a few women who want to do their thing for only one hour a month at 7:00 in the morning?) The W4W's push to bring hundreds of women to the Kotel brought the dominant majority into plain view, conveying in embodied form their contention that the WoW is in fact small and marginal. Although they bitterly criticize the "media circus," they took advantage of it to stake their claim on the Kotel and its politics.

### **The Politics of Piety: WoW, W4W, and Religious Women's Agency**

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood offers a perspective on performativity and agency within religious communities that both builds on and challenges the well-known theories of Foucault and Butler and that may be used to shed light on the dynamics of the Kotel. This analysis shifts focus from the politics of prayer and sacred space to ethics and formations of the self: the activities, religious sensibilities, and ideals for Jewish practice of both groups of activists are part of their overall acting out of themselves, in addition to their politics, which have been more typically foregrounded in extant analyses. A mix of liberal and religious/ethical discourses is employed among the various parties to this conflict, and examining this mix offers a nuanced picture of the forces at work at the Kotel.

In her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Mahmood offers a rich ethnography of the women's "mosque movement" in Cairo, a subset of the Egyptian "piety movement," which is part of the broader Islamic revival. The analytic aim of her ethnography is to rethink subject formation and agency in the context of nonliberal religious communities, especially among women. She argues that the assumptions at the basis of liberal thought in general and feminist theory in particular, "such as the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on," do not account either for the variety of ways in which norms come to be embodied, lived, and performed or for members of societies who function as actors within dominating structures of power but who do not attempt to subvert their domination.<sup>29</sup>

Liberalism's main contribution to the concept of freedom is the linking of self-realization with individual autonomy. In this conception, agency lies in a subject's quest for autonomy. Feminism, a traditionally secular-liberal enterprise, has created as its subject the woman who seeks liberation from the male-dominated

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<sup>29</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

and oppressive world in which she lives. Female agency in this framework means finding spaces in which to resist and subvert the oppressive patriarchal order. Feminist studies of nonliberal communities tend to describe spaces in which women are empowered or ways in which women redirect or recode the resources their traditions offer them. Discussions of the WoW most often take this approach. WoW members themselves have ordered studies to prove the halakhic (Jewish legal) basis for women's participation in these rituals and have argued repeatedly that halakhah in fact allows for women's communal prayer and women wearing prayer garments and reading from Torah scrolls. Yet, simultaneously, WoW members are seen (by themselves, their supporters, and scholars) as transgressing traditional patriarchal boundaries and acting in the spirit of resistance—smuggling in small Torah scrolls, wearing their tallitot around their necks or under their coats, and singing aloud even after the presiding police officer has asked them to hush.

Mahmood, however, contends that locating agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject forms a barrier to exploring women's lives in patriarchal religious traditions. She therefore argues for the uncoupling of self-realization from the autonomous will, claiming that autonomy is not always the end-goal of self-realization, especially in nonliberal communities. Mahmood's main project is to unsettle liberal and feminist notions of agency that privilege the liberatory subject. She critiques poststructuralist feminist theory's focus on resistance and the conceptualization of agency on the binary model of subordination and subversion, consolidation and resignification (doing and undoing, in Butler's terms). According to Mahmood, these formulations fail to examine the variety of bodily manifestations that norms take; she stresses the importance of thinking instead about "the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated."<sup>30</sup> The issue of manifestation of norms is crucial to this discussion of women's prayer at the Kotel, as it is precisely the norms of religious and gendered behavior ("status quo" or "local custom," in Israeli discourse) that are at stake in this conflict.

Mahmood looks to theories of ethical formation for her framework of agency, theories that we may apply to many cases of religious women's activity. Kant's legacy, she notes, was to posit morality as a rational enterprise, irrespective of the manifest forms morality took, resulting in an overwhelming lack of attention to distinct moral practices. Foucault's ethical theory, on the other hand, is Aristotelian in orientation in that it examines the particular material activities that constitute ethical practices, interrogating not what a certain ethical theory means but what the specific embodied forms of these practices do.

In examining the work that ethical practices do in constituting the individual, Mahmood employs the concept of *habitus*. She does not, however, employ Pierre Bourdieu's influential conception of the term as a primarily unconscious process by which subjects come to embody their social and class positions. Rather, she builds on the older, Aristotelian conception of habitus, which "is understood

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<sup>30</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 23.

to be an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, repeated actions help to develop the virtuous self, in contradistinction to the liberal, post-Enlightenment understanding that virtue and emotions precede and motivate actions. A person may learn to pray wholeheartedly and with the right intentions and spiritual focus through the repeated act of praying rather than being expected to have the right spiritual constitution before having performed prayer regularly.

Mahmood’s understanding and use of the term *habitus* as an ethical, internal characteristic that is ingrained and made permanent through the process of repeated ritual or behavioral actions is instructive in forming judgment of women’s prayer at the Kotel. Many of the women who were arrested for wearing a tallit during a WoW service reported being asked by the police during questioning whether or not they wear the tallit regularly when they pray other than at the WoW. The women were asked this question repeatedly, and when they insisted strongly that they do in fact wear the tallit regularly in their everyday lives, the police released them. Whether a woman wore the tallit exclusively with WoW or if she wore it throughout her religious life made a difference to the police in determining the woman’s intentions. If the woman convinced the police that she performed this ritual repeatedly, regularly, and consistently, then the police assumed that wearing the prayer shawl was in fact part of the woman’s ethical and religious sensibilities (*habitus*) and was therefore more acceptable. In other words, the police used the concept of *habitus* to judge whether or not a woman was being provocative. In taking on this attitude, the police missed two crucial points. First, the police did not take into account the fact that the Kotel site often and regularly inspires visitors to take on or try rituals that they do not normally perform. Male visitors (especially male Birthright Israel participants, whose reactions and experiences are widely advertised) regularly report on the ecstatic and revelatory experiences of trying tallit or tefillin for the first time at the Kotel.<sup>32</sup> Ultraorthodox men in fact take advantage of the eagerness and openness to religious ritual that the Kotel inspires; they have a table set up in the men’s section of the plaza at which they offer shawls and phylacteries for men’s use, and ultraorthodox men stationed at the table help men unfamiliar with the practice to perform the ritual and recite the appropriate blessings. Women are not granted this opportunity.

Second, the police did not understand the relationship between the participants’ regular religious lives and their participation in the WoW. The reason the WoW exists is to create the possibility for women to engage—within the space of the Kotel—in the practices they are accustomed to following elsewhere. As discussed earlier, the goal of the WoW is not to create something new but rather to

<sup>31</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 136.

<sup>32</sup> Birthright Israel is an organization that offers free ten-day educational trips to Israel for young Jewish adults around the world age eighteen to twenty-six who have never participated in an educational trip to the country before.

bring these practices into a new space. In fact, many women who do wear the tallit regularly did *not* wear it with the WoW out of fear of reprimand or arrest. As far as I could ascertain, wearing the tallit in defiance of the police when this was not the women's usual ritual practice was not common among participating women. Three women members of Knesset who used their diplomatic immunity to support the WoW made a splash by wearing WoW tallitot when they would not normally do so, and it was considered a unique occurrence.

Mahmood's aim in her work is to challenge academic discourse that addresses feminism, agency, and ethics, a conversation that reverberates within my fieldwork. She takes researchers to task for privileging the liberal subject at the expense of other modes of being. The case of the interaction between WoW and W4W offers a fascinating situation in which two completely different manifestations of female agency within a set ethical-political framework are being contested within a given space. These groups employ differing discourses within their own interactions, both the liberal discourse Mahmood challenges and the type of ethical formations she describes among Egyptian Muslim women. Academic debates regarding the nature of feminism, self-realization, autonomy, resistance, and religious norms are being performed among multiple groups of actors "on the ground"—at the Kotel and beyond.

In an op-ed on the *Times of Israel* website entitled "Sharing the Sacred Kotel Space," Susan Aranoff, one of the founding members of WoW, argued that the same forces that refuse to solve the problem of *agunot* (women whose husbands refuse to grant them a divorce) also refuse to grant the WoW their right to pray as a group in their own way at the Kotel and to protect them from violence. She discusses the bidirectional benefits that both the WoW and the ultraorthodox women receive by their mutual presence and prayer. Regarding how WoW may influence the ultraorthodox women, she comments:

WoW models to all Jewish women who pray at the Kotel that women can take control over their own religious lives. When haredi women, and haredi men, and haredi children see women leading services, wearing tallitot, and even handling and reading from Torah scrolls, their world view is changed. Like it or not, the sights and sounds of women leading services may initially shock them but then, when they get used to it, it will, it has to, change their world view. Women will no longer be seen as following men when it comes to communal prayer, allowing men to lead, but as individuals who are able to function religiously, on their own, without the "help" of men.<sup>33</sup>

Aranoff employs a classically liberal-feminist (perhaps also Orientalist) view that if only these submissive women were exposed to enlightened alternatives, they would throw off their patriarchal shackles and "take control" (read: exert agency) over their religious practices. Although many (if not most) of the WoW members

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Aranoff, "Sharing the Sacred Kotel Space," *Times of Israel, Ops & Blogs*, May 7, 2013, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-wow-should-pray-together-with-haredi-women/>.



personally believe that normative (i.e., not “feminist” or “egalitarian”) orthodox and ultraorthodox women are suppressed within a patriarchal hegemonic system, the task of “changing their world view” is neither the official purpose of the organization nor the goal of the majority of participants. The WoW aims to enable women’s prayer of all kinds and to open the space for women’s singing, dancing, and ritual practice for all those who choose to do so. I present Aranoff’s article here not so much for her arguments as for the response the article elicited and for the clash in worldviews that it presents.

Outraged by her remarks and ignoring the comments regarding the ways in which the WoW members benefit from the presence of ultraorthodox women worshippers, Ronit Peskin, cofounder of W4W, responded with her own op-ed, entitled “Thank You Very Much, but I’m in Love with My Life.” To build her argument, she describes how she went through phases in her life, belonging to modern orthodox, yeshiva (more stringent orthodox), secular, and *dati leumi* (Israeli national religious) communities, continuously feeling uncomfortable and rebellious, until she finally ended up in the Israeli Hasidic community she calls home. She describes how smart, dedicated, and educated the women in her community are, how equal and loving their marriages, and how fulfilling their lives of Torah and religious observance. With righteous indignation, she calls out Aranoff for completely misunderstanding the condition of women in her community:

Please don’t try to tell me that you know better than I do how I should live my life. The way I live my life, as you can see, was very well thought out. It was a path I chose, and fought lots of obstacles to get there. I don’t live this way of life because I haven’t witnessed alternatives. I’ve witnessed them, rejected them, and made the choice to live as I do because I find it the most meaningful type of life for me. Implying that I’m doing what I do merely because I am subjugated by men is insulting to me, insulting my intelligence, insulting the men I love, and insulting to the entire population of Chareidi women. Please respect that the way I serve God is the way that I choose to serve Him, and it is a way of life that makes me happy, content, and fulfilled. I don’t need you to rescue me, and neither do other Chareidi women. If your goal is merely to pray, then pray. But don’t try to “liberate” women who need no liberation. Thank you very much, but I’m in love with my life as it is.<sup>34</sup>

Peskin exploits her life story to argue for her credibility as an autonomous, female, *haredi* (ultraorthodox) agent, though by doing so she promotes the liberal notion that autonomy is in fact procedural; as long as a decision is arrived at through the exercise of free will, the final decision itself may be an illiberal one. However, the same cannot be said for the hundreds of schoolgirls who were born and raised in orthodox and ultraorthodox communities, enrolled in religious girls’ schools by their parents, and sent to the W4W’s protest at the Kotel by their schools under

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<sup>34</sup> Ronit Peskin, “Thank You Very Much, but I’m in Love with My Life,” *Times of Israel, Ops & Blogs*, May 9, 2013, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/thank-you-very-much-but-im-in-love-with-my-life/>.

the direction and encouragement of their rabbis. In this case, no liberal case can be made for the girls' agency. It is precisely here that Mahmood's intervention helps clarify the basic disparity between WoW and the ultraorthodox women.

The ideological position of the WoW is difficult to pin down precisely due to both internal and external factors. Members and supporters of the group fall along a range of positions, and one of the WoW's central principles is to be as inclusive as possible. Besides this, religious feminism itself is a fluid and heterogeneous concept. Additionally, the WoW was founded by and continues to be supported by American feminists and progressive Jews, and members are a mix of American, American-immigrant, and Israeli women. The group's activism takes place in Jerusalem in interaction with other Jerusalem-based groups, the Israeli government, and the Israeli Supreme Court, yet key negotiations include the leadership of American Jewry. The WoW is fighting for legitimacy among the Israeli public but is largely perceived as an American transplant. The sometimes awkward negotiation of American and Israeli religious and political norms causes confusion. As a result of all these factors, the group falls into a liminal space between secular liberalism and religious orthodoxy, with a number of consequences both for its own functioning and for its outside support.

The WoW has one foot in the liberal camp: it aspires to autonomy and gender equality, seeks to topple (certain) patriarchal boundaries, and values resistance. Members' rhetoric is based on equality, constitutional rights, feminist self-realization, and democracy, and they look to the government and the High Court of Justice for resolutions to their conflict. Feminist scholars could easily identify members' pursuits as a form of recoding of religious resources. Their former lawyer, Frances Raday, places them in the context of "the new wave of feminist activism struggling for expression through hermeneutic reform strategy within existing Orthodoxy" that has been developing in Judaism and Christianity since the 1970s.<sup>35</sup> It is important to note here the significance of the American origins of women's rights activism in Israel. The American civil rights movement of the 1960s, the large immigration of American Jews to Israel in the early 1970s, and the increasing number of Israeli scholars and lawyers educated in the United States catalyzed the development of American-style feminist activism—undoubtedly a liberal enterprise—in Israel (like other types of Israeli activism that are based on the notion of civil liberties).<sup>36</sup>

In particular, the WoW's liberal tendencies manifest in the women's approach to singing and their disdain for kol isha. Anthropologist Amanda Weidman has traced the many ways in which voice has been associated with agency, authorship, status, power, and self-realization in post-Enlightenment European American culture.<sup>37</sup> In such expressions as "finding our voice," discovering an "inner voice,"

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35 Raday, "Claiming Equal Religious Personhood," 256.

36 Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli Activism American-Style: Civil Liberties, Environmental, and Peace Organizations as Pressure Groups for Social Change, 1970s–1990s," *Israel Studies* 5, no. 1 (2000): 128–52.

37 Amanda Weidman, "Anthropology and Voice," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 37–51.

“voicing concern,” “giving a voice” to the subaltern, or praising an artist’s “personal voice,” we see the assumption of the significance of the voice and the privileging of the sounded voice. In this paradigm, the WoW’s objectives line up with liberal (Western) goals for feminist participation in public space and secular life: those whose voices are heard—audibly and metaphorically—count. “Hashmi”ini et kolekh!” (Let me hear your voice!) is their rallying cry. For the WoW, singing aloud in prayer is an act of political agency with specifically Zionist overtones. Derek Penslar, for example, highlights the salience of the voice in Zionist culture and the “redemptive, quasi-mystical power” of the spoken Hebrew word: “The veneration of the voice can be seen as an inherent component of Zionist ideology, an aspect of the social and psychological normalization for which the Zionist project strove.”<sup>38</sup> The sounded voice represents (liberal) empowerment, equality, and inclusion; therefore, for the WoW, the doctrine of kol isha cannot represent anything other than the ultimate form of women’s subjugation and exclusion.

At the same time, the WoW has a foot in the nonliberal camp. Especially in the early years of its existence, the WoW encountered hostile opposition from feminists.<sup>39</sup> Jewish feminists did not believe that feminism could make any headway in a fundamentally hierarchical and patriarchal system, and they could not fathom the idea that women would choose to inscribe themselves with the symbols and ordinances of such a system. The WoW maintains its commitment to a divine authority and to halakhah as a binding framework. The women look to prayer and ritual as expressions of devotion and their relationship to that divine power. They maintain gender separation during prayer and dress modestly. The WoW accepts and argues for the centrality of the Kotel in Jewish sacred geography, questioning neither the patriarchal system of the Temple cult nor the Israeli conquest of East Jerusalem that enabled the current form of the Kotel and its plaza. (These principles form the basis of the group’s activity, even though individual supporters of the WoW—such as the three Knesset members mentioned earlier—uphold a variety of religious beliefs or back the project as a component of a larger feminist cause.) The women share these commitments and beliefs with their observant coreligionists.

In the binary model of consolidation and resignification of norms, the WoW takes both positions, depending on with whom it is being compared. The way that the WoW sees the ultraorthodox, so many secular and liberal Jews see orthodox feminists. As Peskin emphasized her autonomous lifestyle choices, so Raday has argued for the WoW’s autonomy.<sup>40</sup> Relative to liberal or secular feminists, the WoW represents consolidation; liberal Jews reject the authoritative power of Jewish law and restructure ritual and theology based on liberal values, whereas the WoW aims for the expansion of women’s religious activities within the boundaries of hal-

<sup>38</sup> Derek Jonathan Penslar, “Transmitting Jewish Culture: Radio in Israel,” *Jewish Social Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 22.

<sup>39</sup> See accounts in Rivka Haut, “Orthodox Women’s Spirituality,” and Phyllis Chesler, “Toward a Psychology of Liberation: Feminism and Religion—a Conclusion,” in Chesler and Haut, *Women of the Wall*, 275–76, 339–40.

<sup>40</sup> Raday, “Claiming Equal Religious Personhood,” 259.

akhah. Relative to their ultraorthodox counterparts, on the other hand, WoW participants represent resignification and the W4W consolidation; W4W members work actively, in their own words, to “uphold the status quo,” whereas the WoW works to break it down and to rethink what may be halakhically permissible for women. The claim that agency and ethical subject formation cannot be interpreted within a binary model becomes starkly clear in the spectrum of performances that take shape at the Kotel.

Here we may analyze the W4W in the way that Mahmood analyzes the Egyptian mosque movement: as women who actively inhabit and perform their set of religious ideals in the way that their processes of ethical formation has formed them to be, without aspiring to reconfigure the norms of the system. Applying this analytic framework, the group of orthodox and ultraorthodox girls were not simply enacting patriarchal norms of female behavior within orthodox Jewish discursive tradition and consolidating and imposing those norms on the space of the Kotel plaza; instead, they were actively part of creating and interpreting the way their religious values come to be materialized and lived.

The same can be said for the women’s performance of kol isha and their obligation to pray quietly in public space. The fact that it was men who developed these interpretations and set of regulations is irrelevant: orthodox women who enact and perpetuate kol isha have faith and trust in the system and believe that each gender has its own and different role to play. The principles of kol isha could mandate that men take it solely upon themselves to avoid hearing women’s singing voices. Observant women, however, take responsibility to uphold kol isha. The ways in which they conduct their everyday tasks and ensure that they are not heard by men is their enactment of modesty and piety, as well as their contribution to the stability and sanctity of the community. If they do their utmost to fulfill their roles as women, they enable the men to fulfill their roles as well. In the case of kol isha, the singing voice represents a woman’s power and sexuality, and a woman’s ability to control her voice is her power to fulfill her God-given role. In controlling the voice, a woman expresses her power and her devotion to her community, her religion, and her God.

In the spirit of liberal politics, ethnographic scholarship—particularly feminist ethnography—seeks out and valorizes precisely the moments of raised voices. Finding and raising the voice of the oppressed is a *modus operandi* of postcolonial, subaltern, and gender studies. In music studies in particular, the material (sonic) and metaphorical registers of the voice are often poetically blended so that singing and other forms of vocal performance are granted political and liberatory significance. Yet by privileging the sounded voice, the agency of women in nonliberal communities and belief systems who use their voices in other ways or who are committed specifically to quiet or silence is denied. The agency of these women lies in the variety of ways in which they embody and perform the codes that govern the voice in their community. It is incumbent upon the ethnographer

to delve into the particular discourses that produce the uses, meanings, and metaphors associated with the voice.

Analyzing agency as a multitude of possibilities produced within specific discourses can encompass the entire spectrum of gendered subjectivities being performed at the Kotel. In this framework, the WoW and the W4W represent two different manifestations of (religious) female agency that are being performed in contestation with each other within a given space. WoW participants seek to embody Jewish ethical virtues that they share with the W4W—prayer, piety, modesty in dress and demeanor, gathering with other women, marking religious calendrical cycles, the centrality of the Temple and Jerusalem—yet perform them in completely different modalities from their ultraorthodox sisters. We can see how the different immanent forms that moral codes take articulate different conceptions of the ethical self. The WoW and the W4W (and the countless other groups and individuals who aim to enact and live Jewish values) engage in multiple bodily practices that may stem from a similar moral code but that articulate differing conceptions of the ethical subject. This can be said both of the multiple participants within each group and of the groups themselves. As Mahmood argues, “Very different configurations of personhood can cohabit the same cultural and historical space, with each configuration the product of a specific discursive formation rather than of the culture at large.”<sup>41</sup> The slogan of the Israel Religious Action Center (the advocacy arm of the Israeli Reform movement, of which Anat Hoffman is director), “There is more than one way of being Jewish,” brings this point to bear on Israeli politics. The individuals and groups discussed in this study perform alternate manifestations of similar values, some manifestations of which may be considered subversive at certain times and in certain contexts and others of which may serve to produce, reinforce, or re-create a predominant ethical and political paradigm.

## Acknowledgments

This publication was made possible by support from the Social Science Research Council’s International Dissertation Research Fellowship, with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, as well as from the Eastman School of Music’s Elsa T. Johnson Fellowship in Musicology. I am also indebted to the many individuals who generously participated in this ethnography. Finally, I am very grateful to WAM editor Emily Wilbourne and the anonymous readers, who offered generous advice and insights on this work.

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<sup>41</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 120.

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